

TRAINING VOLUNTEERS FOR SERVICE IN A HOME FOR THE AGED *

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VOLUNTEER service programs as a supplement to the services of professional staff are necessarily becoming an intrinsic part of the total program in homes for the aged. They are a vital and dynamic component in the goals of rehabilitation. Through the medium of volunteer services, creative activities and opportunities for companionship have enabled the older person to live a more enriched, satisfying way of life.

The volunteer program of the Jewish Home for the Aged of Greater Miami has been in existence for several years. It embodies a rather unique tri-partite cooperative relationship among the Home, the Greater Miami Jewish Community Center, and the Greater Miami Section of the National Council of Jewish Women. The Center conducts, professionally staffs, and supervises the group work program. The Council provides a corps of some 35 volunteers for both the group work and friendly visiting programs, the latter under the supervision of the Home's professionally trained caseworker. The volunteers are under the close supervision of the group worker and caseworker in their respective programs and their own administrative leader from the NCJW. The

group worker, who is a Center extension supervisor, gives half time to the program and relates administratively to the Assistant Director of the Home.

Whatever success we have had with volunteer services, and all three agencies evaluate it as considerable, has resulted from the full partnership among the professional staffs of the 2 agencies and the NCJW leadership, each having respect, understanding and appreciation of the others' roles and unique contributions to the whole.

Three important generalizations flow out of our experience of the past 3 years. We consider them fundamental to the successful initiation and growth of a program of volunteer services under professional supervision.

1. The Home, particularly its administrative and professional staff, must have clearly and explicitly defined and formulated for itself the philosophy, policies, and objectives of the institution.

2. The administrative and professional staff must genuinely and positively feel the importance and value of a volunteer service program, and the volunteer's role in making a significant contribution in the total program of the Home.

3. The planned and continuous orientation and training of volunteers for

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service by professional staff is another prerequisite for a successful volunteer program.

Training for Volunteer Service

If the goals of a volunteer program are to be fully achieved, the orientation of a volunteer for service is of primary importance. The preparation of a volunteer for work with the aged is, in many ways, similar to the preparation needed by any human being for any kind of living situation or special task. In the application of this belief, volunteer service in the Home requires the full participation of the potential volunteer in the planned and professionally led training course offered annually by the Home. The effectiveness of an orientation process may largely be measured by the extent to which the prospective volunteer is enabled to determine for herself her suitability for volunteer work and her potential for adequate performance.

For an orientation and training course to be of any real value and meaning, it must inevitably answer six basic questions which occur to the prospective volunteer, whether or not consciously formulated.

1. What type of setting will I be working in?
2. Who are the people with whom I will be expected to work?
3. What will be my role?
4. What are the personal attributes or qualifications necessary for service?
5. Will help on the job be available?
6. What are the personal gains to me in giving my services?

The orientation phase of the training program consists of 3 sessions, totaling 10 hours in length. These sessions are the culmination of considerable planning, in which the determination of service needs has been carefully thought through by the leadership of the professional agencies and NCJW.

Experience has demonstrated that a professionally guided tour of the Home, preceding the formal meeting, sets a frame of reference for the prospective volunteers from which specific discussion can logically and easily flow. Seeing the Home first hand also helps the volunteer feel she is already a part of, and identified with, this particular institutional setting.

In these orientation sessions, the caseworker and group worker are pivotal in orienting the prospective volunteer to the setting of the Home, the resident group, and the role of the volunteer in their respective programs. In highlighting some of the important personality traits and attitudes necessary for successful volunteer service, the personal and individual nature of the work upon which she is about to embark is emphasized. The volunteer also learns that acceptance of volunteer service begets certain responsibilities such as amenability to supervision, written reports, attendance at group meetings, and prompt and dependable service of at least 2 hours weekly. All of this cannot help but convey to her the importance and value of the work she is undertaking.

Another tool which we have found effective in orienting the prospective volunteer to the Home and the volunteer program is the volunteer handbook which is distributed to all persons attending the training course. This handbook, which represents the combined efforts of the Home, Center, and NCJW leadership, defines and describes the philosophy, policies, procedures, objectives and goals of the Home as well as all phases of the volunteer program.

It is only with the full understanding of what it will mean to be a volunteer in the Home, that the potential volunteer is enabled to arrive at a satisfactory decision about giving her services before she completes the application form.

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Screening and Assignments

In the screening and assignment of volunteer applications, we attempt to correlate as closely as possible the skills and interests indicated by the volunteers with the activities that need staffing. As a general rule, the volunteer's preference is accepted.

The process of assigning the new friendly visitor to individual residents is, in itself, an important part of preparation. For the worker there is a dual responsibility of understanding both the individual volunteer and the individual residents to whom she may be assigned, so as to assure proper mating and the potentials for an effective relationship.

If the volunteer is to achieve successful friendly visiting she needs and expects to receive from the worker orientation to the resident as a person, as well as information that may alert her to areas which should best be avoided in discussion. It is important to anticipate with the volunteer trouble spots that may develop in the relationship, and be ready to help her resolve them. Sharing this information at the outset makes the volunteer aware that she is not responsible for deviant behavior. When such behavior manifests itself, the prior preparation tends to free the volunteer from the need to conceal and struggle with the problem alone. The aim of the worker is to provide the necessary insight and understanding to the volunteer, so that she may become accepting of the resident and his behaviour and thereby continue her role as a friendly visitor. The worker establishes himself as a person who will share responsibility for the resident.

The evaluation and assignment process would be incomplete without the worker's arriving at some awareness of where the volunteer sees herself at this particular point in her life. Such a discussion indicates to the volunteer that

her understanding of herself has a significant bearing on her ability and capacity to help the resident. The volunteer's sharing of some of the patterns of relationships in her own family, and the attitudes and feelings she has developed about older persons, also serve to remind her that her life experiences and reactions to them are pertinent to the relationship upon which she is about to embark. If the volunteer is prepared to anticipate reactions, it may be easier for her to accept and handle them.

The worker must also engage in continuous interpretation to the Home's personnel of what the volunteer program is trying to accomplish, since this kind of program can only be successful when all personnel fully cooperate in the program.

The screening out of unsuitable volunteers is a problem that needs to be faced sooner or later in any volunteer service program. Sometimes in our eagerness to recruit volunteers, we are prone to be less selective. What we need to keep uppermost in our minds is that the volunteer will only get satisfaction from her work if she is suited for work in the Home, and if she is assigned to a job which is congenial and for which she has some gift or training. We must realize that no matter how great the interest of a volunteer may be, she may not be suited by personality or temperament to work with the aged. The professional worker has the responsibility to help the volunteer overcome any feelings of rejection and failure, and to understand that not to be found acceptable is in no way a reflection on her as a person, but simply means her personality and aptitudes may be more suitable for a different kind of work or setting. If done in this spirit, screening need not become such a painful problem, and one can be assured perhaps of greater cooperation from the volunteer.

The intensive orientation and training

course we have developed has proven to be the most effective tool for self-screening on the part of the volunteer. This is reflected after the first orientation session by the large number of drop-outs who freely indicate to us their feelings of inadequacy and unsuitability for the work. Those who continue in the program, for the most part, evidence dependable and quality service potential.

In evaluating a person for volunteer service, we look for a warm, outgoing, sensitive, accepting person who genuinely likes older people; a flexible, resourceful person with ideas and skills she is ready to share with others; a person possessing some measure of self-discipline and self-awareness; one with a sense of responsibility and a willingness to accept instructions and supervision in her work. We have found that the more mature, middle-aged person between 40 and 50 years of age seems to be best suited for the work. In instances where the volunteer was considerably younger or older, her service was relatively brief. In examining this phenomenon, the Home's staff psychiatrist observes that, "there is an apparent correlation between age and degree of interest on the part of volunteer workers in participating in the program with the aged, and particularly with aged, debilitated residents in the Home. The reasons for it are postulated as being related to the intensity of threat and degree of identification with this group.

"On one end of the age scale, persons considerably younger than 40 have little or no interest due to the distance in age and also to the remnants, on an unconscious level, of an omnipotent feeling found in childhood that such situations will not occur to them. On the other end of the scale, persons over 55 are so threatened by being close to those debilitated and seemingly dependent people that they want to deny the existence of this very real possibility for them in the near future, and therefore avoid con-

tact. It is a question of out of sight, out of mind. The age group from 40 to 50 begins to identify with the aged person and does to the residents in the Home that which they would like done to them when they reach a similar condition which they accept is going to occur in the future."

Supervision

The warmth and friendliness of volunteers must be supplemented by knowledge and skills. Continuous supervision promotes their growth and skills. Supervision instills in the volunteer a sense of security, of being appreciated, and of being an important part of the institutional services. The volunteer can accept and use the help that is available from the supervisor when the latter demonstrates his willingness and readiness to help her develop her potentials for effective performance. This can be conveyed partly through verbal expression, but chiefly through the way in which the supervisor uses himself in the relationship. It makes a great deal of difference to the volunteer that the supervisor is available for immediate and direct practical help and guidance, emotional support, inspiration, needed information, and encouragement to help her see the importance of her work. Supervision, if conducted in a purposeful, ongoing way, can insure the increasingly responsible, creative, and self-reliant practice of the mature person who is carefully selected and trained.

Our training program provides for both individual and group supervision on a continuous, regular basis. Group sessions for volunteers of a particular group work activity offer meaningful opportunities to share experiences and ideas from which future planning may flow. It is almost axiomatic that the attitudes and reactions of volunteers to the value of an activity will determine to a great degree the quality of the program

and the resident's acceptance of it. In essence, the volunteer must accept the value before the residents can. The designated volunteer chairman of each activity is a key person through whom the group worker gains understanding about the group experiences and problems that have arisen or may arise. Written reports, which we have found to be an effective tool of supervision, are required from all group work volunteers.

The group worker has found it important frequently to visit and observe activities while they are going on. His presence is not seen as a threat to the volunteer but rather has positive value in that it is interpreted as an expression of his interest and appreciation for the important work she is performing. When an activity is missed by the worker, the volunteer is quick to tell him of her disappointment. This reflects the feelings of importance and pride which the volunteer attaches to her role.

The supervision of friendly visitors is conducted individually on a scheduled basis. Volunteers are scheduled to confer with the worker on a weekly basis for the first three weeks, and at least once a month during the first 3 months. Thereafter, the frequency of supervisory conferences is diminished. Written reports are submitted after each contact, and these serve to indicate when a supervisory conference is necessary. There are intermittent unscheduled conferences that will take "just five minutes."

Beyond the orientation period, it is important that the entire corps of volunteers have an opportunity to meet periodically to exchange their views, disappointments, and successes in the program. It is important that volunteers participate in an annual evaluation session where they have an opportunity to assess their experiences, their accomplishments, their strengths and weaknesses, and the gaps that remain to be filled, pointing the way to future plan-

ning. It is also important that volunteers hear talks by other specialists in the field to broaden their concepts of aging and their role as a volunteer in the total program of the Home. Separate seminars led by the staff psychiatrist of the Home and the attending physician, together with the head nurse, proved particularly stimulating and helpful.

Conclusions

The volunteer training program we have developed has proved its value and effectiveness. There are, however, many areas yet to be explored, many concepts to be tested, and many problems to be worked out.

Recently, when the administrative staffs of the agencies and NCJW leadership met to evaluate the program, the following questions were raised in relation to the training procedures used:

1. What valid criteria can be used for the proper selection and screening of volunteers for work with residents in the Home?
2. How far can we go or should we go, in terms of depth and investment of time, in preparing a potential volunteer for service?
3. Are there more effective means of preparing the volunteer for the important and responsible work she is to undertake?
4. To what extent should volunteers be expected to make use of supervision, to give extra time to it, and to relate to written reports?
5. What should be the nature of the supervisory relationship between the worker and volunteer?
6. Can we develop realistic criteria for standards of performance for volunteers?
7. In the matching of friendly visitor to resident, do we need to rely on trial and error, or can we develop objective criteria to guide us in proper mating?

In conclusion, capturing the volunteer's interest, helping her to serve well, and guiding her into positions of responsibility and leadership in the program are no easy matter. Contrary to common belief, the use of volunteers does not save

the time of the worker. Considerable time and effort are required to prepare and train an inexperienced volunteer to be a person who can offer a meaningful and satisfying relationship to an older person.

We need to emphasize that work with volunteers requires infinite patience, acceptance, understanding, self-awareness, self-discipline, continuous careful analy-

sis of the feelings that govern the interaction in the volunteer-resident situation, skill in meeting the feelings that may be aroused and in resolving problems of the volunteer or the resident.

This is a demanding and taxing job, but for those of us who have been a part of this unique tri-partite relationship, it has been an exciting, creative and even joyous venture.