

Advocacy for Volunteer Involvement: The Role of Funders

Susan J. Ellis

No matter how long I work in this field, I simply will never understand why so few of our attempts at educating decision-makers seem to stick. We are constantly repeating our advocacy efforts whenever new executives come on board - too often starting again at square one. I actually discussed this in 1999 in my [August Hot Topic](#). This issue is once again "hot" because of a recent rash of inexplicable budget cuts, reorganizing decisions, and other actions severely limiting or even eliminating volunteer program resources that - to those of us in the field - seemed to be successful and effective. In almost every case, the changes have been done rapidly and with no apparent thoughtfulness or sense of consequence.

There are a number of key misconceptions that continue to fuel ignorant decision-making. We have to find ways to emphasize the following:

Volunteer Involvement Is *NOT*:

- Free
- A second choice
- An alternative to adequate paid staffing
- Simply a part of fundraising or development
- Exactly like paid personnel management-or completely separate from it
- Basically a problem of recruitment, not of organizational competence
- Dying, old-fashioned, or unattractive to skilled people
- A low-level management function that anyone can do
- Something the paid staff welcomes or is capable of supporting
- A responsibility that can be done as an "add on" to the job of an already-overworked employee
- Extremely hard to control, measure, or hold to high standards
- Self-evidently good p.r., no matter how volunteers are treated
- Inherently risky
- Synonymous with the "nonprofit" or "voluntary" sector (or NGOs)

- Always labeled "volunteering"
- "Uniquely American"

But It IS:

- Universal and international
- A specialty management area
- As effective as the thought and effort put into it
- Too often underutilized and undervalued
- A way to expand the talents and skills available to an organization
- Access to perspectives specifically different from those of paid staff
- Intimately related to:
 - Fundraising
 - PR/Visibility
 - Outreach
 - Client development
- Something Executive Directors and the Board need to consider
- A part of the resource mix
- A way to dream and experiment with new service ideas
- A way to demonstrate an organization matters to the community

Over time, I have come to believe that funders have an obligation to force executives to make better decisions about volunteers. If foundations, major donors, and government agencies insisted on appropriate integration of volunteers in service planning and delivery, I predict we'd see immediate attention to volunteer management issues.

Jane Leighty Justis is crusading on this very topic in the foundation world, as she explained in an interview in *e-Volunteerism* last year <http://evolunteerism.com/fall2000/justisintro.html>. I agree with her advocacy and propose that, collectively, we find ways to get funders to:

1. REQUIRE all grant proposals to include a section on how volunteers will be involved in the new project;
2. ENCOURAGE requests to fund the position of volunteer services manager.
3. EXPECT reports on the degree of volunteer involvement achieved (quantity) and its impact (quality).
4. REJECT proposals from organizations unwilling to consider how the right volunteers might expand the success of their programs.

It is my opinion that an organization seeking gifts of cash while refusing donations of talent is not a good steward of resources. Since "money talks," funders have a strong effect on the ways that agencies operate. If volunteer involvement becomes more integrated with organizational development, and is rewarded with more funds, then executives and other staff will seek education in how to do it the right way.

So the question this month is:

How might we reach funders and advocate for greater attention to volunteer involvement?

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