

## ABSTRACT

*Writing and updating policies for volunteer programs is a key strategy to gain the attention and recognition of board and senior administrators for volunteer programs and for managers of volunteers. Further, in light of the recent and rapid growth in volunteering and in the complexity of volunteer work itself, policy development has become an indispensable element in risk management and liability reduction. Managers of volunteers are encouraged to involve their boards and CEOs in policy development. Building the framework of beliefs, values, and rules through policies will ensure both safe and satisfying involvement for the volunteer, and effective service for the client.*

# The Key to the Boardroom Door: Policies for Volunteer Programs

Linda L. Graff

The word "policy" is one with which we are all familiar, yet for most of us, it is difficult to identify exactly what it means in the context of our agencies and programs. The very word "policy" can be intimidating. Few people work with policies on a regular basis. Most do not have the opportunity to understand policy or to feel at ease with it.

Managers of volunteers may be particularly unfamiliar or uneasy with policy, what it means, what it does. Some may think that policy is beyond their mandate, that policy is typically the responsibility of boards and senior management.

In fact, while boards and senior management do need to attend to matters of policy, so do managers of volunteers. The latter are the most vital link in successful policy development for volunteer programs. Managers of volunteers need to take the initiative, define the need, provide the drive, and contribute the expertise about volunteering and volunteer program management.

Those who do pursue policies for their volunteer programs can expect rich re-

sults such as increased program effectiveness, a more concrete demonstration of volunteer appreciation, and safer and more productive volunteer involvement. Further, by involving themselves in the policy development process, managers of volunteers may gain access to another whole realm of power and influence for themselves as professionals, and for their programs.

For so long, volunteer programs have gone under-recognized and under-valued. They are often ignored and suffer from what Susan Ellis (1986) has called 'benign neglect' from boards and senior management. Managers of volunteer programs are often at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, under-paid, over-worked, and taken for granted. Boards and senior management have lost touch with how important volunteers have become to service delivery and to the community life we all have come to enjoy.

If managers of volunteers can bring forward programmatic policy issues and questions that belong on the board table and demand the attention of their senior

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managers, then, for the first time, boards and senior management will be forced to really look at the important work being accomplished by volunteers. Policy development for volunteer programs is the key to the board room door and perhaps to the beginnings of the recognition and support and power that volunteerism deserves.

## DEFINITIONS OF POLICY AND PROCEDURE

There is a variety of perspectives on what policy is or should be. A number of definitions of policy are presented below since each offers different elements of what policies are about, what they can achieve. All are accurate and none is complete.

*Webster's New World Dictionary* (Second College Edition) defines policy as "a principle, plan, or course of action." Two distinct themes emerge from this definition:

- Policy, in the sense of a principle, implies that some kind of position is being taken, a value or belief is being stated.
- Policy, in the sense of a plan or a course of action, would include specific steps, procedures, or perhaps, methods.

Organizations need to articulate their values through missions and policy statements; organizations also need to have procedural guidelines in place to instruct staff (paid and unpaid) on what to do or not to do.

Shaw (1990) adds these thoughts on the nature of policies:

- Policies apply to everybody associated with the organization—its directors, staff, volunteers and clients;
- A policy states a boundary: inside the boundary, things are acceptable; outside the boundary, things are not;
- It is also in the nature of a policy that violations make one liable for consequences; in that sense, a policy is tough.

Cryderman (1987) helps clarify the difference between policies and procedures. She says policies tell people *what* to do:

Policies form the written basis of operation secondary to legislation and the organization's bylaws. They serve as guidelines for decision making; they prescribe limits and pinpoint responsibilities within an organization. Policies can be viewed as rules or laws related to the facility's overall mission, goals and objectives. They are usually broad statements that are general in content. Despite this, policies may be detailed and particular if appropriate to the subject matter.

On the other hand, procedures tell people *how* to do what they must do:

Procedures give directions according to which daily operations are conducted within the framework of policies. They are a natural outgrowth of policies, supplying the "how to" for the rule. Procedures describe a series of steps, outline sequences of activities or detail progression. Thus the procedure manual is operational and is usually best expressed in a directive tone (Cryderman, 1987).

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between policies and procedures. Perhaps it is wise to follow the pragmatic advice of John Carver (1990): it really is *all* policy—it just appears at different levels of specificity—so what you call it doesn't matter all that much.

What is most important is that policies and procedures are designed and implemented, regardless of what they are called.

## BENEFITS OF POLICIES

Many organizations simply have not had the time to attend to defining the values and policies within which volunteering takes place. Given the current situation wherein everyone is trying to do more and more with less and less, this is understandable. Yet, policies must be attended to. Here are some important reasons why:

- All organizations make policy decisions regularly. They do not always call them policies, and they often do not write them down. So, writing poli-

cies can be a simple matter of formalizing decisions which have already been made.

- Writing decisions in the form of policies and distributing them to paid and volunteer staff can lend them greater import and perhaps better ensure compliance.
- Many policies are developed because of crises or problems. When something goes wrong, it becomes apparent that a position or policy is needed, either to decide what to do now, or to prevent the situation from recurring. So policies determine action and set boundaries beyond which one cannot go.
- Policies clarify responsibilities and define lines of communication and accountability.
- Policies provide a structure for sound management. Since they often identify the "what" and sometimes even the "how," they can bring about program improvements and increase effectiveness.
- Policies ensure continuity over time and from staff to staff. In this sense, policies endure. They promote equity and standardization.
- Policies establish values, beliefs and directions. They connect programs and the work of front-line (paid and unpaid) staff to the larger organization and its mission.

These reasons for investing resources in policy development are equally valid for all departments and at all levels throughout organizations. For volunteer programs, there are some special circumstances that make the development of policies more urgent at this point in time.

The voluntary sector has grown and changed over the last few decades into an indispensable component of our service networks. The work of volunteers has become increasingly complex and responsible. Volunteers work directly with clients, carrying out the "real" work of agencies, often side by side with paid staff. What we have to acknowledge is that the greater the responsibility and complexity of the work, the greater the risk and liability to all those connected with the work.

As a key element in risk identification and management, policies around volunteer involvement can no longer be ignored. Consider these real-life examples:

- volunteers are transferring wheelchair patients in and out of vehicles without training;
- volunteer counselors staff a crisis line with little training, including how to deal with potential suicides, and they have no professional backup;
- a volunteer friendly visitor carries his "client" up and down a flight of stairs each week to take her shopping;
- a pharmacist volunteers as a friendly visitor for a mental health organization and is giving advice to clients about which of their prescription medications they should and should not bother to take;
- an elderly woman who has been a volunteer porter at the hospital for over two decades is beginning to lose her faculties. Last week she took a patient in a wheelchair to the wrong clinic where the patient waited for three hours before staff were able to locate him;
- female volunteers are sent out to do home visits with male ex-offenders, some of whom have been convicted of violent crimes. The volunteers go alone, with no briefing on the nature of the offense;
- high school students volunteer at a home for the aged, helping to feed residents, but they are not told what to do if the resident begins to choke.

Putting policies and procedures into place to guide the work of volunteers and to establish appropriate and safe standards of conduct is increasingly important as the work itself becomes increasingly responsible. This, perhaps more than any other, is the reason why organizations absolutely must begin to develop policies for volunteer programs. This is not to say that policies will resolve all problems and eliminate all hazards. However, policy development and implementation will go a long way to reduce the dangers and risks which currently exist in the field of volunteering.

## ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY— THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

While there are many reasons to attend to policy development, for boards of directors and senior staff, the most pressing reasons may be based in risk management and personal and organizational liability.

There is great debate among authors in the nonprofit management field about the division of responsibilities between paid staff and boards, but there is consensus that ultimate responsibility and accountability lies with the board of directors (O'Connell, 1985; Ross, 1983; Ellis, 1986; Silver, 1988; Shaw, 1990). The increasing prevalence of legal action has implications for the degree of care exercised by boards in nonprofit management. There is not only a greater risk of legal action against organizations, but also against volunteer board members as individuals (Conrad & Glenn, 1976).

Ross lists a number of examples in the nonprofit field where responsibility has been placed by the courts with the board:

I think of a few recent cases that involve the Board in lawsuits: (a) in a hospital where a paraplegic fell out of bed and broke an arm, (b) in a hospital where a baby may have been murdered, (c) in a university where a black worker was not promoted while a white co-worker was, (d) in a university where a foreign student is suing because his doctoral thesis was rejected, (e) in a Big Brothers organization where parents are suing because their son was sexually abused by a 'Big Brother.' In all these cases it is the Board, the responsible unit, that is being sued and not the individuals most closely associated with the incident (Ross, 1983).

Perhaps one of the greatest errors board volunteers make is simply not ensuring that they know what is going on throughout the organization they serve.

There have been several legal cases where board members were held legally accountable, largely because they had failed to exercise reasonable oversight

and objectivity . . . the trustees had not taken responsibility for knowing what was going on (O'Connell, 1985).

## BOARDS AND THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

In the same way that the board is ultimately legally responsible for the organization as a whole, it is also responsible for the volunteer component (Silver, 1988). Ellis notes that decision makers make a point of knowing about salaried workers, but the same does not hold for unsalaried personnel. Silver, in her research on what makes volunteer programs successful, echoes the same point:

Boards of Directors have the positional authority to empower volunteer programs in their agencies or, conversely, to model an attitude which can be described as 'benign indifference.' By their actions, boards establish an attitude toward volunteerism in their organizations. Even by doing 'nothing,' they are saying something. In this situation, neutrality is akin to indifference and promotes the message that volunteerism is unimportant in the organization (1988).

Believing that "not knowing" is an adequate defense is a common error that boards can make, and the volunteer activity of organizations is often an area about which boards could be more informed. In fact, many boards have virtually ignored the volunteer component of their agencies. If for no other reason than out of concern for personal and organizational liability, boards need to begin to inform themselves of the risks and policy issues operating around volunteer involvement.

Boards are often unaware of the kinds of risks that are being taken in the name of the organizations they are supposed to be managing. They are not fulfilling their duty to inform themselves or to look out for the interests of the individuals involved. And, of most relevance here, boards have not taken the steps to determine appropriate policies and ensure the development of procedural guidelines that would reduce risks and ensure more

effective voluntary participation. Such negligence could be interpreted in the courts as mismanagement, nonmanagement, and/or breach of good faith constituting a violation of the fiduciary duty of board membership (United Way, 1990).

Volunteer programs have developed to the level of legitimate, indispensable, "productive" departments. As such they both deserve and require full managerial attention. Not tending to the very real risks and hazards inherent in volunteer program operation is courting disaster. It places the agency and all of its paid and unpaid staff and clients at risk.

In the courts, in the press, in the public mind, boards can be, and are being, held accountable for mistakes, accidents or negligence on the part of volunteers acting as agents of the organization. "Not knowing" simply is not a good enough excuse, legally or morally.

#### EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS—THE IMPORTANCE OF STAFF LEADERSHIP

Senior management—typically Executive Directors, Chief Executive Officers, Administrators—share, with their boards, a significant degree of responsibility for agency and program operation. It is the responsibility of senior staff to bring issues to the attention of the board as well as to oversee all aspects of the day-to-day operation of the organization. But senior staff, like senior volunteers, can sometimes take volunteer involvement for granted.

After years of training and consulting with so many leaders of volunteers, I have become convinced that many of their concerns stem directly from a lack of substantive support from their agencies' top administrators. This lack of support is not due to malice or unwillingness to be of help, but is rather due to the failure of executives to understand what is really needed from them (Ellis, 1986).

To be fair, as Ellis (1986) reminds us, executives are often not taught anything

about volunteers in their formal schooling. And sometimes managers of volunteers do not pass along information about the volunteer program. Often opportunities are missed to bring volunteer activities to the attention of boards and senior staff—opportunities to remind, to educate, to advocate. Managers of volunteers are in the pivotal position to stimulate change in this regard.

As senior staff begin to recognize and appreciate the management principles required to operate the volunteer program, they may begin to utilize those same principles in working with their board and administrative volunteers. Many of those principles are completely transferable, and make for much more effective and productive boards and committees wherever they are implemented.

If CEOs recognize the great skills and expertise demonstrated by managers of volunteers, they might also see how much help the latter could be in recruitment, training, orientation, and retention of board and committee volunteers.

#### THE TEAM APPROACH TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Boards and senior paid staff must be involved in policy development. It is equally important that the manager of volunteers also be involved in the policy-making process, at least as it relates to the department/program. Indeed, the manager may be largely responsible for ensuring that the need for policy is brought to the attention of senior management and the board.

But in the same way that boards do not have the day-to-day knowledge of experience to design detailed policies, managers of volunteers rarely have the mandate to develop or approve organizational policies. They may risk overstepping their authority when they independently step into policy development.

Senior management and the manager of volunteers need to work together in the development of policies for the volunteer

program. Neither can do this alone. But since none of this is likely to happen spontaneously, the manager of volunteers must accept the duty to inform supervisors of the existence of potential risks and of the need for policy development. That is where it all must start.

## RESISTANCE TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT: 'YOU CAN'T DO THAT TO VOLUNTEERS!'

Undoubtedly, there will be readers of this article who are experiencing a growing sense of discomfort with, or even resistance to policy development in volunteer programs. Experience shows that resistance of this sort often surfaces around discussions of topics such as volunteer evaluation, performance review, disciplinary procedures, and so on.

Some managers and boards of directors continue to believe that because volunteers work for free and because they give generously of their time and talents, we have no right to criticize their efforts. Other times resistance is centered in the fear that volunteers will leave if we talk with them about their mistakes or about areas of their work performance that need change or improvement. Others may view the process of policy-making as one of overly formalizing volunteering—it can feel like we are “kicking the heart out of volunteering.”

Three comments in response to such anticipated resistance are in order here:

### 1. *Volunteering As Serious Business*

First, the business of volunteering has become serious business. We have developed and acquired the skills to mobilize great numbers of volunteers to do all kinds of important work, often involving direct contact with clients. There *may* have been a time in the past when the work of some volunteers was not sufficiently demanding or important to require careful tending. If that time ever existed, it has long since passed.

Now, in nearly all cases, if volunteers

perform their work poorly or act inappropriately, the consequences will have an impact on clients, and/or other staff, and/or the organization itself. The fact that the work of volunteers is not remunerated in monetary terms does not make it immune from error, risk, or consequence. Simply put, the work of volunteers must be managed. Volunteers deserve that from us. We are doing no favors by allowing volunteers to perform badly or to place themselves or others in jeopardy. Ignoring or glossing over less than satisfactory work becomes contagious: volunteers begin to treat their own work as we treat it, as if it does not matter. As Lynch (1983) has suggested, holding volunteers responsible for achieving results gives them clear results to strive for. It challenges volunteers to do well and demonstrates how important their work really is.

### 2. *Means and Ends in Voluntary Action*

Second, a note about means and ends. Many volunteer programs have been under-recognized and under-resourced for a long time. Those who have been in charge of volunteer programs, the Coordinators, Directors, and Managers, have had to be advocates for their programs and for their (unpaid) workers both within their own agencies and, often, to the larger community. Volunteer program managers have concentrated so heavily on enhancing the effectiveness of volunteers and programs that they have come to see them as an end in themselves. Operating a productive and effective volunteer program in which volunteers are happy, satisfied, and stay a long time has become the end goal.

What may be lost sight of, or at least, sometimes forgotten, is that volunteers are a means, a tool and a resource, to achieving something else. The real end, of course, is the service to clients, the mission of the agency. Volunteers, like paid workers, must serve that end. It is important to keep (or bring back) into focus, the needs of the clients and the agency.

When managers refocus on clients and service to them, it becomes more clear that it is necessary to do whatever it takes to make that service as effective as it can be. Hence, these positions require management of the volunteer work force. And in so doing, managers must continually engage in a kind of cost-benefit analysis in which the costs of volunteer involvement are weighted against the productivity (service) of that involvement. This may sound cold and calculating, but it is more accurately reflective of the role, and the importance, of volunteers and volunteering in the 90s.

### 3. Find Your Own "Fit"

The third comment is intended neither to contradict nor to diminish the importance of the two preceding points, but it is equally important: write policies that 'fit' each particular application. Be as formal, as stringent, as demanding as is appropriate to the values and beliefs of the organization. Temper policies so that they are congruent with "how you do business in your agency." Introduce new policies in a considered, considerate, and measured way. Too much change will surely drive some volunteers away.

### SUMMARY

But please do not dismiss, out of hand, the whole notion of policy-making because it does not seem relevant or appropriate to the nature of volunteering. Treat the volunteers and the volunteer program with the respect they deserve by building the framework of beliefs, values, and rules through policies that will ensure both safe and satisfying involvement for the volunteer, and effective service for the client.

Do not miss the opportunity to bring the volunteer program to the attention of the board and senior management. Do not miss the opportunity to demonstrate the importance volunteering has to the mission of the agency and the clients served. Policies are the key to open the doors of power to volunteering.

### NOTE

This article is partly based on *By Defi-*

*nition: Policies for Volunteer Programs* (Graff, 1992), which is an excellent source for more details on how to write policies and for sample policies on over 70 policy topics. It is published by Volunteer Ontario, the Ontario Association of Volunteer Bureaux/Centres.

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