

**D**URING MY SEVEN YEARS as coordinator of volunteers in first, a psychiatric facility for teenagers, and second, a home health care program for advanced cancer patients, I have found the issue of professional staff/lay volunteer relations to be of great concern. In analyzing the problems I've encountered and working toward their solution, I have reached some conclusions I'd like to share with other volunteer program administrators.

I believe there are several keys to the development of good volunteer/staff relations; the attitudes of staff toward volunteers in general, the expectations and needs of both volunteers and staff, the supervisory situation itself, and the climate of the entire organization. Looking carefully at each of these factors helps us find the source of any problems we're having in this area.

To be successful, a volunteer program must have the commitment of staff behind it; staff attitudes, however, can get in the way of this commitment. Staff sometimes feel that volunteers are free labor and that any old job can be dumped on them. Other staff members don't think that the jobs volunteers do in the organization really have much value. And some staff seem to be threatened by volunteers, either because they're afraid of losing their jobs to a volunteer or because they recognize that volunteers can give something to clients that staff can't—love and attention not compensated by salary or restricted to the workday. For example, some staff counselors at the psychiatric facility where I worked found it hard to share their clients with volunteers even though the volunteers expanded the services offered by the organization. Furthermore, certain staff members had had bad experiences with volunteers in the past and were lukewarm in their enthusiasm for working with volunteers now.

Unrealistic expectations on the part of both staff and volunteers can also cloud their relations. If volunteers have not been carefully screened and selected for their jobs, they may be seeking something the job doesn't offer. I remember from my elementary school teaching days, for instance, that volunteers wanting to work with children often ended up running the ditto

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## Volunteer/Staff Relations

**Kathy Brown:**

# What Goes Wrong and What Can We Do about It?

*In the last two VALs (winter '81 and fall '80), we have dealt with the future of volunteering as well as the challenges that confront the volunteer community in the years ahead. With this issue, we begin to bring you a different view of those challenges—that of the practitioner who must cope with them on a day-to-day basis. Here, Kathy Brown writes from her work experience on the relationship between paid staff and volunteers.*

*Other readers are invited to share their experiences in coping with inflation, paid staff resistance, volunteer demands for empowerment, the energy crisis, the relationship of government and corporations to volunteering, and other issues and problems facing the volunteer movement in the '80s.*



machine for hours. If staff members want someone to do office work, that should be made clear in a written job description so potential volunteers can say no if they want a different kind of job. Careful job design, recruitment, selection, and placement are thus keys to clear expectations and smooth volunteer/staff relations.

Written policies and procedures for volunteers (covering things like confidentiality, what to do if you're going to be absent, which meetings volunteers should attend, etc.) also help make expectations clear. I give a copy of these policies and procedures to each volunteer and each staff person so everyone knows what is expected of volunteers in the organization. As for what the volunteers expect, we should be finding that out in our initial interviews: Does the volunteer want job experience, training, social contact, or just to keep busy? Knowing what a volunteer wants from the job helps us put that person in the right placement.

Sometimes volunteer/staff problems occur because no one is clearly designated as the volunteer's supervisor. For a volunteer placement to work well, the volunteer needs someone to report to, get direction from, and feel needed by. This will only happen if the staff member really wants to work with the volunteer and accepts the fact that supervising volunteers takes time and energy. Even if the staff member wants a volunteer, he or she may not want *this* volunteer, and such personality clashes need to be resolved. The volunteer/staff supervisory situation, then, needs to be clear and positive for both.

Organizational climate as a whole also affects volunteer/staff relations. Is there staff coherence and is the agency's program working? Is staff morale high or low? Does the organization as a whole value the contribution of volunteers? Does the organization consider the volunteers' work an integral part of its services or a frill without much real value?

All of these factors have a subtle effect on the satisfaction volunteers get from working in the organization. If the program isn't working and morale is low, staff have little to give to volunteers. If the organization doesn't value the contribution of volunteers, staff who work with them subtly convey that message. Organizational climate is an elusive dimension, but a favorable climate is

vital to good volunteer/staff interaction.

Now, given all these factors to analyze, what do we do next if we feel there are volunteer/staff problems in our organizations? I suggest talking first to staff. Find out what their attitudes and expectations are, and find out which staff members really want to work with volunteers and which don't. If you find that the staff as a whole really wants to work with volunteers but doesn't know how to use them effectively, you can do some staff training in this area. If staff expectations are unrealistic, you can redesign volunteer jobs so that placements will be more attractive to potential volunteers. If some staff members say they no longer want volunteers assigned to them, you can reassign any who presently are working with them or try to save the placement by some other intervention. And, if staff as a whole doesn't seem to recognize the value of volunteers, you can remind it of all the things that wouldn't get done and all the services the organization could no longer provide if volunteers weren't involved.

What if particular volunteers are causing problems for the staff and thus undermining the entire program? The first step is to talk with these volunteers and find out what's wrong from their point of view. If they don't find the job satisfying, perhaps you can reassign them or suggest that they volunteer at some other organization which would have a job more appropriate for their needs. If they have disagreements and clashes with a particular staff member, you might want to assign them to someone else. If their attitudes or capabilities just don't fit your organization, you may have to counsel them out (not fire them but help them see that the situation isn't working out and neither they nor the organization is benefiting). That's a very difficult thing to do, but it's preferable to having someone jeopardize staff commitment to the entire volunteer program.

If organizational climate is a problem, you may not be able to do much to improve volunteer/staff relations until the climate improves. Perhaps the only thing you can do in a bad situation is stop placing volunteers until the organization can utilize them well. I did this with one unit in the psychiatric facility where staff repeatedly forgot to let volunteers know that the kids the volunteers were working with were on restriction and couldn't see them; the volunteers would arrive

only to be turned away. I believe that sometimes we as directors of volunteer programs must stand up for the volunteer's right to be carefully placed, well supervised, and genuinely appreciated for their contribution to the work of the organization.

These extreme situations aside, what else can we do to promote good volunteer/staff relations? I've found that including volunteers in case discussions is very helpful, since staff get to know the volunteers better and come to appreciate their insight. Inviting volunteers to staff in-service training is also valuable since learning together promotes better communication. In fact, the more common experiences volunteers and staff can have, the better. Including volunteers in staff parties helps too; it's good for people to get to know each other in social as well as business settings.

Making sure volunteers get the recognition and appreciation they need from staff is another way to promote good relations. I have found that doing formal performance evaluations on each volunteer accomplishes this as well as other goals. By asking staff for feedback on the volunteer as I fill out the evaluation form, then sharing that feedback in a meeting with the volunteer, I often pass on positive comments from staff that they have neglected to say directly. I also encourage staff to say thank you frequently and give appreciation for a job well done whenever it's due. When staff offer time to discuss a problem, listen to and accept a volunteer's suggestion, or seek a volunteer's input in decision-making, the volunteer also gets the feeling of being useful and appreciated.

Finally, I believe volunteer/staff relations are improved when the entire volunteer program is well planned and organized. We as volunteer program directors need to do our jobs well—to design jobs, recruit, select, train, place, and evaluate volunteers in a manner that shows our professional capabilities. If volunteers don't really know what they're doing or why they're doing it (a complaint I've heard from a number of former volunteers), then staff either will ignore them or resent them for being in the way. So the responsibility for good volunteer/staff relations ultimately rests with us, the directors of volunteers in agencies, as we develop and manage effective volunteer programs. ♡