

# Volunteer Management: Once More with Meaning

by Jennifer Woodill

**V**OLUNTEERING IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED as a key strategy of community engagement and participation. Providing much-needed support and services at a community level, volunteering also delivers on civic and philanthropic values within society at large. Volunteering has been widely highlighted in “big picture” discussions about community development, social inclusion, social capital, and community health. It is also frequently cited as a key expression of civic engagement and participation generally in society, and rates of volunteering have been used to measure overall community health.<sup>1</sup> Volunteering is recognized as a key activity in national and international circles that promotes social inclusion and social justice, beginning at the grassroots level but extending to societal changes at local, national, and international levels. The United Nations Development Programme articulates the benefits this way: “Volunteering brings benefits to both society at large and the individual volunteer. It makes important contributions, economically as well as socially. It contributes to a more cohesive society by building trust and reciprocity among citizens.”<sup>2</sup>

And for many, volunteering opens the door to new opportunities for personal and professional development. For example, in a study on volunteerism, newcomers to Canada report benefits that include acquiring professional experience

and contacts in a new country, reducing social isolation, gaining an opportunity to practice English, and getting a chance to learn more about social-service work and Canadian society in general.<sup>3</sup> Volunteering offers a unique strategy for social change, providing support to society and to those who volunteer.<sup>4</sup>

Volunteering can play a critical role in fostering social inclusion. But how do those who make decisions about volunteer recruitment think about these questions—indeed, do they think about these questions at all?

I come to this discussion from a personal perspective. After years of doing front-line community work in an organization with strong community development principles, I applied to work as a volunteer coordinator. I had done research on the role of volunteering in fostering social inclusion and social justice, and I wanted to play my part in the vision.

But soon after, I developed the sinking feeling that I was in the wrong job. New to a volunteer management role (though I had worked with volunteers for years), I wanted to learn everything to do my job well. I jumped headfirst into a new world: I read voraciously about management practices, joined the local Association for Volunteer Administration, and connected with other managers. I learned about topics of interest for volunteer managers,

such as recruiting, screening, evaluation, risk management, and so on. My big-picture questions about how volunteerism connects to community development, civic engagement, and social inclusion were never discussed in these resources, however, or in meetings with other volunteer managers. I felt as though I had landed in a completely different profession, perhaps as a factory manager of sorts, churning out well-oiled volunteers as efficiently as possible. I began to wonder what was going on.

I realized that volunteering suffered from a serious disconnect. While theoretical discussions of volunteerism recognize it as a powerful tool for civic engagement and community development, these ideas have not translated into volunteer management practice on the ground. Under increasing pressure to professionalize volunteer management, there has been little reflection on *practice* and, in particular, how “best practices” *limit* opportunities for citizen engagement and social inclusion. I believe that the underlying principles of endorsed best practices are the principles of *efficiency*, *resource development*, and *control* and that social exclusion is an inevitable result of using these principles at the center of volunteer management practice. This discussion challenges traditional practices and suggests how to make social inclusion a central goal of volunteer management.

## Working with Volunteers: Key Questions

- Why has—or hasn't—your organization recruited volunteers? To fill a void in labor, to encourage community involvement, or both? What role do volunteers play? Are volunteers allocated to manual labor tasks or front-line service work, or do you involve volunteers at a "higher" level, in, say, advocacy, research, and so on?
- Do volunteers see themselves as members of your organization or merely as helpers?
- Who makes decisions about who can and can't volunteer at your agency? Who is the gatekeeper, and how is this responsibility negotiated?
- Does your volunteer coordinator view himself as an administrator, gatekeeper, or community development worker? In terms of responsibilities and authority, how is the coordinator positioned in your agency?
- Who makes up your volunteer force? How diverse is the volunteer base? Do volunteers reflect the community in terms of cultural diversity, age, and class? If not, why? How does your organization's volunteerism affect society at large? Could it have greater impact if more people participated in volunteering?
- What skills, capacities, and relationships do volunteers develop at your organization? Does your organization have a volunteer development program in place?

## Traditional Volunteer Management

Linda Graff and Paul Reed report an estimated 2 percent annual decline in volunteerism, amounting to a 20 percent decline over the next decade.<sup>5</sup> While the decrease is disconcerting, these numbers beg a question: how many people try to volunteer but aren't successful? We assume that volunteerism is declining because fewer people want to volunteer. But could there be a more complex story underlying this decline? Do prospective volunteers face barriers

that discourage participation? Do some face more barriers than others?

In fact, social exclusion is an inevitable result of conducting volunteer management based on the principles of *efficiency, resource development, and control*. These principles are all interrelated and work to support one another. *Efficiency* is about finding volunteers as quickly as possible who will do the job as quickly as possible. In our sector, efficiency is an epidemic that ultimately values quantity over quality of connection. Efficiency justifies turning a prospective volunteer away because he doesn't fit neatly into an organization's predetermined needs.

The principle of *resource development* views volunteers—much like money—as resources or assets. You can see this principle at work by identifying where volunteer management lives within an organizational structure. Often volunteer management is housed with administrative and fundraising functions. This principle underlies the trend to *measure* volunteering and calculate hours worked, people employed, and placing dollar values on the value of a *resource*. Again, quantity rules over quality, because a numerical value cannot express relationships developed or the ability to cultivate passion in another's work. This principle of resource development allows an organization to deem a prospective volunteer "not worth the effort" after conducting a quick cost-benefit analysis. But if a volunteer is poorly educated or he has a disability, traditional management principles don't view him as a valuable resource.

The principle of *control* plays out in all volunteer management practices, which enforce top-down systems with clear rules of accountability and responsibility. A controlled system doesn't allow for gray areas, and communication is top-down. Volunteer managers decide how volunteers can be involved, and volunteers decide only whether they like the mode of involvement. If not, they have to go elsewhere. There is no flexibility or reciprocity in a controlled

system.

The principles of *efficiency, resource development, and control* direct volunteer management practices, where the focus is on finding people to do the work as quickly and easily as possible. So while volunteering can be a win-win strategy for both organizations and volunteers, it cannot meet this potential when the scales are tipped to benefit organizations at the expense of citizen engagement and inclusion.

There is a disconnection between volunteer management practices and the broader goals of the social-service sector—ostensibly to support people as they make progress in their lives. Indeed, consider these scenarios, where organizations' ostensible goal to promote volunteerism is discouraged in practice. When an organization has a program that theoretically supports newcomers but rejects them as volunteers, for example, there is a disconnect. When an employment program seeks volunteers but refuses to accept the unemployed on the premise that they will ultimately find jobs and will lack commitment, there is a disconnect. And finally, when we don't view our work with volunteers as integral to our support of communities, there is also a disconnect.

I propose an alternate way of approaching volunteer work and management, where the emphasis is on social inclusion and community development. With this alternate way of thinking, planning for volunteer involvement, practices, and management structure starts with these central questions: "How can we find creative ways for community members to get involved in and engaged by our work? How can we develop an organizational culture where volunteer engagement and involvement is central to all our programs? How can we develop a culture in which volunteers are completely integrated into the organization?" These questions move us in new and creative directions.

In this model, recruitment is a fluid process and happens continuously. Vol-

## Traditional Volunteer Management versus Volunteer Management from a Social-Inclusion Perspective

Traditional Volunteer Management Practices	Volunteer Management from a Social-Inclusion Perspective
Recruiting is based on agency needs for volunteers.	Community members meet with those who want to volunteer to identify strengths and develop avenues for involvement.
Recruit and screen to find the “best” person for the “job,” and reject those who don’t meet criteria.	Make every effort not to reject volunteers from community involvement. Continuously work toward creating opportunities for involvement.
Volunteer managers’ role is to track organizational needs and fill these needs with volunteers.	Volunteer managers play an organizational role that requires being receptive to agency needs as well as to volunteer needs. Managers challenge staff to think creatively about volunteer involvement.
There should be a clear separation between volunteers and clients.	Participant-volunteer models can encourage leadership development and empower community members.
Some volunteers involve more effort than their help warrants. Organizations conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether volunteers are worth the time and effort. They recruit, screen, and select volunteers who are self-starters, hard workers, and reliable.	Volunteering is an important avenue for those who experience barriers to paid work and participation in society. Volunteering boosts self-esteem, reduces social isolation, and builds new relationships.
Depending on their qualifications, volunteers are given a specific job to do.	Volunteering is fluid, enabling community members to get involved in new ways, to ask questions, to observe, and to help spontaneously.
Volunteers need to fit organizational qualifications in order to volunteer (e.g., a newcomer with poor English skills would not be appropriate as a children’s tutor).	An organization explores ways to create opportunities for learning, (e.g., three-way volunteering is a model that enables newcomers to partner with volunteers in tutoring children).
Volunteers are trained to do their job better, more efficiently, and without needing support.	Organizations can focus volunteer training to provide community leadership training, to support and inspire volunteers to lead and actively participate in their community.

unteer managers play an integral role in an organization, balancing the organization’s need for volunteers with the interest and assets of those who want to volunteer. Instead of developing job descriptions and then recruiting to fill these volunteer positions, managers define roles and responsibilities in a more fluid way. Someone who wants to share his skills can approach a needy organization with a proposal for volunteering, and the job description can be written spontaneously. An annual asset-mapping exercise with volunteers can highlight the skills of volunteers and

programming can then be developed to exploit shared assets. Perhaps new programs and activities are born from volunteer talents.

In this model, a commitment to social inclusion requires that an audit be conducted regularly on volunteer opportunities available and how such opportunities limit participation from community members. If most volunteer opportunities require strong proficiency in English to participate, for example, then the requirement should exclude those lacking a high level of proficiency. But in this model, an organization also

makes a commitment to think creatively about ways to create opportunities for newcomers to volunteer. Instead of finding the “best” person for the “job,” an organization makes a commitment *not* to exclude newcomers from participation in a community and to create meaningful space for their engagement.

In this new model, volunteers work alongside staff rather than in a strict hierarchy. Volunteers are involved at all organizational levels, not just in front-line work but also in supporting managers and directors, perhaps as volunteer consultants, trainers or researchers.<sup>6</sup> The interaction between staff and volunteers is more fluid, whereby staffers mentor volunteers, but volunteers also play a mentoring role, sharing expertise with staff.

In this model, staffers actively encourage and support clients who want to volunteer to gain new skills, meet new people, and get involved in their community. When clients become volunteers, their relationship to the organization changes significantly. As clients, they came to the organization for help and services. As volunteers, they now come to the organization to get and give help and develop a sense of pride through their participation. Staff members are committed to provide extra support to volunteers who need it and view this work as integrated with the larger goals of the organization and the goal of enabling volunteers to move forward.

In this model, risk management strategies must be considered in light of a social-inclusion perspective. An organization acknowledges that while volunteer screening is sometimes necessary (a sex offender should be prohibited from volunteering at an organization that works with children, for example), that screening often serves to exclude those who already face barriers to volunteering. In this model, organizations acknowledge that life is inherently risky, innovation is risky, and the safe route is not necessarily the best route.

## What Next?

This discussion just begins to scratch the surface of the conversation, a conversation that must go deeper with those who are passionate about changing our approach to volunteer management. Bring this perspective to your organization, and get those at the top on board. Convey the importance of volunteerism in terms of promoting civic engagement and social inclusion and the exclusionary effect of traditional volunteer management practices. Find a way to reflect creatively on your organizational principles and practices as you work with volunteers.

Finally, talk to funders about the potential of embracing volunteer management as a tool for civic engagement and community development. When funders make this connection and buy in to its importance, you can establish the argument for funds to support this important work. Note, however, that acquiring funding is a long-term goal without much yield in the near term. In the meantime, organizations have to think creatively and change practices because of lack of money.

Let's get reinspired by volunteerism as a tool for social change. As the United Nations puts it, volunteerism "contributes to a more cohesive society by building trust and reciprocity among citizens." This important work should not be taken lightly. This is work that is inspiring.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashton, Stacy. "Building Caring Communities: The Contributions of Immigrant Volunteers." *Community Volunteer Connections*, 2006.
- De Long, Beth. "The Meaning of Volunteering: Examining the Meaning of Volunteering to New Canadians." Pillar Voluntary Sector Network, March 2005.
- Gallagher, Brenda. "Taking Care: Screening for Community Support Organizations." Volunteer Canada, 2000.
- Graff, Linda. "Volunteering for the Health of It." Volunteer Ontario: June 1991.
- Graff, Linda, and Paul Reed. Who Cares? "The Graff-Reed Conversations" (<http://www.canadawhocares.ca/>), 2007.
- Handy, Femida, and Narasimhan Srinivasan. "Costs and Contributions of Professional Volunteer Management: Lessons from Ontario Hospitals." Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2002.
- Juliussan, Rick. "Volunteering Among Ethnocultural Seniors Who Are New to Canada." Volunteer Canada, 2005.
- Kelly, Colleen. "A People Lens: Why Can't We Find Board Members and Other Volunteers We Require?" Volunteer Vancouver, 2006.
- Points of Light Foundation. "A Matter of Survival: Volunteering by, in, and with Low-Income Communities." Points of Light Foundation, 2000.
- Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone, the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.
- Scott, Katherine. "Making Connections: Social and Civic Engagement among Canadian Immigrants." Canadian Council of Social Development, 2006.
- Stoparczyk, Rachel. "The Meaning of 'Volunteering' to New Canadians in Ottawa: Implications for Managers of Volunteer Resources." Volunteer Ottawa, 2005.
- Volunteer Canada. *The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement*. Volunteer Canada, Canada Volunteerism Initiative, 2006.
- Volunteer Toronto. "Brokering Change: Strategies to Reduce Gaps and Barriers to Volunteer Participation," April 2006.
- Zarinpoush, Fataneh, Cathy Barr, and Jason Moreton. "Managers of Volunteers: A Profile of the Profession." Imagine Canada, 2004.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000; and Who Cares? The Graff-Reed Conversations, 2007.
2. United Nations Volunteers Programme (<http://www.undplao.org/unv/index.php>).
3. Beth, De Long, "The Meaning of Volunteering: Examining the Meaning of Volunteering to New Canadians," Pillar: London, Ontario, March 2005.
4. This quote illustrates the win-win: "By caring and contributing to change, volunteers decrease suffering and disparity, while they gain skills, self-esteem, and change their lives. People work to improve the lives of their neighbors and, in return, enhance their own." "Making a Case for Volunteer Centres," Volunteer Ontario, 1996.
5. Graff and Reed, 2007.
6. Robert Putnam argues that linking social capital, also known as "scaling up," creates connections between social strata (such as a volunteer connecting with a senior manager), enabling lower-income workers to gain access to networks, power, and wealth.

**JENNIFER WOODILL** developed these ideas while working at St. Christopher House ([www.stchrishouse.org](http://www.stchrishouse.org)), a social service agency committed to community development thinking and practice. Woodill now works at the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario as a community volunteer specialist, and can be reached at [jwoodill@hsf.on.ca](mailto:jwoodill@hsf.on.ca).

Do you have a volunteering experience you would like to share? Submit a letter or provide comments at [feedback@npqmag.org](mailto:feedback@npqmag.org). Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150111.