

Volunteering And Social Welfare

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It is a great honor and privilege to be here today and I want to express my appreciation to those who organized this event for having invited me to participate. It is also a very great challenge because I am going to speak today on a topic that often times makes professionals in social welfare feel uncomfortable, the power of volunteers to contribute to the successful achievement of your work.

Let me tell you just a word about the two organizations which I represent so that you will understand something of the context in which I make my remarks. The Points of Light Foundation, where I work as a member of the paid staff, is the "national volunteer center" in the United States. Our mission is to engage more people more effectively in volunteer service that addresses serious social problems.

We work with a nationwide network of 500 local volunteer centers; help major corporations develop volunteer programs for their employees; provide training and technical assistance to voluntary organizations to help them manage volunteers more effectively; and, work with the media to increase public awareness of the value of volunteering.

The International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), which I serve as a volunteer, is the only worldwide membership organization which exists solely to promote and support more effective volunteering. We have members in over 100 countries, including here in Korea. Our major activity is a biennial world conference on volunteering. The 1994 conference was held in Tokyo with strong representation from Korea. The 1996 conference will be held in Cape Town, South Africa with the active support of President Nelson Mandela.

Let me also say an introductory word about the terms I am going to use in these remarks. "Volunteering" and "volunteer service" will be used interchangeably. They should be understood to mean service freely given with no expectation of immediate financial gain, with the primary intention of benefiting others. This does not preclude the receipt of money to reimburse expenses or to enable people to participate. Nor does it preclude the likelihood that volunteers will gain as much or more from their experience as those who they serve.

I also am going to use the words "power" and "empowerment" because, as you will hear, I believe that volunteering ultimately is about the way power is distributed in a society. By "power," I mean both the ability to shape one's own life and environment and to contribute to doing so for the entire community. By "empowerment," I mean the process through which people gain that ability.

Again that background, then, there are four ideas I want to develop with you today.

First, volunteering is a vital force in contemporary society as an effective way to deliver services, as an effective way to solve problems and as a way for people to lead healthier, more productive and more fulfilling lives.

Second, as professionals in social welfare, you have a special responsibility to develop meaningful work for volunteers to do, to encourage people to participate as volunteers and to insure that volunteers are managed effectively.

Third, in order to fulfill that responsibility, you will need to change the way you think about your own work.

Fourth, you must take responsibility to change the organizations in which you work to remove barriers to effective volunteer involvement.

Let me begin at the beginning, then, with the first idea; volunteering is a vital force in contemporary society - as an effective way to deliver services, as an effective way to solve problems and as a way for people to lead healthier, more productive and more fulfilling lives.

I will not take time to recite for you the endless statistics that support what all of us know: there are many forms of illness in our modern world and they are undermining our ability to develop and maintain a high overall quality of life for all people. Human and social problems are increasingly complex and pervasive. Many of the solutions we try seem to breed new, equally complex problems. Those trapped in a material poverty lead lives of pain and despair, with little expectation that they can ever prosper and the grim possibility that they may not even survive. Those with material prosperity too often carry a poverty of the spirit that robs them of the ability to lead fulfilled, productive lives. They become captives of their relative wealth, no longer able to extend their hand to help others.

Now, the simple fact is, there is not enough money in the entire world to solve either material poverty or poverty of the spirit. Nor is there widespread public support in any country for an endless expansion of government - sponsored welfare programs that, increasingly, are perceived as mechanisms to create and maintain dependency relationships. No matter how much social welfare professionals may be able to accomplish, it will never be enough.

The answer, I suggest, rests not in our ability to pay for more professionals but rather in our ability to encourage and enable people to help themselves and one another. It doesn't matter whether you call it "volunteering" or not. What matters is that we find ways to unleash the energy, skills and talent of everyone to participate in community-building, mutual aid and problem-solving. What matter is that we find a way to sustain traditional values of caring about one another in the onslaught of the "information age" and the societal disruption brought by rapidly expanding technology.

All of us know that the greatest fulfillment people can realize is through helping others; indeed, your professional lives are testimony to that. Through their volunteer service, people learn and practice positive values; gain confidence in their own ability to make a difference in the lives of others; and gain the power they need to shape the future course of their communities.

So, volunteering has high value in contemporary society: to those in need who may be served by volunteers, to the community as a whole, and to the individuals who volunteer.

That brings me to my second point: as professionals in social welfare, you have a special responsibility to develop meaningful work for volunteers to do, to encourage people to participate as volunteers and to insure that volunteers are managed effectively.

The responsibility comes from three sources. First, your profession is based on a commitment to provide for those in need in the ways that are most effective. There are no natural laws that say that delivery of social services is best done by paid professionals; indeed, there is ample evidence that volunteers bring a different kind of motivation to their work that actually may enable them to have a greater impact with some consumers.

If your goal is to have the greatest impact possible on human and social problems, then you must have the active support and participation of the full community. You cannot do it alone. Volunteers are a tremendous resource to complement your work and to extend your limited resources.

Second, volunteering is an activity through which people in need can benefit. Let me give you examples. There now is strong research from throughout the world to conclude that volunteering provides direct benefits to a person's physical and mental health. Indeed, when people help one another, they experience many of the same physical changes that characterize aerobic exercise. One particularly dramatic study concluded that when people focus on others rather than themselves, their heart rate slows and their blood pressure drops.

There also is a strong consensus in the research that volunteer participation is a strong determinant of longevity. For retired men, for example, participation may be the most important single factor in determining the length and quality of their life. Volunteering provides strong social support systems that sustain us as we age and prevent us from becoming isolated.

In the face of evidence, how could people in social welfare not embrace volunteering enthusiastically. If you have a professional responsibility for the welfare of older people, for example, helping them to become active volunteers may be one of the most important services you can provide.

Similarly, there is a recent study in the United States that suggests that concluded that just one hour per week of helping behavior by teenagers lowered the risk of substance abuse, dropping out of school, teen pregnancy and other high risk behaviors. If it is your job to work with teens, can you deny them such a powerful resource?

Third, then, it is your position in society that allows you to accept a special responsibility to promote volunteering and to build the organizational systems required to make it as effective as possible. You are in the obvious position to make use of volunteering as a therapeutic tool for those in need. You are in the best position to be strong advocates for volunteering in both voluntary organizations and public sector social service systems. And, you are in the best position to insure that volunteers are given meaningful work to do and that they

are well managed.

My third idea, then, follows along naturally: in order to fulfill that responsibility, you will need to change the way you think about your own work.

We have done some important research in the United States on why some organizations are more effective in the way in which they engage volunteers than others. For our purposes, we defined effectiveness in terms of the extent to which the work of volunteers was perceived to be directly contributing to achievement of the mission and current priorities of organizations. In highly effective organizations, there was great congruence among mission, priorities and volunteer activities. In the less effective organizations, volunteer service had little to do with achievement of mission

Why are some organizations more effective than others in engaging volunteers? We believe that it is in the way in which organizations understand the value of volunteers. It is the paradigm or the lens through which organizations view the work that volunteers can do. Let me tell you a story that illustrates this. While doing our research, we visited two children's hospitals. At the first, we asked whether volunteers working on the wards were asked to share their observations of the children with the nurses. "Never!" we were told. "They don't know what they are seeing. Their job is to play with the children."

When I asked the same question at the second, I was told that volunteers there are required to record their observations of the children. Why? "Because they will see things that the doctors and nurses can't see."

These hospitals operate from totally different paradigms about volunteering. And it is the second, I would argue, that has the greatest overall chance of success in our rapidly changing world. It recognizes that it can do a better job achieving its mission by engaging volunteers in meaningful ways in its work.

Why did the staff of these two hospitals take such diametrically opposed positions about volunteers? I want to be quick to emphasize that it is not because paid staff of human service organizations or youth organizations or educational institutions or anyplace else are "bad" people. Not only do they not dislike volunteers, many of you are volunteers in their own private lives.

It is because they have been taught- indeed, all of us in this room have been taught - to see our work through a particular set of eyes. We have been trained as professionals not only in the right way to do things but in the right way to think about the things we do. Volunteers are a disruption to the way we think.

And none of us is immune to this narrowing of our vision.

Let me tell you another story, this one about an individual nurse. She had a reputation for being particularly resistant to having volunteers involved on her floor of the children's hospital. I had been warned that she might be very unfriendly and not cooperative with our research. But when I interviewed her, she told me this: "Why should I want volunteers to come in here? All they have to do is play with the children. And the children love them. But when the children see me coming they know that I am going to hurt them and they don't like that. Why should the volunteers get all of the good parts of the job?"

When I heard her speak, I could feel the pain that she was experiencing. Here was someone who had been trained to help cure children, even though that often meant giving them shots or other procedures that would cause them pain. She was struggling to reconcile the demands of her work with her natural personal desire to be loved by the children she was serving. And, to make it worse, here came the volunteers to snatch that away from her.

Resistance to volunteers by paid staff has its roots in the way we feel about our work - and in the way we have been taught to think about our work. Another example given to me by a friend who is a social worker. She pointed out that social caseworkers are taught to take a stack of case files and work through them, one at a time. They are never taught to recruit and train some volunteers, sort out the cases best handled by them, monitor their work and spend their own time on the most difficult or challenging cases. But why not?

So, the challenge we face is to "change the paradigm" in which we do our work and in which we create the environment for volunteers. We need to understand volunteers one more resource that helps us achieve our goals as effective professionals.

Finally, then, my fourth major idea: you must take responsibility to change

the organizations in which you work to remove barriers to effective volunteer involvement. In our research, we concluded that there are 11 characteristics that differentiate those organizations that are most effective in engaging volunteers. I won't go through each of them, but I do want to tell you the four major "action principles" that we drew out of those characteristics.

First, the more effective organizations are clear about the results they are trying to achieve and are clear about the contribution that can be made by volunteers.

Second, leaders at all levels of the organizations are committed to achieving the greatest benefit from volunteers and make sure that organizational barriers to volunteering are minimized.

Third, both paid staff and volunteers are highly respected and there is a conscious effort to build teamwork between them.

Fourth, the more effective organizations are constantly trying to improve their performance by learning from the experience of their volunteers.

Such organizations are not "born" that way. They are made. And it is people like us who can help us make them that way.

Professionals in social welfare face a remarkable set of challenges. We are called upon to confront some of the most perplexing human problems the world has ever known. We are asked to work with too few resources in an often hostile environment. We are asked to be advocates on complex issues and for people who have been pushed far from the mainstream of community life.

To be successful in such a world, we need the understanding, help and support of the public. We need to be able to call on the energy and skills of the entire community. And, as we fight for changes in public policy, we need to look over our shoulders and see that the community is with us.

I don't want to suggest that volunteering is a "magic bullet," that by itself can solve the problems of the world. It is not. There are no easy answers, no quick solutions. But it is an effective tool, a unique resource.

The challenge before us is to find the best way to make use of that tool, that resource so that we may do our jobs more effectively.

Thank you.