

As I See It

Beyond Professionalism

By Vern Lake



Vern Lake is the chief of volunteer services in the Minnesota Department of Public Welfare. He is the creator of the popular list, "101 Ways to Give Recognition to Volunteers," which appeared in the winter 1977 VAL and is reprinted once a year for VOLUNTEER's recognition kit.

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, THERE HAS been considerable concern among administrators of volunteer programs that their work is not recognized for its breadth and complexity. They feel they deserve to be recognized as a profession among the professions. Yet, it is not always clear as to what kind of recognition is sought. Ideas run all the way from some kind of identifiable craft guild to the idea of professional unionism, even to the concept of divine vocation.

Progress has been made, but we are still far from being recognized or accepted as a profession among the professions. The possibility has not even occurred to some. To others, it lacks urgency, even interest. And to many for

whom it seems important, it is hedged with reservation and misgiving.

I believe it is time for us to expand our thinking and, in the process, to move beyond our preoccupation with professionalism. Perhaps the coveted recognition would come to us as a result. Our literature, at least, would attract greater attention, our agendas would seem less self-serving, and our claim to professionalism would be more convincing. We would become a public interest group in a triple sense of the phrase—as a group not only interested in and concerned for the public, but also a group of interest to the public, having something imaginative, even revolutionary, to say.

If we are to go beyond professionalism, however, it is imperative that we appreciate more fully the magnitude of our field. We must reflect upon the ramifications of this magnitude, and assertively challenge the social order to respond to the implications.

The Magnitude of Our Field

In our society, there are two major systems for providing goods and services. One is paid, the other voluntary. What is not done by the first is left presumptuously for the latter. It is enlightening and stimulating to note that of these two systems, the voluntary system is the major one. Paid labor is a minority increment when a full accounting for life's goods and services is made. Unfortunately, our perspective on volunteerism, and certainly the distribution of rewards, is too often foreshortened by our tendency to think of volunteers only in conjunction with a paid staff and an organizational entity.

The real truth about life, however, is that most of the world's work is done by volunteer labor and always has been—if the definition of volunteerism is work done without personal financial gain. On the domestic front, for instance, housekeeping, homemaking, home nursing, child rearing, day care, food and laundry services are, for the most part, unpaid, critical human services. In addition, lawns are mowed, gardens planted and harvested, snow removed, children tutored, play supervised, buildings repaired, property maintained, errands run and good deeds done—all voluntarily!

In the community, who solicits for United Way? Who contributes the money solicited? Who solicits for a multitude of other causes and concerns? Who responds to the solicitations? Who staffs the political campaign office? Who supplies the campaign coffers? Who joins "service" clubs? Who become officers? Who most often organizes and leads community organizations? Who are the people who participate? Where do Little League coaches come from? Who are the Big Brothers? Big Sisters? Scout leaders?

In times of crisis, who puts out most of the world's fires? Who fights most of its wars? Who fills the sandbags, watches the dikes, and evacuates the threatened when there are floods? Who brings food and blankets when people are hungry and cold? Who arrives first when calamity strikes? Who is still there when the crisis abates and the paid workers have gone?

Truth is falsified when we say the world runs on money. It runs on volunteerism. Without volunteers the world could not survive for even one day. If volunteers did not hold the world together while others are engaged in paid

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employment, there would be no world for them to return to after work. It is a great misfortune that in the course of its economic evolution the human race has been persuaded to view life from the bottom lines prefixed with dollar signs.

Volunteer program directors and administrators will transcend the pursuit of their own professionalism and perform a redeeming service when they recognize the magnitude of the field in which they practice and begin to challenge society with its implications. Instead of obsequiously striving for admission into a world of professional peerage, they will insist that the peerages take more cognizance of the reality which undergirds us all.

Ramifications of the Magnitude

1. Volunteerism is the largest piece in the world of work.

The 1981 Gallup Survey on Volunteering revealed that fifty-two percent of American adults volunteer. This is a noteworthy finding, even though it is fifty percent incorrect. As a matter of total fact, every person performs as a volunteer at some time or other, usually many times a day. Inevitably, every person becomes a volunteer. The ratio of volunteers to population is one to one. It is as impossible to run out of volunteers as it is to run out of people. And because every person becomes a volunteer but not every person goes on a payroll, volunteerism represents the largest piece in the world of work.

This claim may offend the volunteer administrator's sense of humility, but not to recognize it dilutes reality.

Such a claim may arouse the ire of other participants in volunteerism, but not to declare it leaves the truth distorted.

Such a claim probably will trigger the anxiety, even the hostility, of those with vested interests in the status quo; but not to risk it would represent a failure in courage.

The pragmatic may feel that such a claim is too ubiquitous to be useful, perhaps because they prefer small, tidy, manageable worlds to large, complex, perplexing ones.

The modest may feel we are overreaching propriety with such a claim, but not to is to disregard the truth and to thwart an opportunity to achieve substantial social change as the result of enlarged thinking.

2. Volunteerism deserves to be taken into fuller, more serious account.

In one of its earliest fulminations the National Organization for Women (NOW) resented the fact that many of the volunteer services identified above were taken for granted as "women's work." Understandably, but unnecessarily, NOW concluded that the best strategy for women would be to disengage themselves from volunteerism and to seek admission at monetary par into the mischievous world of male chauvinism. Equally understandably, but also unnecessarily, the world of AVA (Association for Volunteer Administration) became nervous, felt attacked and fired off rounds of irrelevant rebuttal.

Tactically, it would have been a propitious moment for both parties to amalgamate their angers and anxieties and to

demand that our society respond with some fairer, newer, creative redesign of the distribution and reward systems commensurate with the magnitude of the voluntary sector.

3. If the magnitude of volunteerism in the world of work were taken into full account when accounting for the production of goods and services in our society, it would foster a reconception of the nation's economy. . . .

Most persons are familiar with the idea of a "gross national product" (GNP) and have some understanding of what it is. Unfortunately, the idea of the GNP, like the idea of volunteering, is too narrowly focused. Like the tendency to think of volunteers only in reference to a paid staff or organizational entity, so the idea of a gross national product is seen in reference to the dollar value of goods and services placed for sale in the market place.

This is too limited a view.

The taking of volunteerism into account when accounting for the nation's production of goods and services requires a more expanded and extended understanding of the term "gross national product," and perhaps even requires a new name.

May I suggest "gross national achievement" (GNA)?

GNA would be a happier acronym than GNP, for it would include the contributions of all citizens, even the unemployed, the poor, the handicapped, the rich, the retired, the elderly, even those "on welfare."

4. . . . and a reexamination of its reward system.

Writing in the September 1975 issue of *Redbook* magazine, the late Dr. Margaret Mead addressed the question, Do we really need volunteers? It pleased our profession that she answered in the affirmative. With equal validity, however, it could be asked, Do we really need paid labor?

The answer in both instances is, Not necessarily, for what society really needs is goods and services. Both paid and voluntary systems are currently utilized for their production and distribution. However, this is not necessarily unchangeable. A society need not be both; and, it could become either-or.

A more difficult but relevant question is, By what formula should the goods and services be distributed? There is a cherished notion entrenched in our society, nourished by folklore and protected by phrases, that the present way of doing things is indigenous to America and that those who question it are somehow suspect. This is both untrue and undeserved.

It is corrective to note that America, in its beginnings, rejected Europe's politics but retained its economics, never adequately perceiving that they had evolved in tandem. Consequently, our Founding Fathers fostered a new politics but did not foster a new economics. The result has been that America's social experience recapitulates Europe's by an interval of two or three decades and frustrates the achievement of America's commitment to "liberty and justice for all."

The new politics required a new economics. Because we never have conceived one, America's egalitarian dreams continue to prove elusive.

Challenge the Social Order

The most quoted classicist of voluntarists is Alexis de

Tocqueville who visited the United States in the early nineteenth century, noted the amount of volunteerism in the emerging nation, and cited it as one of the new nation's most distinguishing marks. As an emerging profession in the twentieth century, volunteer administrators have been pleased to quote such a personage in support of their work, its historical roots and its legitimacy in the ongoing scheme of things.

But how many who quote Tocqueville appreciate with excitement what he was observing with scholarly detachment and are willing to declare with enthusiasm what the phenomenon he was observing so challengingly implies?

Actually, Tocqueville was observing a universal behavior of civilized people expanded to extraordinary dimensions by the exigencies of frontier life. It was frontier necessity that fueled the explosive emergence of volunteerism as a distinguishing mark on the American scene. It was not something behaviorally new or unique. It was not something exclusively "Made in America." It had and has been happening every day, everywhere, throughout human history.

But what, perhaps, Tocqueville failed to see, and subsequent generations of Americans have failed to see, was the potential for implementing the ideals of freedom, justice and equality embedded in the behavioral phenomenon called "volunteerism," ideals to which the new nation was Constitutionally committed.

Questions Deserving Attention

The following questions are easier to ask than to answer. They ought not to be ignored, however, for with their answers could come a resolution of many major social problems.

1. If the other name for America is Freedom, is there any enterprise more free than the volunteer's?
2. If the whole is equal to the sum of its parts and, therefore, the whole would be diminished by omission of any of the parts, by what rationale should the whole be distributed in a "gross national achievement" (GNA) oriented society?
3. If you and I, the volunteer directors and administrators, are as good as our claims about the dependability, integrity and value of volunteers, what is our professional responsibility as spokespersons in their behalf?
4. How professionally credible is it to covet for ourselves the vestments of the paid world as the marks of our success in the world of volunteerism where the motivations and rewards are fundamentally different from the other? On this one, I agree with Ivan Scheier that we should be "serious about holding our feet to the fire. . . ."
5. How mentally coherent is it to use the possibility of eventual employment in the paid world as a recruiting pitch for interim participation in the volunteer world? More subtly, what negative inferences as to our personal orientation toward the work world lurk in the miasma?

We who seek professional status for our function in the world of work will become more deserving of it if we go beyond professionalism and challenge the social order to revamp itself by taking seriously into account what is so obvious it has become obscured: the magnitude of volunteerism and its implications. In so doing we will be doing more than polishing our image; we will be helping to preserve the American heritage. ♥



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