

# ***Developing Effective Volunteer Services***

by Nancy Hedrick, M.A.

The equivalent of one person working full-time for over thirty years - 70,000 hours - has been devoted in a period of ten years at Prairie View, a rural comprehensive mental health center in the heart of Kansas. Over 350 persons have contributed time, talent and energy in a volunteer program to supply emotional support to patients, i.e. persons with "problems in living". How has time, talent and energy been mobilized and sustained through the years? This article is an attempt to answer that question; it is an effort to clarify guidelines for setting up and maintaining an effective volunteer program in a community mental health center. The program model presented here could be altered to be used in other institutional settings such as a general hospital psychiatric unit, a hospice, or a church.

## **HISTORY**

Prairie View Mental Health Center, established 25 years ago, as a private psychiatric hospital today is a non-profit 43-bed psychiatric hospital and a comprehensive mental health center serving three counties on a contractual basis to the extent that the combination of private fees, insurance and public money allows. It is sponsored by the Mennonite churches but aims for close cooperation with the community and seeks to blend these two dynamics with the concern and skills of the staff and volunteers to make available a comprehensive program.

Prairie View is committed to a community philosophy that the less a person who is expe-

riencing problems in living is separated from his or her support system, of family and friends, the more quickly a sense of well-being can be regained. Prairie View attempts to utilize community resources and talents through an active volunteer program to reinforce this philosophy.

The volunteer program utilizes volunteers in every treatment modality. It is a service oriented program, providing human resources, not financial resources. Volunteer participation is not in lieu of paid staff participation but rather an additional dimension of participation enriching the treatment program.

Today 77 persons volunteer on a regular basis. This is a ratio of one volunteer to every two full-time paid staff members. Volunteers bring diverse experiences and talents to the treatment program. Sixty volunteers are females, 17 males. Age ranges from 18 to 77. Thirty-four are housewives, 8 college students, 13 retired persons, 22 employed persons (secretaries, insurance executive, SRS case worker, teachers, school counselor, nurses, factory foreman). Volunteers come from six Kansas counties, several from foreign countries who are visiting in the area. Each in his or her own unique way with one common interest - caring - provides a link in a community support network.

## **ORGANIZATION OF A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM**

Since its inception Prairie View has utilized volunteer talent, but it was not until 1968 that an effort was made to mobilize volunteers in an organized volunteer program. It is important in organizing a volunteer program that the Director be a staff member who is in contact with all aspects of the center and

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who knows the local community. The Director of Personnel is a logical person to direct the volunteer program as volunteers are a human resource just as employees are. After designating a staff person to initiate an organized program a task force of professional staff invited all staff members to suggest volunteer needs and express concerns about initiating such a program. After five months of meeting every other week, a definite need for a volunteer program was determined with full backing of the staff.

To involve the community in planning the program, an advisory committee representing the three contact counties was appointed by the County Commissioners. The goal of the volunteer program as defined by staff and the committee is twofold: the volunteer should symbolize to the patient contact with the outside community and in reverse the volunteer should represent to the public the concept of a mental health center and its needs. A volunteer program should lessen the center's "isolation" from both directions.

The committee members serving three year terms, meet monthly with the Volunteer Director. The members act as advisors in developing and sustaining a systematic volunteer program.

An organized plan for utilizing human resources is as essential in working with volunteers as it is in working with staff members. The plan utilizes job planning, recruitment, application, placement, orientation, ongoing training, evaluation and explicit policies and record keeping.

The Volunteer Services Committee initially recruited 30 volunteers. Through the years volunteers themselves have been the best recruiters; their appeals are based on enthusiasm from their own volunteer experience. No public appeal for volunteers via the media has been made.

The application process is similar to the hiring process with interviewing, screening and references.

Volunteer placement requires care and skill. The volunteer's interest must be matched with the institution's needs. Asking a very capable person to carry out trivial responsibilities is deadly in a volunteer program. A volunteer is placed from the beginning in a position that makes immediate use of education and experience. After assessment of

institutional need and the volunteer's qualifications placement is made based on a realistic assessment of time the volunteer is able to give. Each volunteer is assigned to a staff supervisor.

Orientation includes an overview of the Prairie View history, program and philosophy. The fact is stressed that the volunteer by virtue of giving time and talent is supplying an ingredient which paid personnel cannot provide - companionship and concern which have no price tag. The importance of confidentiality is also stressed.

On-the-job training and performance evaluation is the responsibility of the supervisor. The supervisor-volunteer relationship is important. The volunteer is encouraged to share feelings with the supervisor regarding the volunteer's experience. Evaluation with the supervisor is made after an initial three-month commitment is completed. If the experience has not been mutually satisfactory, the volunteer has an acceptable way to withdraw or be placed elsewhere.

Ongoing training includes annual classes for volunteers (three one-half day sessions) dealing with topics of developing skill in working with patients and personal growth. The Volunteer Services Committee plans the topics. Discounts for workshops offered by the center are often granted to volunteers. The professional library is available to volunteers.

Record keeping is similar to record keeping for personnel including application and vita, time records, quarterly reports and annual reports, current roster and schedule of placement. Ongoing record keeping reveals an overview of the program's development. For example, tenure can be analyzed: 4 of the current volunteers started in 1969, 6 in 1970, 3 in 1971, etc. The continuation of the volunteer in service reflects how well the needs of the volunteer and the program have been met.

Volunteers are involved in roles in every treatment modality. In Creative Arts the role is to assist by interacting with patients verbally and through craft media. Even if a volunteer works on a personal craft project, it is therapeutic if a sense of satisfaction is imparted to the patient. In the Day Center the volunteer acts as receptionist, socializes with patients and in some instances participates in group therapy. A volunteer is assigned to a particular patient in a one-to-one

relationship in the companionship role. Assignments are made in the inpatient, day patient and aging programs. A tea once a month for inpatients, day patients and a rotating portion of the staff is provided by a group of volunteers. A volunteer acts as clerk and receptionist at the Medication Clinic. Volunteers participate in socialization groups and in groups in the alcohol and drug abuse program. Volunteers in music provide music for the weekly worship service, group sessions with children and are on call to give private piano lessons to patients. Volunteer librarians take responsibility for the Prairie View professional library. In psychodrama sessions for children and adults, volunteers play supporting roles. On-call volunteers make posters, take pictures for displays, and act as hosts for large gatherings.

Not all volunteer roles have been successful. An attempt was made to develop an ongoing musical group for inpatients. The lack of continuity in musical talent due to patient turnover and short inpatient stays made this volunteer effort not feasible. Furnishing transportation has not been a satisfying role for volunteers.

#### GUIDELINES FOR A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

Emerging from the Prairie View experience several guidelines appear to be important.

Separate a service volunteer program from a fund raising program. The two most essential resources to any institution are human resources and financial resources. A volunteer who is interested in working directly with patients may not be interested in participating in fund raising projects and vice versa. To mix the two objectives without being atune to the volunteer's needs detracts from achieving the full potential of patient related service and fund raising.

Capitalize on the volunteer-supervisor relationship. The supervisor's support is essential in planning and sustaining a volunteer role. The volunteer needs to feel a part of the treatment team, needs to share concerns in working with patients with someone who is knowledgeable, needs feedback that he or she is doing a good job. A close working relationship between the volunteer and the supervisor is the key to an effective volunteer program.

Provide institutional recognition and other rewards for volunteers. In the Prairie View program each volunteer who serves 25 hours or

more a year is recognized at a volunteer awards banquet. Certificates are given to those serving 25 to 100 hours, engraved silver plates for 100 to 200 hours, an engraved silver bowl for 200 or more hours. Accumulated hours are recognized by 1040-2080 club membership. A volunteer who has worked the equivalent of one-half a year full time (1,040 hours) is awarded a 1040 plaque and for the equivalent of one year full-time work (2,080 hours) is awarded a 2080 plaque. Public recognition helps give the volunteer identification with the institution.

Tangible evidence of recognition such as awards, though symbolic of the appreciation for the volunteer service, in the final analysis is subordinate to intangible rewards. The highest recognition a volunteer can have is a feeling of being needed, the supervisor's thank you at the end of the assignment, the center's acceptance of the volunteer as a vital part of the total program as shown in the daily attitude of staff and the administration. By administering a volunteer program in a similar way to the personnel program, investing in training and supervision, recognition is given to the fact that the volunteer is viewed as a human resource just as a paid staff member. The attitude of considering the volunteer as a valuable human resource helps the volunteer to use capacities to the fullest to obtain not only individual satisfaction but also satisfaction of being part of the work group.

In analyzing who benefits from a volunteer program, hopefully the patients, volunteers, staff members, and the community benefit. The patients benefit by volunteer participation in knowing that members of the community care enough about them as persons and are accepting enough to give time and talent. Such caring has made significant contribution to many person's lives and has been a part of the healing which has occurred. Volunteers serve as role models of persons who are successfully coping with society. Staff members benefit by experiencing the support and empathy that volunteers provide. The center itself gains in that volunteers who feel useful and who experience personal growth take back to the community their enthusiasm and interest thus lessening the gap between the center and its constituents. The community benefits by gaining understanding of mental health concerns by volunteers taking to the community their interest and spirit of the work which is being done. Volunteers benefit by the opportunity for personal growth and learning.