

# ***Effective Use of Your Volunteers in Political Camps***

By Catherine Smyth, Volunteer

Often the reaction of an agency staff member to political involvement of their volunteers is one of query and apprehension. "Why should we concern ourselves with politics?" "My volunteers don't want to have anything to do with politics!" "We concern ourselves only with the needs of our clients, why should we care about politics?"

Stop for just a moment. Who makes the laws and regulations that control your agency? Which level of government determines the financial grant or budget allocated to your agency?

Please consider encouraging some of your volunteers to participate in the campaign of a candidate or elected official who will make decisions affecting the operation of your organization. Win or lose, that candidate will be in the position to effectively influence the future of your agency. If the candidate your volunteers choose to support is a winner he or she will be more receptive to communication or suggestions to a known campaign worker than to a total stranger. If your volunteers have backed the opposition candidate, the elected official will still pay more attention to requests in an effort to

---

*Smyth is the President of the Texas Federation of Republican Women and sits on the Board of Directors for the Volunteer Center of Dallas County.*

avoid active opposition in the next election.

*First, determine the level of government that has the most influence on your organization. Second, carefully select a candidate competing for a position in county, state, or national government. Individually interview the candidates; evaluate their past performance in the community or in their elected position; weigh their receptiveness to the concerns of people and decide which one most closely identifies with the value, needs, and future of your agency. Then, encourage volunteers to actively participate in the campaign of your selected candidate.*

*Elected officials can be helpful in many ways. Contact their offices and request information on any pending legislation that affects you and your volunteers. Urge your volunteers to write their elected officials urging passage or defeat of such legislation.*

*Learn how to "lobby" for your agency. Invite elected officials to come and tour your offices and/or centers of activity and provide as much news media coverage as possible. This effort will publicize your activities and also provide the elected officials with sought-after publicity and name identification with a worthy cause.*

*Teach elected officials the agency jargon we all take for granted. Do they understand what*

you are talking about when you are making reports or requests? Educate them and they will better understand your service to the community.

*Include elected officials in your agency mailing list.* Request a copy of all of their newsletters. Invite them to your annual meetings and parties. Even if the elected official is not able to attend, often a staff member will come and in the long run, may be your most effective contact.

*Emphasize the size and sphere of influence of your agency and the clients you serve.* An elected official will translate your figures into votes in the next election. Do not underestimate your clout.

*Most important of all, be organized in all your transactions with the elected officials and their offices.* Your contacts with them will reflect upon your operation of your agency. Be prompt, punctual, concise, and considerate of their time limitations. Prepare a discussion agenda prior to your meeting; one copy for you, one for the elected official, and one for your files. Follow up on telephone conversations with written memos summarizing any discussions or commitments. Whenever possible, limit letters to one page and capsule your remarks as best you can without omitting vital information.

You and your volunteers have the ability and opportunity to strengthen your agency by increasing your involvement in political camps. Each year we seem to have keener competition for volunteers who are seeking meaningful and constructive involvement and who are fewer in number due to increased employment. In addition, we all face greater financial needs and fewer resources. *We can no longer afford a "who, me?" attitude in terms of political involvement.*