



POLICYMAKER POWER

When You Involve Your Leaders and They Help Volunteers Get The Job Done

By Paula J. Beugen

Your volunteer program could easily become the focal point for any and every unmet service need or project for which no other source of support can be found. No matter how much thought has gone into an idea, or the importance of the service in relation to your existing program priorities, the volunteer program is often expected to take on requests upon demand.

With proper policymaker education, however, this need not be the case. You could have a well-focused effort with top-level support and reinforcement to help get the organization's most important jobs done.

Recently, I asked some leaders of volunteer programs what they wish policymakers in their organizations would understand. Here are some of their thoughts:

- Running a volunteer program is a really sophisticated business. It takes a lot to translate a vision for volunteer services into significant work for volunteers and their clientele.

- Volunteers are not just another data item in the annual report, nor can they be expected to carry out purely altruistic work without consideration given to their own needs.

- Well-run volunteer programs must be managed just as any other department in an organization. Too often policymaker attention to the volunteer program is on a hit-or-miss basis.

- Sometimes volunteers or staff receive all the recognition and credit from their supervisors without corresponding recognition of the other partners. This does not create a healthy environment.

- When it comes to policymakers, what

they do counts more than what they say. It's one thing to give a speech at the annual recognition event, but without adequate resources for volunteers to do their work, the "thank you" can feel empty.

- Volunteers can make or break any organization. A haphazard attitude toward volunteer work will create just that — a sloppy service delivery system.

Stress on volunteer programs is escalating. Volunteerism is now receiving lots of public visibility and the expectations for volunteers are high. For example, decentralization of government services and further cuts in government spending, among other trends, are leading to increased demand for volunteers. The full impact of the Gramm-Rudman Hollings legislation has not yet been felt.

The burden is on leaders of volunteers to help spell out the capabilities and limitations of the volunteer community. We must call attention to issues that will affect organizational effectiveness and the climate for volunteers. We are obligated to sensitize policymakers about attitudes and actions toward volunteerism that could have a positive or negative effect. Since volunteerism is an emerging field, we cannot expect others to articulate the volunteer perspective. This is our responsibility.

So, how do we approach policymakers and what do we need to tell them?

Policymakers are busy people — overloaded with priorities, requests for hearings and piles of mail. A concise, to-the-point approach is essential. Here are some strategies to consider:

- Focus on your most critical issues.
- Preschedule your meeting or presentation time and stick to the agenda and allotted timeframe.

- Introduce only a few key points.

- Implement an ongoing advocacy campaign to prepare policymakers long be-

fore any crisis decisions are necessary.

- Frequently offer brief opportunities for policymakers to participate in the activities of your program. (Don't express disappointment if they are able to attend only periodically. Do express appreciation for the times they can be present, and give them public credit when the opportunities arise.)

- Recognize when you are the best person to make contact with policymakers and when outside help could be more effective (i.e., help from other experts, influential persons or volunteers).

- Encourage policymakers to attend training sessions on volunteerism through their own professional associations.

Here are possible areas to address with your organization's policymakers:

Climate for Volunteers

Creating a climate for volunteers is a tremendous challenge for any organization. Policymakers are instrumental in establishing that climate. By carefully timing the initiation of a new volunteer program, policymakers will influence the acceptance of that program. For example, volunteers will not be readily accepted when they are brought in immediately after or during a major budget cut or strike. Volunteers can be successful only with the help and support of others.

There must be enthusiasm or at least acceptance of volunteers through all levels of the organization. Volunteers will be received well when careful pre-planning is carried out for volunteer roles.

The organization must be sure to prepare for specific responsibilities, anticipate and resolve potential problems and involve others affected by volunteers in the planning process. Policymakers influence this course at the outset of any new program.

Policymakers are motivators. Their en-

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ergy is required to strengthen recruitment, retention and recognition of volunteers. Gestures such as comments at meetings, attendance at volunteer events and recognition of opportunities for volunteer advancement inspire volunteers to work even harder.

What Volunteers Can Do

Volunteer contributions are far reaching. In addition to the wide range of direct service tasks they contribute, volunteers help build an image for your organization or cause. The type of people who choose to get involved and their level of commitment signal your organization's quality of service and stature.

Policymakers will be intrigued by the facts that volunteers can advocate for organizational needs in a way that may be inappropriate for paid staff — for example, to the legislature or with private sector funding sources. Also, volunteers are often the catalysts for mobilizing the community around organizational causes such as referendums or fundraising campaigns.

Certainly volunteers can stretch your organization beyond the ordinary by

- bringing in new creativity and ideas;
- offering specific skills and talents;
- stimulating a feeling of enthusiasm and commitment in the organization;
- serving as catalysts for public, private and voluntary sector partnerships; and
- testing new approaches and methods before policymakers invest larger amounts of resources.

Myths about Volunteers

Volunteers are not free labor. They require a budget and support services to reach their potential. Nor are volunteers a panacea for all ills. Volunteer roles must be appropriate within the context of any situation.

In staffed organizations, volunteers do not take the place of paid staff. They can supplement services provided by paid staff, however, by providing additional individual assistance, enrichment or relief of details so professionals can utilize their skills more fully. In fact, paid staff members play a crucial role in facilitating the work of volunteers. While volunteers can be found working at increasingly complex tasks, responsibilities of paid staff working with volunteers become more intense.

Volunteers are not instantly available. Organizations need carefully thought out recruitment strategies that consider the increasing competition for volunteers. Poli-

cymakers must take a stand on support services they are willing to make available for volunteers, such as expense reimbursement, adequate space and materials, child care and so forth. Organizations have to work hard to maximize the benefits and minimize the barriers for volunteers.

Worth of Volunteer Programs

Volunteer programs are worth much more than is apparent on the surface. Among other things, Steve McCurley, volunteer program consultant, suggests the following considerations for policymakers in realizing their program's worth:

- The dollar value of the hours donated by volunteers
- The number of people within and outside your organization who are touched by volunteers, as well as the quality of service they receive
- The value of monetary and material donations offered by volunteers
- The worth of unreimbursed expenses incurred by volunteers
- The results of community linkages with other organizations, businesses and individuals established through volunteers

In some circles, volunteer programs may be considered "soft" services because they do not generate "hard" dollars. Smart organizations recognize that a dollar value can be placed on volunteer services. In fact, it would require (often nonexistent) "hard dollars" to provide volunteer services through other means. Beyond this, in many cases the efforts of volunteers result in significant monetary gifts or grants to the organization — "hard dollars."

MOVS' POLICYMAKER TRAINING PROGRAM

This article originally appeared in the newsletter of the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services (MOVS), Department of Administration, which has developed a complete training program for policymakers throughout the state. Its goal is to provide a new or renewed enthusiasm for volunteer participation and recognition of the potential for volunteers, as well as the development of specific skills and knowledge of importance to policymakers as they encounter volunteer-related issues while conducting ongoing business.

The training package has been designed as a full-day workshop, although its segments can be presented separately.

MOVS is now conducting outreach to policymaker associations and networks to schedule training programs.

Role of Volunteer Leader

A capable, qualified administrator (leader) of volunteers is central to an effectively operated volunteer program. This is the individual who interfaces with the volunteers, paid staff, administration and community-at-large and manages the volunteer program. Management includes needs identification, recruitment, placement, training, supervision, support, evaluation and recognition of volunteers.

Volunteer administration has become increasingly professionalized. There is a growing body of knowledge and methodology for working with volunteers. Just as volunteers are an extension of the paid staff, the volunteer administrator belongs on the management teams and could logically be an extension of the personnel department. Considering the level of responsibilities, community contacts and influence of the volunteer administrator, it would behoove policymakers to place this position at the highest possible level on the organizational chart.

Issues in Volunteerism

Policymakers face many issues when making volunteer-related decisions. Issues may involve legal or ethical considerations. Questions frequently arise around such topics as volunteer-labor relationships, the unemployed person who volunteers, employment or academic credit for volunteer experience, insurance coverage for volunteers, and data privacy and volunteers.

These and other ethical questions also deserve policymaker consideration:

- How much emphasis will be placed on staff development to prepare paid staff to work with volunteers?
- What will be done to assure equitable access to volunteer services by clientele?
- What is the ideal level of citizen participation in decision-making, advisory and direct service roles?
- How much financial and personal commitment will be made by policymakers to volunteerism?

Take charge of your volunteer program by working closely with policymakers to mold its direction. Challenge policymakers to stay informed, to take a stand on volunteers, and to view volunteerism as an avenue for achieving your organization's mission and goals. Help policymakers set sound policies and parameters for your volunteer program by sharing your insights and offering continued support and commitment to turn your organization's vision for success into reality.