

Voluntary service institutions throughout the country are to get a cash injection shortly, to help expand their work and to encourage the unemployed to lend a hand. It is an admirable sentiment, but can the government expect the wholehearted co-operation of the health service unions to the detriment of their members' jobs? RUTH DEVLIN looks at the situation.

Voluntary work for the jobless

LAST week the government announced a £4 million scheme to develop voluntary service opportunities in the health and personal social services for Britain's army of unemployed.

The government's plans came as no great surprise — the public got wind of what was to come in July when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told the House of Commons the government was to "immediately develop further opportunities for unemployed people of all ages".

Mrs Thatcher said there were opportunities in the social and health services, where community support for the handicapped and elderly "depended on a wide range of voluntary services as well as statutory provision". Mrs Thatcher promised an extra £4 million for 1982/3 to expand these activities, and said the department would be considering how best to apply the money.

Constructive

Now the DHSS is looking for a "constructive and imaginative response" to its consultation paper.

The government makes it clear early on in the document that any voluntary work by the unemployed should not be used as a substitute for paid employment. "Nor will there be any question of compelling unemployed people to take part," it says.

Despite this softly-softly approach, the document has already provoked fury among health service unions, who have been faced in recent weeks with government proposals to consider alternative methods of funding the NHS, as well as vetting foreign patients who may not be entitled to free treatment.

The Confederation of Health Service Employees and the National Union of Public Employees were conspicuous by their absence from the list of organisations to which the paper was officially circulated. Did the government foresee trouble?

Alan Fisher, general secretary of NUPE, said the scheme would do nothing to solve the problems of the unemployed. While accepting there was a place for voluntary workers in

any "healthy" statutory service, he said the money would be better employed creating more paid jobs in the public sector. The government scheme was "another step in its programme of destroying an NHS free to all at the point of service."

COHSE was "sceptical" about the plans. A spokesman said: "We would not like to see people coming into hospitals doing voluntary work under duress. We would certainly be against the unemployed doing voluntary work if it was dependent on their receiving social security benefit."

Evidence

The question of volunteers' working alongside paid health service workers is a smouldering, emotional problem which has been going on for the last ten years. COHSE is totally opposed to volunteers taking over jobs which were part of the nursing sphere.

The response from voluntary agencies to the government's plans has, however, been favourable on the whole.

The Volunteer Centre, which advises nationally on volunteer and community involvement, has welcomed the DHSS's proposals. It already has evidence that more and more unemployed people are taking up voluntary work without the government's encouragement. The rise in people coming forward has been especially noticeable in areas of high unemployment.

But the Volunteer Centre also put out an early warning sign of the hazards ahead. It has a long file of people who have been denied unemployment benefit because they owned up to the social security office that they were doing voluntary work — and the office has interpreted this as indicating they were not available for work — an essential criteria for obtaining benefit.

The government is expected to tighten up guidelines in this grey area, as well as issue advice on how much volunteers can be paid in expenses before they are in danger of losing their benefit.

Lynda Chalker, under secretary of state for social services, has already indicated that unemployed people who want to



Under secretary of state for social services, Lynda Chalker, who says the unemployed will not disqualify themselves from social security by undertaking voluntary work.

do voluntary work will be allowed to give 24 hours rather than immediate notice of availability for work.

With no job in sight for many unemployed people, increased opportunities to do some kind of voluntary work without being penalised could prove attractive to some people. So what exactly does the government intend to spend the extra money on?

Well, it does not come up with any specific ideas for projects. It leaves that to the organisations who have been sent a copy of the consultation paper.

However, its main criteria is that any proposed projects must make a "worthwhile contribution to meeting health needs, or personal social services needs". Which could leave many voluntary organisations wondering what kind of contribution the government thinks they have been making up till now.

Involvement

The document stresses that priority should be given to expenditure which would give "lasting benefits" in terms of increasing volunteer involvement in areas of high unemployment. But it makes it clear that no project can be supported indefinitely from government funds.

The department is particularly keen to hear about projects which are "one-off" ideas, or likely to be self-sustaining after the initial injection of cash — particularly as a decision has

not been reached on whether funding will be available after 1983.

The scheme has three main objectives. These are: to develop opportunities for unemployed people to undertake voluntary action; to expand voluntary action in the fields of health and personal social services; and to spend the money in such ways that "benefits will continue to accrue in the longer term".

It will give priority to projects which fulfil all three criteria, but will also consider those which meet the first two.

The government will consider meeting administrative, capital and training costs, as well as salaries and "pocket money" expenses. Most, if not all, of the money will be spent on projects within the voluntary sector. But the document does not rule out expenditure within the statutory sector — so that it can provide support for the voluntary sector.

The paper sets out six options for channeling the money into projects, including setting up a special fund, whose trustees would be responsible for making decisions on which projects should be funded, as well as handing out the money.

Enriching

There might also be an opportunity for health and social services authorities to make grants.

The DHSS plans to monitor the scheme on a basic level. It wants comments on the proposals by January 8.

Nobody would be mean enough to suggest that the voluntary sector does not do a wonderful job, and that voluntary work is not a valuable and enriching experience for anybody to undertake.

But the implication behind the prime minister's words quoted at the beginning of this article — that community support for the elderly and the handicapped depends on a wide range of voluntary services — is worrying indeed.

The NHS is suffering from government cuts. Health workers are fighting for a rise in their low pay. It would not be surprising if they were to feel cynical about a £4 million injection into the voluntary, rather than the statutory, sector.