

Roles for the Volunteer, The Agency and Community: An Oral History Project

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The establishment of an oral history program, using volunteer interviewers to record immigration and resettlement experiences in order to enhance future service delivery, has revealed the existence of groups of potential volunteers seeking volunteer roles in the Jewish community, which are not direct service roles, but do provide for the learning of new skills and knowledges . . . If agencies fail to provide such roles, these volunteers could be lost to the community.

JFS and the Volunteer System

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles (JFS of LA) serves a large Jewish community, offering a wide range of services which includes counseling, advocacy, preventive, concrete and resettlement services. The agency is becoming increasingly involved in special programs based on governmental funding sources which have extended the range of services far beyond those of a traditional family service agency. Professional staff members include meal site managers, coordinators of housing and safety projects, and translators as well as social workers. Presently, under the supervision of professional staff members, more than 400 volunteers have direct client contact as providers of service in agency programs.

Volunteers originally performed all direct service roles in private agencies. They have always held important decision-making roles through membership on boards and committees. With the advent of professionalism, volunteer roles have tended to focus almost exclusively in fund-raising and policy-making functions. JFS of LA has begun to develop service-giving volunteers again only within the past 20 years. During this period, volunteer roles have progressed from support services to direct services; from tasks such as addressing envelopes, filing and answering phones to working as para-professional counselors.

It is a myth that volunteer projects reduce agency costs. Several years ago, JFS of LA

surveyed the costs and benefits of the volunteer program, finding variations in costs according to the nature of the services delivered and the skills required for service delivery. The survey showed that the more sophisticated the volunteer programs, the greater the need for high level staffing and resources. Volunteer projects enhance agency professional services and represent a way client services may be made more available; but this does not happen without ongoing agency supports.

Moreover, there is a great difference between meaningful volunteer roles and "busy work." "Busy work" volunteer jobs need little skill, preparation or supervision, while meaningful volunteer roles are planned to consider the needs of the client, the agency and the volunteer. They require a heavy agency investment of staff time and resources.

The Oral History Project

From their earliest beginnings, Jewish communities in the United States have maintained a tradition of communal responsibility for strangers and newcomers. Communities of all sizes have developed resources, structures, and services to aid in the resettlement of immigrant Jews. The Soviet Jews Resettlement Unit of JFS of LA continues this tradition of community responsibility for newcomers, using communally raised funds to provide special services to the newest group of

immigrants.

Since the Resettlement Unit represents large expenditures of community resources, the agency decided there would be value in recording the immigration and resettlement experiences of people who came to Los Angeles in the past, directly from foreign countries. The decision to implement an oral history project was motivated by the hope that knowledge gained from understanding past immigration experiences could relate to present and future service delivery patterns. Project activities were designed to be performed by especially trained volunteer oral history interviewers.

There are 24 volunteer interviewers in the Oral History Project. Several were volunteer case aides at JFS, but most were recruited in the community, selected from more than 80 prospective volunteers and screened to determine both their interest and willingness to make the stringent commitments of time and study required. Most are married women and college graduates. Some have masters degrees and several are currently enrolled in college level programs. Most are over 50 years old, with one-third of the group over 60. In contrast to the direct service volunteers at JFS of LA, most of the oral history volunteers have had remunerated employment. Many have had only a little involvement with the Jewish community, usually limited to financial contributions to the Los Angeles United Jewish Welfare Fund. About one-half have never actively volunteered before.

Within the group of oral history volunteers, there appears to be two major sub-groups: an older group of retired persons, and a younger group, generally under forty, who are in part-time employment. The younger volunteers tend to be in decision-making stages regarding their future careers. Both groups want high quality volunteer experiences which offer opportunities to learn and use new skills. They are also seeking meaningful connections with the organized Jewish community. For many, this may be a first real connection.

By the end of the project-year, the volunteer

interviewers will have participated in twelve 3-hour training sessions. Subjects covered in the training included oral history techniques, interviewing, use of recording equipment, role of the volunteer interviewer, history and cultures of periods and groups studied as well as the Los Angeles Jewish community. In addition to the specific training sessions, each volunteer will have also attended 15 weekly work group meetings, and performed two to three total interviews. A complete oral history interview consists of two to five sessions with the interviewee as well as preparation of all supporting documents including field notes, biographic statement, tape section summaries and an index.

Meaning of the Project for the Volunteers

Discovery of the existence of a new volunteer population with its own special needs and meanings has been an unexpected dividend of the project. This phenomenon may be understood in retrospect by evaluating what appeal the project might have held for the potential volunteer. Working in the project, a volunteer would have the opportunity to learn and use new skills in a quasi-professional manner; to have direct contact with her Jewish origins; to participate in the design and operationalization of a new program; to develop original historical materials; to work with a variety of lay and professional people; to have a role in the development of new services; to gain personal meaning by establishing ties to the Jewish community; to learn community values and priorities concerning budgeting and funding; etc.

When the volunteers were surveyed after working 7 months in the project, they expressed satisfactions in three areas: The learning of new skills, a sense of being connected to the Jewish community, and increased knowledge in various content areas. As one person stated, "Perhaps my involvement in the Oral History Project is my way of creating a tribute to my own family on an individual level, and on a larger scale a tribute

to the endurance and perpetuation of a people—to the legacy of life and learning for which Judaism stands.” Another wrote, “I’ve noticed the interviewing skills we’ve learned have carried over into my daily 9 to 5 job . . . and I find myself eliciting an enormous amount of candor—something I have only the Project to thank for. But, beyond the skills we’ve learned, I’ve been developing an entirely new sense of Jewish history and my identification with a nation of perpetual wanderers.”

Meaning of the Project for the Agency

In addition to the benefits which will accrue from project results, the Oral History Project has meaning for the agency on various levels. First, as a group of involved participants, the volunteer interviewers represent a present and future talent pool for the agency. In their present roles they provide a constant source of positive public relations which reaches beyond the Jewish community. They are “turned on” to the project and the agency, and make frequent glowing statements about both. Because they are so pleased with the project and with their roles as interviewers, most have been willing to take on extra duties including recruitment of potential interviewees, maintenance roles within the project, and policy-making functions. In their second year, many will be trained in the research skills needed in order to move into the next program phase. Also, as they come to know the agency better, they are beginning to express interest in volunteer roles outside of the Oral History Project. Perhaps the project will have the greatest significance for future agency planning and projects. The oral history volunteer role marks a progression in the evolution of volunteer roles at JFS. For the first time, a volunteer role was established which went beyond meeting current client or agency needs and began to address the needs of a special population of potential volunteers. New understandings relevant to the planning of meaningful volunteer roles can be developed by comparing the satisfactions of the oral

history volunteer with the current trend of declining interest in volunteering. The fact that there were at least three qualified applicants for every volunteer opening in the project carries extra significance at a time when interest in previously well-established volunteer organizations is dwindling.

The Jewish feminist press has become very critical of the appropriateness of volunteer activities for middle-class women. Paula Hyman, writing in *Lilith*,¹ refers to the steady decline in power and prestige of the major Jewish women’s organizations and to their failure in providing meaningful roles to meet the changing needs of contemporary Jewish women. She finds that most middle-class women are merely “joiners” or “dues-payers” who avoid volunteer involvements and seek employment both for the challenge of the work itself and social recognition.

It is time to become proactive rather than reactive in the design of volunteer roles. We must start to plan for the new generations of volunteers. The Oral History Project indicated the existence of two new groups of volunteers; we should also consider a third group in our planning. Many women in the Jewish community want to learn new skills because they have discovered that the traditional role of the married woman is not constant. Divorce or widowhood find them abruptly alone, having no marketable skills and no sense of themselves as capable of earning a living and able to support their children. There is even a term invented for this group: “displaced homemakers.” Well-designed volunteer jobs could begin to provide some of the experiences these women will need in order to build new lives for themselves.

When planning new volunteer roles, we must consider each person’s need and availability for volunteering throughout the life cycle. We should provide appropriate volunteer experiences for young people in high

¹ Paula Hyman, “The Volunteer Organizations: Vanguard or Rear Guard?” *Lilith*, No. 5 (1978/5739) p. 22.

school, college and early adulthood, as well as for people in mid-life and retirement. Volunteer jobs should be time-limited and negotiable as well as meeting the current needs of the individual. In the design of volunteer programs we must start where the volunteer is and have opportunities available to respond to the individual volunteer's growth and change in life style.

Volunteering is no longer the province of the middle-aged, middle-class woman who, lacking opportunities to express her potential, submits to the dreariness of low level volunteer tasks. Increasingly, clerical jobs have become the most difficult volunteer jobs to fill. Potential volunteers are willing to accommodate to waiting lists and selective screening procedures for placement in those volunteer jobs which offer learning of new skills along with rigorous training courses and ongoing supervision.

The Meaning of New Volunteer Roles for the Community

The fact that we are discussing new volunteer roles is a statement about the current roles of women and men in the United States and in the Jewish community. It reflects economic change and changes in the meaning of work and leisure. With less time needed to produce goods, more time is available for leisure time activities such as volunteering. Work standards also begin to apply to volunteering. These include contracts, provision of job satisfactions and well-defined job duties, time commitments and standards of supervision. Sarason discusses the ways in which a person's work and career choices may

be alienating and lead to dissatisfactions. Leisure-time activities which provide a sense of community become even more important:

When a person becomes aware that he cannot continue to make a strong commitment to work, that an impersonal society has rendered him impotent and dependent and has frustrated the desire for personal growth, the resulting alienation and loneliness bring to the fore the absence and need for a sense of community.²

This need for community was true for the Oral History volunteer interviewer. Their satisfactions in volunteering came more from a need to connect with their heritage and community, and less from a sense of altruism than is true for volunteers who give direct service at JFS of LA.

Increasingly, we must learn how to provide new volunteer experiences for people who are looking towards the organized community as the place where their needs for community and growth could be met. We must explore ways of enhancing fund-raising and direct service volunteer programs to attract and reward new volunteer populations. The notion of meeting immediate defined client needs as the only basis for design of volunteer programs should be evaluated against the emerging needs and potentials of the new generation of volunteers. If we fail to consider the needs of the new volunteers, a further estrangement of these groups from the organized Jewish community will result.

² Seymour B. Sarason, *Work, Aging and Social Change: Professionals and the One Life—One Career Imperative*. New York: The Free Press, 1977, p. 287.