

# MANDATED VOLUNTEERISM: OXYMORON?

## Prescribed Participation and the Vanishing Volunteer

by Ivan Scheier, Ph.D.

Director, Center for Creative Community

Once upon a time, the word "volunteer" meant "to choose." Today, that's no longer certain. Huge needs for unpaid person-power, growing effectiveness in high-pressure persuasion of people to participate, and generally the institutionalizing of volunteerism over the past twenty years—all have tended to take the choice out of volunteering, for more and more people. More and more "volunteering" is done, less by clear free choice and more by prescription, powerful social expectations, or actual mandate.

Examples:

- students as a "must" part of coursework; teacher tells you to
- transitional volunteers: your therapist prescribes it
- young executives in businesses that want a reputation for social responsibility; the CEO says so
- offenders in community or alternative service; the judge tells you to
- mandated youth community service, school-by-school and sometimes statewide, maybe soon nationally; the legislature says so

— community service required as a condition of membership in a service club, religious, civic or fraternal group; the membership by-laws say so

— likely coming through U.S. Bill H.R. 2156, up to 35% of a U.S. College Loan may be forgiven, plus deferments made easier, in return for an ex-student taking a low-paid (part volunteer?) position with a charitable non-profit

— other possibilities include virtually no recourse but to use "volunteer" experience for resume-building to enter the job market or drastically change to a new type of position; virtually irresistible media and other social pressure which makes it difficult not to volunteer.

This kind of thing has been creeping up on us for at least twenty years. Today, many of the programs I visit, though still calling themselves "volunteer" programs, in fact, have more prescribed participants than volunteers I don't necessarily object. The growing pressure to prescribed participation brings in some new people we otherwise might never see; moreover, they can get a positive experience of community service which leads them actually to choose to continue, when their prescribed term of service is completed.

All to the good, though I can't help wondering how many volunteers we might actually be **losing** through the process. Here, I mean the person—not uncommon—who has just so much leisure time to invest in community service. Nowadays, that time might have to go to obligated service, where formerly it might have been choiceful.

But mainly, I want us to face up to what is happening, think about it, discuss its implications. For example, I suspect more volunteer program leaders tend to lump prescribed and choiceful volunteers together, not wishing to make unnecessary distinctions. But are the motivations enough alike so the two can be placed, supervised, and recognized in the same way? I'm not sure about that, always. One consideration here is whether once we have effectively removed a person's choice not to participate, we at least give them some choice as to **how** they can participate, and where. I know, for example, of a second-grader whose teacher told her everyone in the class **was** going to do some volunteer work. She then went home to have her mother decide what kind of volunteer work she was going to do and when. My question: in what sense was this little girl a volunteer? (She apparently enjoyed the work, but that isn't the question, is it?)

Another area of concern we should discuss is the role of the referring organization or individual and what they can and should do to help make the experience more volunteer-like.

In a broader sense, our challenge is to encourage volunteering without killing it.

*This article first appeared in the Dovia Exchange 1989. Used with permission.*

### SPECIAL ISSUE SUPPLEMENT

*This is the first of our "Special Issue Supplements." In each of this year's editions of the VINE we hope to address a current issue in the field of volunteerism. We hope that the facts and commentary presented will stimulate some discussion both in the local regions and in our Letters to the Editor space.*

This edition's SIS looks at "Mandated Volunteerism: Oxymoron?," a topic addressed by PennSERVE at the 1990 Pennsylvania Conference on Volunteerism. The supplement includes think pieces, practical suggestions for working with mandated volunteers, and personal experiences with such volunteers.

Topics which have been suggested for future editions are "Traditional Organizational Volunteers and the All Volunteer Group: What's the Connection" (also a topic at the 1990 conference) and "The Limits to Volunteerism - Can We Do Everything?" Additional topics will be covered as you let us know about your interests.

We hope you'll be inspired to share some of your thoughts and experiences with us on the issue of Mandated Volunteers and that you'll let us know what other topics we might cover in future Special Issue Supplements. Keep those cards and letters coming to PAVine Editor, 21 Briar Cliff Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15202.

# Community Service In Our Schools

by  
Arlene Grubbs, Editor, PAVine

The Pennsylvania State Board of Education has resolved: "That the State Board of Education believes programs of community service should be an integral part of education at all levels and strongly urges schools, colleges, and universities to institute or strengthen community service programs so that every student is encouraged to serve and participate in volunteer services." Clearly community services in one form or another will be appearing in more and more school districts.

A recent PennSERVE survey of over 300 school districts in Pennsylvania indicated that 13.6% of the districts were giving academic credit for community service. This is an increase of 8% over 1988. In addition 27 schools have received community service grants through the Successful Students Partnership, the State's award-winning anti-drop-out program. An article in the newsletter of the Pennsylvania Department of Education reports that since January when no public schools in Pennsylvania required community service, five school districts have made community service mandatory (Bethlehem, Elizabethtown, Fox Chapel, Keystone Oaks and Steel Valley.) Several others, including Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, have made community service an integral part of major restructuring and reform efforts. Nationally about 50% of all private schools require some sort of volunteer, community service for graduation.\*

However, there remains a substantial difference in philosophy in community and educational circles over granting credit for community service freely chosen and requiring it as a condition of graduation. Bethlehem School district has attracted national attention because its community service program has been sued by parents protesting the fact that their students have to volunteer. A decision by the federal judge on a motion by the school district to dismiss the case is expected in late fall or early winter. No other school district has reported opposition to their programs. In Keystone Oaks, where the requirement is for 120 hours over four years, a survey conducted on October 1 of this first year of the program revealed that 60% of the students had already completed at least 30 hours of volunteer service.

Last summer the Johnson Foundation, a convener of educational and international conferences in Racine, Wisconsin, issued a draft of a set of "Principles of Good Practice in Combining Service and Learning." The draft was prepared by a group of 17 leaders of service organizations, schools, universities, and national associations convened for that purpose at Wingspread, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed former home of H.F. Johnson, now a conference center. The draft reads as follows:\*\*

"As a nation founded upon active citizenship and participation in community life, we have always believed that individuals can and should serve. It is crucial that service toward the common good be combined with reflective learning to assure that service programs of high quality can be created and sustained over time, and to help every person appreciate how service can be a significant and ongoing part of life. Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both. Those who serve and those who are served are thus able to develop the informed judgment, imagination and skills which lead to greater capacity to contribute to the common good." Good practice in combining service and learning, the conference said, does the following:

1. Engages people in responsible and appropriately challenging actions for the common good.
2. Provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience.
3. Acknowledges that those with needs define their needs.
4. Has genuine, active and sustained organizational commitment.

5. Articulates clear service and learning goals for all parties involved.
6. Clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
7. Incorporates an ongoing process for matching resources and needs for the mutual benefit of all concerned.
8. Insures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate and in the best interests of all involved.
9. Includes training, supervision, monitoring, support and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.
10. Is committed to program participation by and with diverse population.

With the kind of growth noted above and the support and encouragement of important groups in the educational community it seems obvious that community service as a part of the educational system is here to stay. The principles articulated above do much to provide guidelines for a program that will create both service and learning, but they stop short of addressing the issue of choice vs. requirement and all the possibilities which lie between these two extremes. Nor has there been much written about what advantages and disadvantages there are to mandated versus chosen community service in terms of both service delivery and educational experience. It remains for all of us, — educators, school boards, volunteers, and volunteer administrators — to do some serious thinking about and exploring of these issues.

\**Journal of Volunteer Administration*, Winter 1989-90, Vol. VII:2, p. 48

\*\**Voluntary Action Leadership*: Summer 1989, p. 29.

## Service Learning: A Personal Experience

by  
Mary Kay Peterson, Region 5, Coordinator

For my Literacy Program in Chester County the student population is strictly Developmentally Disabled (MR) Adults. Recently I went out to Unionville High School for an informational meeting with approximately a dozen Juniors and Seniors. I find it both thrilling and amazing that so many young people are willing to give up one night a week for months at a time to work with a mentally handicapped adult. Whoever said kids are only interested in material things never met this group of kids or the ones who volunteered last year.

These young people went all out for their students last year. Birthdays were celebrated, small achievements recognized. The volunteers made a commitment and carried it above and beyond the call of duty.

They were reliable, self-motivated and self-reliant. I stopped occasionally to see how things were once the program was up and running and that was the extent of involvement until the end of the school year. All of the Unionville High School tutors told me how rewarding it was for **THEM**.

I am a believer of youth involvement but last year's experience has made me doubly enthused.

I think programs and volunteer coordinators should give any young person who wishes to participate a chance. It is a vastly untapped resource just waiting to be asked.

If anyone wants more information, I will be happy to gush over the phone to them about these kids. I am very proud of them. I can be reached at (215) 891-2220.