

Tackling Causes Not Symptoms: New/Old Roles for Volunteers

by Susan J. Ellis

The following provocative snippets, particularly in light of the present world political stage, open a discussion¹ about political activism and the role of volunteers:

- David Wagner, in his book *What's Love Got to Do with It? A Critical Look at American Charity* (New York Press, 2000), explores whether charity exists as a substitute for social justice and posits that charity signifies inequality and is more symbolism than accomplishment. In a review of the book in the e-zine, Salon, the reviewer starts out:

"Just as I was finishing David Wagner's tightly argued essay on the history of American charity, out came a poll that seemed to confirm everything the sociologist was saying: Religion and its do-gooder stepchild, volunteerism, have all but smothered real political engagement in America."

- From "Dilbert" creator Scott Adams comes a cartoon of temporary CEO Dogbert cutting employee health-care benefits while simultaneously joining the board of the local free clinic. In the last frame he receives an award for having increased the clinic's number of clients during his tenure on the board!

- A veteran activist observes that what started as a one-page resource sheet for homeless services has evolved in 25 years into a multi-page, glossy publication featuring innumerable such agencies. He ponders that the one-page resource sheet was part of an effort to end homelessness, not to develop services to "help" homeless people.

- The 1998 Virginia Volunteering survey asked volunteers in what types of work they were involved (as opposed to the need or cause addressed). The results put advocacy at the bottom: direct service, 47 percent; resource development, 32 percent; leadership roles, 30 percent; clerical work, 22 percent; advocacy, 14 percent.

All of these items raise an important question for the volunteer field: Are we engaging enough volunteers, enough of the time, in advocacy and activism along with direct services?

Have we in "volunteer management" spent so much time focusing on support roles and helpfulness that we no longer foster activism? Now more than ever, we as a people and as worldwide citizens need to focus on root causes and prevention of new problems. Advocacy is part and parcel of influencing policies and decisions that will address the complicated issues facing us. Certainly the needs addressed by direct services are impossible to ignore and the services important to continue. But what questions, principles, challenges and resolve do we as a profession need to face as we engage volunteers to go the source?

There are a number of issues to consider.

- Most social agencies and institutions were originally started by pioneering volunteers who focused on a problem and invented creative ways to address it. Many of these same agencies have now become so vested in maintaining them-

selves that they have lost sight of solving the problem they were created to address. They need to bring back those pioneering volunteers! The power of volunteer involvement is proven by the history of most of our organizations. This potential for what is now called "civic engagement" is always present; September 11th only made it more visible.

- Students of history are taught all about the great social movements—abolition, temperance, peace, civil rights—with only rare mention of the salient fact that "movements" are the cumulative effect of the efforts of countless citizens, above and beyond what they do to earn a living, on behalf of causes on which they burn. After all, what did Paul Revere do as an occupation? He was a silversmith. But we remember him more as a revolutionary. No one is paid to rebel!

When I posted a response to a newsgroup request for books on "neighborhood organizing" by suggesting the titles of some volunteer management books that might prove useful, I was "flamed." A newsgroup member, writing her e-mail in capital letters to emphasize her anger, told me: "How dare you imply that activists and volunteers are the same thing! Volunteers help out, but activists get things done." Fascinating perspective. But if you think that vocabulary doesn't matter, consider the reaction of your organization if you replaced the word "volunteer" with "activist" in agency materials! Do we *want* volunteers to make waves?

• In fact, most established organizations want help, not input, from volunteers. But this is an enormous missed opportunity. We need to harness the diversity of perspectives volunteers offer. They are *not* just like the paid staff—and that's exactly the point! Along with hands and hearts, advocacy involves volunteers using their ideas and voices as well. Are we designing specific advocacy roles for volunteers? When we train volunteers, do we include such skills as how to speak their minds in constructive and persuasive ways?

• Volunteers are always private citizens and can act as such. Employees may be hampered by the constraints of legal jurisdictions, political boundaries, or funding restrictions. But a volunteer can cross invisible lines, go to the media, lobby a legislator. When a paid worker attempts to campaign for a cause, someone somewhere will wonder skeptically if the message is a bit self-serving. After all, more funding or other support will mean continued employment for this advocate. But volunteers bring the "perception of credibility." By having no financial vested interest in the outcome of the advocacy campaign, volunteers are heard as genuine. The demonstration of their active citizenship—with the implication that they are voters—is also not lost on politicians.

• Volunteer administrators face some ethical issues in mobilizing volunteers as advocates. It is a tenet of a free and pluralistic society that volunteers/citizens may stand on either side of any issue. So, how do we encourage volunteers to be advocates without exercising undue influence on their position or appearing to be motivated by their own or their organization's self-interest? On the other hand, how do we educate volunteers to choose positions that strengthen the ultimate mission of our organizations?

• Engaging volunteers in advocacy provides a legitimate "career path" for volunteers. Michael McCabe, in an excellent article in a recent issue of *e-Volunteerism*,² speaks about a

"continuum" of service in which volunteers begin by hands-on involvement in direct-service positions and ultimately advance to an intelligent understanding of the *causes* of a problem and work actively to effect real social change. Advocacy offers seasoned volunteers leadership and teaching roles, with responsibilities that tap and recognize their advanced abilities.

Here's the challenge: As everyone else is paid to conduct business as usual, how do we provide the environment in which volunteers can step out of the trees, see the forest, and prevent fires? How do we enable volunteers to:

- re-examine fundamental assumptions about why and how we give service?
- re-determine priorities in a changing world?
- analyze what is working and why, and what is not working and why not?
- be political—not in a partisan sense, but in influencing legislative votes on the issues that affect long-term solutions?

In all honesty, it should be acknowledged that often it is volunteers themselves who are resistant to stepping out of their direct service roles. Some volunteers actually become obstacles to change, particularly if they attempt to maintain old traditions because they like them and not because they are best for those who are served. They may feel unskilled in advocacy or dislike the political process. On one hand, since we still need to provide client services, the challenge is to recruit new volunteers who actively *want* to deal with the causes of problems while the veterans keep "serving." But on the other hand, it is our obligation to believe that all volunteers, above all, want to *make a difference*. It might be easier than we think to accomplish this. Why not try the following:

- Encourage (and train) all volunteers to be alert to comments made by clients, visitors, or others about a variety of issues—and create a mechanism for reporting what has been learned. What do clients want or need? What do they think of the organization and its present services? How might things change?

• Provide volunteers with Web addresses of sites that provide information on your cause in a variety of ways, both as background and to inform them of pending legislation or other upcoming events. Post announcements of marches on city hall, meetings with legislators, etc. Keeping volunteers informed gives them a fighting chance to participate in such activities.

• We often say that volunteers are "community representatives," yet how often do we tap them for any information? Schedule periodic meetings in which agency administrators engage volunteers in a discussion of issues, answering questions so that volunteers can be effective public educators, but also asking for the opinions and perspectives of the volunteers.

• Directly ask volunteers to do something that affects the cause of your organization's existence. Even small acts can result in big action. For example, record comments from volunteers as the background for a slide show to be used in public education. Hold a letter writing party during which volunteers, in their own words, write to legislators about something important approaching a vote, or write to the local radio station asking for air time.

• Arrange field trips in which volunteers go to similar organizations in town or to neighboring towns for the purpose of meeting with other *volunteers* who share an interest in the same cause. These volunteers can—again as private citizens—join forces in ways that employees could not. Help them develop an Internet listserv to keep in touch and organize collaborative efforts.

The word "war" is again in use. Terrorism, racial bigotry, and fears of many kinds are world-wide concerns. I believe that volunteers can be peacemakers and coalition builders. In fact, only private citizens can do this quickly and locally. We may have to "free" volunteers from some of the direct-service roles they may love to do so that they can advocate for social justice. We cannot limit ourselves to

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being concerned with "volunteer management." This is a time for volunteerism as a philosophy of community life—the engagement of citizens above and beyond the ordinary.

Endnotes

1. A version of this essay first appeared as the November 2001 "Hot Topic" on the Energize, Inc. Web site at (www.energizeinc.com). You can read the response of site visitors to Susan Ellis's comments and add your own at (www.energizeinc.com/hot/res01nov.htm).

2. McCabe, Michael. 2001. "Pathways to Change: Linking Service to Sustainable Change." *e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community*, Summer. (www.e-volunteerism.com/issues/01sum.html)

About the Author

Susan J. Ellis is the president of Energize, Inc. a training, consulting, and publishing firm that specializes in volunteerism. She founded the Philadelphia-based company in 1977 and since that time has assisted clients throughout North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Australia to create or strengthen their volunteer corps.