

# The Social Work Profession's Attitude towards Volunteerism

Gay Strickler

In the past ten years, the social work profession has had to face serious challenges in the form of budget cutbacks, soaring caseloads and a political way of thinking that seems to frown on aid to any but the most desperate individuals. Numerous articles in social work periodicals have discussed these obstacles, and many creative solutions have been proposed. Yet rarely in the literature is there any consideration of volunteerism as a possible resource. There is virtually no discussion of whether or how volunteers could be used to extend or supplement services. This seems both surprising and unfortunate. It is surprising because for most of its history social work has been closely allied with volunteerism. It is unfortunate because ignoring the issue of volunteerism today may prove to be a missed opportunity which social work will regret in the future. The intention of this article is to describe what does exist concerning volunteerism in current social work periodicals and to consider why there is so little written on the subject.

## DEFINITIONS AND SOURCES

In trying to assess the attitude of the social work profession towards volunteerism in the 1980s, the author used the definition of volunteers from the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. Volunteers are "persons who contribute their services without remuneration to public or voluntary organizations engaged in all types of social welfare activities."<sup>1</sup> The term "social work profession" is not so easily defined. However, for the purposes of this article, the term will include those activities and individuals sanctioned by the National Association of Social Workers. With these definitions in hand, this researcher turned to a variety of social work periodicals pub-

lished in the years 1980-1985. It was hoped that a survey of periodicals, rather than new books, would offer a more current and wider view of the field. The periodicals examined were: *Administration in Social Work*, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, *Social Casework*, *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, *Policy Studies Journal*, *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, *Social Service Review* and the *Journal of Social Service Research*.

The 1983-84 Supplement to the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* offers a concise yet comprehensive discussion of volunteerism in social work. The article, by Gordon Manser, looks at volunteers in terms of their numbers, where they work, what they do and why they do what they do. Manser also touches on the self-help phenomenon and the need for networking. Most interesting, however, is his section on "Barriers to Full Utilization" in which he quotes a report by the National Forum on Volunteering: "...the major barrier in effective volunteer involvement lies in the inability or unwillingness of paid, helping professionals to accept volunteers as legitimate partners in the helping process..."<sup>2</sup>

## SEEKING MENTION OF VOLUNTEERS

The gauntlet having been thrown down, one might assume there would be some reaction to this line of thinking. Unfortunately a scrutiny of the current periodicals shows virtually nothing at all on the subject. There are many titles which lead one to think volunteerism will receive attention in the form of at least a sentence or two. Examples include: "Declining Public Social Service Resources: A Managerial Problem,"<sup>3</sup> "The Politics of Cutback Management,"<sup>4</sup> "Adapting to Austerity:

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*Gay Strickler* is a Ph.D. candidate at the Bryn Mawr College School of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. She is an active volunteer in local civic and school organizations.

Human Services after Proposition 13,"<sup>5</sup> "Management Trends in the Human Services in the 1980s,"<sup>6</sup> "Community Empowerment: The Critical Role of Neighborhoods."<sup>7</sup> In none of these or other similarly entitled articles is volunteerism mentioned as a possible resource in meeting the problem of less available funds to employ staff and increased demand for services. Often, as in the article on neighborhoods, volunteerism is simply assumed with no question as to whether neighborhood residents will even want to volunteer the time to empower themselves. Moreover, in none of these articles is there any discussion as to why volunteers should *not* be involved. Although the Reagan administration has continually justified many of its cutbacks by calling on volunteer capabilities, there is nothing in the social work literature showing why this approach won't work.

While there are some articles in which volunteers are mentioned, their roles are often taken for granted, and there is no concern with some of the deeper issues than their mere participation in a project. The issue of volunteerism, if discussed at all, is an indirect consequence of research on other topics. There are only a few articles falling into this category. They are: "Self-Help for Families of the Mentally Ill,"<sup>8</sup> "The Use of Social Networks in Social Welfare,"<sup>9</sup> and "Community-Based Human Service Organizations: Theory and Practice."<sup>10</sup>

The author found only one article devoted specifically to a problem facing the utilization of volunteers in a social service: this was "Volunteer Ombudsman Burnout in Long-Term Care Services: Some Causes and Solutions."<sup>11</sup> While directed toward a very circumscribed group of volunteers, the article is notable for two reasons. First, it considers an important issue involving volunteers and, second, it deals with an area in which there could be tremendous potential for volunteers.

Aside from the aforementioned article, there is only one other source in which volunteerism is discussed in any depth. *The Journal of Jewish Communal Service* presents a dramatic exception to the dearth of interest in volunteerism. Almost every issue of this periodical in the last five

years has contained at least one article on the meatier issues of volunteerism. The Jewish element of the social work profession seems very concerned with numerous aspects of volunteerism, as the following titles indicate: "Working With the New Breed of Volunteer,"<sup>12</sup> "The Changing Role of Jewish Women: Implications for Family, Social Work Agency and Social Work Practice,"<sup>13</sup> and "Recruitment of the Best: A Study of Why Dallas Jewish Women Leaders Volunteer."<sup>14</sup>

This sample of titles, unlike the previous ones in this paper, does not include all the articles written, but is representative of many written in a similar vein for the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. Jewish social services obviously consider volunteerism vital to their continued existence and effectiveness. As one author wrote:

*Without our volunteers there will not be a healthy, organized Jewish community to transmit Jewish values, to raise funds for Israel or to supplement agency services. In these times of extreme government cutbacks, the Jewish community must fortify itself with an even more plentiful, sophisticated, trained voluntary network.*<sup>15</sup>

One question which arises is why the Jewish component of the social work profession is interested in volunteerism and the issues surrounding it. This author wishes to concentrate on the other side of this question: Why *isn't* the rest of the social work profession interested in volunteerism?

## ROOTS OF THE VOLUNTEER/SOCIAL WORKER CONNECTION

This lack of interest was not always the rule. The social work profession grew out of volunteerism and maintained close ties with it through the 1950s. For instance, in the 1930s, the National Committee on Volunteers was an Associate Group of the National Conference on Social Welfare. In the 1940s the National Social Welfare Assembly was one of the founders of the Advisory Committee on Citizen Participation which centered on volunteers in social policy formation and social services.

In 1945 and 1949, the Council on Social Work Education held workshops, the primary focus of which was the responsibility of social work schools to prepare students to work with volunteers. In the decade of

the fifties, the National Council of Social Work and the Association of Volunteer Bureaus held annual workshops. The goal of these workshops was to enhance the capacity of volunteer bureaus to work with agencies on the principles, methods and procedures which would lead to the best match between volunteer and agency.

Articles in social work periodicals during this time reflected the close connection between social work and volunteerism. Beginning with the publication of its second volume in 1933, the *Social Work Yearbook* (predecessor to the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*) annually devoted space to oftentimes glowing reports of volunteerism's contribution to social work. Other periodicals also published articles dealing with volunteerism, the difference between now and then lying not so much in numbers as in the substantive issues discussed.

In the 1940s and 1950s the use of volunteers was considered in areas in which today their participation is regarded by some as taboo. "Predominance of Volunteer and Employed Workers without Professional Education in Direct Service to Groups"<sup>16</sup> and "The Use of Volunteers in Conjunction with Psychotherapy"<sup>17</sup> are two examples. Furthermore, in articles with more general-sounding titles such as "A Three-Dimensional Approach to Health and Welfare Planning"<sup>18</sup> and "Whence and Whither Social Work—A Sociological Perspective,"<sup>19</sup> volunteerism is not only mentioned, but seriously discussed, unlike the current articles previously mentioned.

Even in the 1960s and 1970s, as cooperation between the two spheres became more troubled, articles still reflected concern with the basic issues. Examples include: "Volunteers in Social Welfare: The Challenge of Their Future,"<sup>20</sup> "The Retired Social Worker as a Volunteer,"<sup>21</sup> "Human Services Trends in the mid-1970's,"<sup>22</sup> "Volunteers in a Juvenile Court,"<sup>23</sup> and "Voluntary Agencies in Four Welfare States."<sup>24</sup> During no five-year period since the 1930s has there been such an avoidance of volunteerism in the periodicals, excluding the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, as in the 1980s.

## WHY DID VOLUNTEERS DISAPPEAR?

What is or are the reasons for this sudden hiatus? Is the social work profession simply no longer interested in volunteerism? There are certainly reasons why it might not be. The involvement of volunteers is a mixed blessing. First, the recruitment, training, supervision and organizing of volunteers requires staff time and agency money. In the 1980s, both staff and money are being increasingly diminished. Thus, the cost of volunteers in an agency may prove greater than the benefits.

Secondly, the incorporation of volunteers into social services can be viewed as a ploy to take the government off the hook; if social services can be delivered by volunteers, then government funding is no longer necessary. At a time when the national government is attempting to sweeten the pill of financial cutbacks with a simultaneous emphasis on the glories of volunteerism, it is understandable that the social work profession would be wary of taking a step which permits a further abrogation of government's responsibility for social welfare.

Feminists and unionists of the social work profession offer a third objection to volunteerism. Both view volunteers as depriving their respective constituents of paying jobs. The National Organization of Women criticized volunteerism on the following grounds: 1) unpaid work downgrades the status of women; 2) it exploits women's time and talents; 3) it works against the development of part-time employment and flexible schedules for paying jobs; 4) it exacerbates the problem of inadequate funding for social services; and 5) it emphasizes a band-aid approach instead of getting at the root of social welfare problems.<sup>25</sup> Members of social work unions have complained, in a similar vein, that volunteers take away jobs, thus leading to increased unemployment of social workers.

There are other perhaps less obvious reasons for social work's apparent dismissal of volunteerism. One writer argues that social workers have historically been involved in direct relationships with clients. Increasingly, social workers are doing resource allocation, decision-mak-

ing, evaluation and other jobs which are a step away from face-to-face contact with the client. The volunteer has taken over ...some of the more attractive tasks that have erstwhile been the fantasized segment of social work practice; it is the social worker who must come to terms with the increasingly specialized and target centered nature of his work.<sup>26</sup>

Another suggestion is that articles on volunteerism are being written but are being submitted to periodicals specializing in volunteerism rather than in social work. A variation on this argument is that articles submitted to social work journals are being refused on the premise that they are more appropriate for journals focusing on volunteerism.

This last argument is certainly reflective of the independent status which volunteerism has acquired in the last twenty years. Volunteerism constitutes a field of its own now, with its own periodicals and publications; it is no longer an adjunct of the social work profession. This development seems to have begun during the 1960s. The 1960s saw the overnight flowering of many new kinds of volunteerism, particularly in the political realm. Many volunteer groups sprang forth around the issues of civil rights and the Vietnam War. Self-help groups increased dramatically in numbers and scope of activity. None of these volunteer activities were dependent on social work.

The 1970s continued volunteerism's progress towards independence from the social work profession. Call for Action Bureaus were created, high schools and colleges initiated volunteer activities and businesses did the same. In all these instances, the initiative came from outside the social work profession. Volunteer groups also began to pool resources, forming, for example, the Alliance for Volunteerism. Networking became more prevalent, especially to press for insurance, training institutes, tax benefits and specific legislation. One could say that during this period volunteerism was becoming "professionalized." It was certainly no longer dependent on the social work profession for its credibility.

It is possible that volunteerism's growing independence from the social work profession frightened the latter. In the eye of the social worker, not only were

volunteers no longer simply doing what social workers told them to do, they were taking over functions which had once been the social worker's (functions which had, ironically, originally been the volunteer's). Advocacy for social reform is an example of this trend.

Furthermore, the "professionalization" of the volunteer comes at a time when the field of social work is feeling less than secure about its own professional status and is grappling with issues like decertification, educational requirements and licensure. This author suggests that the lack of security about its own "professionalism" may have contributed to social work's reluctance to consider volunteerism as one means of coping with the simultaneous problems of fewer resources and increased demand for service.

#### REFLECTIONS ON THE SEPARATION

This writer would also like to suggest that this reaction is unnecessary. Volunteerism and social work have much more in common than otherwise. In fact, today more than ever, it is important that these commonalities be acted upon in meeting what are also common challenges. Although social work complains of the decrease in government responsibility for its citizens' social welfare, a greater problem may be the way in which government is taking action unilaterally, without benefit of citizen participation. The threat may not be to our welfare system, but to our democracy.

A major concern of the 1980s is how to maintain the citizens' role in their "democracy" in the face of a huge government apparatus, a highly technological and specialized culture, and a consequent depersonalization of the entire society. Both volunteerism and social work are based on values which are inherently democratic. The goals of democracy are not that different from the goals of the volunteer and the social worker. Both focus on the individual and the right to participate fully in society. Both fields are also crucial to the functioning of a democratic society.

One believer in volunteerism's role in democracy writes:

*Active concern for a cause by individuals and groups is an essential ingredient in social*

progress in a democracy...The connection of the ordinary citizen with the government and local authorities who are running the country is remote. He can vote for his parliamentary candidate and local councillor according to his views . . . If this were the sum total of democratic action the power of the individual would be small indeed, but fortunately this is far from the case. The individual makes up for the minute influence he exerts as a voter by active participation in the working of society by membership of groups and organizations which seek to improve conditions and to change policy, and by humble day-to-day work as a good neighbor. This is democracy in action.<sup>27</sup>

The author of an article in a 1956 issue of *Social Work* wrote about social work's importance to democracy in terms which the profession would still hopefully echo today:

*It is dependent on our ability as fellow Americans to cooperate with each other in developing the necessary social organization so that every American citizen will have an equal opportunity to share in the abundance of this fortunate land and an equal opportunity to achieve for himself a personally satisfying and socially useful life.*<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, it is sometimes more difficult to tolerate democracy within one's ranks than it is outside it. As volunteers became more assertive about their needs and preferences, social work has seemed less desirous of involving these volunteers. The following was written more than fifteen years ago, but is still a problem today.

*We have taken great pride in the fact that we are "democratically operated" institutions. We have said that it is the job of the board to establish policy and the job of the staff to execute that policy. How much of that statement is really true? Many of us have used our position to create boards of like-minded people, who think much as we do. More than anything else, our boards have tended to become reflections of ourself. Through skillful manipulation of the nominating process, we insure that people who think like we do get elected to key offices. We have been much inclined to take the docile, well-mannered volunteer who can be "managed" and see that he rises to the top. Trouble makers, once supported, are skillfully eliminated as disruptive influences. The result is a board that is the "mirror image" of the executive. The monthly agenda features a soothing*

*recital of service statistics and passage of pre-determined resolutions.*<sup>29</sup>

While the same charge can no doubt be levied against volunteer institutions, the point is that neither social work nor the volunteer sector can ignore the dangers to individualism which are evident today. Volunteerism and social work have a common challenge and can only benefit in working together to meet it.

In more concrete terms, there is much that social work can gain from the use of volunteers. It should also be emphasized that there exists such a plethora of tasks to be fulfilled, that it seems unlikely that there would not be some areas where volunteers could operate without competing with social workers. Such areas include: 1) identifying problems requiring social service; 2) policy-making; 3) fundraising; 4) interpreting social service programs to the public; 5) reporting and evaluating community reactions to programs; and 6) acting as advocates. There are, of course many other areas in which volunteers could be of use. The point is that they are an available resource in a time of diminishing resources.

This author is not claiming that the social service profession must involve volunteers, nor that it necessarily accept volunteerism as a positive element of social-welfare. She does, however, want to argue that volunteerism must at least be considered and discussed. Ignoring the issues will neither enhance social work's effectiveness nor shore up its insecurities about its own status. Such stand-offishness as the profession currently exhibits toward volunteerism is akin to burying one's head in the sand. At best, the profession will only have to deal with a missed opportunity; at worst, the refusal to even consider a potential resource may contribute to a weakening of those democratic elements of our society which constitute the very foundations of the social work profession.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sieder and Kirshbaum, "Volunteers," p. 1583.

<sup>2</sup>Manser, "Volunteers," p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>Finch, "Declining Public Social Service

Resources: A Managerial Problem."

<sup>4</sup>Pawlak, Peter and Fink, "The Politics of Cutback Management."

<sup>5</sup>Terrell, "Adapting to Austerity: Human Services after Proposition 13."

<sup>6</sup>Sorri, "Management Trends in the Human Services in the 1980's."

<sup>7</sup>Naparstek, "Community Empowerment: The Critical Role of Neighborhoods."

<sup>8</sup>Matfield, "Self-Help for Families of the Mentally Ill."

<sup>9</sup>Maguire and Biegel, "The Use of Social Networks in Social Welfare."

<sup>10</sup>Tourigny and Miller, "Community-Based Human Service Organizations: Theory and Practice."

<sup>11</sup>Litwin and Monk, "Volunteer Ombudsman Burnout in Long-Term Care Services: Some Causes and Solutions."

<sup>12</sup>Farber, "Working With the New Breed of Volunteer."

<sup>13</sup>Pressma, "The Changing Role of Jewish Women: Implications for Family, Social Work Agency and Social Work Practice."

<sup>14</sup>Schwamm, "Recruitment of the Best: A Study of Why Dallas Jewish Women Leaders Volunteer."

<sup>15</sup>Pressma, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup>Murphy, "Predominance of Volunteer and Employed Workers Without Professional Education in Direct Service to Groups."

<sup>17</sup>May, "The Use of Volunteers in Conjunction with Psychotherapy."

<sup>18</sup>Angell, "A Three Dimensional Approach to Health and Welfare Planning."

<sup>19</sup>Eaton, "Whence and Whither Social Work? A Sociological Perspective."

<sup>20</sup>Levin, "Volunteers in Social Welfare: The Challenge of their Future."

<sup>21</sup>Einstein, "The Retired Social Worker as a Volunteer."

<sup>22</sup>Demone and Shulberg, "Human Services Trends in the Mid-1970's."

<sup>23</sup>Stoebel, Sterne and Sterne, "Volunteers in a Juvenile Court."

<sup>24</sup>Kramer, "Voluntary Agencies in Four Welfare States."

<sup>25</sup>Ellis and Noyes, *By the People*, p. 224.

<sup>26</sup>Davies, *Support Systems in Social Work*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup>Morris, *Voluntary Work in the Welfare State*, p. 210.

<sup>28</sup>Altmeyer, "The Dynamics of Social

Work," p. 10.

<sup>29</sup>*Professions Under Pressure*, p. 40.

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