Results of a National Survey of Recruitment and Motivation Techniques

By Nan H. Smith and Gregory T. Berns

Introduction

The Office of Volunteer Services, North Carolina Department of Human Resources, provides human service agencies with technical assistance in organizing, implementing, and maintaining volunteer programs. Included in these agencies are ones that serve persons with developmental disabilities. It came to the attention of the office through several volunteer administrators in the state's mental retardation and psychiatric hospitals that recruiting and motivating volunteers to work with persons with disabilities is no easy task. With the move toward deinstitutionalization, this task will be even more difficult as only the more severely handicapped individuals will eventually be treated by our institutions.

In becoming aware of these concerns in North Carolina, the idea of a national survey to find out what other programs were doing seemed appropriate. It was hoped that after completing the survey, the results would show a "state of the art" in volunteerism. The survey was to cover everything from what volunteers were doing and where they could be found, through supervision and recognition methods. The purpose, in summary, was to find out how to recruit and motivate volunteers working with persons with disabilities.

Method

The first step in the process was to acquire a mailing list from each state. This was achieved by writing to each state's equivalent of North Carolina's Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse

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Division and explaining the purpose of the survey. In return, mailing lists from 36 of the 50 states were received. The agencies represented on these lists along with national organizations, such as the Easter Seal Society, United Cerebral Palsy, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and the March of Dimes, comprised the largest population for the survey.

In all, 900 survey forms were sent out with a cover letter explaining what needed to be done and asking each agency to share the form with other appropriate agencies. As a result, 300 responses were received. Of these, 281 or 95% were tabulated (the other 19 either had no volunteer program or came back incomplete). Although only 36 states were on the mailing list, responses were received from 45 states; this was due to the agencies sharing the forms and national organizations sending forms to local chapters in all 50 states.

The questions were such that a narrative answer was required. This enabled the respondent to have a great deal of freedom in answering and also eliminated biases that might have appeared on a checklist-type form. A summary of the survey questions is shown as Appendix 1.

As the surveys were received, they were grouped according to the type of program and the more numerous types were then grouped according to size. The groups were state schools, state institutions (psychiatric hospitals and mental retardation centers), national organizations, group homes, nursing homes, social service agencies, mental health centers, developmental centers (non-residential), Good Will agencies, and general developmental disability programs (varied).

As a result of the narrative style of response to the survey questions, the tabulation of the forms was at best a difficult task. Responses to each question were recorded during the first reading of the surveys. Then most frequently cited answers were tabulated. This information is the basis for the findings presented in the report.

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Findings

Volunteer Staff

It was important to find out whether a program had a full-time, part-time or no volunteer coordinator, as that fact would affect the perspective of all other responses. For example, a program with a part-time coordinator may have different methods of recruitment or different problems than a program with a full-time coordinator.

It was found that 63% of programs responding had a full-time coordinator. Programs with part-time coordinators made up 18% of the responses and 17% had no coordinator.

The section of the questionnaire that seemed most affected by the presence or absence of a volunteer coordinator was the problem portion. The programs without a volunteer coordinator cited this lack as a problem itself. The respondents found that an absence of volunteer services staff created difficulties in carrying on the different components of the program (such as recruitment) due to the fact that these responsibilities fell on staff with other jobs and with little extra time.

Expectations concerning the "service-life" of a given volunteer varies greatly among volunteer administrators. The ideal situation for volunteer programs might include training a set number of volunteers and placing them on the job, and having them involved for at least one year. It was important to find out if this ideal was realistic, especially in work with clients who may not respond to volunteer efforts.

The findings from the survey indicate that few programs have very many long-term volunteers, for example, volunteers who work regularly for six months or more. It was found that almost 60% of the programs described less than half of their volunteers as long-term. In the survey, 16% stated that from 55% to 80% of their volunteers were long-term, and 8% stated that over 80% of their volunteers were long-term.

It should be noted that 70% of those programs which had 85% or higher long-term involvement were programs where there was no direct client contact involved in the volunteer activities. The activities associated with these programs included fund-raising and clerical activities. This is significant in revealing the amount of time to expect volunteers to remain involved in direct client care.

The survey revealed two frequently cited responses for a realistic time frame for volunteer involvement: six months and twelve months. There were an equal number of responses for each, and the responses did not vary significantly according to program type. However, the "service-life" of a volunteer is affected by a number of different factors. For example, a volunteer might be expected to stay twelve months if rewards are built into the job. On the other hand, volunteers working with persons with severe disabilities may not receive the immediate satisfaction of seeing results from their work and may, therefore, stay a relatively short time.

Volunteer Activities

One finding from the survey is that volunteers appear to be involved in similar types of activities regardless of the kind of program they work in. Volunteers from nine of the thirteen types of programs responding to the survey listed recreation/entertainment as either the most frequent or second most frequent type of service they performed as volunteers. Volunteers from ten of the thirteen program types listed working on a one-to-one basis with clients as the most frequent or second most frequent modality of service. Less frequent types of services in which volunteers were engaged included clerical, religious, transportation and fund-raising activities.

Volunteers were involved in some very innovative activities, such as dental hygiene, cosmetology and psychological testing, but these did not appear frequently enough to be significant.

Many respondents stated that they did not have volunteers, only "board members." These persons were not considered volunteers, even though they donated their time in an advisory capacity and represented in some programs as many as 40 individuals. The concept that board members are not volunteers should not be supported because it may prevent the application of sound volunteer administrative practices (in such areas as recruitment and recognition, for example) to this component of the overall program.

Volunteer Recruitment

Trends in the spectrum of people volunteering are changing as more people return to the work force. It is important to know where to find volunteers successfully. Asked from where they recruited their volunteers, 63% of repondents of the survey identified volunteer organizations, including civic groups and Voluntary Action Centers. Other significant findings were: 54% recruited from high schools and colleges; 52% recruited from the general community (individuals); and 33% recruited from churches.

It is interesting to note that 9% of all respondents specified that Voluntary Action Centers were very successful recruiters.

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Other innovative ideas for places to recruit included prisons, state court systems, and group homes for the mentally retarded. Often these programs are overlooked as potential sources of volunteers. This indicates that we need to broaden our scope and be creative in planning volunteer recruitment.

In current volunteer literature, word-of-mouth has been suggested as the best form of recruitment. This was reinforced by the results of the survey. Of the respondents, 45% listed word-of-mouth as the best method of recruitment.

It is interesting to note that 24% of all respondents felt that a satisified volunteer was the best method of recruitment. This may be an area overlooked by many programs. Particularly in programs where a person may feel uneasy about starting a volunteer job, an experienced volunteer can often ease the situation and sell the program for the agency. This could also be important in volunteers helping to train new volunteers. Use of the media to recruit volunteers was listed as the best recruitment method by 22% of the respondents.

Orientation, Training and Supervision

The orientation, training and supervision volunteers receive affects their performance on the job and the length of their service. While all respondents recognized the need for and provided an orientation of new volunteers, less than half cited any specific training they made available to the volunteer. Of the respondents, 27% stated that their program offered training prior to the volunteer beginning work and 24% offered on-the-job training.

Supervision of the volunteer, however, was available in most programs, and in 79% of the cases was given by the staff person with whom the volunteer worked most closely. Of the respondents, 10% indicated that the volunteer coordinator provided supervision to all volunteers in the program, while 6% of the respondents stated that no supervision of any kind was offered.

Evaluation of volunteers as part of the supervisory process was included by 44% of the survey respondents. This was an encouraging finding, since not only is evaluation important to volunteers, it is important to the overall evaluation of the volunteer program. Evaluation of volunteers can give clues as to whether training has been adequate and whether the volunteer has become an integral part of the service the agency provides. Also, volunteer work in many states is now considered equivalent on an hour-for-hour basis to paid employment as work experience which can be submitted on job applications. This adds further importance to the evaluating of volunteer performance since volunteer administrators become job references for many volunteers.

Volunteer Motivation and Recognition

Respondents from eleven of the thirteen types of programs surveyed most often listed a meaningful job as the most important motivating factor of volunteers (47%). Volunteers who perceive their work as meaningful appear to be more satisfied with their work and are more likely to remain longer in the program's service. The volunteer's personal interest in a client's disability was also mentioned frequently (26%) as motivating certain volunteers. The survey respondents likewise placed emphasis on the importance of maintaining good staff rapport with volunteers (20%). Thus, training staff in how to work with volunteers may provide a basis for successful volunteer experiences.

Recognition is also a part of motivation for volunteers, and methods of recognizing volunteers played an important part in volunteer retention for respondents. Pins and certificates as recognition were used in 55% of the programs. In the survey, 33% also sponsored an annual event; 29% sponsored teas, dinners or receptions; 16% used informal thank-you's; and 13% sent out letters. Some programs used all or any combination of these activities. Some innovative ideas were brought out on several surveys, such as letting the clients do all recognition activities, and securing movie or special event tickets at a discount rate for volunteers. Here, too, it is important to be creative and find ways to recognize volunteers meaningfully.

Problems Experienced by Volunteer Programs

Respondents were asked to list specific problems they had encountered as they administered their programs. Staff resistance to volunteers was the most frequent problem identified by respondents in almost half of the program types. Respondents also frequently mentioned that their volunteers were undependable. Other responses included the absence of a volunteer coordinator and the state of the economy which is forcing many potential volunteers back into the paid work force. Of the respondents, 9% also cited the rising cost of gas as a cause of declining numbers of people able to volunteer.

Summary

Although all the findings of the survey relate to the entirety of a volunteer program, and are thus intertwined, it appears that the motivation factor is the key to maintaining a strong volunteer program. When the motivating factor has been identified, then the volunteer administrator knows how to plan for and imple-

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ment volunteer involvement. Volunteers are most often motivated, according to the survey findings, by a meaningful job and special interest in a client's disability. Therefore, we need to develop sound, challenging job descriptions and recruit realistically, remembering that not everyone can or will be interested in working with special clients. This is not to say that someone without previous experience cannot volunteer. Students need to gain experience, for example. But for long-term involvement and quick placement, the person with previous knowledge of or interest in the disability proves to be more successful. For those wishing to volunteer with no special interests or previous work, training must be provided at extra lengths to prepare the volunteer for what to expect. The findings also suggest that training staff to more effectively relate to volunteers will enhance the volunteer's experience and the volunteer program.

It is not a new concept to volunteerism, but it bears repeating: if motivating factors are identified and built in, the job becomes meaningful and the involvement a success.

APPENDIX 1

The following are the short-answer and narrative questions asked in the survey:

1. Agency: type of client served; ages of clients served; size of program (number of staff, number of clients).

2. Volunteer Program: number of full-time coordinators, part-time, or none; number of volunteers per year. Of this number, how many are long-term volunteers (volunteers who work on an ongoing and regular basis for 6 months or more)?

3. List volunteer activities.

4. From where are volunteers recruited?

5. What seems to be the best method(s) of recruitment?

6. What is included in the volunteer's orientation program?

7. What is included in the training program?

8. Describe the supervision volunteers receive (Who supervises? How often are volunteers evaluated?).

9. What seems to motivate volunteers to remain with your agency?

10. What forms of recognition do you use?

11. What problems have you encountered with your volunteer program?

12. What do you think is a realistic amount of time to expect volunteers to continue to work with persons who have severe disabilities? _____ months.

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