The Difference Beteween Needing and Wanting Volunteers

By Susan J. Ellis

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Here is a true story without identifying the people or organization involved.

I have a friend who is a licensed psychologist and who has enrolled as a volunteer with Give an Hour (www.giveanhour.org), a national organization that helps mental health professionals donate their services to U.S. military personnel and families affected by the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. She was recently referred a client and had an excellent contact with the director of volunteer services at the referring facility. In fact, the DVS was so excited about the potential of Give an Hour as a resource that she sent a special memo to the staff alerting them to this new opportunity to assist clients. But the memo got an unexpected reaction from a department head who refused permission for any staff to refer clients to this community organization. Why? It would make us look bad for not being able to serve everyone ourselves.

I wish this story was unique. Unfortunately, every day something similar occurs in all sorts of settings around the world. We need to recognize and tackle what amounts to the prejudice of paid staff against people who offer their services for free. This will only grow as a problem with the proliferation of "skilled volunteer" or *pro bono* projects, where – by design – highly-qualified professionals are recruited to donate their expertise.

It's the gap between ever-expanding *needs* getting volunteer attention and the resistance from paid workers who do not actually *want* this help.

In the situation I just described, where was advocacy for the needs of the clients? Who should (or could) ask the question "are you exploring every resource available to you already?" Or, who defines what "serving clients" means? Is it not as valuable to have the access and knowledge to *refer* someone to a competent counselor as to make him or her wait for the same (possibly even less competent) service from someone directly on staff?

More Examples

This reminds me of the arguments I had a number of years ago in two different public library systems at the time they were expanding volunteer involvement. First, the librarians resisted allowing volunteers to conduct story hours and, then, library aides refused to allow volunteers to check out books. In both cases (and in both systems), their reasoning was: "that's MY job." And, in response, I noted that "your job is *to make sure there are* story hours or that books are checked out. One way to fulfill that obligation is to give oversight to volunteers whom you train to do the work properly." It was a new perspective – particularly convincing after librarians admitted that they rarely had time to do more than one story hour a week themselves, but that children would love more. Not to mention that the librarians could still choose the books, but that the volunteers who would read them out loud might be selected for their *performance abilities* (hardly a common skill for librarians).

Again, despite the benefits to service recipients, resistance to volunteers stemmed from employee self-protection. Who challenges when such self-protection is legitimate or merely selfish?

In another recent incident with an anonymous organization that was concerned about the lack of ongoing orientation and support of volunteers, I was asked how to respond to staff's reluctance to involve experienced volunteers as training facilitators because "we're not sure we can count on them to say what we want them to." OK. So the logic is that it's better to squeeze in sporadic sessions the staff can find the time to do rather than train appropriate volunteers do them regularly and well? Not to mention the offer was to have *experienced* volunteers be the facilitators.

Whose responsibility is to question the priorities and attitudes of these staff members?

Implications and Questions

We have dealt with the issue of volunteer/employee relations many times in this space, in books and articles, and in training sessions. What makes it "hot" right now is all the attention being paid to the increasing need for volunteers as the economy takes its toll on available services. I have no doubts that people are willing to contribute their time and want to do so effectively. But I am very concerned at the less-than-enthusiastic reception they will get in too many organizations.

How open is *your* organization to meaningful volunteer engagement? To how many of the following statements can you answer "yes, we do"?

- We ask "what roles can volunteers fill in this activity" every time we plan a new project or service.
- Volunteers are assigned to work with department heads and other managers, as well as to lower-level employees.
- We recruit consultants and various experts to give their services *pro bono* when we need to tap special skills – especially skills not already offered by anyone on staff.
- Volunteers serve on planning and assessment committees alongside employees.

- We regularly turn to volunteers for new ideas, feedback and input.
- We value time donors as much as money donors.

These are only a few measures of true willingness to find the full range of resources to help meet your organization's mission and serve the most people in the best ways. It's volunteers as *integral* to service delivery, not just as nice helpers.

And now it's *your* turn...

- *What's your reaction to all this?*
- *How have you tackled employee resistance to meaningful volunteer roles?*
- *What can we do – individually or collectively – to address these issues in the open?*

Related Topics: Employee/Volunteer Relations | Executive Director, Role of | Recruitment | Image of Volunteering | Trends and Issues | Profession of Volunteer Management

Submitted on 26 March 2009 by Colette Whelan, Colette Whelan LLC, Disaster Consultant, Bend United States

I am currently setting up a Medical Reserve Corps in the county in which I reside. I am working closely with regional, State and Federal entities to glean best practices for this endeavor. The biggest roadblock I see to effectively recruiting medical professionals to volunteer in the event of a community disaster or emergency is the lack of liability coverage and Workers' Compensation. There is a sever lack of uniformity between local jurisdictions, within States and Regions as to how this issue is being dealth with.

It is great to say we should all volunteer and there are many people out there who would gladly do so, but how can we expect people who rely on their medical licenses to sustain their families and their livelihoods to risk forfeiting their licenses in the event of a liability claim or in the event of sustaining an injury while volunteering? It is a difficult and complex situation and one that needs addressing promptly.

Submitted on 23 March 2008 by Christine Nardecchia, City of Dublin Ohio, Volunteer Services Administrator, Dublin, Ohio USA

I'm a bit stunned reading the comments about not using volunteers because of confidentiality concerns. The logic is flawed; if you don't want people to have access to such information, then why hire paid employees to have access to the information? Quite frankly, it has been my experience that volunteers hold to policy more effectively than employees. If a DVS properly matches, screens, trains and holds accountable volunteers-their duty to uphold confidentiality is not just remarkable, but a point of pride for an agency. Address the issues with volunteers. Don't avoid them. Harness the power of volunteers. Don't tip-toe around the potential of using their talent because of fear. Duty belongs to us all, not just those who collect a paycheck.

Submitted on 18 March 2008 by Leslie J. Scallet, Washington, DC USA

In response to Lyn Robinson's question:

It's my experience that most nonprofits that do not already have major, staffed volunteer programs do not have a way to begin thinking about how to use professional volunteers. Since it is no one's job to think about this, it falls to the ED or another overworked staff person, and they may benefit from a quick backgrounder on how to get started. Similarly, the professional thinking about volunteering may need some guidance on how his/her role differs from staff, what problems there may be for the nonprofit in fitting a volunteer into the program, etc. I'm just suggesting that someone identify or put together a couple of brief "backgrounders" on fitting a professional volunteer into an organization's program. These could be distributed through various organizations and web sites as a resource during this time when (apparently) so many professionals are looking for volunteer opportunities and so many nonprofits are facing resource cutbacks.

Submitted on 15 March 2009 by Lyn Robinson, Hospital for Special Care, Director of Volunteer Services, New Britain, CT USA

Question for Leslie Skallet's on her remarks on 3/5/09 : Can you expand on "simple resources" when you refer to (1) "assuring that nonprofits have simple resources for knowing how to utilize professional volunteers" and
(2) "professional volunteers have simple resources that explain the issues and suggest how best to approach professional volunteer opportunities."

With changes in healthcare, including reductions in reimbursement, affecting the hospitals where we provide volunteer services, DVS need all the techniques available to gain clear knowledge of those needs and to place volunteers efficiently and effectively.

Submitted on 9 March 2009 by L. Johnson, HR Director, clinical laboratory

Nobody has mentioned it...are there no FLSA rules that preclude using unpaid volunteers at a for-profit company? Is it an FMLSA claim that is the basis of the class action mentioned in this blog?

Susan replies:

I'm not sure what "class action" you're referring to, as no lawsuit was mentioned here. However, your question is one that comes up periodically. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) is meant to protect employees from being forced into unremunerated labor, such as overtime. It does not "forbid" volunteers from anything, per se, other than displacing paid workers. Many for-profit settings still have volunteers providing direct service to clients (as well as unpaid student "interns" helping in administrative offices). I deal with this at length in a Hot Topic I wrote in 2000: "Volunteering in For-Profit Settings: Exploitation or Value Added?" https://www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics/2000/february (Also be sure to see the responses at https://www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics/2000/february which include several from volunteer managers at for-profit institutions.)

Submitted on 7 March 2009 by Amy Bennett, Carlsbad City Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Carlsbad, Ca USA

Once again a great topic Susan! I have a question and an idea for another great topic that came up in the response below about privacy issues in libraries:

Many non-profits and government organizations have information that is confidential (such as medical records, credit card information, social security numbers, etc.) and they may hesitate to have a volunteer work with access to this information. The concern from the Library Director below was twofold. 1. "If a volunteer checks out books, he/she is privy to the patron's private information including what the patron is reading. I do not want my patrons to feel that they can't check out a certain book on, say homosexuality, because dear Mrs. Smith from church will now know what he/she is reading." 2. "Yes, you can train volunteers to respect the patron's privacy, but as a supervisor you never, ever, have the same recourse if something should go awry."

This is a topic I would love to hear more about. You can train, coach, counsel and/or terminate both a volunteer and a paid staff person and both could be neighbors of the library patron. I wonder if the possible loss of a pay check is the reason a staff person would not abuse access to private information. Are there other reasons why a paid staff person would maintain confidentiality while a volunteer would not? What are the risks? We have so many wonderful professional volunteers who potentially could help us with tasks that involve confidential information. I would love to hear what others think about this.

Submitted on 7 March 2008 by H Roberts, PLNJ Inc. - Blankie Depot. President
Keyport/NJ USA
Picture this, the staffer is clocking 40 hours a week to their agency and is about to be asked to find a "few more hours in that week" to accomplish 10 other tasks because they had to let an employee go due to budget cuts. Instead of pulling the volunteer applications from the last six months out of the file drawer or placing a free online ad in the volunteer recruitment portals, this lone staffer is now over loaded. Does that make sense?

Or would an agency that recruits professional volunteers in anticipation of need, spends time training that skilled individual and places them in a constructive role at the office reap the benefits of both time and money saved? No brainer.

But more than that, a skilled volunteer offers a willingness to care and contribute to that agencies clients, budget constraints, fundraising needs, community involvement and staffs workload. That volunteer you hesitated to recruit could have offered networking opportunities vital to every agency and they took the time to understand YOUR agency. You didn't just turn away that one volunteer but potentially everyone that pro knows!

It's not about need or want of volunteers. It's about individuals electing to share their time and talents with an agency. There are alot of charities to choose from. Professional volunteers offering 10-20 hours a week have my respect...how about yours?

Submitted on 5 March by Andy Fryar, www.ozvpm.com, Director, Adelaide Australia
As always - thanks for a great HT Susan. One of the things I talk about when conducting training is how paid staff (sadly often VM's included) make the mistake of understanding that their job descriptions are a document that tells them what they need to DO, rather than them seeing it as being a document wich outlines what they are RESPONSIBLE FOR making happen. I have found that once paid staff get their heads around this, and understand that the effective utilisation of volunteers to support them in achieving that role is a possibility, much of the negativity suddenly disappears. Just a thought!

Submitted on 5 March 2009 by Leslie J. Scallet, Washington, DC USA
Thanks for focusing on this! As a former nonprofit ED, now retired, I've been volunteering in various capacities for the last several years, with both good and bad experiences. In addition to the issues you raise, I've found that sometimes where help is most needed staff are defensive about not knowing how to do something, or fear a volunteer will show them up, rather than seeing an opportunity to learn (for free) from someone with experience. This is likely to be exacerbated with the fear of being part of organizational cutbacks. On the other hand, I've had very good experiences where organizations have thought thru how volunteers can help, and made the volunteer activity a valued and regular part of their program.

As we baby boomers move into retirement, we provide a huge potential resource for volunteer work -- that will become a frustrating waste unless some attention is put into (1) assuring that nonprofits have simple resources for knowing how to utilize professional volunteers (in addition to the more traditional forms of volunteer work) and (2) professional volunteers have simple resources that explain the issues and suggest how best to approach professional volunteer opportunities. This is a natural for foundations to provide for their grantees.

Submitted on 4 March 2009 by Felicia Cheney, Edgartown Library, Director, Edgartown USA
As a librarian, I must respond to your opinion on using volunteers for checking out books. I agree wholeheartedly that volunteers are important to libraries and using qualified story tellers is a great addition.

The use of volunteers to check out books however, is not such a great idea. As a public library director I am conscious of our commitment to maintaining confidentiality. If a volunteer checks out books, he/she is privy to the patron's private information including what the patron is reading. I do not want my patrons to feel that they can't check out a certain book on, say homosexuality, because dear Mrs. Smith from church will now know what he/she is reading.

Yes, you can train volunteers to respect the patron's privacy, but as a supervisor you never, ever, have the same recourse if something should go awry.

In addition, small libraries often do not have the resources to ensure adequate training of volunteers. I would encourage people to make use of any volunteer they can but especially in areas that do not require professional training--storytelling, craft making, book covering, etc. They are really great if they add to a library's service rather than fulfill the basic service needs.

Finally, taxpayers can see a volunteer doing a professional's job and not be aware of why the training makes a difference. So, using volunteers in certain areas must be carefully considered. There is a reason why some positions are paid.

No matter what volunteers require supervision. Small organizations are quite often must deficient in that area. I hope that before an organization takes on volunteers it has a strategy in place for managing them.

Submitted on 2 March 2008 by Nicolette Winner, HandsOn, West Central Ohio Director
As a professional volunteer program manager, I see it as MY job to ask the tough questions of staff when it comes to volunteers. Not only do VPM's have access to a wide variety of volunteer talent, but they often serve as efficiency experts within an organization. We CAN get more done with less dollars, but only because we're willing to think outside of the box.

My advice? If you're a VPM who isn't invited to the planning meetings or the "big kids' table", invite yourself. Don't take no for an answer. Advocate for your volunteers and the ways volunteers can better services for your clients. Running a successful volunteer program isn't about winning a popularity contest, but rather about improving your organization's services and its reach within the community. Trust me... Your boss will thank you for it AFTERWARD.