



Insight

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GIVING FREELY: VOLUNTARISM TODAY

In the current climate of government deregulation, diminution of federal programs, and broad-based federal budget reductions, the importance of the private individual as a provider of services is readily apparent. Just as President Reagan has called on the business community to assume responsibility for programs no longer the object of federal support, so too has he challenged the individual citizen to make a contribution, not only of dollars, but also of self.

While the President's eloquent plea focused the public's attention on the significance of voluntarism, its importance has long been recognized by both voluntary organizations and those who serve them freely. The American volunteer is an institution as familiar as the Little League team we coach, the blood bank to which we give blood, or the community hospitals which we serve as trustee. And, although there is both need and room for expansion in the field of voluntary service, the allegiance to voluntarism and its place in American society continue to exist on a major scale.

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The issues of who volunteers, what work they do, how much time they devote to voluntary efforts and other closely related questions were recently addressed by a Gallup poll. The poll, commissioned by Independent Sector, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the encouragement of philanthropy, found that when voluntary work was defined in a broad sense, 52% of American adults participated in some type of volunteer service activity.

A further effort by the pollsters to identify the proportion of the population which volunteers on a regular and active basis resulted in the finding that 31% of the population averaged two or more volunteer hours a week. The poll also found that women, persons under 55, people with more formal education, and suburban and rural residents were among those most likely to volunteer. Additionally, the survey indicated that volunteer efforts crossed the demographic lines of sex, age and race.

John Thomas, Vice President for Communications at Independent Sector, called the poll results positive, particularly when viewed in the context of a previous survey on voluntarism conducted in 1974. The earlier study concluded that only 24% of the population volunteered, although this figure may have reflected only formally structured volunteer efforts.

OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

While the results of the Gallup Poll demonstrate a commitment to voluntarism by over half the population, the results also indicate that a substantial portion of Americans—48%—are not engaged in voluntary work, even when voluntary service is very widely defined. This state of affairs might be viewed as a disheartening fact; it can also be regarded as an opportunity. At a time when the need for volunteers is expanding at an accelerated pace, it is essential for voluntary organizations to identify and call upon that segment of the citizenry which is not already serving. Public service and charitable organizations will undoubtedly examine the reasons for refusing to volunteer, factors also determined by the poll, with an eye towards overcoming identified objections and broadening the circle of voluntary participants.

Perhaps the most important piece of information to emerge from the Independent Sector sponsored poll is the determination that 44% of adults who volunteered within the last year became involved in their volunteer work because someone asked them. This finding confirmed the experience of the volunteer coordinator for a well-known health organization, who observed that just as you have to ask for contributions, you have to ask for volunteers. You cannot simply wait for either of these essential commodities to come to you.

The common perception of what constitutes volunteer work has not kept pace with voluntarism as it is currently being practiced. The unemployed housewife who collects dollars door-to-door for medical research, or the club member who devotes weekday afternoons to the hospital thrift shop connotes, to many, the traditional role of the volunteer. As women have joined the work force in increasing numbers over recent years, a gradual assumption has taken root that voluntarism, as an entity, must necessarily be on the decline. While the experience of some voluntary agencies supports this contention, other organizations report continued interest in voluntarism, both in number of volunteers and diversity of modes of service.

Some experts in the field of voluntarism, acknowledging the difficulty in defining its meaning and scope, feel that voluntarism extends into the area of citizen advocacy and social statement. Campaigning for a political candidate,

making a statement about society, civil rights, objecting to or promoting nuclear power can and has involved thousands of manhours, given without compensation, for the sake of a belief in something better. This, too, is a form of voluntarism.

TRADITION UPDATED

Even the more traditional aspects of volunteering are changing as the needs of charities, society, and the volunteers themselves, change. While many organizations still utilize volunteer power in such time honored tasks as fund raising campaigns and envelope stuffing, more often than not need and interest have prompted new and effective ways of using volunteers.

An example of the growth in the role of volunteers is the effort carried out by Recording for the Blind. Established in 1951 by a small group of women for the purpose of helping blinded veterans complete college, the organization now has a cadre of 5,000 volunteers who record a wide variety of educational material which is made available, free of charge, to blind and other handicapped students. Not only has the volume of volunteers to this service expanded, but the nature of the service they provide has also become more elaborate. As handicapped students gain access to more complex educational programs, the need for more technically trained volunteers has become evident. In response to this ever-increasing level of need, Recording for the Blind has developed a system whereby a two-person team, proficient in a given field such as law or computer science, works from the same text, with one team member serving as reader and the other as monitor. Volunteers record educational material in such complex fields as medicine, engineering and mathematics under professional recording conditions.

Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. has noted a slight dwindling of daytime, weekday volunteers who work in the hospital, but it still receives an outpouring of volunteer help at other times and in other ways. Many volunteers, including a number of men, contribute time on evenings and weekends. In addition to those persons who give time directly at the facility, countless others give service outside the hospital proper. Senior citizens provide the hospital with a number of homemade items including "Clipper Clowns," a hospital symbol which is given to every child who is admitted. Other volunteers make layettes for premature babies, as well as special items used in child therapy.

WHY SERVE?

What factors motivate someone to volunteer? One retired businesswoman who actively volunteered throughout her career, and continues to do so in her retirement years, may speak for many in her observation. "I have never subscribed to the theory that there is no more to charity than writing a check." Continuing her thoughts, she expressed a fundamental conviction that a gift is not a gift without the giver.

Often the motivation for volunteering is not so abstract. Many voluntary health organizations report that, historically, the bulk of their volunteers have come from the ranks of those who have some personal association with a particular disease. The painful experience of having a loved one, par-

ticularly a child, suffer from an untreatable or incurable malady often prompts a family member to take action to combat the affliction. This action may be as elementary as door-to-door fund raising for an existing charity or as innovative as founding an entirely new organization, dedicated to wiping out the dread disease.

When her husband, Woody Guthrie, died of Huntington's Disease in 1967, his widow Marjorie Guthrie initiated an effort to make the public aware of this devastating hereditary disease, an effort which ultimately led to the formation of the Committee to Combat Huntington's Disease. Much of Mrs. Guthrie's work, which continues to the present day, consists of educating not only the public about this condition, but also legislators and members of the medical profession. The organization which she founded now supports and promotes research and also offers advice on patient services.

Ronald Schenkenberger, Director of Patient and Community Services for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, notes that volunteers are an integral part of the programs of his organization. However, he has observed a subtle change in the composition of the volunteer force, commenting that 20 years ago when the disease was not well known, most volunteers were personally involved with the affliction. Over the years, as successful fund raising, research and education made an impact on the public, volunteers were less likely to be directly involved with the disease.

UNTOLD VALUE, NO PRICE

Many volunteer tasks supplement work performed by an organization's employees. Often, however, there are unique services which volunteers can provide that could not be duplicated by paid staff members, no matter what financial resources an organization might possess. Few programs better illustrate this fact than the American Cancer Society's "Reach To Recovery" project. In this voluntary effort, women, who have themselves undergone a mastectomy, visit recent breast surgery patients while they are still hospitalized. Always undertaken upon the recommendation of the attending physician, these visits by well-groomed, active Reach To Recovery volunteers can, in the words of Dr. Diane Fink, American Cancer Society Vice President for Service and Rehabilitation, "be a tremendous boost of morale during the period of greatest anxiety."

Such programs go to the heart of voluntarism, constituting a real sharing of self with each person benefitting from the exchange.

FINDING, KEEPING VOLUNTEERS

Organizations which utilize volunteers are examining the best methods to attract and retain these workers. Recognition of the necessity for flexibility is often a pivotal factor in achieving this goal. A spokesperson for a regional blood service of the American Red Cross stressed the need to make certain that volunteer programs meet the needs of the volunteers as well as the sponsoring organization. She advocated a "non-prepackaged" approach to soliciting and using volunteers, noting that the range of volunteer positions in her own organization offered participants a choice of loca-

tions, hours, days of the week, projects, internship programs, donor related services, clerical or telephone positions. Identifying a great need for volunteer services, she commented that even one hour a week, given on a regular basis, is of value. Other groups reported that so limited a commitment would not work successfully in their own operations. Children's Hospital National Medical Center requires that its volunteers give a minimum of 100 hours a year, with the additional requirement that the volunteer give a minimum of 2-4 hours a week.

The ability to give a certain number of hours is one requirement volunteers may have to meet; another may be particular skills. The use of volunteers proficient in a foreign language is of significance to many cultural and social service institutions. The National Gallery of Art offers tours in French, Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese and Russian to non-English speaking gallery visitors conducted by volunteer guides. "It would be mind-boggling to fund and carry out this activity without volunteers," noted a gallery spokesperson.

WHAT VOLUNTEERS NEED

For voluntary efforts to succeed, the volunteer needs preparation and a meaningful task. Mary DeCarlo, President of the Volunteer Development Institute, an organization which provides information, training and technical assistance to volunteers and administrators of volunteer programs, expressed concern that large numbers of citizens will respond to the President's appeal, but that many service agencies may not be prepared to handle the outpouring of offers. She voiced concern that poor preparation on the part of an organization may discourage volunteers and deter them from future efforts.

Ann Kinsella, Deputy Director for Member Relations/Volunteer Services of the National Easter Seal Society, stressed that the management of volunteer programs is becoming increasingly important. For volunteer jobs to be meaningful, the organization must define the specific duties involved, provide complete job descriptions and carry out work performance evaluations. She also pointed out that the training or skills a volunteer receives in a particular voluntary position may be the motivating factor in deciding to give time and service to that organization. Proper staff preparation is a further consideration in the success of any volunteer program. If proper groundwork, i.e. planning and training of the paid staff members, has not been undertaken, the volunteer may be a burden, not a benefit.

Mary DeCarlo advised organizations to design volunteer programs with a six month leadtime, to set specific objectives, to define the volunteer functions, to do a pilot program and, if that is successful, to expand the effort. She also urged groups to consider using volunteer workers for a wider variety of tasks. Such assignments as writing, public relations, and even administrative services should be open to volunteers. In addition Ms. DeCarlo emphasized the importance of appointing a specific individual to coordinate volunteer efforts. The coordinator may be paid, or volunteer, but should be considered part of the staff. A final caveat posed by Mary DeCarlo concerned overworking a volunteer. Just as not providing meaningful work can cause volunteer fall-

out, so can too great a demand on his time. A besieged volunteer may begin to wonder why he is not being compensated for a full-time job.

The term "meaningful work" crops up with such frequency that it is close to becoming a cliché. But the interpretation of "meaning" may have less to do with a designated task than the context within which the job is placed. Envelope-stuffing can be a meaningful contribution if someone takes the time to explain what the project involves, its significance to the organization and how this one act fits into a larger plan.

MYTHS AND REALITIES

Erroneous assumptions can raise unnecessary obstacles in obtaining both volunteer time and financial support. While many agencies, particularly traditional voluntary health organizations, report a diminution of women volunteers providing services during weekday hours, this does not mean that all women who have returned to the work force have discontinued volunteer service. Nor does it mean that only homemakers can perform voluntary tasks.

The American Cancer Society recently conducted a study (itself carried out in large part by volunteers) to identify the factors which influence the success or failure of a residential door-to-door drive. The study examined a variety of concerns, including the loss of homemakers as volunteers. The results of this study came as a surprise to those who initiated it.

One of the first challenges to firmly held beliefs was the discovery that the weather, particularly snowfall, was not a factor in the success of the Cancer Crusade. Another assumption had been that the tremendous success of various special fund raising events had diverted volunteer strength from the door-to-door campaign. Again the assumption proved invalid. The study showed that as special event income went up, residential giving exhibited a parallel increase in growth. This may well illustrate the old fund raising axiom that gifts beget more gifts, both of money and time.

Another factor which the study addressed was the correlation between crime in the streets and the success of the Crusade. The result of this part of the study, based primarily on interviews, indicated that crime, or fear of crime, was more likely to be a factor in suburban recruitment than in urban efforts. The Society is currently in the process of examining other potential factors which may affect the success of urban recruitment.

The information which the American Cancer Society collected about the entry of large numbers of women into the work force relates to the experience of other charitable organizations. At first the Society noted a decline in residential volunteer recruitment, but as time went on the problem lessened. Ronald Pearson, Assistant Vice President for the Cancer Crusade, attributed the improvement to two distinct factors. First of all, women who had volunteered while not working found they could continue their involvement even after securing employment. Second, the Society is making adjustments in its own recruitment and training programs to accommodate social changes. Such basic steps as changing meeting times to evening hours, recruiting husband and wife teams, and actively recruiting more men all contribute to the success of the Crusade.

BUSINESS VOLUNTEERS

One aspect of voluntarism which has both realized and untapped potential is that which is sponsored by American business. Increasingly, many companies are recognizing the value of gifts of time and expertise, as well as financial contributions. The Xerox Corporation sponsors both Community Involvement Programs and Social Service Leaves; IBM Corporation operates a Fund for Community Service as well as a Social Service Leave program. Levi Strauss & Company sponsors Community Involvement Teams in 80 plant communities around the world and operates a skills bank in its headquarters office to identify opportunities for volunteer service by employees.

Another Levi Strauss program focuses on management training for nonprofit organizations. This program, established to provide training and technical assistance on an ongoing basis, is offered in several locations in the United States, as well as one project in Canada.

Chevron USA, Inc. sponsors Employee Involvement Funds at Chevron facilities throughout the country. Funds are made available to grass roots committees, composed of Chevron employees holding diverse positions in the company. (Management may sit on these committees in an advisory role, but holds no vote.) The committees meet monthly, on company time, to review applications from employees for funding of groups and projects to which employees are already giving time and service. The only requirements for eligibility to receive such grants are that the benefitting organization must provide a community service, that company employees must already be giving time to it, and that the organization be nonprofit.

One of the most valued corporate contributions may be a loaned employee. In this type of program an employee with particular management skills, or a specific public service commitment, joins the staff of a nonprofit organization for periods ranging from a few months to several years. The Social Service Leave program of the Xerox Corporation is not limited to executive personnel; any employee can request to participate. Applicants submit their requests to a selection committee composed of employees, representing a variety of positions within the company, which makes the final selection. Recent social service leaves have involved work with a local hospice, counseling with alcohol abuse victims and setting up independent living programs for handicapped individuals.

AT&T has also had success with similar efforts. One employee was loaned as public relations coordinator for a Washington, D.C. based nonprofit organization, established to encourage energy conservation and energy efficiency. She was so successful in this role that the organization requested she be allowed to continue to work with the group in the capacity of executive director. The affiliation has continued for three years.

Another long term loan commenced in 1978 when an AT&T employee with particular expertise in motor vehicle fleet management began working with the City of New York in the transportation field. Both of these employees continued to receive their compensation from AT&T while carrying out these services.

THE COMMITMENT TO SERVE

Whether it is the well-known Faculty Loan Program conducted by IBM, the volunteer ambulance driver or the college student dancing in a marathon, the result is the same: a goal is accomplished that would not have been attained had someone not volunteered. Community service is a common thread running through American society.

Even when such work is more "enforced" than volunteer, the commitment to serve can emerge. A study of community service orders, commissioned by the National Institute of Corrections and published in 1980, looks into diverse aspects of alternative sentencing for various violations of law. In such programs offenders must carry out periods of public service in lieu of fines or imprisonment. According to this study, *Community Service by Offenders*, a "sizable proportion of program participants continue to work in the agencies to which they were assigned after the required number of hours has been completed." What was once an obligation becomes a choice.

Ultimately, the future of voluntarism rests on the motivations of individuals. Some serve for very specific purposes, hoping to eradicate a disease which caused them personal loss, others give precious hours as an expression of their conviction that something can be better. Many volunteers recognize they too receive benefits from their activities, whether it is simply the satisfaction of accomplishing something worthwhile, or a way of confronting personal misfortunes.

For many, the need to volunteer stems from a recognition that their own comfortable circumstances are not always shared by others. One volunteer, with a long-standing commitment to programs devoted to helping disadvantaged youths, recalled that throughout her many years of volunteer work she often thought about her daughters. "I kept thinking how lucky my own girls were to have so secure a life."

The quest for a healthier body, a calmer mind, a fairer law, a safer neighborhood, a brighter future, a better education, a goal around the corner or a utopia in the heavens, somewhere in America someone is volunteering to achieve it. Americans like to rally to a cause and there is no reason to expect less in the future.

—Candace Von Salzen

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