

A Lack of Status Is Changing the Face of Volunteerism

By ENID NEMY

What is the difference between working seriously at a paid job and working seriously at an unpaid job? The obvious answer is money, but equally correct, and perhaps even more important, is status.

The men and women who enter volunteer work are willing to forgo financial rewards. Their recompense comes in other forms. But many have found that salary and status are apparently indivisible and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to attain one without the other. And many, for that very reason, and with no pressing economic need, are leaving volunteer work for the paid marketplace.

"My personal opinion is that we lose a lot of volunteers because we don't treat them seriously enough," said Kayla Marks, personnel director of the Young Women's Christian Association in El Paso, Tex., a view endorsed particularly strongly in New York, which must compete with an appealing variety of paying jobs.

A number of organizations that use or rely on volunteer help agree that the time is ripe for change. They believe that volunteers must be treated more professionally and accorded more respect. On the other hand, they believe, too, that volunteers must make a commitment, and make every effort to live up to that commitment.

The introduction of written agreements and contracts, and their use now by an increasing number of organizations around the country, is an attempt to achieve both ends. Such agreements have no legal force, but nonetheless they may eventually change the face of volunteerism.

The commitments in writing are bilateral. The volunteer pledges to work a specified minimum number of hours a week, for a certain period of time. For its part, the organization outlines what it expects of the volunteer — in effect a job description — and commits itself to training, guidance, supervision and support.

The El Paso Y.W.C.A. is one of scores of organizations that now require that some volunteers in specific programs sign contracts.

"The agreement is really intended as an understanding and clarification," Miss Marks said. "What it says is that there is something important to do, and that there are expectations."

She had noticed, she said, that volunteers were frequently left with the feeling that their presence didn't really matter, and that, in fact, agency personnel often did not use a volunteer's time to the best advantage.

"Volunteers should be treated like any other staff, with the same amount of respect," she said.

When passage of Proposition 13 cut the paid work force of Marin County in

California, volunteers were placed throughout the various county departments on a contract basis. The volunteers take part in everything from career counseling for jailed inmates to clerical work, creating libraries, coor-

Civic Center Volunteers in San Rafael, Calif.

"Volunteers get needed supervision and, if necessary, training," she said. "When they leave the program, they get a written record, evaluated on the

To improve morale, agencies are using written and signed contracts to foster more professionalism and respect.

inating programs and legal research.

Their written and signed contracts contain an agreed-upon number of hours, usually averaging between 12 and 15 a week, and a service period ranging from three months to one year. At the end of the first month, supervisor and volunteer review the pluses and minuses of both the job and job performance.

The basic purpose of the contract is "clear communication," to insure that both supervisor and volunteer understand their respective responsibilities, said Joan Brown, coordinator of the

same form as a regular employee, and a letter of recommendation."

She termed the reaction "incredible."

"All but one volunteer have said that it has been a significant experience in their lives and the professionalism is part of it," she said. "Everyone likes having an objective measure, getting a clear sense of self. Volunteers in the past have not been evaluated, their worth has not been measured. We expect a professional performance on their part, and we treat them as professionals."

The Marin County program, and other contract programs have attracted not only traditional volunteers — retired and financially secure men and women — but a number of "re-entry" people. These are primarily women who wish to resume an interrupted career. The period of professionalized volunteer service allows them to build confidence, and serves as a testing ground to see if they would like to continue the type of work for which they've volunteered.

"Many volunteers are very capable and could hold very important jobs if they wanted to," said Marjorie MacAdams of Dallas. Mrs. MacAdams used contracts when she was volunteer administrator of the Northwest Family Outreach Center, and plans to have even more stringent contracts for the new program she is directing in Foster Child Advocacy Services.

"We have a very small attrition rate in volunteers," she said. "A very strong point is that they are treated with the respect accorded a professional."

In Atlanta, Karen Peterman, volunteer coordinator from the National Council of Jewish Women to the Nursing Home Ombudsman program, noted that although nothing could be done if a volunteer didn't live up to a contract, "signing makes them think about their commitment."

"Most volunteers live up to their contracts — signing affects them psychologically," said Corazon Doyle, executive director of Community Information and Referral Services in Phoenix.

Although many volunteers believe that contracts lend professionalism and status to volunteerism, and that a written evaluation and reference would be useful tools should a volunteer wish to transfer to paid work (the Federal Office of Personnel Management already accepts volunteer work as credit experience in a Civil Service application), the opinion is by no means unanimous.

"Some volunteers object on philosophical grounds," said Shirley Leviton, president of the National Council of Jewish Women. The council has been a pioneer and a major force in exploring the value of written contracts, and in encouraging their use.

Mrs. Leviton continued: "The objections arise because some women feel it is part of their heritage to serve, to give part of themselves without a payoff. Others take the attitude that a contract isn't necessary, that their word is their bond."

Her own attitude was that a contract did tend to upgrade status, and that it lent volunteerism another dimension.

"We are encouraging women to put 'volunteerism' as their profession on census forms," she said.