

THE CLIENT VOLUNTEER

BARBARA STORSLEE

Regional Office

Department of Children and Family Services

Chicago, Illinois

As an Administrator of a state Child Welfare office, I encouraged the development of a volunteer program with emphasis on involving the protective service client as a volunteer. The program was fascinating to watch as there was a tremendous change in the client after they began to volunteer. One client, named Mary, described in the initial interview her fears, saying she was so frightened she did not feel she would be able to walk down the hallway of the agency to the room where she was to be interviewed. After having worked for one month as a volunteer, this same client walked into the agency and had to walk through a room where a staff meeting was being held. The staff was having a break for coffee. Mary said, clearly, "If I wasn't so busy, I'd sit down and have a cup of coffee with you." This same client's personal grooming also improved. Initially she came to the agency in shorts, hair uncombed, no make-up; eventually she began wearing a dress, her hair was combed and she began experimenting with eye make-up and lipstick.

One characteristic of the protective service client is their isolation from society. Not only do they have difficulty understanding society, but they seldom have contact with people. They do not belong to community organizations, and often their limited contacts are with those that live in similar handicapping conditions. Separation from fellow human beings and isolation from the mainstream of society leads them to feel alone and inadequate. Clients have little opportunity to give of themselves and usually are caught in the position of being given to. By not offering them a way to give of themselves, we handicap their growth, their need to give and their need for identity and success.

THE HOMEMAKER IS ONE KEY TO INVOLVING CLIENTS IN THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM.

As I began to look closely at the protective service client as a volunteer, I found that in the instances where the client was a volunteer, her involvement had been initiated and encouraged by the homemaker who had been assigned to the family. The homemaker utilized the agency volunteer program to help the client become involved in something outside her own family and in doing so the client began to change.

The homemaker's role was one of a model, where they learned to talk, share ideas and handle themselves in a social situation. The homemaker then encouraged the client to become involved at the agency as a volunteer. The client learned to relate to staff, other volunteers and had an

opportunity to be successful. Learning to relate in a warm, accepting setting opened up a new and wider world. Succeeding in the environment of the agency left the client less afraid of new situations and of failures.

Roberta, age 22, was referred to the agency by the police due to concern on their part and neighbors that her 18-month-old child had been killed while playing in the street. She had another child, age 3, when referred to the agency. She lived in condemned housing with her elderly mother and father. In a taped group discussion, she describes her relationship with the homemaker and as a volunteer with the agency as follows:

“A year ago in October I lost my little boy and I was pretty upset over it. I didn’t feel much like doing anything, which I hardly didn’t until the homemakers come in on me. Now I have been working right and left with them and so what problem I had is a lot better and I’m doing more for other people besides myself. You see, I just didn’t feel much like living. I used to sit in a tavern drinking a lot and the homemaker came in and talked to me and explained things to me. I have a four-year-old girl and the homemaker said I should spend my money on her and put my responsibility towards her instead of being in the tavern so much. I kept telling them, ‘I’m going to quit, I’m going to quit.’ Finally then one day, the homemaker come back and I told her I had quit and she was so tickled, she couldn’t believe it. She said why and I said, ‘Well, whenever I was around you all at the office, I just felt kind of out of place by going out and drinking.’ It was a new experience; I feel pretty good about it. I want to meet people and work with people and I don’t know if it’s any help or not, but right now I’m taking my high school lessons at home in my spare time; I want to get my high school diploma. I’m working so I can get a job, ‘cuz I want to work and be out helping people.”

WHAT THE CLIENT DOES AS A VOLUNTEER.

Volunteer positions where the clients have found opportunities to be of service are numerous. Their involvement in a clothing exchange can be exciting. They enjoy sorting clothing, making minor repairs, washing and ironing the clothing.

In the same taped discussion, Mary, an alcoholic with two children, said about her experience with the clothing exchange:

“I made a pest out of myself. I think I was over here every day. I loved it. It was like my second home. I think I was with the agency about a month at the most when I started volunteering, and I got so much joy and satisfaction out of that. One room was stacked with 70 boxes of clothes and I never had so much fun in my life as I did getting them gathered up for other people. I loved it.”

This can also be a teaching activity for those clients that need help in learning how to care for clothing.

The clients who have children in school feel much gratification from going with the homemaker to other clients' homes to assist in housecleaning, and to give additional attention to the young children still at home while the mother is busy with the homemaker.

Each client, regardless of how many problems they have themselves, has some ability which can be utilized and developed. For example, Jane, a divorcee, mother of six children and living in inadequate housing and struggling with a drinking problem, had an amazing talent for cooking nutritionally low cost meals. She became a volunteer and demonstrated her talents to other women.

Clients make great office helpers. They enjoy addressing envelopes, can be taught the proper way to answer the telephone, manage the switchboard and help with the filing.

The volunteer publication is another way a client can contribute. One client wrote an article for each publication which dealt with family and recreational activities in the community that were free or inexpensive. She was aided by a volunteer editor but her own simple style was reflected in the article. The clients also folded the publication, addressed and stamped the envelopes. At Christmastime the clients can be involved in helping to create a Christmas card which also reflects their involvement with the agency and can be involved in a workshop where mothers get together to help one another make their children toys for Christmas.

The opportunities for involving the client will undoubtedly be endless once we as professional staff become committed to opening the agency to the client and recognize each individual has something to give whether it be big or small. When we do this we will be fulfilling our responsibility as an agency. The rewards will be great as was expressed by one client volunteer when asked how she felt about volunteering with the agency:

"We all have feelings, to me one of the greatest satisfactions that any human being can get on this earth, is to be able to help somebody else. I'm not very good on words, I don't claim to be, but if I can go in and if somebody's depressed and just be able to put my arm on their shoulder and say, 'Hey, I care,' and really mean it, to me that is worth more money than anybody could put in this room and that's from my heart. I love people, I didn't think I did. I thought I was a people hater, but I'm not. I love people and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for anybody."