

The despised volunteer

by Patricia McBee

John Guinther's November 2nd *Welcomat* article, "The witch doctors and our 'voodoo elections,'" examines the relationship between political volunteers and paid campaign operatives. He observes that volunteers tend to get squeezed out: "Since the candidates are spending good money on these experts—unlike the volunteer campaign workers—the candidates

thousands of dollars' worth of skilled help they get from citizens who care about the community. But too often we undervalue precious things that are free.

If an organization hires a staff person to support the work of its volunteers, do they put this director of volunteers in an attractive office alongside the executive director and the director of development, who are also bringing resources into the organization?

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listen to these experts. . . The more they listen to the experts, the less they listen to the volunteers and regulars who—in part because they don't cost money—become devalued in the candidate's eyes and are expected as amateurs to yield to the professionalism of those the candidate hired."

Guinther has discovered in the political world an amazing fact that can be found in social agencies, hospitals and churches throughout the Philadelphia area: Intelligent, capable people who get paid well to do important work can be regarded as inept when they offer to do the same work for free.

Not always, of course. Some of our institutions recognize and value the

Alas, usually not. Volunteer program administrators are often found in small basement offices, generally without clerical support.

In organizations where the executive director makes sure to send personal holiday greetings to donors who have given \$500 or more, do they do the same for people who have given \$1,000 worth of skilled help? Generally not.

Do administrators ask for reports and keep track of the productivity of volunteers the way they do the productivity of paid staff or return in invested dollars? Rarely. In fact, a recent study of hospital administrators shows that in non-profit hospitals

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they gave dramatically inaccurate estimates of the hours given to their hospitals by volunteers and the nature of the work done by those volunteers.

Interestingly, administrators in *for-profit* hospitals very accurately reported the bottom line on their volunteer program.

Programs that don't cultivate their volunteer corps are missing big dollars. Nationally, the service of volunteers is estimated at a dollar value of \$110 billion per year. That is \$110 billion that we don't have to spend in taxes or charitable donations.

In the five-county Philadelphia area, the estimate is \$1.8 billion. The average volunteer contributes time valued at \$1,700. That is major philanthropy by any measure, and it deserves the sort of recognition and support that's routinely given to cash donations.

But measuring it in dollars doesn't even start to give you a sense of the value of volunteers to the community groups, political campaigns and service organizations where they work. As Guinther points out, the Main Street campaign headquarters staffed by volunteers give a political campaign a "grass roots feel." Volunteers communicate caring because *they do care*—that is their principal motive for getting involved.

Volunteers provide valuable public education, helping their friends and neighbors understand what goes into putting in a new exhibit at the museum or how a disabled person manages to cope and maintain a job

and home despite his or her disabling condition. Volunteers become ambassadors for the organization where they do their volunteer work.

Volunteers lend credibility. When someone who has nothing to gain for himself comes and asks you to help out or to contribute money to a cause where he personally is active, his plea carries a more authentic ring than when a paid solicitor telephones you.

Successful fund-raisers have known for years that the best person to send to ask for money is a peer of the person being asked. Get a corporate president to ask other corporate presidents to contribute. Have a wealthy matron host a tea for other wealthy matrons. In effect these volunteers are saying, "This is important to me; I hope it will be important to you." And they succeed at bringing in the donations.

Volunteers bring new talent and new ideas to an organization. Especially in organizations with small staffs, where everyone has to be a jack of all trades, it's a great advantage to have the use of a specialist for a few hours a week. But even where there is a large, skilled, paid staff, volunteers bring in new ideas that are not encumbered by the traditions and assumptions of the organization.

Consider the "blue ribbon panels" of experts summoned by governmental bodies to lend credibility to assessment of critical and complex issues. Volunteers can be a rich source of that same kind of clear thinking from

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the outside to keep our institutions fresh and creative.

Volunteers create jobs. Despite the fears occasionally raised by unions that volunteers take jobs away from paid workers, the record is quite to the contrary. For evidence, you need search no farther than Guinther's article.

Where did the jobs for Guinther's political "witch doctors" come from? The jobs were created by volunteers, who then began to seem indispensable, and *voilà!* The candidates came up with the money to make sure the people are there when they're needed.

If you want to look more broadly, the first nurses were volunteers, as were the first social workers. Many other individual jobs have been created in organizations where the work of a volunteer was deemed so valuable it was turned into a permanent paid position.

What's more, volunteers are major donors of cash. In study after study it has been shown that people who do volunteer work are far more likely to be generous donors—and that is true from political campaigns to scout programs. So if volunteers aren't taken seriously for the value of their time, maybe decision-makers should at least take them into account as prospective donors and cultivate their volunteer corps as a way of increasing their donor base.

Make no mistake here. I am not talking about your old-fashioned, narrow definition of volunteers: low-skilled people doing idiot work. That was

never a valid definition, and it's even less so now.

I am talking about doctors who give lectures for the Red Cross, accountants who help small community groups set up their bookkeeping systems, teachers who put in an extra few hours a week as Sunday School teachers, experienced mothers who help teenage parents learn to cope with the needs of their infants, skilled typists who help environmental groups keep the public informed about environmental issues, engineers who give their time to develop specialized equipment for disabled children, drivers who take the severely ill to medical appointments, computer programmers and input operators who help food banks keep track of their inventory.

Yes, and I am also talking about the people who hold down skilled paid jobs and still give their time to raking leaves in the neighborhood clean-up, serving spaghetti for the community center fundraiser, and painting hopscotch lines on the school pavement.

The time has come to recognize volunteers for what they are: a valuable, essential part of the community in which we live and work. And then to treat them with the respect they deserve. ●

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