THE CHALLENGE OF DECENTRALIZING A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

By Melanie Ghio

A great deal has been written about trends in volunteerism and the effect of broader, socio-economic trends on the volunteer scene. It is sometimes difficult to see how a world-wide development will impact our own programs within our short tenures, but trends do affect us very quickly in our fast-paced society. The trend toward decentralization is quite prevalent already and may soon begin to affect even smaller volunteer programs.

A decentralized program is one in which volunteers for a single agency provide services in any one of several physically separate sites. The more common type of decentralization is found in the agency that provides basically the same services at each of its sites — a public school system, for example.

Some decentralized programs are even more complex, offering very different services at different locations. These programs are unified by sponsorship, funding, directorship, legislation or other management function.

Many organizations have discovered the advantages of decentralization, moving into neighborhoods where the people needing services are to be found. Social service and counseling agencies began opening branch offices in suburban areas years ago; big city hospitals now have small clinics scattered around the metropolitan area to handle minor emergencies and routine health care. Even museums, so long associated with their monumental edifices, are opening mini-museums, staging temporary exhibits in shopping centers, and making other outreach efforts.

Just as potential clients and patrons are to be found in many parts of town, volunteers and other resources are also waiting to be tapped in each locale. Recruiting

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volunteers to work at the shelter for abused children located downtown may prove difficult; community group homes in several different neighborhoods might well present a much more attractive volunteer opportunity.

Just as volunteers take an interest in services located in their own neighborhoods, businesses, churches, civic groups and other institutions can be encouraged to adopt clients or donate goods and services to programs nearby. Decentralization helps to create a small town feeling of mutual responsibility, as long as the program is a good neighbor, of course.

While decentralizing program services, many social service agencies are actually centralizing most administrative and management services. This centralized administrative system is often encouraged by major funding sources — state and federal agencies and the United Way — and is made possible through expanding computer networks.

The reality points out one of the disadvantages of decentralized volunteer programs, however, and that is lack of autonomy. Volunteers and other staff may often feel that important decisions are made at the far-away main office. A great deal of administrative work may be necessary to meet the accountability standards of several layers of funding and sponsoring agencies.

This work seems far removed from the day-to-day services provided at the site. Even basic record-keeping, such as time sheets for volunteers, may seem petty, since everyone at the site is well aware of who does what, when. Why must the main office concern itself with these details?

Volunteers in decentralized sites may also suffer from lack of appropriate recognition, being so far removed from agency headquarters and the top-level personnel housed there. On the other hand, the volunteer may not be in the least concerned with the mission or the goals of the larger

agency. His/her dedication may be completely localized.

The skill of a volunteer administrator is seriously tested in a decentralized program with central management functions. A leadership style must be adopted — one that allows each program to flourish in a decentralized fashion while meeting required centralized accountability standards. He/she must create a system in which functions that are centralized for economy's sake also serve as the center of an interagency network of information and resources.

That information and resource pool is then every bit as valuable and necessary to the participating members of the network as it is to the central bureaucracy. It cannot be set up as a power base controlling particular management functions but rather as a mutually beneficial network of programs with the commonality of volunteerism.

There are several management techniques that will contribute to the effectiveness of such a complete set-up.

"Mr. Piggy" plays with kids at a Catholic Charities day care center in New Orleans.

Just as situational leadership has proven to be a valid system of supervision, "situational management" is necessary for a complex, decentralized agency. The volunteer administrator in a decentralized agency must have a great deal of personal flexibility in his/her management style. Each site will have its own set of strengths, weaknesses, needs and resources.

A program in the early stages of development may require the telling or instructing style, just as a new, inexperienced volunteer would. At the other extreme, the well-established, successful program requires delegation. Being able to assess the managerial style required by each program site is the first measure of the ability to manage a decentralized program effectively.

One of the sites in our agency that manages its volunteer program most effectively is an adult daycare center in a lower middle-class suburban neighborhood. The program director makes excellent use of her center's human resources through creative involvement of church auxiliaries, civic groups, students, neighbors and neighboring businesses. Because they have their roots in the neighborhood, and because local politicians and civic groups are proud of the existence of the center in their area, public awareness of the program is high.

This program requires very little supervision or management expertise from the main office. The program director knows that she can call for assistance if needed, but most of her calls to my office are informative in nature. She informs me of the activities of the volunteers and their progress in meeting their goals. I answer procedural questions and act as cheerleader for the program. They do a very good job on their own, with very little assistance from the main office, and that needs to be recognized by me and by the agency hierarchy.

Another program in our complex agency provides residential care for severely retarded, multi-handicapped children. The previous volunteer coordinator was a trained recreational therapist who was not skilled in volunteer management when we began our work together. Through the months, she and I met several times and spoke by phone frequently.

Unlike many new volunteer administrators, recruiting did not present a problem to her. The areas where she needed assistance were in planning and job design, delegating supervisory duties and evaluation. We worked on each of these in turn, through both informal and formal training situations. She soon began to assimilate these management skills and no longer required so much attention from the main office. It was great to see her develop from a novice to a peer while I moved from instructor to peer/mentor, all the while developing a supportive relationship.

The same flexibility that allows for situational management will prove valuable in the administrator's handling of policies and procedures. An administrator who can live with variety, who, in fact, sees variety as an expression of individual strengths rather than as confusion and lack of compliance, is one step ahead of the game. Being flexible enough to set very few policies is a sign of management maturity, particularly in volunteerism where we want to develop potential for leadership. Rather than establishing lots of policies that might create compliance problems, the flexible manager will formalize procedures only in the most critical instances.

Our hard and fast policies are few. We require that all volunteers go through the prescribed interview/screening process in order to be considered official volunteers for insurance purposes and legal consideration. The interviewing can be done by main office or site staff, the choice of which offers programs several possible benefits.

Those who want our staff to do the interviewing see it as a real time saver for their staff and a good way to screen out the totally inappropriate applicant. Other programs prefer to do their own intake activities so as to involve volunteers more quickly and at more convenient locations. Program staff can decide for themselves what type of orientation and training to provide; we simply require that each volunteer receive orientation before beginning. We provide guidelines for orientation and encourage creative training techniques as the means for most effectively orienting new volunteers.

Our only other "engraved in stone" procedures regard time sheets and terminations. We require that a monthly report of the time volunteers give to the agency be turned in within five working days of the following month. This allows us to prepare our own reports regarding agency-wide volunteer activities and serves as the basis for many collateral reports prepared throughout the year.

The form of the time reports varies almost as much as the programs we sponsor, but we accept almost any legible time sheet that fits the needs of the site. Terminations must be discussed with me beforehand so that we can protect both the volunteer and the agency from unpleasant, unnecessary repercussions.

The most important factor in operating a decentralized program is the existence of an inter-agency network that focuses on volunteerism. The volunteer administrator in a multi-site program must create an interdependent network: each site is both an independent program and a link in a larger, supportive framework. The volunteer administrator can facilitate the networking through workshops, brainstorming, meetings, sharing opportuni-

Elderly clients learn crafts skills from volunteers at an adult day care center.

ties, and all forms of communication.

We have used all of the above-mentioned techniques through the years. We provide occasional in-house workshops in various volunteer management functions, and we always promote participation in our local Volunteer Center training events. We send inter-office memos, copies of articles and other material to all the members of our inter-agency network frequently. Our newsletter, designed primarily for the volunteers, never fails to mention activities of the volunteer administrators at various sites.

There are many difficulties in managing this type of program, of course. The same problems that are prevalent in all forms of volunteer management are even more pronounced in a complex, decentralized set-up.

Feelings of completion and closure are often denied the administrator in this type of agency. The volunteers, with the exception of a small staff in the main office, are working at the many sites we operate. Their success and progress are shared with the volunteer administrators, which is as it should be. But it does create a feeling of being "out of the real action" sometimes. It is very easy to forget the real goals of the program when the clients and the volunteer staff are so far away. The temptation to do other things is always present.

Finally, the need for good conflict resolution skills and a deep understanding of the uses of social power are needed, because at this level of volunteer management, conflicts are very complex and the people who must be influenced are of great and multitudinous variety. Without those skills, management is impossible; with those skills, the program is manageable but may well be stressful and exhausting.

In summary, a multi-site, decentralized program or agency challenges the volunteer manager to identify his/her own strengths and resources. Those same gifts must be available to anyone involved in volunteerism throughout the agency; the director must be accessible and supportive. She/he should exert a minimal amount of traditional control mechanisms and develop potential leadership in each site. He/she must be supremely aware of the difficulties of management in a complex agency and guard against being victimized by those built-in pitfalls. In these ways, the challenge of decentralization can be met most productively and effectively.