

## A Program for Sighted, Blind, Low Vision, and Disabled Volunteers

Jeannette Franks, M.A.

Traditionally, many services for blind and visually impaired persons have been provided by volunteers. Volunteers are an integral part of the services offered at Vision Services—An Agency for the Visually Impaired in Seattle, Wash. They provide visual information to clients, public education, assistance in the store, office support, and staff for the newsletter. These volunteer jobs complement the programs for low vision rehabilitation, orientation and mobility, daily living skills, and social work provided by the paid staff of this United Way agency.

In 1983 a record-breaking total of 219 volunteers contributed 11,276 hours of service to the agency. Approximately 20 percent were handicapped, and many of the clients who benefited from the services of these volunteers served in turn as volunteers for others. This spirit of sharing exemplifies volunteering and our agency's philosophy toward this service.

Volunteering offers many benefits to participants, including job skill development, recognition, social interaction, and personal satisfaction. "Volunteering is an American tradition and an historical right of all citizens" (Beugen, 1984). Vision Services is committed to making volunteer opportunities available not only for sighted people, but also for blind and visually impaired persons, as well as those with other disabilities. Our experience shows that handicapped volunteers can be an important part of a successful volunteer program.

In general, volunteers with handicaps receive the same training and volunteer opportunities as others. All select ap-

propriate assignments and receive guidance to help insure success.

### VOLUNTEER PROGRAM STRUCTURE

When individuals want to volunteer through our agency, their initial contact is followed by an interview with the manager of volunteers. In this interview, material in the program manual is reviewed. Our Volunteer Program Manual, available in large print and on tape cassette, contains a history of the agency, eligibility requirements, recording procedures, communications systems, responsibilities of volunteers and clients, and a discussion of recognition and appreciation. Appendices include an organization chart, criteria for accepting volunteers, placement information sheet, client and volunteer evaluation forms, reporting form for hours worked, and job descriptions for personal service, information, clerical, and store volunteers.

A one-hour orientation and training session with the manager is required of potential volunteers. A reference is requested and checked. Orientation covers material in the program manual, agency programs, a review of the history and demographics of blindness, awareness of and sensitivity to the needs and capabilities of blind and visually impaired persons, safety and emergency procedures, respect for the dignity and worth of visually impaired persons, proper behavior around dog guides, sighted guide techniques, information about braille and large print, and examples of normal and handicapped volunteers at work.

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*Jeannette Franks* is Manager of Volunteers at Vision Services—An Agency for the Visually Impaired in Seattle, Washington. This article is reprinted with permission from American Foundation for the Blind. It appeared in the *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, October 1985, copyright American Foundation for the Blind, 15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011.

The manager of volunteers then reviews all requests for volunteers with each applicant and they agree on an assignment that seems most appropriate. Each volunteer has an opportunity to do the assigned task one time before making a commitment. As soon as a placement is decided upon, both the volunteer and client must accept or reject it. If the match is mutually acceptable, a three-month assignment follows. At the end of this period both the client and volunteer evaluate the placement. At this time the volunteer can decide to continue with the assignment for another three months, change to a new one, or take three months leave before selecting another assignment. Also at this time, the client can request a new volunteer.

Some volunteers stay with the same placement for years, others switch frequently. Some volunteers have more than one assignment just as some clients work with more than one volunteer.

#### VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Most sighted volunteers provide access to visual information for blind and visually impaired individuals. Certified braillists transcribe print material, and a few persons read to tape. The largest single group of these personal service volunteers reads directly to individuals. Many of this volunteer group are themselves blind or visually impaired, and they take placements where friendly visiting, good listening, or peer support is requested. A few perform these duties on the telephone, but most work directly with their people.

Information volunteers are active in public education and awareness events and in activities like the Speakers Bureau, health fairs, vision screenings, community service forums, and fund-raising events. The majority of these volunteers are blind or visually impaired.

Clerical volunteers help with mailing lists, reproduce braille and print materials, send out newsletters and bulk mail, and perform other office tasks. Many of them are blind or visually impaired.

Blind and visually impaired volunteers also work in the agency's aids and appliances store where braille writing materials, talking calculators, tactile games,

and similar items are sold.

Volunteers with other disabilities have also found the program accessible. Some housebound persons, confined to bed or wheelchair, produce tape recordings at home. Some do friendly visiting or reading on the telephone. When one client was having difficulty finding someone nearby to read stock market reports to her, a volunteer who lived across town but subscribed to the same publication read the quotations over the telephone.

Another volunteer, confined to bed with a spinal injury, served as a telephone visitor for an isolated elderly woman in her neighborhood.

Some persons whose visual impairment is recent have found new skills and resources by volunteering in the store. Confidence and self-esteem are built by providing needed services. Volunteers learn how to keep inventory, make change, teach shoppers to use complicated items, and provide information about the store's many goods and services which are especially designed for blind people, or particularly useful to them.

Volunteers with emotional and learning disabilities also have been involved in the program. A young actress with dyslexia found that reading for blind persons enhanced her confidence and career. A person recovering from a nervous breakdown found stability and comfort from her regular volunteer assignment.

Learning such saleable skills as handling cash and receipts, operating office machines, working with the public, speaking in public, and becoming familiar with professional office environments are benefits of these placements. Also significant are such intangibles as feeling good and feeling needed. "These intangible benefits are important both because of the ways in which they help fill up people's lives with meaningful activities and also because they are another way in which volunteering enables handicapped people to share mainstream experiences." (Hensley, 1984).

#### CASE STUDIES

Five case studies of active volunteers who have provided more than 1542 hours of service are described below:

V is a volunteer who came to the agency a year after becoming blind because of diabetes. A homemaker with little job experience, she felt that working in the agency store would teach her skills and expertise relevant to her blindness. Now, two years later, she trains new volunteers and accepts new challenges such as learning to use and teach others to use a Kurzweil Reading Computer. When asked how she felt about volunteering, she responded, "I like it. The experiences are challenging."

W, a semi-retired accountant, is hearing impaired. He considers that the best part of his volunteer assignments is "seeing how my clients cope with their impairments." The four blind persons he reads for describe him as "excellent," "wonderful," "very good," and an important part of their "remaining independent."

Volunteer X is blind and has used volunteer readers all her adult life. She is an active information volunteer and a braille proofreader for the agency in addition to her full-time paid job for a tax agency. "I really enjoy volunteering because it's a way of giving back what I receive," she says.

Volunteer Y is confined to a wheelchair as a result of multiple sclerosis and an accident. He usually reads to tape, but has also read in person to a client who came to his home. He says, "It's nice to be appreciated," and feels good about the "positive reinforcement."

The death of a family member can be an emotionally disabling experience. Z came to our agency soon after becoming a widow. "It opened up a whole new world," she says. "I had to have a reason to get up in the morning." Her volunteer job turned into paid part-time employment because of her acquired job skills.

## CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this program is to enable as many people as possible to enjoy the benefits and opportunities of volunteering. At one time the typical volunteer was thought to be a female suburban homemaker with ample free time and few "professional" skills. However, in this program most volunteers work full time at paid jobs, men and women are represented in equal numbers, and volunteers typically

may be handicapped persons. The training and structure of this program produces volunteers with professional skills and meaningful jobs working in an unpaid capacity for the agency. We plan to continue this successful approach in the future.

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## REFERENCES

- Beugen, P. "Equal Access to Volunteer Participation." *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 1984, p. 1.
- Hensley, G. *Involving the Handicapped As Volunteers: A Guidebook*. Seattle: Vision Services—An Agency for the Visually Impaired, 1984.