

THE VALUES OF VOLUNTEERISM: I

by

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It is a pleasure to be with you on the occasion of your conference focusing on Social Intervention in the 70's as you move to a more complete professionalism.

As an administrator of a home for the aged I am well aware of the significance and value of the volunteer, and in our own experience have watched the growth of the volunteer system bring about the creation or establishment of the position on our staff of the coordinator of volunteer services.

Philosophically volunteerism grew out of need: the need of one person to be needed—the need of another to be served. This is ideally a two way street with the served also needing to give of himself and the giver or the volunteer also needing to be ministered to.

The voluntary social agency is a natural for the development of a system of volunteerism; beginning with the Board of Directors, moving through the women's auxiliaries, to various program aides, and then on to the friendly visitor. Perhaps we can share some thoughts with you this morning regarding our own experiences.

May I say first of all that our Home is more like a geriatric center development than a traditional home for the aged, with a multipurpose range of services from an apartment building for the elderly, facilities for intermediate care, and approved extended care facility with round the clock registered nursing supervision.

Traditionally the Board represented the vested interests of families, frequently passing that interest from parent to child. More precious than the making of policy was the opportunity afforded for personal involvement in the lives of the residents. This was frequently reflected in a "lady bountiful" or "beneficent prince" attitude. In such a volunteer relationship the needs of the benefactor most often superseded those of the resident and sometimes, although well meaning, interfered with the orderly administration of the facility.

Boards have undergone change. Still manned by persons desiring to contribute time and talent to the elderly, the concern is primarily with the development of a facility or complex designed to meet the immediate needs of the residents and the broader needs reflected in the community. Embracing the philosophy of the consumer's right to participate in planning and decisions affecting him, the Board includes in its membership, representatives from the Residents and Tenants Councils and from the auxiliaries so vitally involved in services to the institution, as well as a relatively new Family and Friends Council composed obviously of the families and friends of residents. We especially commend

this approach as a viable representative of consumers for agencies in the mental health field.

So necessary to the life blood of the voluntary agency or institution is the group primarily concerned with raising funds necessary for the day to day operation but more importantly for the growth and development of both the physical plant and expanded programs. The members of first auxiliaries are hardy souls and willing workers, raising funds and attracting friends and finding countless ways to be of service. We were fortunate in that our Senior Auxiliary remained the bellwether of money raising groups while attracting other clubs and groups to pool their interests and resources in behalf of the Home. It soon became evident that someone should and must coordinate the efforts of these organizations so as to bring order and harmony to bear and insure maximum return to the beneficiaries. Thus was born for us the Council of Auxiliaries and the Coordinator of Volunteers. Public relations was a natural added responsibility to this position. As the corps of individual volunteers increased, some structure had to be set up which would allow for the maximum use of time and talents.

In our Home each volunteer becomes a service aide in a department of the facility and is directly supervised by the director or supervisor of the particular service; i.e., recreation, social service, nursing, physical and occupational therapy, and so on. If it is felt that some of the spontaneity and individual choice is sacrificed in this type of planning, it is offset by the positive use the various departments can make of volunteers to effectively supplement the work of regular employees. This is not to say that particular skills and talents are not extended in special ways to augment regular services or even to bring an extra dimension.

Returning to our philosophical premise that volunteers need to be needed, what other characteristics should we note? We might extend "need" to include a sense of usefulness, a feeling of importance, a feeling of acceptance and an avenue of social acceptance. The volunteer brings a variety of skills, talents, interests and abilities and frequently wants to serve as she wants to serve, when she wants and whom she wants. This selfish element in the volunteer is one of the problems faced by the coordinator who has the unique responsibility of keeping the volunteer, the resident and the employee happy or at least compatible.

The coordinator must have patience, tact, energy, and good humor. In addition, a kind of complete knowledge of the agency function and operation, administrative ability, and a sense of satisfaction, securing good will for the agency, and above all helping the residents achieve a more fulfilling life experience, regardless of the level at which they may be functioning.

The volunteers for specific services must be carefully screened for the nature of their service rests on a personal relationship where attitudes, expressions, even postures can not only defeat the purpose of the

service but also damage the adjustment of an individual to his surroundings, thereby negating in effect our entire reason for being.

I'm sure you're asking what we would like to see in a volunteer and when we think of all the things we hope they will do, it seems somewhat presumptuous on our part to give our profile but this is one way we can develop a corps of volunteers worthy of the name. We ask the volunteer to be ready to submerge his need in the larger need of the one served—and do primarily the job we want done.

Although I wholeheartedly endorse volunteerism as a right, not a privilege, I hasten to say that the volunteer must recognize a responsibility to represent the agency when he serves in any capacity—he becomes for that time a part of the organization. He must accept the reality of less than perfect conditions under which to work. These frequently reflect low operating budgets and poor physical facilities. He must either accept these or join in social action efforts to change them. (Hopefully the latter.) Another interesting hazard is the non-cooperative, perhaps even hostile, regular employee of the agency. (This phenomenon of the reluctant employee may be due to some feelings of insecurity or jealousy—some discomfort that someone from the outside has an opportunity to evaluate his service or augment his skills.)

Most difficult of all, the volunteer must be prepared to forego the tangible expression of gratitude from the direct recipient of his services. This becomes a part of our responsibility to recognize the magnitude of sacrifice entailed in volunteers and attract new ones.

It becomes our responsibility, too, to suggest new vistas for volunteers—new ways to serve—new challenges for their abilities. Today's word is relevant involvement and supporting that is awareness. There is re-recognition that many of the individual problems the volunteer meets are rooted in the larger problems of society. There is recognition that unless we all begin to attack the ills in social welfare, physical and mental health, education, racism, poverty we will make little headway in solving or alleviating the problems of individuals in our homes, or institutions, or agencies. The volunteer must reach out and join hands with the consumers of services and help them to join the ranks of the politically aware and socially active.

All segments must become volunteers to broaden the base, strengthen the bonds, sweeten the rewards of involvement. For instance in our own Home to repeat an earlier reference, relatives and friends of residents have organized as volunteers. This has brought them into the Home, relieved them of anxiety and guilt feelings, kept them abreast of Home problems and aims, reassured loved ones of continued interest and concern with their welfare and happiness, and serve to reconcile expectations with performance.

Aged men and women have joined Vista or become substitute grandparents, giving of themselves and their substance. Volunteers are everywhere! Young people are candy strippers or tutors, or readers, or friend-

ly visitors, or hosts at parties or what ever! Middle agers raise funds, drive cars, run errands, bake and sew and pour tea. Meetings and conferences are everywhere!

Active recruiting should be where the people are and around specific projects. Schools, school groups, churches, church groups, clubs, sororities, fraternities and the like are ready resources. A happy volunteer is a happy recruiter.

Value the person—value the service. The agency should regularly publicly and privately express its appreciation to volunteers. Tangible expression in plaques, citations or the like should be used where possible. The natural desire for praise should be recognized.

Share your dreams, your plans, your future; for your success is in the hands of the many volunteers who serve in so many ways. That these efforts should be supervised and directed by a coordinator is right. That you should seek to strengthen the professional stature of this position is right. Since the coordinator frequently began as a volunteer, care should be taken not to breed out those qualities of difference. Perhaps those qualities are epitomized in that famous answer “he isn’t heavy, Father—he’s my brother”; for truly the volunteer is his brother’s keeper and this in turn is our mutual responsibility.

One final note—these are serious times in which we live. Our country is in real trouble, internationally and domestically. The problems of peace, racism, poverty, and repression beset us on all sides. The hopes of black people and other minorities are continually frustrated as their calls for freedom, social justice, equity, and dignity continually go unanswered.

We should not deceive ourselves into believing that things are changing for the better. They’re not! In my opinion, things have seldom looked worse.

It is part of the overall responsibility to heed these calls and help reorder our priorities to bring about needed changes—to make a better world in which to live.