

## ABSTRACT

*Bonaventure House in Chicago is one of two adult licensed supportive residences in the State of Illinois for people living with AIDS. Residents have access to medical case management, pastoral care, social workers/counselors, and recovery programs for substance addiction. Over 120 volunteers provide practical and supportive services for the residents. This article reports on management procedures and challenges faced by the Bonaventure House volunteer program.*

# A Volunteer Program at a Supportive Residence for People with AIDS

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The Alexian Brothers' Bonaventure House is a licensed supportive residence for 30 men and women living with AIDS. Bonaventure House is located in Chicago's Lakeview section, a portion of which is a home neighborhood for Chicago's gay community. Since the House opened its doors in 1989, it has provided housing, medical case management, supportive services, substance abuse recovery programs, and pastoral care to more than 260 residents. Requirement for residency is a confirmed diagnosis of AIDS. Bonaventure House admits people without regard to race, color, gender, ethnic origin, religious belief, physical handicap, sexual orientation, or income. The House is funded by a mixture of federal and corporate grants and by private donations.

Bonaventure House depends upon the support of more than 120 active volunteers who work an average of 1,200 hours per month. Volunteers provide supportive company for residents, coordinate recreational activities, and help with dining services, building maintenance and financial development. Because they play such an important role in the facility, the volunteers as a matter of policy are substantially

represented on various committees within the organization. Each member of the board of directors also volunteers his/her time in direct service to Bonaventure House. A volunteer advisory council meets quarterly with staff to share concerns and to plan social activities and training sessions.

## WHY VOLUNTEERS CHOOSE BONAVENTURE HOUSE

People choose to volunteer at Bonaventure House for a variety of reasons, but some of their motivations also are found among volunteers at other AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs). Many feel that volunteer work enhances their sense of community and belonging, they feel good helping others, or they have felt the impact of AIDS personally. They may have lost partners, family members, colleagues, neighbors, and friends to the disease. For them, volunteering is an important way to keep the memory of a loved one alive.

Other volunteers see their work at Bonaventure House as an important expression of their spirituality and faith. The fact that the House is owned and operated by the Alexian Brothers of America, a

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health care ministry within the Roman Catholic Church, attracts volunteers who want to donate their time and talents on behalf of their own church community. One such example is "Club Seven," a group of seven women from St. Sabina's Church, an African-American parish on Chicago's South Side, who prepare dinner for the residents on a regular basis.

Volunteers also are attracted by the search for meaningful activity in their lives. Many have careers that offer little or no occasion for social service work. Consequently, they find the volunteer experience at Bonaventure House a refreshing opportunity to do social service/community work. They find intense personal satisfaction in volunteering and often use the phrase "meaningful work" when describing their volunteer experience to the professional staff.

For the most part, the volunteer corps at Bonaventure House identifies strongly with its mission, which is to "enhance the quality of life for people living with AIDS while offering them the opportunity for assisted living within a comprehensive, supportive environment, maintaining their dignity without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, physical challenges, or income." This shared mission between the volunteers and the organization is critical to the success of the Bonaventure House volunteer program.

#### THE POPULATION OF BONAVENTURE HOUSE

When Bonaventure House first opened, the resident population consisted of gay white males. Over the years, changes in AIDS demographics brought a corresponding change to the Bonaventure House resident community. While the majority of clients are male, now there are female residents. This gender mix adds to the variety and diversity of the House. Over 50 percent of clients are African- or Hispanic-American. Some of the residents are parents, and family visits are an important part of the day-to-day activities at

the House. The changing demographics of the AIDS population have brought experiential diversity to the volunteer program.

The changing client population has caused a reassessment of the volunteer corps. Although there are increasing numbers of minority volunteers, they are not as representative of the resident/client population as they could be. The policies and activities of the House are evolving in response to these demographic changes.

#### FIRST CONTACT: VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

Bonaventure House attracts many volunteers both from its immediate neighborhood and from the larger Chicago metropolitan area. Prospective volunteers first hear about Bonaventure House from a variety of sources. Advertising in the local press and in church bulletins has proven to be very effective. Active Bonaventure House volunteers attend local volunteer fairs and are encouraged to invite an interested friend, colleague, relative, or neighbor to visit the House and experience the volunteer program in action. This kind of personal connection is the House's most successful recruiting technique.

The volunteer coordinator visits local college campuses to speak to student groups and campus ministers about volunteer opportunities. Networking with college groups has been effective in recruiting student interns in the field of social work, pastoral care, and food service. Sometimes unsolicited referrals are made after local news media report on events at Bonaventure House.

When potential volunteers first come to Bonaventure House, they complete an application for volunteer services and receive position descriptions and information about the House and the services offered to residents.

#### INTAKE INTERVIEW

After completing an application form, the prospective volunteer is scheduled for an intake interview. The interview is always held at the House and provides an

opportunity for the prospective volunteer to meet other volunteers, staff, and residents and to ask questions about the volunteer program. The intake interview is an important assessment of suitability. It allows the volunteer to express interest in specific tasks that can be written up in a personally tailored position description. It also allows the volunteer coordinator an opportunity to gauge the suitability of the volunteer for specific jobs.

In the course of the interview, the candidate's ability to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds is explored. Sexual orientation and substance addiction issues among the resident community also are discussed at this time. As was noted earlier, a considerable number of Bonaventure House volunteers recently have experienced bereavement as a result of losing someone to AIDS. Those who are recently bereaved are asked to wait for a period of six months before joining the volunteer program so they will have an opportunity to adjust better to their own loss. A record is kept of all referrals and interviews so that, if appropriate, contact can be reestablished in the future.

Sometimes prospective volunteers need to be told they cannot volunteer. They may not have the skills needed or they may be volunteering for reasons that are unacceptable. Since the focus at the House is on living and on maximizing the independence of residents, those who want to be bedside visitors for the dying would not be suitable for this program.

## VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Volunteer training is 12 hours with a four-hour orientation session and an eight-hour training day. The orientation and training explain the origin and mission of the organization, and familiarize new volunteers with the facility, safety procedures, telephone protocol, infection control, boundary and sensitivity issues, client confidentiality, substance abuse, and the recovery program. In a session known as AIDS 101 volunteers are given up-to-date information about the AIDS virus, its treatments

and side-effects. There is also an opportunity for volunteers to meet some of the residents through a resident panel: A group of House residents who are willing to share their stories with the new volunteers and provide insights into community living at Bonaventure House.

The training is highly interactive. It encompasses discussion, question-and-answer sessions, and the use of a wide range of training methods, including video, overhead projection, flipchart, board and marker, handouts, role-play exercises, and simulations. Trainers are accredited professionals with a background in adult education as well as in AIDS service. Because of its work in training, Bonaventure House helped to found the volunteer training consortium at the Midwest AIDS Training and Education Center (MATEC) at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In addition to orientation and training, volunteers are offered quarterly inservice training. Inservices cover topics such as substance abuse, tuberculosis, mental health awareness, pastoral care, and grief issues. Scheduling orientation, training, and inservices poses a major challenge. They always have been held on Sundays, but not all prospective volunteers are available on that day. Since trainers are not always available weekday evenings or Saturdays, scheduling poses a major problem. A challenge for the volunteer coordinator right now is to develop flexible training schedules that work for both volunteers and staff.

## TOOLS FOR THE JOB AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The Bonaventure House volunteer manual contains information about the facility and all policies and procedures which allow volunteers to use their time constructively and beneficially. The manual contains a code of ethics for volunteers that emphasizes maintaining personal boundaries so that both the volunteers and the House residents have a safe working environment where the dignity and the independence of the residents are ac-

knowledge. Because Bonaventure House is a residential community, volunteers are encouraged to be available to the Bonaventure community as a whole, rather than spend all of their time with particular individuals.

A challenge facing volunteer administrators at ASOs is the delivery of adequate support systems to volunteers especially when a client dies. Effective support systems greatly enable volunteers to cope with multiple losses. Many ASOs ask volunteers to help provide one-on-one care for individual clients through a "buddy" system. In contrast, Bonaventure House encourages volunteers to interact with all 30 of its residents. Repeated bereavements can be deeply wounding. To mitigate this problem, volunteers are encouraged to establish friendly relationships which help the residents but without the kind of intense, interpersonal involvement that characterizes close friendship. Striving for objectivity and dispassion does not diminish the quality of volunteer service, but offers volunteers guidelines as they interact with residents in order to keep relationships functioning smoothly. The end result of using this model is to help reduce burn-out while promoting volunteer retention. However, burn-out is a reality at Bonaventure House, and turnover among volunteers can be high.

All volunteers attend monthly support group meetings. These meetings are mandatory during a volunteer's first six months. To further integrate them into the facility, volunteers are encouraged to call weekly on a special hotline for updates about the resident community. Details about hospitalizations, new residents, and in-house activities are made available through the hotline. A monthly newsletter is mailed to all volunteers. An audio cassette, recorded weekly by the volunteer coordinator, presents updates on work projects, house needs, and news about the community important for volunteers to know. Volunteers are required to listen to this recording at the start of their shifts. The volunteer coordinator, staff members,

and supervisors always are available to volunteers should they need advice or help during their shifts. Ideally, a "phone-tree" makes it possible for all volunteers to be informed of a resident's death. Although the phone-tree does not function as well as it should, the fact that staff at least *tries* to contact volunteers at the time of a resident's death is perceived positively by most of the volunteers. Volunteers are welcome to attend memorial services and other rituals held at the House whenever a resident dies.

### MENTORING PROGRAM

During their first shifts at the House, veteran volunteers offer assistance to new volunteers. Veterans also allow new volunteers the opportunity to contact them outside the House should they have any questions or concerns. This mentoring program is essential in helping the new volunteer feel welcome and encouraged during her/his initial exposure to the work done at the House. Meeting people for the first time and matching names with faces is as stressful at Bonaventure House as it is in any new environment. The presence of a mentor who guides and encourages is appreciated. Mentors telephone new volunteers after a particularly busy time or "crisis moment" to find out how they are coping and whether they can be helpful in any way.

### RECOGNITION

Volunteer recognition at Bonaventure House is both formal and informal. Informal recognition includes holiday greeting cards for volunteers, notes of appreciation, telephone calls and personal thank-you's, as well as individual profiles in the newsletter and acknowledgment and congratulations given to each volunteer on the anniversary date of their volunteer service. Formal recognition events are held twice a year. In spring there is an awards brunch at a local restaurant. The annual volunteer picnic is held at the end of the summer. On these occasions certifi-

cates and modest gifts are presented to volunteers who have been with the agency for more than one year. Plaques are placed in a prominent location at Bonaventure House to honor those who have completed one year of service as well as those who have completed five years. A small group of volunteers has remained at the House since it opened in 1989, showing their commitment to the program.

#### SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION

While the model of supervision is understood as a support system for volunteers, it also promotes excellence in the volunteer workforce. Through appropriate supervision, volunteers are made aware that their work is just as important as that of the professional staff. In order to become a volunteer one must go through the same procedures as would an applicant for a paid position. The process allows volunteers to be matched with tasks and placed on projects at which they can excel, and provides on-going assistance so that their volunteer experience at Bonaventure House remains rewarding and beneficial.

The Bonaventure House volunteer program is evaluated annually by its volunteers. Volunteers are evaluated not only by their supervisors, but by their own self-assessment. This feedback makes it possible for Bonaventure House staff, and especially its volunteer coordinator, to adapt the volunteer program to the changing needs of the Bonaventure House resident community and its volunteers. For example, when volunteers expressed a desire to help with recreational activities one week-day evening a week, Bingo games were developed complete with prizes for lucky participants. Other projects that grew out of volunteer feedback include plants/gardening, board games, book clubs, movie groups, massage therapy, and music/art therapy. As volunteers express an interest in becoming involved in developing special projects, Bonaventure House encourages them as long as the project is within budget.

#### BUDGET

The Polk Bros. Foundation supports the Bonaventure House volunteer program. This Chicago-based foundation funds organizations in the community that have a significant volunteer component. The foundation pays the salary and professional fees of the volunteer coordinator at the House, underwrites advertising for volunteers, and reimburses the costs of photocopying and mailing the monthly volunteer newsletter. Their sponsorship also supports appreciation events such as the annual awards dinner/brunch and volunteer picnic, and helps meet the expense of training materials and volunteer education.

#### CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF AIDS VOLUNTEERISM

This article has spoken of the successful elements of the volunteer program at Bonaventure House, but what are the obstacles and challenges?

A major problem is volunteer retention. Through informal feedback it is believed that many of its volunteers enjoy volunteering and feel appreciated for the work they do, but the number who drop out of the program is high. There is a need to focus more energy and time on retaining currently active volunteers. It has been taken for granted that because Bonaventure House is an ASO, volunteer turnover will be high. This assumption needs to be challenged.

Another obstacle is funding. Despite the generosity of sponsors, they cannot be expected to donate year after year. As non-profit organizations seek more funding from fewer donors, Bonaventure House must find less expensive but no less creative ways of funding the volunteer program.

A final challenge is staff relations. Staff should never expect volunteers to *do* their work, but instead expect *assistance*. Not only must volunteers be educated, trained, and supported, but also staff so they both can work effectively and collaboratively.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, training volunteers to work

with experiential diversity can be difficult. Bonaventure House has always had a culturally diverse client population, work force, and volunteer corps. Now that the client demographics are changing, there are great differences between the experiences of our clients and the experiences of our volunteers. Bonaventure House now provides housing and supportive services for people who have serious addiction problems and a history of chronic drug use. How can volunteers be better prepared for working with this population? How can training be improved to prepare volunteers for experiential diversity? These are challenging questions for the present and the future.

Recent improvements in AIDS treatment mean a greater life expectancy for people with AIDS. More people of color are impacted by the AIDS virus. The volunteer program at Bonaventure House and at other ASOs will need to evolve to address these two facts. Such an evolution will require an even more diverse volun-

teer corps trained to keep up with new treatments and their long-term effects. Even greater emphasis will have to be placed on on-going volunteer training and inservice enrichment. Sharing resources and knowledge with other care providers in the community would greatly enhance training.

Bonaventure House looks forward to the challenges ahead. One goal for the volunteer program is to become an increasingly stable anchor in the midst of change.

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