

What Are Volunteers Good For?



Steve McCurley, **SHIP TA Center Volunteer Management Consultant**

One of the distinguishing characteristics of SHIP is that it is a program that relies on the services of volunteers. Most of us take this fact for granted; however, when the program was created, the decision was made that SHIP programs should convince members of the community to donate their time as core providers of SHIP services.

The decision didn't have to go that way. A SHIP program could be operated simply by hiring more staff to give presentations and do counseling. It's actually easier to manage a program that uses only paid staff. Hiring a few people is easier than recruiting a lot of them – each paid employee works full time, there are fewer people to supervise, etc.

But that leaves the question: Which way is better?

Involving volunteers is not just a good idea for SHIPs, it's actually a very important idea, given what SHIP is trying to do and who it is trying to serve.

Assuming roughly equal education and training, here are the kinds of work that volunteers may actually be better at performing than paid staff:

1. Work that involves developing trust with doubtful clients

Many beneficiaries that come to SHIP with questions or problems about Medicare are confused, frustrated, and angry. In fact, generally in this country, many recipients of services have no affection for or trust in the institutions that attempt to help them. They have been the objects of the attention of big institutions

“No one is paying me to do or say this; I am here because I care and want to help. I have no hidden agenda.”

for much of their lives, and they have occasionally suffered in the process. Many are afraid that anything they say will be used against them. This distrust of the institution carries over to a deep suspicion of the people who are employed by it. Clients do not trust the motives of paid staff attempting to help them – they simply view them as one more cog of a large machine that may chew them up and spit them out.

Volunteers seem able to cross this barrier, forging the connection that gets the client to both accept services and to pay attention to advice and information offered.

Volunteers can achieve this rather incredible feat simply through explaining who they are and why they are present: “No one is paying me to do or say this; I am here because I care and want to help. I have no hidden agenda.”

Many programs have discovered this remarkable ability of volunteers and rely on it.

The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, uses volunteers in large cities to convince citizens to complete census forms. Collecting demographic data about the U.S. population would seem to be an easy task – send out

continued...



forms, check off boxes in response to nine questions, and the job is done. In the 2010 Census, however, only 52 percent of all Census forms had been returned by the end-of-March deadline, with large cities such as New York showing response rates as low as 32 percent.

“People want to know that you care before they care what you know.” -Stephen Covey

A major reason for this is simple: People don’t trust government intentions, even when it comes to simple forms.

In some communities, getting forms completed is a cumbersome and expensive process of sending paid Census takers door-to-door relentlessly until people finally complete the form. Some people will make extensive efforts to evade Census workers. The solution comes in the form of volunteers -- many from ethnic communities -- who can quickly forge relationships and win enough trust to ask

for cooperation. As the Census Bureau has learned, paid staff (even if from the same ethnic background) can’t create the same trust nearly as quickly or as well.

Management guru Stephen Covey once made the observation, “People want to know that you care before they care what you know.”

Volunteers are in a much better position to establish this element of caring than paid staff and are thus potentially much better at establishing relationships with mistrustful clients.

2. Work that involves translating information so that clients understand it

There are two aspects of this: one is very direct and obvious, and the other is a bit more subtle.

First, volunteers give organizations the ability to speak to beneficiaries in languages they understand. My friend Elisabeth Hoodless, who ran the largest volunteer-involving charity in the United Kingdom, once pointed out to me that 452 languages are commonly spoken in London on an average day. No charity or government program can afford to hire enough staff with the language capacity to communicate with all members of our increasingly diverse communities. Volunteers offer the only hope in this situation.

In a very direct way, volunteer “translators” offer organizations the simple ability to talk with those they are trying to help; they both speak the right language and understand the cultural context of what is being said and not said.

Parenthetically, “translator” is one of the volunteer roles to which more SHIPs should be paying attention. It’s a great way to expand the demographics of both your volunteer and beneficiary populations.

The second way that volunteers offer translation skills is less obvious but perhaps more interesting: Information conveyed to beneficiaries is only useful if the beneficiary understands it. In many fields the jargon used by professionals has little or no meaning to the average person. Medicare with its highly complex rules and obscure phraseology is a perfect example of this problem.

We’ll use health care as a way to illustrate this notion. Doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals speak a language of their own. If you’ve ever been a patient in a hospital, you know the bewildering feeling of being lost in data that you don’t understand and that no one seems able to explain in a way that is intelligible to you.

continued...



Volunteers cut through this technical environment and communicate with patients on a personal, one-to-one basis. Communication with volunteers permits patients to freely express their needs and concerns in a relaxed, caring, and informal environment. Patients tend to ask more follow-up questions to volunteers than they do to paid staff. They are also more likely to admit when they don't understand something because they feel like they are talking with their peers. This explains why research in hospitals found that patients are more satisfied by volunteer services than the related formal patient support programs provided by paid staff.

Helpful advice is only good if it is understood. Volunteers have a much greater ability than paid staff to make sure that when good information is offered it is actually received and acted upon by the listener. Many paid staff possess so much knowledge that they simply can't express it to the average person.

3. Work that benefits from the “luxury of focus”

Paid staff must find a way to devote time to all of the demands of their jobs. Further, no matter what their primary job, employees also must squeeze in extra tasks, from a request for a report to attending sometimes less-than-useful meetings. No single client or single project can get an employee's undivided attention all the time or even for a good bit of time.

“We really mean it when we say we need you and here's why...”

Not so for volunteers. They have the option to focus intensively on a particular issue or client or to actively seek work that is interesting and enjoyable to them – even to the exclusion of extraneous tasks. Volunteers can specialize, even if they “only” serve for two hours a week. This is a luxury of focus, concentration, and time rarely justifiable for employees. And since volunteers only work because they really want to, they tend to work with enthusiasm and energy, something that is much harder to do when you work at least 40 hours a week.

The result: A task or assignment that a paid staff member can devote, say, 15 minutes a week to can suddenly get two complete hours of attention from a volunteer who truly wants to do that very thing with that very beneficiary.

Such information can be useful when explaining to your new staff or partner agencies why you insist on working through volunteers. It can also help when explaining to a prospective volunteer why you think it's critical they donate their time to SHIP: “We really mean it when we say we need you and here's why...” 📢