

# The New AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration

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## INTRODUCTION

To many people ethics in the workplace is a thorny and a difficult issue. Their life at work is filled with practical concerns: under-staffing, under-funding, and administrative headaches. Often codes of ethics are filed and forgotten.

The new AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration is different. It is both relevant and practical. In addition, it is designed to be a hands-on tool for volunteer administrators who find themselves faced with a difficult ethical issue. Building upon AVA's previous code of ethics, the new statement steps back and takes a fresh look at the ethical values and the core competencies that underlie the profession of volunteer administration. The article that follows reviews the basic models used to create the new ethics statement, and takes the reader through an example of how the statement can be used to make more ethical decisions.

## TWO MODELS FOR UNDERSTANDING ETHICS

The first model (Figure 1) comes from Ginette Johnstone and Judith Waymire's work, *What if... A Guide to Ethical Decision Making*. Johnstone and Waymire create a pyramidal model that holistically captures the relationships between the complex elements faced by an administrator of volunteers and the organization in which he/she works. Some of the definitions that follow are modified from this model.

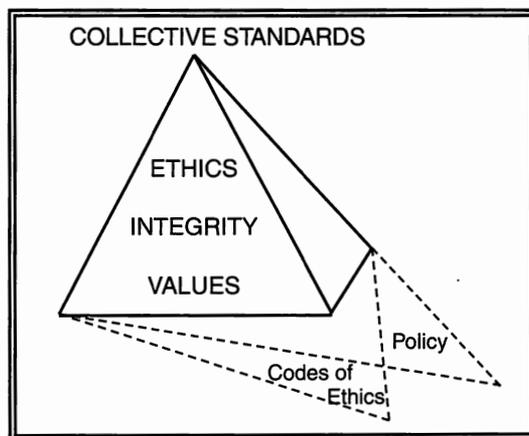
On the bottom of the pyramid are VALUES, the "core beliefs or desires which act to guide or motivate attitudes and actions," according to Johnstone and Way-

mire. Values come from our life experience, our religion or faith, our cultural context, upbringing and so on. Values hold up the pyramid and are its foundation.

The next level of the pyramid is INTEGRITY, the quality that creates compatibility between our actions and our values. Having integrity is a challenge for both individuals and organizations that want to experience consistency between their values and their actions.

Moving up to the next layer in the pyramid are ETHICS. Ethics are a particular code of values. They are social values, which guide behavior with others. The key point here is that ethics address our relationships with others and are, therefore, social in their orientation. In other words, there are no personal ethics.

The cap of the pyramid is COLLECTIVE STANDARDS. Collective standards are the particular methods of practice developed by one group, a subset of the whole soci-



**Figure 1**  
**VALUES PYRAMID**  
**Building on Values Leads to**  
**Policy and Code of Ethics.**

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ety, which help to guide its specific practice. Up to this point a whole society could be in agreement. However, we recognize that each profession is unique and has practices which must be recognized and understood separately. These would be that profession's collective standards.

Johnstone and Waymire also note that under certain conditions the pyramid will cast two shadows. The first shadow, CODES OF ETHICS, is the formal system of *rules* that govern the behavior of a group. The second shadow, POLICY, are the *guidelines* used to govern the behavior of a group in specific situations. Both codes of ethics and policy are ways of formalizing what happens when you put the pyramid into action. In other words, codes of ethics and policies are values in action and should, first and foremost, be linked to the ethics of a group. If you create policies, for example, before exploring ethical values, your policies are at risk of being disconnected from the values, ethics, and collective standards of the group.

A second model to help us understand ethics (Figure 2) comes from the Josephson Institute of Ethics. Within the Josephson model, VALUES guide or motivate our actions or attitudes. At this point we are talking about everything we value: time, money, equality, caring, the arts, and so on.

In this mix of values some have an ethical aspect and some do not. ETHICALLY NEUTRAL VALUES could include: money,

power, status, fun, etc. MORALS are individual values which come from our various cultural traditions including educational, familial, and religious. When two or more people come together we leave the realm of individual morals and enter ETHICAL VALUES. Ethical values are social values which directly relate to beliefs about what is right and proper. As was already mentioned, there are no personal ethics. The Josephson Institute of Ethics has shown that six core ethical values exist which transcend cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic differences. These six core ethical values are: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, justice and fairness, caring, and citizenship.

Evolving from these six values are ETHICAL PRINCIPLES, which are specific rules of conduct. They are closely related to the collective standards discussed previously. From ethical principles come ETHICAL ACTIONS. Within the AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration this means both growth of an ethical decision-making competency, and the implementation of those decisions in one's professional life.

#### USING THE AVA STATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

The new ethics statement is designed as a decision-making tool which links ethical values and ethical principles to practical

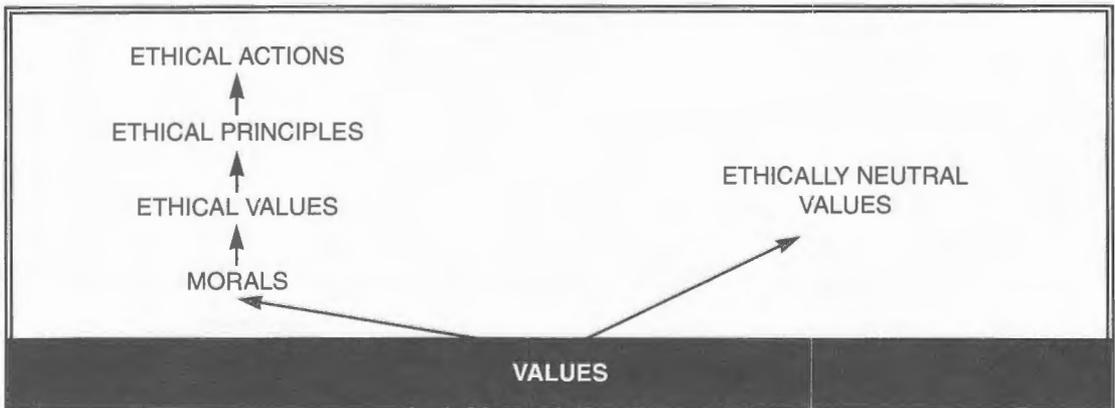


Figure 2  
ETHICS MAP

Differentiating between the ethical and ethically neutral values.

volunteer program components. Unlike a "code of ethics," AVA's new document assists volunteer administrators in finding rational solutions to ethical dilemmas. Summarized, the core ethical values and related principles in the AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration include:

- *Citizenship and Philanthropy*—including the ethical principles of a philosophy of volunteerism and social responsibility.
- *Respect*—including the ethical principles of autonomy, courtesy, civility, decency, understanding, acceptance, accessibility, privacy, human dignity, mutuality, and self-determination.
- *Responsibility*—including the ethical principles of accountability, pursuit of excellence, self-restraint, self-disclosure, continuous improvement, perseverance, diligence, and professional responsibility.
- *Caring*—including both compassion and generosity.
- *Justice and Fairness*—including the ethical principles of procedural fairness, impartiality, and equity.
- *Trustworthiness*—including the ethical principles of honesty, truthfulness, sincerity, non-deception, candor, integrity, moral courage, promise-keeping, fair interpretation of contracts, reasonability of commitments, clarity of commitments, loyalty, safeguarding confidential information, and avoiding conflicts of interest.

For the purpose of this article, we will look at a very limited case study to demonstrate how the ethical decision-making process works and how the AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration can be used by volunteer administrators.

The ethical decision-making model, based on the work by The Josephson Institute of Ethics, is described in seven steps:

### **1. State the problem or dilemma.**

- Who are the stakeholders?
- What core ethical values from the AVA ethics statement are involved?

- What ethical principles from the AVA ethics statement are involved?

### **2. Restate the problem in terms of what must be decided.**

- Will the decision conflict with any core ethical value or ethical principle?
  - which ethical value or principle is in conflict?
  - what is the conflict?

### **3. What other kinds of solutions might exist to the problem or dilemma?**

### **4. Decide which action to take—take the action which yields the greater long term benefit.**

- State your decision using a core ethical value or principle from the AVA ethics statement.

### **5. Evaluate your decision from these three perspectives:**

- "Golden Rule"—does the decision treat others as you would wish to be treated?
- Publicity—would you be comfortable with your reasoning and decision if it were to appear on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper?
- Children in the room—would you be comfortable answering children's questions about your action? Are you practicing what you preach?

### **6. Implement your decision.**

### **7. Monitor and modify the decision as necessary.**

#### **WORKING THROUGH A CASE**

Consider the following case:

*You collect personal information on your volunteers as part of your volunteer recruitment process and you keep this information in a binder on your desk for easy access. Today you interview a volunteer who you accept into one of the volunteer positions in your organization. Following accepted practice, after you formally place the volunteer in your organization, you ask for "protected" information for*

*internal purposes including: disabilities, age, marital status, and religion. The volunteer discloses that he/she has a physical disability and requests that you keep the information confidential. As you place the completed volunteer form in your binder, the volunteer states that he/she feels that you are not respecting his/her privacy by keeping his/her information in the binder on your desk. He/she requests that you guarantee that the information is kept confidential and private. What is your ethical course of action?*

**STEP ONE: STATE THE PROBLEM OR DILEMMA.**

Looking over the core ethical values we probably find that the core ethical value at stake is that of *Respect* along with the ethical principle of *Privacy*. To restate the problem: The issue at stake is the respectful treatment of private information.

The next consideration here is identifying the key stakeholders. The clients of the organization are always considered key stakeholders. In this case, other key stakeholders are the volunteer, and you as the volunteer administrator. Other stakeholders to the situation would be all existing and future volunteers, and possibly management, funders, staff, and so on. Each interpretation of this case will differ, and it should be acknowledged that difference is both important and valuable. Ethical decision-making is a context-dependent activity meaning that there is no correct answer for all situations. Each volunteer administrator plays a critical role in bringing the particular knowledge of his/her situation to bear on the ethical dilemma. This means that each reader could identify widely varying key stakeholders depending upon how the reader interprets the case study and given their current situation.

For our purposes, let us assume that the key stakeholder are the volunteers and the organization's clients.

The ethical dilemma can be restated in terms of a core ethical value, ethical principle, and key stakeholders involved. For example: This ethical dilemma is whether or not personal information should be

kept in a secure place if our organization is to respect the privacy of clients and volunteers.

**STEP TWO: RESTATE THE PROBLEM IN TERMS OF WHAT MUST BE DECIDED.**

Here the question for consideration is whether or not the previously stated ethical dilemma is in conflict with any of the core ethical values or principles. In our case it seems evident that there is, indeed, a conflict between the current practice of keeping private information on one's desk, and the ethical value of respect, and the ethical principle of privacy. Keeping confidential information available in an openly available binder on one's desk raises real ethical issues.

To restate the ethical dilemma in terms of what must be decided could produce a statement such as: What do I as the volunteer administrator need to do in order to respect the privacy of personal information for our agency's volunteers and clients?

**STEP THREE: WHAT OTHER KINDS OF SOLUTIONS MIGHT EXIST TO THE PROBLEM OR DILEMMA?**

Here we consider the possible actions that we could take. We could consider the question above in terms of the following actions:

- Do nothing and keep the binder of personal information on the desk.
- Purchase a locking file cabinet to secure the personal information of clients and volunteers.
- Put the binder in a closed but not secured drawer in the desk.
- Purchase a software package to manage volunteer and client information that can be secured by password or encryption technology.

The reader will be able to add to this list given his/her personal perspectives within his/her organization or workplace. What is important at this step is creating a rich list of alternative choices.

STEP FOUR: DECIDE WHICH ACTION TO TAKE. TAKE THE ACTION WHICH YIELDS THE GREATER LONG-TERM BENEFIT.

Review the alternative courses of action generated in Step Three. Assess each course of action against the goal of achieving the greatest long-term benefit.

Each reader will come to his/her own conclusions. In considering the above courses of action, which would yield the greatest benefit in the long-term? Consider the following:

- Doing nothing, always a possibility, would mean all volunteers and even clients would have their personal and confidential information left open to review by anyone who picked the binder off the desk. Sensitive information on AIDS, disabilities, gender, age, phone numbers, and so on, would not be kept private, and the impression could be that the organization does not value privacy
- To purchase a locking cabinet would demonstrate a real organizational commitment to securing and protecting personal and private information. Client information could also be protected in this way.
- By putting the information in a closed but not locked drawer, security around private information is increased. The question is whether or not this approach adequately protects the private and personal information of clients and volunteers. If a volunteer disclosed that he/she had AIDS, would you feel comfortable that you had protected that person's privacy by just placing the file in a desk drawer?

STEP FIVE. EVALUATE YOUR DECISION FROM THESE THREE PERSPECTIVES:

- "Golden Rule"—Depending upon the course of action you have decided to take, put yourself in the role of one of the key stakeholders. Would you appreciate being on the receiving end of your decision? For example, how would you feel if you knew that all of your most

personal information was left on a desk, stored in an unsecured location, or locked up?

- Publicity—Would you be comfortable with your reasoning and decision if it were to appear on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper with your name appearing frequently in the text? For example, imagine the article that would be written if you showed no concern for private information by leaving it on your desk and having some of that information fall into the wrong person's hands.
- Children in the room—Would you be comfortable answering children's questions about your actions? Children are not interested in rationalizations. Can you defend your decision without falling back on complex rationalizations? For example, could you explain the decision to do nothing to protect a client's privacy to a child who might be a client of the organization?

STEP SIX: IMPLEMENT YOUR DECISION.

The next step is to put your decision into action. Each decision is different as is each workplace so implementation strategies will vary. If feasible, consider involving others in the implementation phase. Document your decision and the implementation steps.

STEP SEVEN: MONITOR AND MODIFY THE DECISION AS NECESSARY.

As your decision is implemented, monitor what is occurring and modify the implementation or the decision to generate the desired ethical outcome.

## CONCLUSION

The new AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration builds upon the tradition of a values-based profession. It clarifies the connection between ethical values and core professional competencies and program components, and effectively and practically links ethics and practice. In addition, the ethics statement is framed in an ethical decision-making

framework which makes it a practical tool for professionals seeking to improve their competencies in making ethical decisions.

For a full description of each of these core ethical values and their related principles, readers are encouraged to refer to the full AVA Statement of Professional Ethics in Volunteer Administration available through the AVA office, P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, CO 80306, U.S.A.

If you have comments or suggestions on the AVA ethics statement, please contact the AVA office. Your input will help refine and improve the profession.

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#### REFERENCES

- Association for Volunteer Administration (1995, March). *Statement of professional ethics in volunteer administration*. Boulder, CO.
- Johnstone, G., & Waymire, J. V. (1992, September). *What if . . . A guide to ethical decision making*. Carp, Canada: Johnstone Training and Consultation.
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