

Volunteers in a Unionized Agency: Partners or Threats?*

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In the last year or so, members of the labour movement have raised questions about the use of volunteers by voluntary agencies and the very role of volunteers and voluntary agencies in an era of unemployment. Their concerns arise from issues relating to job security for their members, particularly in public service unions. These are not simple issues, nor are they questions for which single unequivocal answers can be found. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the issues that must be considered and to provide answers to some of the questions which arise from the use of volunteers in voluntary sector agencies. It is based on the experience of the YWCA of Metropolitan Toronto, but will attempt to generalize from that experience and reach broader conclusions.

About 80 per cent of the staff of the YWCA were first organized into a bargaining unit in 1975 at a time when there was a concerted effort by labour unions to organize the employees of a number of social service or voluntary agencies. The initial tensions arising from unionization were exacerbated by the confrontational style which was characteristic of labour relations in the 1970's, but much of that original hostility between unions and management has now dissipated, partly through attrition, partly through changes in approach on both sides. In general, both parties now see union-management relations as essentially a business relationship, and the roles of both are generally understood.

But the YWCA is also a voluntary agency, and has been for 111 years. Indeed, it was organized by volunteers who saw a societal need and began to meet it directly. It was only after several years of direct service on their part that the Association was large enough to begin to employ staff. The tradition and practice of the use of volunteers in the YWCA, both as policy makers and in the direct provision of service, is very strong.

A central focus of the mission statement of the YWCA of Metro Toronto is a commitment to the development of greater opportunities for women. That commitment not only directs the kind of services we provide; it also underlies the ways in which we use volunteers. We have rejected both the "Lady Bountiful" and the "envelope stuffer" models of volunteering, and have sought to define volunteer roles within the Association which not only result in valuable contributions to the Association, but have significance for the volunteers performing them. We make extensive efforts to provide training, supervision and

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support to volunteers, both to ensure the quality of the service that they provide and to ensure that their volunteer experience will be a source of satisfaction to them. Women working as volunteers within the YWCA have the opportunity to assume new roles and develop or hone skills which they may later find useful in the paid work force or in other areas of community service. Through collective action on policy issues, they also have the opportunity to have a significant impact on the community. Many YWCA volunteers, in Metro Toronto and other Associations, have moved on for further training, to new career opportunities, or to political or other community service.

Finally, it should be remembered that, throughout its history, the YWCA of Metro Toronto has provided services to employed women. Its first objects, in 1873, were:

... to provide for the spiritual, moral and temporal welfare of women dependent on their own exertions for support.

As the organization provided services to employed women, concern for the conditions under which they worked developed, and advocacy on their behalf became an important activity of the Association. While this activity has certainly increased in the last 12 years under the impact of the women's movement, our earlier history included many initiatives which were taken to improve the status of women in the workplace. As our policies related to the working conditions of women have been developed, there has been an organizational need to ensure that our own employment policies are as consistent with our social policies as we can make them.

As a result of these historic concerns we have always had a strong commitment to the welfare of both our employed staff and the volunteers who work in our Association. In the best of all possible worlds these commitments would be complementary; in the real world, interests and commitments sometimes conflict. Let us examine some of the points where tension can arise.

The YWCA of Metro Toronto, like all voluntary agencies, has a policy-setting Board of Directors. One initial fear of the board members at the time the staff was unionized was that the union would demand direct representation on the board and there was uneasiness about how this would affect the board's ability to develop policy. This demand has not materialized. Unionization did, however, bring an added dimension to the development of personnel policies which become subject to the negotiating process. In our experience, this has led to greater consistency and a more professional approach to personnel matters. We would agree with those officials in the union movement who hold that the best organizers in unorganized agencies are managers or personnel committees whose policies are exploitive, inconsistent and short-sighted. Unionization makes it necessary for both volunteers and management staff to exercise greater foresight and develop greater clarity of intention.

Our union has worked directly with management staff and board members on a series of task forces. The results have been mixed. The least satisfying experiences have

occurred when there has been a need to deal with changes in programs or services which have resulted in staff cuts. Some of these cuts have come for purely economic reasons: loss of a government contract or the decreasing financial viability of a fee-based program. Some have come about because of changes in the community or in the direction of the Association such as our move from a single program directed at immigrant women to a policy that opened every part of our Association to women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Whatever the reason, the reduction of the number of positions in the Association is naturally of concern to the union. That concern can work against management's need to make tough decisions in the long-term interests of the Association so discussions involving staff reductions are inevitably adversarial.

On the other hand, we have had very productive experiences when both union and management were able to identify common interests and to work together to achieve them. Most successful was a joint task force to review our pension plan and recommend changes in it. The result was a new plan that had support from staff at all levels and that was better understood by staff than any previous pension plan had been.

Still, an intersection of the roles of Board volunteers and unionized staff on policy and planning issues is usually formal and relatively rare. Much more common are the day-to-day contacts between staff and volunteers delivering direct service to participants in our programs. Their roles intersect at many points:

- In our Take-A-Break program for full-time homemakers with children, paid staff train volunteers as group leaders. This means that with a relatively small staff, we are able to support a significant number of groups in various parts of the community, as well as to provide some high quality leadership development to women who are currently out of the work force.
- Volunteer tutors in our pre-employment programs supplement the work of paid program workers and teachers by working with women on an individual basis.
- A volunteer in our hostel answers the telephone and handles routine matters during the weekly staff meeting so that all staff members can participate in the meeting, particularly during case management discussions.
- Volunteers assist with recreational and other supplementary activities in our residences.

These and other volunteer roles are seen by our staff as enhancing the service they provide, adding components which would be difficult to fund and which would be impossible or impractical to provide through paid staff.

Sometimes, however, there are choices to be made. Child care is an integral component of our Take-a-Break program. One source of such child care would

be hourly paid baby sitters from the community. But, if the program fees are not to be out of reach of the women for whom the program is designed, and the program is not to be so expensive that the YWCA cannot afford to offer it, we have to look to other less costly ways of providing this service. We have, therefore, sought and found volunteers to provide it. While we are not eliminating bargaining-unit positions by doing so, we are, of course, reducing opportunities for paid employment.

Even more problems are arising for many voluntary agencies because of the job creation programs developed by both levels of government. There is little threat to a staff member from a volunteer who comes in once a week for a few hours to tutor, answer the telephone, or take care of children, and who receives no compensation other than out-of-pocket expenses. More threatening is a person paid by government and seconded to an agency, or continuing to draw unemployment insurance, who may spend several days a week working alongside staff members.

Clearly, those who are employed under job creation programs benefit from them. The opportunity to get out on a regular basis, to keep skills honed, and to increase their experience is invaluable. The agency also benefits. Augmenting staff through such job schemes enables it to extend its service beyond what it could normally afford, or to get some work done which would otherwise not be done at all or could only be done with difficulty. The union itself and bargaining unit staff, however, may see the possibility of salaried positions and increased employment undercut by such schemes, even though they recognize the advantages for the agency and the individuals involved. Questions arise. When is such work merely "enhancing" the agency's work, and when does it become "essential" so that it should be incorporated into the agency's budget and continuing responsibilities, rather than being treated as an "extra"?

Even more threatening to regular employees is the possibility of replacing paid staff with volunteers carrying out the same, or very similar, responsibilities. Again, the agency, in a period of diminishing financial resources, may well be faced with the difficult choice of using volunteers in place of paid staff or not providing the service at all. For those clients or program participants who have come to depend on the service, the choice may be clear; staff whose positions are lost when they are replaced by volunteers may well feel that one social need is being met by creating another, and possibly larger, one.

Another area in which there is potential friction between volunteers and unionized staff is the response of management in the event of a strike. Again, there are conflicts of interest and of ideology: the desire to maintain services, indeed the necessity of maintaining some essential services; reluctance or refusal to cross picket lines by some volunteers; and the stresses between striking staff members and the volunteers with whom they normally work or between volunteers supporting the striking workers and management staff who are seeking their co-operation.

Every unionized agency, at one time or another, has to come to terms with its response to a strike. The Metro Toronto YWCA operates, in addition to a variety of group programs and services, two residential facilities, one of which houses over 100 women on a long-term basis. Our policy, established several years ago by the board, was that in the event of a strike we would close all services except the residences, and operate them with a skeleton crew of management staff, board members and some former board members or other long-term volunteers. We would neither hire outside people nor recruit a large body of volunteers to do other work normally done by unionized employees. Other agencies with different services or higher management staff/bargaining unit ratios would no doubt come up with different responses.

Tension has also arisen between the labour movement and the voluntary sector over the issue of competition between government agencies and voluntary sector agencies (usually funded by government) for opportunities to deliver service. This carries with it the possibility of friction between the voluntary sector unions and the public service unions, not over the use of volunteers, but over the question of which unionized staff will deliver services. Issues of "turf" and philosophical differences enter into this conflict. Voluntary agencies often feel at a disadvantage in negotiations with government over whether services will be delivered directly by government or delivered on a purchase-of-service basis by voluntary agencies. That disadvantage may be partly ameliorated when governments wish to cut back their staff complements and see purchase-of-service as a more economical and efficient way for them to ensure that the service is provided, as has been happening recently. The discussion of this issue is then often limited to the relative costs of one or the other alternative. However, there are other arguments for the delivery of service by the voluntary sector:

- 1) One difference between government and voluntary services is often scale. In most cases, service provided by government is on a very large scale, so as to be available to everyone. A "safety net" is necessary, but the very availability to all comers may mean that a particular service meets no one's needs very well. Smaller organizations are able to tailor their services to particular targets, and therefore to meet needs more closely.
- 2) Voluntary agencies are seen by many clients as noncoercive, and therefore more approachable. This may be particularly important for people who have some relationships with government agencies which are not entirely noncoercive: single mothers on Family Benefits, school dropouts, immigrants, the unemployed, or people in trouble with the law.
- 3) Voluntary agencies can adopt an advocacy role which is much less available—if it is available at all—to government services. As "disinterested parties", voluntary agencies have a long history of bringing to public attention the needs of their clients, the social problems which affect them, and potential solutions. (Public service unions, of course, have also been advocates for the people in the institutions which employ their members.)

These issues face us now in the context of a sluggish recovery and a climate of cutbacks and reductions of both government services and government funding at every level. Both voluntary agencies and the labour movement see many more threats than opportunities in this environment and, almost inevitably, take defensive action to protect their interests. Yet, clearly we share many interests and must find ways of resolving the problems and differences between us in ways which strengthen rather than weaken the social fabric and the institutions we both serve.

The voluntary sector must recognize the legitimate concerns of the labour movement in seeking to protect the jobs and improve the working conditions of its members and of others in the labour force. The labour movement for its part must acknowledge that the use of volunteers is not a short-term expedient during hard times but an honourable and long-standing practice which has many social benefits and that voluntary agencies must be preserved and strengthened so that the range and diversity of services available in the community are not reduced.

The labour movement and the voluntary sector must see each other as allies to ensure that adequate services are provided in the community. This will not be easy; many of the "gray areas" discussed here cannot be resolved, and either party, or the community at large, may disagree with decisions taken in specific situations. But if we do not respond to each other as collaborators rather than competitors, we will all be weakened, and society will be the loser.