

Volunteerism Consortium
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Harriet H. Naylor, HEW

WASTED RESOURCES: HANDICAPPED, YOUTH, AGED AND RETIRING

That's a terrible thought, wasted resources who are people! But it is true: all these kinds of people have very special gifts to give, if we give them half a chance. I am reminded of a sign in a hardware store in North Bend, Oregon "Together we can do it yourself!" Not merchants, we administrators are gatekeepers for opportunities, not for busy work, but for essential services and relationships based on very special abilities, experiences and characteristics. Matching people to people who need them is good for everybody, and it takes skill, imagination, and a sharp eye to spot the very special ability that each one has to the special need of someone else. We can bring out the best in people, and nurture each one being helped by other volunteers, and even more when he is a volunteer himself. Human development means giving, too!

The one characteristic all groups mentioned have in common is that they feel "out of it." They don't volunteer spontaneously because they fear being rebuffed, stigmatized, because they are handicapped, too young, or too old. Because they feel that others have low expectations and they come to have a low self esteem, even though they know they could do a lot. With volunteers as supportive friends, these people could gain confidence and competence - and as volunteers they have a special motivation to help people overcome the limits society places upon their own kind of persons.

In today's inflation/depression crunch, these are the people least likely to be hired and first fired. Often they are not counted among the unemployed because they are not actively trying to get a job. Their lack of confidence makes it hard to compete in the market place. We now have antidiscrimination laws of far reaching implications, but the people they were written to benefit need a lot more than technical acceptance before they gain faith that they can be really effective.

Labels mean feelings of rejection and loss of identity. Sometimes those feelings rise up because too much has been done for them. They've had to "receive services" which were "delivered" whether they wanted them or not. To be trusted to "do it yourself" is a very important aspect of volunteering. People want to be on the

giving end, for nothing so improves one's feelings about himself as being depended on. When the gift is commitment of oneself in service, the quality of that service is improved. Richard Titmuss points out in his book, The Gift Relationship subtitled From Human Blood to Social Policy, that "specific instruments of public policy encourage or discourage, foster or destroy, the individual expression of altruism and regard for the needs of others..." he goes on to say that "the opportunity to behave altruistically is an essential human right...and one of the most sensitive universal social indicators upon which other freedoms depend." So volunteering is not only good for individuals, but for the sense of community essential to a democratic society.

The first people we should consider for volunteer services are consumers, who have transcended a problem with help, and want very much to help someone else. People who have submitted to a great deal of service to correct a disabling condition or solve their problems have a special need to prove there are things only they can do. For people still struggling at earlier stages, these folks are authentic inspirations.

Let's take the labels in the order they were given to this workshop. First, "the handicapped":

That dreadful label is rooted in the image of a person, cap in hand, begging for alms! But it is an umbrella word used in some beneficent legislation. The White House Conference for the Handicapped, demonstrated the many kinds of handicaps. In our culture, children are protected from the unusual, and most adults have no awareness of what life is like for persons unlike themselves. And those unlike persons have a terrible need to be understood and accepted as persons, not cases or numbers.

People go right on being people, with the same hopes and other needs as other people, whether they are born with or suffer a calamity which adds a special need. They need to love and be loved, to have meaningful work, to belong to other people and they have civil rights. All the State Conferences recognized a special need to raise consciousness in others. Mutual support through self-help groups such as "We are People, too," for retarded persons, or "Recovery, Inc." for mentally recovering persons or the Lost Chord Club, persons who have had a larynx removed, support one another through uncomfortable times in the community, after a hospital stay, or preventing one. No group has quite the camaraderie of fellow victims.

Recently, more is being done to make volunteering possible for handicapped persons. Team volunteering is one way: each volunteer has an enabler role with the other one, often with both persons somewhat limited, but a combination makes it possible for both to serve. Transportation provisions are often needed.

Being a person, first, is terribly important - different from all other persons! Volunteering is a safe and less embarrassing way to acquire and test skills which may lead to employment. The transitional volunteer in the mental health field is a good example of someone who proves his abilities in a volunteer job and then can be recommended for a paid one. United Cerebral Palsy has staff and an advisory council of victims.

Each kind of limiting experience seems to give persons an extra ability in some other way. With sight gone, other sensory methods of perception are heightened. Blind persons want to move about independently. They feel they perceive character better than sighted persons who are distracted by what they see. These are special sensitivities and capabilities which we can apply where they are most needed, providing expanded opportunities for both volunteer and the person served.

The deaf are anxious to know what people are saying everywhere, but especially on TV. They recommend braille signs for elevators and directories, sign language as a public school curriculum for all students. What's more, they volunteer to teach it as a contribution to citizenship education. No one knows better than they do what a deaf person needs to have other persons do and understand!

The most consistent recommendations from the White House Conference were for mainstreaming: consciousness-raising for public recognition, equality of opportunities for persons with special limitations. Opportunities must emphasize the commonalities of all persons rather than their differences: to learn, to earn, to enjoy and be enjoyed, to join in.

We are all now attacking architectural and transportation barriers to the wheelchair. The most encouraging sign is how much more progress has been made since the handicapped persons themselves took advocacy into their own hands. They could achieve a great deal more if they include some non-consumer community leaders in their organizations, volunteers who have access to the people who allocate shrinking

community resources, who can unlock the town coffers. But we all have a long way to go for equity of opportunity in physical access, in jobs, in recreation and cultural resources for physically limited persons.

It seems every generation has to learn about values and risks for itself, first hand. This generation of new mothers has not seen polio strike terror into a whole town. The Center for Disease Control has had to embark on a campaign, modeled after the one Mrs. Dale Bumpers and NCVA started in Arkansas in 1972, to catch up. Only 47% of children of low income in the U.S. have received shots which are routine for middle and upper classes. But if these children get diphtheria, or German measles, their own lives can be impaired, and those of many others affected. Prevention also is important on a purely economic basis: a life time of institutional care costs the taxpayers a half a million in 1958 dollars, let alone the waste in human potential.

Handicapped volunteer opportunities run the gamut of experience from prevention through rehabilitation. No one feels this more strongly than a victim who has come through the fire. I believe all volunteers are motivated by a rescue fantasy, but victims have a special zeal. The rehabilitation field has not really encouraged volunteering or volunteers, in spite of the Goodwill Project and the growing use of volunteers in other fields. The White House Conference reemphasized this need for volunteers.

Youth have very special problems of gaining acceptance and recognition of their potential capabilities in our society. Nothing is so frustrating as not being taken seriously! Although some important work has been done by youth organizations in citizenship education through self governance, the vast majority of young people feel they are treated as children for far too long. Their natural rebellion can go in positive or negative paths.

To read the newspapers is to become alarmed about youth and the future of this country. But to hear what young volunteers are doing for themselves and for their communities is to know that things are much better than the headlines say. The statistics on minority youth unemployment are appalling. Teenage pregnancies occur in epidemic proportions. Society takes a punitive attitude, and youth respond with running away, drug abuse and other forms of withdrawal. Statutory offenders are treated like, even labelled, criminals. For those who do get entangled with the law, thousands of volunteers are providing linkages to opportunities and sponsorship, recreation and career aspiration models as well as valid friendships to heal the wounds of rejection and neglect.

But there is another side to the picture: youth participation in volunteer activities has increased a great deal the past ten years. (The Census Bureau found 22% of 14-17 year olds in 1974.) Experiential education is "in" and junior and senior high youth are supplementing community services with projects of their own. Working with professional staff can show them what various vocations are like, the most realistic career exploration possible. ACTION's National Student Volunteer Program assists secondary schools and colleges to develop field placements for students, but has no current data. Today there are almost 119 million in public secondary school and 1.4 million in private schools. We have a long way to go to involve a significant proportion of them as volunteers.

The energy and enthusiasm of the young gives a great lift to staff and beneficiaries, especially to older persons. Youthful enthusiasm accomplishes impossible feats. The students at Syracuse University are fostergrandchildren to the residents of public housing for senior citizens. Comfortable relationships develop because the young don't feel accountable to the elderly. Rather, they feel a common bond in being "disenfranchized" according to Maggie Kuhn of the Gray Panthers. She and Mary Conway Kohler of the National Commission on Resources for Youth, have leapt that gap and opened fabulous opportunities for youth to learn and to influence public policy.

The National School Volunteer Program claims five million volunteers in schools across the country. Among them are students themselves in peer-help groups and older working with younger. They've even found in Right to Read projects that an excellent method for helping poor readers is to assign them to help someone who reads less well than they do. We learn most effectively by teaching others! School volunteering seems to be going to cut the appalling numbers on functional illiteracy which determine unemployability in a fast paced technological world.

Like all other age levels, the important thing to youth is being trusted with real responsibility, having a voice in program policy development and decision-making groups. Youth who have been subjected to tokenism and unlistening consultations are turned off volunteering for the present, but those who know they really influence policy are probably volunteers for life.

One of the few advantages of the aging process in this youth oriented-society (but not too young, as I have described it) is the prerogative of being completely yourself, idiosyncracies and all! Olive Randall

of the President's Council on Aging says the longer you live, the more different from everyone else you become. Madison Avenue and Revlon behave as though the world contains only sophisticated, swinging types. They accentuate the positive and mask imperfections in the rest of us only up to a point. After that, you wear what's comfortable whether it's in style or not, and you discover that makeup accentuates the negatives, not the positives, and takes time away from important things, anyway. So you look outward, full of wisdom acquired the hard way, wanting to keep somebody else out of the pitfalls you know about.

Quickly you discover that within your own family, people really do want to do it themselves! Instead of feeling obsolete and useless, it's very important to find some other people who are less self-confident, and turn them into self-confident do-it-yourselfers too. You have a lot to give. Nothing restores the ego quite so much as being essential to someone else, knowing that you and you only can bestow a sense of being cherished, the courage to go ahead because someone believes you can do it. Volunteering supplies such roles for people who most need to be sure they are needed: all the people in our title: the handicapped, youth, aged--I don't like that past tense! I'm not through with aging yet, and neither is anyone else who's alive!--and especially the retired. The second meaning we attach to retiring, according to Mr. Webster, is "drawing back from contact with others." That's the part of aging and retirement we want to avoid, and volunteering is the answer! We have proved that volunteering reverses senescence in the elderly. It takes a high level of skill to match all the wisdom now sitting on the shelf to people who want and need it. Of all the constituencies who benefit from volunteering, the elderly are most gratifying because the mutual benefits are demonstrated so quickly. Attendance and retention records clearly show older volunteers to be the most reliable.

Volunteering is a bridge to cushion the shock of retirement. One's volunteering interests provide continuity over the sharp experience of changing identity and life style which can be so traumatic. A person interested in a cause or a volunteer service assignment will look forward to retirement as a time he will have more time to get things done which are important to him. In the last few years we see increasingly sessions on volunteering included in pre-retirement courses in private industry and the federal departments. Mental health authorities recommend this pursuit of outside interests particularly at periods of life when roles change and activities slow down: when one might "withdraw from contact."

Working with volunteers is an area of skill and knowledge which most of the curricula for preparing people-helping professions ignore. This is becoming an increasingly serious problem as citizen participation is encouraged in every field of human services. Staff keep a great many myths about volunteering alive, long after they have been disproved, without knowing about the growth and changes in the volunteering world. Turnover, attendance, reliability and performance analyses have shown us that volunteers and paid staff behave in very similar ways. Volunteers are people, too! Since the "helping professions" do not get this perspective in their required training, we have a massive remedial education job to do for them on-the-job in continuing education. Fortunately, concepts of life long learning education are gaining acceptance. Just as technologies develop and change, so do human resources. Legislation recognizes the importance of volunteering: expenses entailed can be paid, thus opening opportunity to all sorts of persons. Those of us engaged in facilitating volunteering stand ready to help in events like this one, to help prevent the waste of human resources who are so desperately needed to make our world humane. Most of the "disabled," "too young" and "too old" are not too disabled or too young or too old. All have a need to be needed, many have an urgent sense of mission, energy, and natural wisdom to share which would enrich services, extend and reinforce the work of the paid professional staff and benefit the people we all have chosen to serve. I say to you, "Go forth and multiply the breadth and depth of your services with all the people just waiting to be asked." They need the experience of volunteering, and we need what they can do for us!