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THE VOLUNTEER
AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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It has been suggested that the health of a society is reflected in the patterns of voluntary association chosen. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the volunteer as an agent of social change. Of particular interest is the emergence of a new program that has sought to assist committed volunteers in growing beyond the traditional role of service providers to become trained and active social reformers.

In historical terms the presence of volunteerism is probably as old as mankind. In our society, the tradition is deeply rooted in our Judeo-Christian ethics. Many of our present health services and most of our social services have organized philanthropy to thank for their beginnings.

As a philosophy and in practice, volunteerism has undergone a vital resurgence in the last decade. Volunteerism has optimistically been praised as the savior of democracy and as the answer to many of our increasing social ills. Human interdependence and the belief that "we are our brother's keeper" are the basis of all voluntary activity.

Not only does society stand to benefit from the efforts of well directed volunteerism, but the individual volunteer can reap from side effects such as personal growth, increased skills and confidence.

Types of voluntary activity range from individual service work to participation in voluntary associations or on volunteer boards. These three types of volunteerism are the most widely known. They also usually direct their energies to some sort of service provision. The interested potential volunteer approaching a volunteer bureau offering his services would most likely be directed towards one of these service oriented roles. This type of matching individuals to service tasks is the most organized and visible area of voluntary activity. And yet, if our potential volunteer values his time and energy and realizes their potential contribution to society, his decision of how to spend them should be a well

informed one. The informed volunteer should also examine the potential volunteer activity in terms of how he can further develop his skills and satisfy his needs for self expression and fulfillment.

In order to make this informed choice about where to direct his volunteer efforts, our potential volunteer might be interested in examining another aspect of volunteer activity that is less well defined, visible and organized but may well have the most impact and potential for social change. The term "voluntarism" is often used to differentiate social action activity from service oriented activity. Related concepts are self-help and citizen participation. In this type of voluntary activity, the process is just as important as the goal.

Many people have become involved in voluntarism during the recent trends towards self-help and consumer protection. Neighborhood councils and various pressure groups such as environment protection groups are also part of this political aspect of voluntary activity. Many groups begin as reactors to a situation they desire to prevent or change. The growth of government at all levels has increased the necessity for the checks and balances or "watch dog" function of the voluntary sector. These groups often move from their reaction role to become advocates and contributors. They are in a better position to define the needs and priorities of a community than is government. The healthy growth and survival of voluntarism is essential to the future of democracy.

In Edmonton, Alberta, voluntarism has become the basis for an innovative year old program. The Edmonton Social Planning Council is beginning a second promising year of incorporating volunteers into their activities. In August, 1976, the Council, under the guidance of Executive Director, Elwood Springman, launched a volunteer program that is perhaps unique in Canada. The concept and goals of the program grew from both an agency need and a commitment to the philosophy of citizen participation.

The need was identified in the Spring of 1976, when the small staff of the Council (two Planners and one Director) found they could not meet the needs of all the community groups who sought their consultation. A growing variety of concerns and projects were demanding attention. How could these needs best be met without an appreciable increase in staff? The use of trained volunteers was the answer. The task was then to plan a volunteer program that would teach the complexities of community development and planning to ordinary citizens. No other program seemed to be attempting the task of training volunteers for effective citizen participation. The potential of the program for developing community leadership was recognized. The volunteers would be trained to act as resource people to:

neighborhood groups, focusing attention primarily on urban development concerns and citizen planning at a neighborhood level. The staff were hopeful that the project would generate the help needed for them to reach their goal of long range planning as opposed to being caught in the position of reacting to crisis situations.

The Edmonton Social Planning Council staff began the project by educating and committing themselves to the philosophy of voluntarism. Not only the initial but the on-going role of the program would be an educational and social consciousness raising one. Rather than the volunteers being told what to do, they would become actively involved in the planning of their own program. The implementation of this project would require a team work approach. The volunteers would be treated as colleagues and meaningful and equal interchange between volunteers and staff was expected.

The program was experimental for the first year. Funding for this period was obtained when a proposal to the Junior League of Edmonton was accepted. The Junior League provided \$6,000.00 towards the hiring of a social researcher. This additional staff person was to assist in the co-ordination of the volunteer program on a part-time basis. In return, the Junior League was to receive placements and training for several of their volunteers. The Alliance of Neighborhood Groups also provided \$6,000.00 for the first year. An additional \$1,600.00 for instructional manhours was obtained from the Edmonton Association for Continuing Education and Recreation (the local further education authority). Mike Burns joined Elwood and the two planners (Linda Duncan and Sue Arrison) to become the social researcher and co-ordinator of volunteers for the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

The optimum number of volunteers for the first year was decided as eight. Three of these came from the Junior League and another two came from the Edmonton Social Planning Council Board. The other volunteers were recruited from staff contacts with interested community leaders. No volunteers dropped out during the year.

A year long contract was initiated with all the new recruits to the project. The agency side of the contract provided for supervision in project planning and activities, group supervision and individual volunteer supervision. Education was also promoted through project involvement and group meetings. Evaluation of individual volunteers, as well as the project, was built into the program. Both were to be on an on-going basis with continuous volunteer input. The functions of the co-ordinator of volunteers were clearly outlined in the contract. One staff member was to be assigned to each volunteer for the purpose of providing direction

with projects, monitoring progress and evaluating involvement. All volunteers were considered to be on a four month probationary period, pending an evaluation and a progress report. The decision to leave or continue with the program was made at that point.

The volunteer's side of the contract covered time, project involvement, education, evaluation, staff/volunteer relationships and the probationary period. The volunteers were asked to commit themselves to a time contribution of not less than four hours per week. Project involvement was to be supervised by the assigned staff member and was to be related to the individual interests of the volunteer. A certain amount of independence was expected of the volunteers. Volunteers were expected to attend monthly group meetings and to contribute to the education of themselves and the other volunteers through their participation. The volunteers were expected to contribute to their own evaluation as well as to the evaluation of the projects. In relation to staff/volunteer relationships, the volunteers were expected to follow normal office procedures, become members of the Edmonton Social Planning Council and comply to its philosophy and principles, maintain confidentiality and maintain open communication with the Edmonton Social Planning Council staff.

The approach in training the volunteers was aimed at providing basic knowledge and skills as well as with practical, on-the-job training as volunteer community workers. Individual projects were designed to be relevant to the community involved, as well as to fit in with the volunteers interests. All projects had to be considered relevant to the general purpose and goals of the Edmonton Social Planning Council. This purpose is to facilitate significant social change by encouraging citizen participation directed towards the goal of a humane urban environment.

The following seven training objectives were outlined with activities and a time frame to accomplish each. Provision was made for frequent review and evaluation at each step along the way.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To increase a maximum of eight volunteers' knowledge and understanding of the Edmonton Social Planning Council and facilitate initial involvement with the Council.
- 2) To promote development of knowledge and understanding regarding policies which influence urban development.
- 3) To promote volunteers knowledge development regarding informational resources, relevant agencies (governmental and non-governmental) and city neighborhoods.
- 4) To facilitate development of skills related to planning and community group work.

- 5) To provide consultation to neighborhood groups.
- 6) To evaluate volunteer performance.
- 7) To provide opportunity for volunteers to evaluate staff performance.

PROJECTS

Two volunteers worked together on a citizen participation program for government employees. The first phase was the development of the background information for an educational package to be utilized by municipal and provincial government employees. A second phase will be the development of a questionnaire to be used in interviewing government employees and ascertaining their knowledge and attitudes in respect to their concept of citizen participation. The third phase will be the actual development of the educational package itself.

Another individual worked on the structure and design of community workshops. These workshops were to be held in conjunction with interested communities to help them improve their group skills.

Two more volunteers, along with a B.S.W. practicum student, worked at designing and implementing a seven part seminar series designed to raise the consciousness level of ordinary citizens with regards to the possibilities of citizen participation and citizen planning. This series was entitled "Taking Part: Planning Your Community's Future" and was offered free to the general public.

Another volunteer worked on developing a Citizens' Resource Manual for Neighborhood Planning. This manual is to be completed and published in the fall of 1977.

Another volunteer and the B.S.W. practicum student worked together on plans for a project entitled "Theatre for Community Involvement". The purpose of this project is to utilize drama presentations in facilitating education of community residents on community issues and problems, leading to increased participation by residents in community affairs. This project is underway but has not yet reached completion.

Another volunteer worked with staff on a feasibility study to determine the possibility of establishing a Community Development Corporation in the inner-city. This project is related to a strategy of citizen control of enterprises indigenous to inner-city communities while providing opportunities for skill development amongst the hard core unemployed. Implementation will take place in the fall of 1977.

Although the volunteers divided their interests and talents amongst the various projects, they benefited from the knowledge and support gained in their

monthly group meetings. They also acted as a group in responding to the Canadian Committee on Voluntarism's document on Voluntarism. In a four page letter, they offered support as well as constructive criticism of the document.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of the year old program was carried out as a total staff-volunteer group while planning for the following year's program. Goals of the volunteer program were restated at an individual, agency and community level. This information became part of a comprehensive package that was sent out to prospective volunteers for the second year.

Volunteers were also evaluated individually utilizing questionnaires and interviews with staff. The volunteers evaluated their own performance and that of the Edmonton Social Planning Council staff. Feedback from these evaluations indicated that most of the volunteers felt they were doing something meaningful and found the content of the program interesting. The volunteers appreciated having a contract. Most of the volunteers appreciated the participatory model where they were encouraged to make plans and decisions. They felt they were being taken seriously, much like part-time staff. Indications were that the staff supervision was adequate.

On the negative side, a few of the volunteers found the relative lack of structure and the participatory model of the program to be frustrating. They had been used to carrying out concrete tasks in previous volunteer involvements and found the planning aspect of this program to be frustrating. Four out of the eight volunteers renewed their contract to continue their involvement for another year.

What has the Edmonton Social Planning Council learned from its experience as initiators of this unique program? Feedback from the staff was positive, for the most part, towards all aspects of the program. Most of the negative feelings were found to be a result of the difference in expectations between the staff and volunteers at the beginning of the year. Hopefully this will be resolved in the second year by having the volunteers more directly involved in planning the program.

During a recent interview, Elwood Springman indicated he was most pleased with the growing awareness he witnessed in the volunteers. They showed a positive feeling about having more control over the decisions that affect them and their communities. The volunteer program increased the active membership of the agency and doubled the amount of work the staff could have done. Elwood also observed that the staff learned a great deal about themselves and their work by having been associated with such fine people.

~~Disappointments for Elwood were related to the number of incomplete projects.~~

Not as much was actually accomplished on these projects as he had originally hoped. Again, this indicated to him that in future the volunteers need to be more involved with the planning process and the expectations made clearer for both staff and volunteers.

There have been some changes in the program as it begins its second year. The criteria for the selection of the volunteers was more specific. The emphasis has been on the selection of volunteers from more of the communities in need of resource people. The Edmonton Social Planning Council is also planning to hire a part-time Co-ordinator of Volunteers to replace Mike Burns who will be concentrating on research and policy analysis. The new program will also try to provide a little more structure for the new volunteers. A final emphasis will be on long range research so that it will be possible to measure the actual impact of the program on selected communities in Edmonton.

The volunteers and staff of the Edmonton Social Planning Council have witnessed the development of a volunteer program that stresses high commitment on the part of all involved, quality rather than quantity of effort, personal growth and education and social consciousness raising in an attempt to get at the real social issues rather than apply the traditional bandage approach to problems. Although the impact of voluntary effort is a difficult thing to gauge, it is through the positive effort of such committed minorities as these that real social change evolves.

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