

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

LITERATURE REVIEW:
SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING

Prepared by
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September, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

It is important to consider the notion of volunteering, both as a rehabilitative tool, and as an activity that in general enriches and enhances the lives of individuals and the collective community.¹

This document represents a brief review of the literature regarding “special needs volunteering” and “supported volunteer programs.” An exhaustive search has not been conducted, and this review should not be considered comprehensive. Its purpose is to present a brief overview of many of the key themes that surface throughout the literature in this field, and it directs readers to some of the most germane and useful material available to date.

WHAT IS SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING?

Lautenschlager (1992: vi) provides this background for the concept of “supported volunteering”:

"With the ever growing need for volunteers, it is vital for voluntary organizations to explore new ways of attracting volunteers. Supported volunteer programs are a creative way to tap into the diverse human resources in a community, while at the same time making volunteer opportunities accessible to those with special needs.

¹. VOLUNTEERING: A Pathway To Integration. Central Volunteer Bureau of Ottawa. p. 40.

"Traditionally, there has been a strong tendency for voluntary organizations to recruit volunteers from the middle and upper classes of the non-disabled, white population. However, there have been changes in recent years.

"There is now a greater acceptance of the necessity of encouraging volunteers with special needs and from diverse backgrounds to become involved in 'mainstream' volunteering. Nevertheless, there are still barriers to the participation of individuals who have special needs due to disabilities or disadvantageous circumstances."

Graff (1992: 1) describes "special needs" volunteering this way:

"Typically, volunteering has been directed to white, middle class, able-bodied persons. Little has been done to explore or encourage the participation of others in the not-for-profit sector."

"Special needs volunteering is about identifying barriers to voluntary action for specific target groups and then working to remove them. It is about opening volunteering to a broader range of participants through special recruitment, education and placement accommodations. It is about addressing the under-representation of many special needs groups within the volunteer movement. Ultimately it is about making special accommodations and investing increased support to special needs populations so that they can both become involved as volunteers, and increase their satisfaction and productivity as volunteers."

Lautenschlager (1992: 1-2) offers the following rationale that underpins supported volunteering:

"The aim of 'supported' volunteer programs is to involve people who have special needs arising out of disabilities or disadvantaged circumstances and keep them involved in volunteering. Like other special programs, supported volunteer programs are a deliberate attempt to recruit volunteers from target groups that have been under-represented. However, supported programs have an extra dimension that is critical: **special arrangements for the placement of volunteers and individual support for them once the placement has been made.** This support may also extend to the manager of volunteer resources.

"In supported volunteer programs, a concerted effort must be made to help volunteers who have special needs because of disabilities or disadvantaged social or economic circumstances to function at their best. To achieve this, barriers to their participation must be identified and removed, and suitable accommodations made so they can succeed at their volunteer jobs. The result is a supportive environment which puts the accent on abilities rather than difficulties.

"Two basic tenets underlie the concept of supported volunteerism:

- no one should be denied the opportunity to volunteer for reasons unrelated to ability; and
- people with special needs have much to offer and to gain from volunteer work."

She adds:

"In one sense, supported volunteer programs could be considered to be both a social service and a catalyst for social change in their own right. By offering people with special needs the opportunity to participate as volunteers and to enjoy the benefits that volunteering can offer, they promote social equality.

"By providing an avenue for social integration, they can help break down stereotypes and prejudices that have a negative impact on all areas of the lives of Canadians with special needs." (p.3)

WHO IS A “SPECIAL NEEDS” VOLUNTEER?

Graff (1992: 2) speaks to the inclusivity of the term “special needs volunteer” in this way:

“The field of special needs volunteering is so new that there is still no consensus about what the term means or what groups should be included by it. For example, it can refer to any of the following:

- persons with physical disabilities
- persons with psychiatric disabilities or illnesses
- persons who are developmentally delayed
- persons who are economically disadvantaged
- persons who are socially disadvantaged
- unemployed individuals
- seniors
- youth
- multicultural populations
- persons with learning disabilities

“Clearly, there is tremendous variation both between and within special needs populations. The factors to consider in involving persons with psychiatric disabilities will be very different from those needed to integrate volunteers with culturally diverse backgrounds. The kind of placement that works best for persons with one kind of physical disability will not suit another person with a different, or maybe even the same disability. The kind of position a person with schizophrenia needs may be different from that for an individual with manic depression.

“Special needs volunteers are not a homogeneous group and one needs to be careful about both assumptions and stereotypes.”

Graff (1992: 1) adds this caution about labelling:

“... in beginning to explore this whole range of `others,' we need to be cautious. The purpose is to increase and support voluntary action among target groups who encounter obstacles, yet the very process of identifying and labelling target populations can be, or can be seen to be, discriminatory or otherwise limiting.

“It is therefore important to note at the outset, it is not our intent to limit or isolate any specific group of persons through the label of special needs volunteer. Indeed, the reverse is the case. The central aim here is to produce a directory which will contribute to the increased involvement of all kinds of volunteers in both mainstream and other voluntary organizations across Canada. “

MacKinnon offered a similar discussion in the publication she wrote about volunteering for persons with “mental handicaps”:

“For the purposes of this manual, we will refer to persons with disabilities as individuals with special needs. We do not intend to label people, only to offer support where needed. We feel strongly that ability, not disability, is the overriding factor in placing a person in volunteer work.” (1991: 3)

Lautenschlager (1992: vii) offers these comments on what groups might be included in the definition of special needs volunteering:

“I have used the phrase ‘special-needs volunteer’ throughout this book to mean not only disabled people, which is the usual scope of this term, but also people who are at a disadvantage as volunteers because of the circumstances of their lives. Such disadvantages may include poverty, illiteracy, unfamiliarity with an official language of the country, or discrimination because of race or ethnicity.

“What is key in all these discussions is not the disadvantage but the fact that it hampers those who have it in their efforts as volunteers.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS AND CONCEPTS

As Lautenschlager cautioned in 1992, “Anyone who intends to pursue this subject should be aware that, because supported volunteering is a new area, the terminology is still evolving.” (page 28)

The term “special needs volunteering” was the first to come into common usage in the field of volunteer program management, and it typically referred to the process of integrating persons with “special needs” into volunteer placements in not-for-profit agencies.

Other terms such as “equal-opportunity volunteering,” “equal-access volunteering,” and “difficult-to-place volunteers” have also surfaced from time to time in the field.

In a move to potentially less offensive language that focussed less on the limitations of the worker and more on the process of integration, the term “supported volunteering” arose, paralleling terminology in the arena of paid work where the term “supported employment” was gaining in use. Lautenschlager suggests this as the term of choice since it “seems to best convey the concept without pulling a train of other connotations behind it.” (1992: 28)

Graff (1992: 6) tried to add clarity to the language by creating a distinction between “special needs volunteering” and “supported volunteering” this way:

“The term ‘supported volunteering’ is sometimes used to describe special needs volunteer programs in placement agencies. However, it may be more appropriately confined to the centralized, coordinating efforts typically found in Volunteer Centres.”

She elaborated on the suggestion in the following note:

“The use of the term ‘supported volunteering’ to refer to the unique role of Volunteer Centres in the special needs volunteering field is new. Typically, we have used ‘special needs volunteering’ to describe the work of both Volunteer Centres (and other similar central referral organizations) and placement agencies. Further, ‘special needs volunteering’ and ‘supported volunteering’ have been used interchangeably. But the role of Volunteer Centres in the field of special needs volunteering is very different from the role of placement agencies. It is therefore suggested that this distinction in roles be reflected in terminology.”

As disability-service and advocacy organizations have come to understand and appreciate the value of volunteering for persons with a range of disabilities and special needs,² many have extended their services to include “supporting” their clients in their volunteer work in the same way that such agencies support their clients through job search, job preparation, and job hardening endeavours. It is not unusual these days for persons with disabilities to have “their workers” accompany them through the volunteer interview and screening process. Some have their workers accompany them in the orientation and training phases of volunteer involvement and a few continue to have the ongoing support of such staff for the duration of the volunteer involvement. This involvement of “support workers” has given new meaning to the phenomenon of “supported volunteering.”

In a more recent development, the involvement of persons with “special needs” has been called “transitional volunteering,” probably originating from persons in transition between paid jobs looking to volunteer opportunities as a mechanism to ease or facilitate the process of finding paid work. From that usage, the term has broadened, as described by McCurley and Lynch (1996: 100):

“Some individuals pursue volunteering while making a “transition” in their life, either as a step from domestic into paid work, or as a means of helping overcome mental or physical difficulties.

“Assisting such individuals is a very worthwhile endeavour, and is one of the great fringe benefits of operating a volunteer program - being able to significantly help both the client and the volunteer at the same time.”

². The staff at the Central Volunteer Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton noticed in the early 1980's a dramatic increase in the number of persons with mental health issues being referred to volunteer work through the Central Volunteer Bureau. They interpreted this to be a reflection of “a general shift in the treatment of those experiencing mental health problems, including deinstitutionalisation and development of community-based programs.” (Central Volunteer Bureau, 1988: 38) This pattern of deinstitutionalisation and “community living” spread to other populations and service areas through the 1980's.

An increase in the number of people from ethnic minorities seeking volunteer positions and an increase in the number of requests for volunteers [of diverse cultural backgrounds] from mainstream agencies were noted by the same volunteer centre in their 1990 publication on recruiting and working with ethnocultural volunteers. (Pike, 1990: 1)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING

- ▶ Lautenschlager (1992: 3-4) outlines five essential underpinnings of supported volunteering:
 - ▶ *the universal right to volunteer* - an expanded definition of volunteerism that assumes that all people are potential volunteers and that anyone who can make a contribution to the community should be encouraged to volunteer.
 - ▶ *social equality and equal opportunity* - a fundamental belief that all people should have access to the benefits of volunteering as a fundamental part of Canadian life and that everyone has the right to a fair chance at success in their volunteer work; barriers which hinder fair access to volunteering should be eliminated; volunteers with special needs should be allowed the kinds of support they require to do the job.
 - ▶ *diversity as a positive force* - an understanding that a diverse community is a rich resource that can be used in a variety of ways and can provide a volunteer base which will more accurately reflect the make-up of the community's population; an assumption that a diverse and representative volunteer base will enrich and strengthen an organization.
 - ▶ *volunteering as a benefit to the volunteer* - an acknowledgement that volunteers themselves benefit in a variety of ways from their volunteer work; volunteering does, and should, fulfil unmet needs of the volunteers themselves; the development of knowledge and skills should thus be actively encouraged.
 - ▶ *sensitivity to individual differences* - acceptance of the fact that treating everyone fairly does not necessarily mean treating them the same.”

THE VALUE OF SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING

Value To The Volunteer

One of the fundamental premises of supported volunteering is that volunteering is not unidirectional. That is, volunteering is not just about benefits flowing from the volunteer to the organization and its clients. Indeed volunteering is a two directional enterprise in which participation in volunteering gives back important rewards to the volunteer. Herein lies the critical importance of supported volunteering and the reason why many in the field of supported volunteering believe we have an obligation to break down barriers to involvement in volunteering: people ought not to be denied the opportunity to participate and reap the rewards of that participation. This rationale may have particular significance for many persons who have special needs since recent evidence indicates that the kinds of rewards that flow to the volunteer from volunteering may have particular relevance to persons with various forms of disabilities, disadvantages, and/or who are otherwise marginalized.

In the 1991 publication, *Volunteer For The Health Of It*, Graff reviewed the literature regarding the health benefits of volunteering for volunteers. The following excerpt is taken from the literature review of that publication (pp. 10-15).³

“Despite the fact that volunteers articulate over and over again that the benefits of volunteering to themselves are at least as great as the benefits to others, information and research in this area remains sketchy. The National Survey indicates that 93 percent of volunteers say volunteering was 'very' or 'quite' important to themselves, while less than one percent indicated that volunteering was 'not important at all.' (Ross and Shillington, 1989: 14)

“Often the literature on volunteering identifies the benefits to volunteers only in terms of skills and knowledge gained through volunteering. Such is the case, for example, in the promotion of corporate volunteering where marketing programs centre on the skills and contacts employees can bring from volunteering to their paid work. (c.f. Allen, 1983: 170)

“References within the volunteer literature concerning the health or psychological benefits of volunteering to the volunteer appear most often in discussions of motivation. For example,

Studies of why people volunteer and why they continue to volunteer support the view that it provides important psychic benefits. In the 1985 Gallup survey on volunteering {U.S.A.}, for example, 52 % of those who volunteer indicate that they continue to do so because they 'like doing something useful and helping others'; 32% said they 'enjoy doing the volunteer work and feeling needed.' Volunteering, in short, makes people feel good about themselves. (Vizza, 1986: 8)

“A report on a project aimed at enabling individuals with mental health problems to participate more fully in the community by becoming volunteers states:

... in volunteering there is a meshing of altruistic motives with the volunteer's self-interests. Volunteering is of benefit not only to the client or receiver of the action, or to the organization or community involving the volunteer, but also to the volunteer - disabled or not.

(Central Volunteer Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton, 1990: 41)

“That project report concludes that the "greatest gain made by those who participated as volunteers was in self-esteem." (Central Volunteer Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton, 1990: 43)

“The same publication reviews a survey by the Edmonton Volunteer Action Centre, the responses to which identified the key rewards of volunteering as "personal satisfaction, feelings of self-worth, experience and knowledge, and companionship." (p. 43)

“In a report that looks at volunteering for many different 'special needs' populations, the Victoria Volunteer Bureau contends:

...volunteering is very beneficial for individuals who are recovering from schizophrenia. Volunteering provides an opportunity for involvement without the stress created by the expectations of a full-time job. It is therapeutic because it enables individuals to feel they have something valuable to offer.

(Victoria Volunteer Bureau, 1991: 11)

³. Used with permission.

“A monograph which presents information on volunteering in Ontario collected from the National Survey notes:

When asked to indicate the quality of their health, 85% of volunteers reported their health as 'good' while 79% of non-volunteers gave this same answer 2% of volunteers reported their health to be 'poor' while 6% of non-volunteers reported 'poor' health. (Graff, 1989: 4)

“The data do not permit one to infer that a causal relationship necessarily exists between volunteering and health. That is, one cannot say on the basis of these data alone that volunteering makes or keeps volunteers healthy(ier) but the question of such a relationship is certainly raised.

“In a study of youth at high risk for problems such as substance abuse, dropping out of school and teen pregnancy, researchers identified self-esteem as an important variable "because it is an individual's view of his/her abilities to succeed. Positive feelings about oneself appear to increase successful performance." (Smith, Havercamp and Randol, 1990: 19) The project staff hypothesised that volunteering would contribute to an increase in feelings of self-esteem. The project engaged high-risk youth as volunteer teachers. Researchers reported that "the results of the Volunteer Teacher Program were dramatic" and that "the treatment group showed a significant increase in self-esteem." (1990: 21)

“In another study, the relationship between volunteering and increased self-esteem has been tied to both greater personal empowerment and enhanced health. Lord and Farlow discuss the profound sense of powerlessness experienced by people, whether poor, disabled or elderly, who had been rejected by their communities and marginalized. These authors noted that certain of these individuals were still able to experience a strong sense of personal control -empowerment - and found that 'involvement in community life was mentioned by most as being key to the growth in their personal empowerment.' (1990: 4)

We found that the process of participation itself was both empowering and self-reinforcing. As people gained in self-confidence, they would seek more avenues for participation; their involvement in community activity would, in turn, enhance their self-confidence and sense of personal control... Participation appears to contribute to empowerment because it increases social contact, reduces isolation, and enables people to take part in meaningful activity. ...When people feel more in control, their stress level is reduced and they are freer to make decisions that will have a healthy impact on their lives.... (Lord and Farlow, 1990: 6-7)

“Interestingly, it is within the fields of psychological and medical research that one can find the strongest evidence of the benefits of volunteering to the volunteer. And, in the relationship between volunteering and health, the concept of self-esteem may play a key role. It is suggested that the "high" that follows moderate exercise may result from "powerful psychological factors - including heightened senses of self-esteem and self discipline." (Hopson, 1988: 32) A similar "high" and a sense of heightened self-esteem have been shown to be a by product of volunteering. (Luks, 1988: 39)

“It is also suggested that helping others may offer protection from life's stressors.

Altruism is the currency with which we buy the social support that sustains us. In his classic, *The Stress of Life*, Selye coined the phrase 'altruistic egoism' -or, as we might call it, selfish altruism - to describe his idea.

(Growald and Luks, 1988: 2)

“Luks reports on a survey in which many respondents reported experiencing a greater calmness and enhanced self-worth from volunteer work:

One elderly woman wrote that doing something nice for someone actually snapped her out of periods of depression. Another reported more self-esteem after volunteer work. (1988: 42)

“Using the term 'helper's calm', Luks says doing good for others may be related to reduced emotional stress:

One woman wrote that she treated her stress-related headaches by shopping for clothing for poor children. Another actually uses her volunteer work at a nursing home to keep her blood pressure under control. (1988: 42)

“Many techniques have evolved over centuries to decrease blood pressure, heart and metabolic rates, and to achieve the health benefits which follow. Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson says: "Altruism works this way, just as do yoga, spirituality, and meditation."

(quoted in Luks, 1988: 42)

“In a further extension of this relationship between volunteering and health, Growald and Luks (1988: 2) suggest that not only **doing** good but "even thinking about altruistic action - may give the immune system a boost." Luks states that although the good feelings which come from touching or listening to someone are most intense while actually engaged in the activity, it can apparently be recalled. (1988: 42)

“Other research indicates that doing good for others may stimulate the release of endorphins into the blood stream. Endorphins are the body's natural opiates which produce good feelings (Luks, 1988: 39), and endorphins are linked to improved nervous system (Growald and Luks, 1988) and immune system function. (Hopson, 1988; Growald and Luks, 1988)

“In real physical terms the rewards obtained from contact with other people through voluntary associations are clear in the work of epidemiologist James House and his colleagues in Michigan who studied 2,700 people for more than a decade to monitor the link between social relationships and health. "After adjustment for age and a variety of risk factors for mortality, men reporting a higher level of social relationships and activities in 1967-1969 were significantly less likely to die during the follow up period." (House, 1982: 123)

“People's need for connections to other people is related to longevity. In a large survey in Alameda County, California, Berkman and Syme studied almost 5,000 people over a nine-year period.

They found that those who were unmarried, had few friends or relatives and shunned community organizations were more than twice as likely to die during that time than people who had these social relationships. This was true regardless of race, income, level of activity and other lifestyle factors.

(Growald and Luks, 1988: 1-2)

“Control seems to be an important dimension in the connection between volunteering and health. Luks reports that the pleasure which flows from altruism does not appear to arise from simply donating money. He says that "being in control is crucial to the health benefits of giving." (1988: 42)

“That volunteering can have a significant and measurable effect on health has become undeniable. What has been known on an intuitive level for a long time is now clearly proven in the scientific, psychological and medical research fields. Voluntary action can enable people to increase control over and improve their health. So not only does volunteering help the client, the agency, the community and society as a whole, but the decision to volunteer represents, for the volunteer, a choice of a healthy lifestyle.

Taking time to help, then, may be a basic step to protect health.
(Luks, 1988: 42)

Although rehabilitation programs are needed as well, volunteering is a bigger step, because the individual is not a 'client,' but a contributor. This provides increased self-worth: the physiological and emotional boost that is key to recovery.
(Victoria Volunteer Bureau, 1991: 33)”

Considering what the literature now proves about the value of volunteering to volunteers, and in light of the significant barriers to volunteering experienced by persons with disabilities and other special needs, the importance of efforts to encourage and support involvement in volunteering by persons with special needs becomes self-evident.

BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

One of the key themes in supported volunteering is that certain populations of people - people who have a disability(ies), people who are disenfranchised, people who are marginalized - experience greater barriers to locating suitable volunteer opportunities than the general population experiences.

The barriers come in many forms and have been discussed in a variety of sources. The early mainstream (i.e., not about supported volunteering specifically) volunteer program management literature contains encouraging messages about broadening the base of volunteering (c.f., Marlene Wilson, 1976: 118; and Eva Schindler-Rainman 1987: 66) and more recent mainstream literature in the field of volunteerism and volunteer program management contains similar messages (c.f., McCurley and Lynch, 1996: 100)

More specific delineation of barriers are found in the literature specifically about supported volunteering. For example, the Central Volunteer Bureau (CVB) of Ottawa-Carleton (1988: 38-39) noted for persons with mental health issues the following barriers:

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- ▶ reluctance within community organizations to accept volunteers with psychiatric disabilities
 - ▶ coordinators of volunteers are busy people who have little time to offer extra support or supervision to volunteers who are lacking in self-confidence and social skills, have uncertain work habits and potential, and who are generally vulnerable because of community attitudes towards the disabled
 - ▶ a general lack of knowledge and experience with psychiatric disabilities among supervisors of volunteers, resulting in anxiety and nervousness about working with volunteers experiencing mental health problems
 - ▶ a limited understanding on the part of referring professionals about volunteering and the extent to which volunteering is realistic for clients
 - ▶ slender resources at the Volunteer Bureau and the absence of expertise in the combined areas of volunteer assessment and mental health work resulting in a diminished capacity to provide consultation or support to the supervisors of volunteers in organizations
 - ▶ no community model of supported volunteering, resulting in the CVB'S acting with limited knowledge and by trial and error

The Volunteer Centre of Metropolitan Toronto (1992: 6) identified for volunteers from multicultural communities the barriers of language and cultural differences; an inability to pay for out-of-pocket expenses for transportation, meals, parking, child care and training materials; and dress codes.

Troubles with transportation and a lack of reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses were also mentioned as the two most pressing barriers for senior volunteers in a Calgary study although neither of these variables touched large numbers of respondents. (The Volunteer Centre of Calgary, et al., 1991: 22)

In a study of voluntary action and multiculturalism, the Volunteer Centre of Hamilton listed a series of barriers to volunteering as identified in focus groups with representatives of specific ethnic groups (Martin and Galvin, 1988: 14; and Galvin, 1988):

- ▶ no understanding on the part of volunteers from diverse ethnic backgrounds about the variety of voluntary activities available
- ▶ no information about the benefits of voluntary action
- ▶ little time to become involved in volunteering due to economic exigencies and/or family and religious commitments
- ▶ difficulties with a new language
- ▶ the feeling that members of ethnic communities are unwanted in this society as a whole, and therefore in the voluntary sector
- ▶ discrimination and prejudice against “new Canadian” groups

Lautenschlager (1992: 4-6) reviews a wide range of what she calls *external barriers* experienced by a range of populations relating to their disability or disadvantage. For example, people with mobility impairments experience physical barriers that limit access, including transportation issues; people with hearing impairments must confront the absence of sign language interpreters, appropriate communications technologies, and other people's ignorance of effective communication techniques; people with intellectual disabilities must face prejudice and other people's failure to understand that they have many skills to offer; members of visible minorities face social segregation and systemic discrimination; persons who are seasonally employed lack short-term volunteer opportunities; etc.

The second type of barrier explored by Lautenschlager includes those of social and attitudinal origin. She notes, in particular, the tendency to focus on disability, and the entrenchment of discrimination throughout our society.

The third type of barrier involves economic deterrents. For many, their special needs or circumstances will have affected their chances of obtaining employment or earning a living wage. The hard costs of volunteering place it out of reach of some.

The fourth type of barrier to volunteering is the personal barrier, the range of psychological barriers including lack of self-confidence and self-esteem; anxiety about trying something new and the fear of failure; inability to recognize one's own abilities.

The fifth and final type of barrier is what Lautenschlager calls the awareness barrier. She says people with special needs or circumstances may not understand the concept of volunteerism in general and supported volunteerism in particular.

In a publication about the health promoting benefits of volunteering, and in particular, the benefits of volunteering for special needs volunteers, Graff (1991: 28-36) reviews a wide range barriers that were identified by special needs volunteers themselves such as: attitudes, myths, and ignorance about volunteering; the out-of-pocket costs of volunteering; the need to earn money and/or find paid work (youth & persons who were unemployed); the absence of free time (youth); the desire to retain flexibility and freedom (seniors); fears, anxieties and confidence (seniors); transportation (persons with a physical disability); physical and emotional limitations (persons with a physical disability); fear of the unknown (persons with mental health issues); prejudice and ignorance (persons with mental health issues); staff resistance (persons with mental health issues).

In another section of the same publication, Graff reviews an extensive list of additional barriers identified by volunteer centre representatives from their experience in operating supported volunteer programs in their own communities. (See *Volunteer For The Health Of It* - Appendix B)

MacKinnon notes barriers that arise from agencies' hesitancy to place volunteers with special needs, and in particular, those with mental health issues:

“Most coordinators of volunteers are busy and feel they cannot offer the extra time required to support and supervise these volunteers.

“Agencies may work with a very fragile or vulnerable clientele such as seniors or street kids. They envision that volunteers with special needs would be unable to handle the client's needs and would only be an added burden.

“Many volunteer positions require the volunteer to be flexible, able to handle stress, and have strong people skills. This may exclude individuals with psychiatric or mental disabilities.

“Some agencies have already placed a number of volunteers with special needs. ... They feel they have already reached their limit for the number they can place.” (1991: 26)

Pyle says “By far the greatest obstacle to volunteering, and in gaining full participation in the community, are the attitudinal barriers and negative stereotyping that accentuate an individual’s disability and overlooks their abilities. Myths abound about what people with disabilities can and cannot do. ...” (1996: 2)

ISSUES IN SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING

Discrimination

Discrimination is a theme that recurs throughout the literature on supported volunteering. It takes different forms, and it is not always evil or even intentional, but the result is always the creation of a barrier to volunteering for people who have special needs. For example,

- ▶ Jean MacKinnon notes the impact of attitudes and ignorance around mental illness:
“The psychiatrically disabled can benefit from volunteering and they have a great deal to offer. However, the societal barriers around mental illness may prevent them from being given the opportunity to contribute. These barriers are due in part to a lack of understanding of mental illness.” (1991: 10)
- ▶ Weaver (1993: 7) offers a similar observation. He talks about the growing pattern of mental health professionals looking to volunteerism as a way to increase socialization and offer vocational rehabilitation opportunities for their patients, but adds the following:
“While treatment professionals, rehabilitation counsellors, advocates, and the patients themselves support this trend toward volunteerism as rehabilitation, it seems to be less well received by volunteer directors. Unfamiliar with mental illness or its treatment, local volunteer coordinators reported serious misgivings and were reacting with fear when having to deal with this population. Unfortunately, part of the stigma of mental illness is the errant belief that mentally ill persons are more prone to violence than the rest of the general population.”
- ▶ The Central Volunteer Bureau noted a reluctance within community organizations to accept volunteers with psychiatric disabilities, exacerbated by a general lack of knowledge and experience with psychiatric disabilities. (1988: 38-39)
- ▶ Graff (1991: Appendix B) echoed a similar sentiment in noting that agency staff and/or clients may be unwilling to work with or uncomfortable being around “unusual”/different volunteers.

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- ▶ Lautenschlager (1991: 5) repeats the message:

“Negative stereotypes about individuals who are different in any way are very common. There may thus be reluctance in any organization to accept ‘unusual’ volunteers. Whether conscious or not, this lack of acceptance on the part of others may show up as obvious discomfort or patronizing attitudes towards individuals with special needs. For some, the very idea of involving volunteers with special needs may push strong prejudices based on ignorance and fear to the fore.”
 - ▶ The Volunteer Centre of Metropolitan Toronto (1992: 2) speaks directly to discrimination as an element that must be addressed in all attempts to recruit volunteers from multicultural communities:

“In order to ensure that volunteer programs meet with success, agencies must be prepared to address issues of prejudice and racism that may exist in their agency. Steps may need to be taken to:

 - Institute a change in organizational behaviour
 - Examine current volunteer policies, procedures, recruitment, orientation and training programs
 - Identify potential barriers to volunteer participation.
 - ▶ Galvin speaks directly of the discrimination both experienced and feared by members of ethnic groups who were asked about factors that might deter their involvement in volunteering:

“For some of the groups interviewed in this study, fear of racism (based on their experiences in Canadian society) is a major deterrent to getting involved in voluntary action outside the ethnic community. Visible minority groups are especially concerned about encountering discrimination in the course of their volunteering.” (1988: 17)
 - ▶ Strachan (1991: 7-8) mentions the misassumptions and biases that frequently emerge regarding persons with physical disabilities:

“It is unlikely that an employer would ask a candidate for an accounting position if they could ride a bicycle or swim a mile, since those questions have no value when assessing a person’s success in a new job. All too often, judgements are made about people with disabilities which are based on this sort of reasoning.”
 - ▶ Pyle (1996: 1) echoes a similar perception regarding persons with physical disabilities:

“When we envision hiring and supervising a volunteer who is blind, or hard of hearing, or unable to move about without a wheelchair, it is natural to run up against core beliefs about what it means to have a disability. We might assume that people with disabilities are passively dependent on receiving services, not skilled individuals who can effectively deliver services to others. We may also believe that to have a disability means a lack of ability, or that these individuals are capable of only simple, repetitive tasks. ... In fact, individuals with disabilities are working and volunteering successfully in every sector of society, sharing their skills and abilities, gaining valuable work experience, and satisfying the human need to be of service to others.”

Preparing the Workplace

Much of the literature in the field of supported volunteering helps organizations to prepare their workplace for special needs volunteers, and provides information and advice on how to work with specific special needs populations.

For work with volunteers who have physical disabilities, see Strachan, 1991; Pyle, 1996.

For work with volunteers who have psychiatric disabilities or mental health issues, see MacKinnon, 1991; The Central Volunteer Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton, 1988; Weaver, 1993.

For work with volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds, see The Volunteer Centre of Metropolitan Toronto, 1992; Pike, 1990; Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, 1992; The Volunteer Centre of Calgary, 1992.

For work with senior volunteers, see The Volunteer Centre of Calgary et. al., 1991; Burden, 1991.

For work with volunteers who are unemployed and seeking paid employment, contact the Community Services Council, Volunteer Centre, St. John's, Newfoundland..

For work with youth volunteers, see Adolph and Ahwee, 1990.

As discussed below, the greatest majority of literature in the fields of supported employment, and work with populations of persons with various disabilities (typically from disability service organizations) translates well for the volunteer placement setting.

Accommodations

An accommodation is a change made to the work environment, or to the manner in which a task is accomplished, that makes it possible for volunteers to share their skills and abilities. (Pyle, 1996: 7) The objective of an accommodation is to ensure that a disability or special need does not prevent the individual from doing a job that he or she is otherwise qualified to do. Its purpose is to neutralize the impact of the special need and maximize the effectiveness of the skills and abilities. (Lautenschlager, 1992: 17)

The prevailing wisdom in the literature on accommodations in both paid and the volunteer environments indicates that in most instances, people with special needs do not require major or costly accommodations, and determining what is needed is usually as easy as simply asking the person him or herself.

Lautenschlager says it this way:

“The very thought of having to make special accommodations or to provide extra support may deter some organizations from considering a volunteer with special needs. Lack of knowledge in this area may lead to the assumption that accommodations are prohibitively expensive, in terms of either money or time. But this is not necessarily the case.” (1992: 20)

The following two quotes from the Winnipeg Independent Living Resource Centre's publication on working with volunteers with disabilities (Strachan, 1991: 7-8, 24) sum up the key themes:

“Successful utilization of volunteers with disabilities does not always require a fountain of creativity or unusual sensitivity. As often happens, a change in attitude and practice happens more by accident than anything else. Once you have had some exposure to people with disabilities on an individual basis, it is easy to make the natural kinds of accommodations necessary. If you or a colleague broke an arm, those around you would assist with any activities that you were not able to do, or transfer those duties to someone else until you were able to do it again. These kinds of natural (and simple) accommodations can be made without any of the extensive amount of time or money that is often associated with having people with disabilities present in your office.”

“Reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities have a lot of agencies needlessly worried. Our experience is that accommodations are easier and far cheaper than most people fear. Accommodations are nothing new in the work environment. Organizations make accommodations when they buy new equipment, rearrange furniture, allow flexible scheduling, or alter the work environment in any way.”

Volunteer Ready - Individuals

For decades the promoters of volunteerism claimed that there was a place for everybody in volunteering, but work in the field of supported volunteering has made practitioners in the field acknowledge that not all persons are always ready to take on volunteer work. While supported volunteering is, in essence, about breaking down barriers, making accommodations, and providing the extra support that some people need to gain access to volunteer opportunities and the benefits volunteering can bestow, there is a small proportion of persons whose support and accommodations needs are so great, among other reasons, that they are not ready or able to volunteer.

This is a concept that the volunteer movement has had difficulty in acknowledging, but a few authors have dared to speak to the issue.

Lautenschlager explores the concept of volunteer readiness in the context of a cost/benefit analysis from the placement agency's perspective:

“When the level of support required to integrate a special-needs volunteer is very high, the organization will have to weigh the case carefully. Depending on the type of placement, issues of safety and liability can also come into play. If one accepts the basic premise that all people have the right to seek dignified means to be productive and independent, these decisions may be very difficult to make. ... for an agency or organization that relies on volunteers to fulfil its objectives, the involvement of volunteers with special needs would likely have to be regarded as a means to an end - that is, to productivity. Of necessity, there are limitations to what a voluntary organization can offer when additional time and money are required.

“Realistically, the cost/benefit analysis will probably have to tip in favour of the amount of work that can be accomplished, rather than the value of the volunteer's involvement in and of itself. Where extensive continuing support is needed, it is probably not possible for a voluntary organization to provide it without special funding or a partnership with an organization that was able to contribute such a level of support.

“At the heart of any volunteer assignment is the work to be done. If volunteers require a great deal of extra time and effort on a continuing basis, it could be argued that they are more like clients than volunteers. At times, it may be premature to consider an individual with special needs for a volunteer position.”

Lautenschlager touches on key points in this excerpt. First, the movement must admit that while volunteering is full of an unbelievable number of incredibly varied opportunities, there is always a small number of persons at any given point in time for whom volunteering is not the right choice.

Second, organizations that deploy volunteers must always keep their mission in focus and understand that volunteer involvement is usually not an end in and of itself, but rather, a means to accomplish the organization’s mission. Hence, the advisability of the cost-benefit analysis. If it costs an organization more in time, energy, and other resources to involve a volunteer than the volunteer gives to the agency through his or her involvement, then the agency has a legitimate reason to decline that volunteer’s offer of assistance.

An additional point to consider regarding volunteer readiness has to do with the distinction between therapeutic and therapy. There is no doubt that volunteering offers benefits to the persons engaged in it, and promoters of volunteerism (typically, Volunteer Centres) have expended great energy over the last two decades educating agencies and potential referral agents who work with special needs populations of that very fact. Volunteering can be an important variable in rehabilitation, recovery, healing, job preparation, and so on, but the equation must be a mutual one, and works only so long as the organization is also receiving from the volunteer. Hence, supported volunteering can be “therapeutic,” but when it becomes primarily therapy (addressing the volunteer’s needs more or less exclusively), the reciprocity breaks down and the organization will have difficulty justifying its resource allocation to the (unpaid) worker-turned-client.

Volunteer Ready - Agencies

A relatively recent theme to appear in the field of supported volunteering is the notion of volunteer-readiness as it applies to agencies. (Graff, 1997: 61) That is, there may be some agencies that are not ready to accept volunteers with special needs because they have not prepared the workplace to be a welcoming, positive, and supportive environment for persons with special needs.

Pike speaks about the need for organizational change in the introduction to a manual on working with ethnocultural volunteers:

“This manual looks at ways to help your organization, its staff and its volunteers become more sensitive and responsive to ethnic minority volunteers. We won’t be telling you how you can make these new volunteers act more like your old volunteers. We will, however, suggest how your organization can adapt to the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of the community you serve and become part of the multicultural reality that is Canada today. ... Those organizations that can listen and learn from their ethnic minority volunteers, and can be flexible enough to adapt their procedures and attitudes, will find themselves greatly strengthened.” (1990: 3)

RELATED LITERATURE FROM THE “FOR PAY” SECTOR

The parallels between supported volunteering and supported employment are very strong.

“Judge Rosalie Abella wrote in the Royal Commission Report, Equality in Employment:

“It is not that the designated groups are unable to achieve equality on their own, it is that the obstacles in their way are so formidable and self-perpetuating that they cannot be overcome without intervention. It is both intolerable and insensitive if we simply wait and hope that the barriers will disappear with time. Equality in employment will not happen unless we make it happen.”

(Quoted in HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT CANADA, 1994: 5-6)

This same comment could just as accurately be made about the supported volunteering field.

While beyond the scope of the present review, it is important to note that probably the majority of literature on parallel topics from the paid work sector has great relevance to volunteer work as well. With a longer tradition and greater resources, that body of literature has much to offer to the voluntary sector, particularly as the work of volunteers increasingly approximates that of paid staff in many organizations throughout the not-for-profit sector. Look for materials on topics such as:

- ▶ employment equity
- ▶ affirmative action
- ▶ job accommodations
- ▶ fair employment practices
- ▶ equal opportunity employment

Look also at the literature from disability service and advocacy organizations, and from governments on how to work respectfully with persons who have various forms of disabilities since this material translates well to the volunteer placement setting.

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