

Volunteers Are Not A "Program"

By Patty Bouse

In December of 1976 I was hired by Nebraska Social Services to develop a volunteer program. With a background in direct service social work and administration of private agencies, I was really starting from scratch.

My predecessor had performed the ritual of 49 letters to 49 states, requesting information on volunteer programs in welfare. I read a lot.

The reasons for promoting or establishing volunteers in welfare have been documented by others in the past. They include: enriching current services to clients through added manpower; extending community awareness of welfare through the volunteer's acquaintance with it; relief of casework staff of routine tasks; provision for a new age group input; innovation and fresh ideas; and the allowance for disadvantaged groups to obtain work experience.

I met with local volunteer administrators. I called Harriet Naylor (HEW) in Washington (go straight to the top!). I looked at social service concerns and goals. I called individuals with my position in surrounding states, and set up an informal communication network with them.

Patty Bouse is a Resource Development Specialist at the Division of Social Services for the State of Nebraska.

Eventually, I came to an important conclusion which affects the way we approach our counties and regions in pressing for the establishment of volunteers as part of our services. That decision was to treat volunteers as one of many resources available to social service workers to perform their jobs, i.e., extend aid to clients. We have many service programs, such as day care, various services for children in protective services, alternative living situations for adults. Sometimes it is best to provide these services by way of social service staff members, sometimes by paid "providers" (such as day care home operators), and, volunteers are now officially recognized as a third alternative. They are considered an alternative, a way to extend the quantity or quality of services to clients in many program areas.

Volunteer usage is promoted and heralded as a great way to provide services, but it is not dictated. We cannot force a county or a worker to use volunteers. The original Harris Amendment to the Social Security Act has eliminated the necessity for states to use volunteers in Title XX programs (although they must mention them in their plans). Forced volunteers would meet great resistance, and would probably be ineffective.

In order to generate excitement and impart knowledge to our social workers, I designed workshops for county workers. These were held regionally. My first workshop was a rude awakening and a prophecy

for workshops to come. I hoped that I could generate excitement and pass on my own new respect for the possible accomplishments of volunteers in social welfare. I hoped that workers would react like the proverbial child set free in the candy store.

The basic content of the workshop included: defining "volunteers"; Title XX and volunteers; why volunteers?; a panel of county directors supportive of volunteers; program design; staff attitudes; maintaining standards; confidentiality; recruitment; orientation; welfare principles; job assignments; supervision and support; and assessment.

There were approximately 15 women at this workshop, all county workers. They aligned themselves quickly according to generation. One group of more mature, very experienced (I've been welfare in Jackson County since 1941) women and several groups of younger, more recent, additions to the staff. The young'uns got through their assignments quickly, with some enthusiasm. The more mature group demanded my constant attention, primarily to respond to their protests as to why they couldn't accomplish their assignments. By the end of the day this group managed to accomplish nothing, while taking all of my time and attention. I realized belatedly that my attention and encouragement would have been less wasted on those who were working, and who were open to new ideas. To some degree I decided after this experience to not use a great amount of energy in convincing unconvincible staff. The new staff that were interested would generate the amount of enthusiasm necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of volunteers.

The results of the workshops were minimal. They did raise some of the county workers' consciousness levels concerning the use of volunteers. Very few went on to add volunteers to their services. I was somewhat discouraged.

A point often made by busy employees, "It's hard to think about draining the swamp when you are up to your ears in alligators", is well taken. To the distraught, overworked and frazzled social worker, I suggest they reevaluate their time and energy in performing their job. In the long run, would it be more effective if they used some time to add volunteers to their resources?

A new plan of attack was formed.

Specific new programs, staffed primarily or completely by volunteers were developed. In child protective services, parent aides were discovered and developed in five counties. As those connected with each program see the possibility for success, they become more open to the uses of volunteers. The basic concept of parent aides (carefully supervised volunteer parents who befriend identified abusive and neglectful parents) is easily translated to spouse abuse programs, foster parent programs, etc. We have many specific populations who would gain tremendously by receiving an experienced "buddy".

The success of these individualized volunteer programs in scattered counties is beginning to affect other counties. After one town has begun to use volunteers in a specific program area, the town over the hill hears about it and calls for information and help.

The pace of acceptance is excruciatingly slow.

Some of the typical problems have included: social workers feeling threatened; a feeling that volunteers are unreliable and take too much time; and some workers "tried using a volunteer, once, in 1943, and it didn't work out!" Some workers won't change their approach without a change in the Social Services Manual, which tells them they must.

I have been hesitant to develop formal materials, such as handbooks and manuals. They seem inflexible. I want service workers to consider volunteers every time they review resources for every client. I want energy to flow towards generating new ways of using volunteers. Too often manuals are taken too literally.

Although part of our apparent recent success in volunteer development comes from specific programs, I continue to look at volunteers in general as resources. I am, by title, a Resource Developer not a Volunteer Director. By developing volunteers at the time they have a resource problem with a client, the program cannot die. If I leave, the seed has already been planted. There is no volunteer program to destroy, and hopefully it will live on as long as those workers who have accepted the concept are employed by the State.