

— VOLUNTEER STAFF RELATIONSHIPS IN A UNION ENVIRONMENT —

by Li Zahnd

A healthy, active partnership of staff and volunteers is essential for an effective volunteer program within a unionized hospital setting.

At the Rockyview General Hospital, administration, unions, managers of volunteers and human resources professionals have been working closely together building and fostering staff relations that have helped create an environment conducive to volunteer involvement:

- We are guided by a policy which clearly states that volunteers enhance and enrich the services to our patients and that they do not replace paid staff members.
- Collaboratively, hospital staff and managers of volunteer resources develop new programs and design assignment guides for every volunteer opportunity. These are then reviewed by labour relations (HR) and union, approved by administration.
- The language used in our assignment guides is distinctly different from that of staff job descriptions. Tasks and expectations are clearly stated.
- We inform volunteers at orientation on policies regarding volunteers and paid staff relationships.
- The value of volunteer participation and the responsibilities and expectations that are part of the partnership concept are presented at all staff orientations and through ongoing education opportunities.

- We monitor and evaluate the actual activities and tasks performed by volunteers to ensure they are within the approved assignment guides.
- Together with the unions, we have developed policies and procedures regarding the role of volunteers during industrial conflict. The volunteers have a choice to continue with their regular duties and/or to accept additional or extended duties within their regular assignments. Additional and extended duties will be approved by administration and Volunteer Resources. No new programs and assignments will be established during a strike and the Volunteer Resources department will not be involved in strike placements.
- We celebrate the successes of our partnership through informal but regular staff recognition activities.

The restructuring of the delivery of health care in Alberta has brought with it closures of hospitals, massive staff cuts and regionalisation. The Rockyview General Hospital is now part of the Calgary Regional Health Authority, Acute Care Sector (five hospitals).

The Volunteer Resources departments of the different hospitals share the same values regarding staff relations and ethical use of volunteers.

The major changes we have experienced since 1993 have been, quite understandably so, stressing the staff - volunteer relationships. Activities carried out by volunteers, in the past appreciated as support, are now suddenly experienced as threats and managers struggling to deliver services with reduced resources are asking for inappropriate volunteer support.

To date, we were able to rely on the established trust to help us "weather the different storms." But trust is not enough, additional actions are needed to show our continued commitment to the ethical use of volunteers:

- We use common communication tools (i.e., a newsletter) to talk about the role of volunteers and to invite supervisory staff to involve us in finding creative and appropriate solutions to the challenges they are faced with. Volunteers for one time special projects can sometimes provide immediate relief and long term strategies for responding to the new realities may include designing or re-designing programs from scratch, which makes volunteers a truly integral part of the resources available, both at a direct and indirect level. Explanations regarding the ethical use of volunteers have also been used to support requests for adequate staffing.
- We continue to educate staff and volunteers and closely monitor programs regarding additions and changes to assignment guides.

- We have established a one year grace period during which we do not place any more volunteers or establish new programs in areas that have experienced major cuts.

Staffs have felt comfortable expressing their concerns and fears to us. We recognize and respect their feelings and take the time to provide them with facts and information. Their coming forward has also helped us identify concerns that could lead to a union grievance or public relations issue.

I have experience in working with non-union and union environments. I believe the level of effectiveness of the staff - volunteer partnership greatly affects the success of any volunteer program regardless of its setting. Working with unions has been a positive learning experience for me. I have a very clear understanding of the role of volunteers in a public institution and I have come to truly recognize and respect union and management staffing issues. It pays to invest in this partnership. Our patients tell us so.

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