Questioning Volunteer Management

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Volunteering has been widely recognized as a key strategy of community engagement and participation. For many, volunteering has been a positive experience and has opened doors to new opportunities. It is well documented that volunteering is valuable on many levels, by providing much-needed supports and services on a community level, to expressing civic and philanthropic values on a societal level. Volunteering is also valuable to the person who volunteers, and it is well documented that volunteering has been used as a stepping stone for many in moving forward in their life goals. For example, newcomers have reported positive gains from volunteering, including (but not limited to): gaining Canadian experience (and a Canadian reference that can be used in job searching), reducing social isolation through making new friends, practicing English, and learning more about social service work and Canadian society in general[1]. Volunteering is unique in this "win-win" strategy for social change, providing support to society as well as support to the person who volunteers[2].

Volunteering has been widely highlighted in 'big picture' discussions about community development, social inclusion, social capital and community health. It has been well documented that volunteering is a key expression of civic engagement and participation generally in society, and rates of volunteering has been used as an important factor to measure the overall health of a community (Putnam 2000, Graff & Reed 2007). In both national and international circles, volunteering has been held up as a key activity that promotes social inclusion and social justice, starting at the grassroots level but spreading to societal changes at the local, national and international level. As expressed by the United Nations Development Program:

> *Volunteering brings benefits to both society at large and the individual volunteer. It makes important contributions, economically as well as socially. It contributes to more cohesive society by building trust and reciprocity among citizens.* – United Nations Development Program, http://www.undplao.org/unv/index.php

Volunteering clearly has the potential to play an incredibly important role in fostering social inclusion. If so, then how are we, the ones who make decisions about volunteer involvement in our organizations, thinking about these questions? Or are we thinking at all?

I come to this discussion paper on a very personal note. After years of doing front-line community work from a strong commitment to community development principles, I

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[1] De Long, Beth. "The Meaning of Volunteering: Examining the Meaning of Volunteering to New Canadians." Pillar: London, ON, March 2005.

[2] This quote illustrates this win-win: "*By caring and contributing to change, volunteers decrease suffering and disparity, while they gain skills, self-esteem, and change their lives. People work to improve the lives of their neighbours and, in return, enhance their own*". – Making a Case for Volunteer Centres – Volunteer Ontario, 1996

applied to work as a "Volunteer Coordinator" with excitement about playing a leadership role in promoting volunteerism and civic engagement. I had done my reading about the role that volunteering plays in fostering social inclusion and social justice and I wanted to play my part in this vision.

Very quickly after I became a "Volunteer Coordinator", I had a sinking feeling that I was in the wrong job. As someone new to the field of "volunteer management" (I had worked with volunteers for years before but not in a formal 'management' role), I wanted to learn everything to do my job well. I jumped head first into my new world of volunteer management, reading voraciously about volunteer management practices, joining my local AVA (Association for Volunteer Administrators) and connecting with other volunteer managers. I learned about the different topics of interest to volunteer managers: recruiting, screening, risk management, interviewing, evaluation, etc. My big picture questions, about how volunteerism connects to community development, civic engagement and social inclusion were never mentioned, in the books or meetings or discussions with other volunteer managers. I felt like I had been dropped into a completely different profession, perhaps as a Human Resources Manager, an Administrator, or maybe a Factory Manager, churning out well-oiled volunteers as efficiently as possible. I started wondering, what was going on?

While volunteerism has been recognized as a powerful tool for civic engagement and community development in the big picture theoretical discussions, this discussion has *not* been translated into how volunteer management is *practiced* on the ground. There is a serious disconnect. Under the increasing pressure to professionalize volunteer management, there has been very little to no critical reflection on *practice*, and how the endorsed "best practices" (discussed in the books, conferences etc) play a role in *limiting* opportunities for citizen engagement and social inclusion. I believe that the main underlying principles behind the endorsed volunteer management 'best practices' are the principles of efficiency, resource development and control. I believe that social exclusion is an inevitable result of doing volunteer management from these principles. This discussion paper is my attempt at challenging our traditional volunteer management practices and suggesting possible new and creative ways of working with volunteers from a social inclusion perspective.

Traditional Volunteer Management – Pedagogy and Practices:

> He has moved to Canada to create a better life for his family. He was a professor in his home country, teaching political science. He has been actively looking for work for over a year and has been unsuccessful. He wants to volunteer, to meet new people, to keep his skills relevant for the job market, and to improve his English. He calls one place and they say he can volunteer by washing the floors. He calls another place, leaves a message and never hears back. He calls a third place and they turn him away, saying that he does not meet their criteria. He calls a fourth place, a fifth place… He finally gives up.

I hear different versions of this story all the time. I have also participated in this story of social exclusion, both implicitly and explicitly, in my role as a Volunteer Manager. While we implicitly play a role in this story on a daily basis in our volunteer programs, we lament the statistics that volunteerism is declining in Canada. For example, Linda

Graff and Paul Reed report an estimate of a 2% decline in volunteerism each year, which will mean a 20% decline in 10 years time[3]. While these statistics are disconcerting, I have not seen statistics collected on how many people want and try to volunteer but aren't successful. We assume that volunteerism is declining because less people are interested in volunteering, but could there be a more complex story underneath? Are people facing more barriers to getting involved as a volunteer? Do some people face more barriers than others in volunteering?

There are complex issues going on in this scenario that are beyond the scope of this paper. For example, the scope of this paper doesn't allow me to discuss the well-documented lack of resources, both for supporting volunteers as well as for the social services sector generally[4]. Lack of funding leads to badly run organizations, where phone calls aren't returned and volunteers wash floors.

However, I think we need to dig deeper than the issue of lack of resources. For example, the reason behind an organization turning him away because he doesn't meet their criteria, goes beyond the issue of a lack of resources, to the *principles* we are applying when we are doing our jobs. I understand this scenario because I live it every day as a volunteer manager at a big organization, pressured to find the right people to do the volunteer jobs needed as quickly as possibly. And in this quest to fill positions, I am the gate-keeper for who gets to be involved, letting the ones in who will be immediately helpful and shutting some out who don't fit the criteria.

I believe that the underlying principles that drive volunteer management practices are the principles of *efficiency, resource development and control*. Social exclusion is an inevitable result of doing volunteer management from these principles. These principles are all inter-related and work to support each other. *Efficiency* is about speed and high numbers and finding volunteers as quickly as possible who will do the job needed to be done as quickly as possible. Efficiency is an epidemic in our sector, allowing us to get lots done in a short period of time, but without pausing to consider the whole person or complete picture. Efficiency is about quantity over quality. Efficiency allows us to turn someone away from volunteering, because he doesn't fit neatly into our needs, and we don't believe we have time to consider what he could give as a volunteer.

The principle of *resource development* is the perspective of seeing volunteers as resources, in the same way that money is a resource. You can see this principle at work in most organizations by noticing where volunteer management is housed in the organizational structure. Often volunteer management is housed with administrative and fundraising functions, with this principle at play. Volunteers are seen as resources in the same way that paid staff are considered to be as *human resources*, with the main difference being that volunteers are unpaid and therefore provide free labor. This is the principle that underlies the trend to *measure* volunteering, counting hours and people and putting dollar values to express the value of this *resource*. Quantity rules over quality again in this, as a numerical value cannot express the quality of relationships developed or the change in one's sense of self or their values. This principle of resource development is what gives us permission to turn someone away from volunteering, doing a quick cost-benefit analysis and seeing their offer to volunteer as not "worth it". Maybe

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[3] Graff&Reed 2007.

[4] For example, see Canadian Council on Social Development – Funding Matters project - http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2003/fm/fs2.htm

they'll need extra support to volunteer because their English isn't strong enough or their education level isn't high enough or they have a disability or they move slowly or for whatever reason, so they are no longer a valuable resource.

The principle of *control* plays out in all of our volunteer management practices, where we have created and enforce top-down systems with clear rules of accountability and responsibility. There are no blurry lines or questions in a controlled system. Communication is one-directional in a controlled system, from top to bottom. Volunteer managers decide on how volunteers can be involved, and volunteers decide if they like this or not. If not, they go elsewhere. There is no flexibility in a controlled system. The principle of control underlies bureaucratic processes, where one has to follow a set of rules and jump through hoops to volunteer. Individuals may be asked to fill out paperwork, provide references, do an interview, and/or get their police record checked, before they're chosen to volunteer. If they are indeed chosen, then they often need to read a manual, attend training and/or participate in another interview before they start volunteering. This volunteer management system excludes people. What about the person who faces literacy challenges and can't fill in the application form? What about the newcomer who doesn't have references because they've just arrived in Canada and don't know anyone? We may make exceptions for these cases, but one needs to declare that they don't fit in the system before an exception can be made. One is made to feel inadequate before they can volunteer.

The principles of *efficiency, resource development and control* have set the direction of volunteer management practices, where the focus is on finding people to do the work that needs to be done, as quickly and easily as possible. While volunteering has the potential to be a "win-win" strategy for both organizations and volunteers in terms of social change and community development, it cannot meet this potential when the tables are turned to only benefit organizations, at the expense of citizen engagement and inclusion. There is a disconnection between our volunteer management practices versus our broader goals in the social service sector, supporting people to move ahead in their lives. For example, there is a disconnect when an organization supports newcomers as a core program but then turns them away from volunteering. There is a disconnect when an Employment program wants to find volunteers to help out but refuses to take on unemployed volunteers, saying they will soon find jobs and therefore won't be committed as volunteers. There is a disconnect when we don't see our work with volunteers as central to our work in supporting communities and working towards social change.

<u>What Could a New Model Look Like?:</u>

What could Volunteer Management from a social inclusion perspective look like? How would it be different? Below, I share some of my initial ideas on new and/or different ways of approaching our work in volunteer management. At the end of the paper in Appendix A, there is a chart that outlines some of these ideas and practices, comparing traditional volunteer management with a model of volunteer management from a social inclusion perspective.

I recognize that there will be challenges to implementing these ideas within the constraints of organizational and funding structures, and each organization engaging with

these ideas comes from a different place. I put these ideas out as visioning to hopefully spark change, and this change can and will look differently in different contexts.

In this new model, there is an organizational commitment to social inclusion and community development that is integrated with practices of volunteer involvement. Planning around volunteer involvement, practices and management structure starts with the central questions: "How can we find creative ways for community members to get involved and engaged in our work? How can we develop an organizational culture where volunteer engagement and involvement is central to all of our programs? How can we develop a culture where volunteers are completely integrated in the organization, feeling a strong sense of meaning and relationship?" These questions move us in a new and creative direction.

In this model, planning is fluid and happens continuously. Volunteer managers play an integral role in an organization, balancing the organizational need for volunteers with the interest and assets of the people who want to volunteer. Instead of developing position descriptions and recruiting for people to fill these volunteer positions, the process of defining roles and responsibilities is more fluid. Someone who wants to share their skills and assets can approach the organization with their idea for volunteering and the position description can be written spontaneously. An annual asset mapping exercise with volunteers could highlight the skills and talents of volunteers and programming could be developed to make use of the shared assets. Perhaps new programs and activities are born out of volunteer talents.

In this model, a commitment to social inclusion means that there is a regular equity audit done on the volunteer opportunities available and how these opportunities may limit participation from certain community members. For example, if most of the volunteer opportunities require a high level of English to participate, then this excludes newcomers who have not yet achieved this level of English. Therefore, the organization makes a commitment to think creatively about ways to open up opportunities for newcomers to volunteer. In this model, instead of finding the "best" person for the "job", there would be commitment made to make every effort *not* to turn people away from getting involved in their community. There would be an embraced continuous challenge of creating meaningful spaces for involvement.

In this new model, more volunteers are working alongside staff, rather than under staff. Volunteers are involved at all levels of the organization, not just doing front-line work, but also are involved in supporting managers and directors, perhaps as volunteer consultants, trainers or researchers[5]. The interaction between staff and volunteers is more fluid, where staff may play a mentoring role by supporting volunteers but volunteers can also play a mentoring role, sharing expertise with staff.

As well in this model, staff actively encourage and support clients to volunteer, as a way for clients to gain new skills, meet new people, and get involved in their community. When clients become volunteers, their relationship to the organization significantly changes. When they were a client, they came because they needed help and received services. As a volunteer, they now come to help out as well as to get help and they feel a

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[5] Putnam argues that *linking social capital*, also known as "scaling up", where there is a connection made between social classes (like a volunteer connecting with a senior manager), is very advantageous to the person from a lower class, allowing for access to particular networks, connected to power and wealth.

strong sense of pride and meaning in being connected to the organization. Staff members are committed to providing extra support to volunteers who need it, and see this work integrated with the goals of their work generally, to support people (clients or volunteers) in moving forward in their life.

In this model, "screening" would be a term banned from our vocabulary, as the central idea of screening is to go through a selection process where people are either chosen to or excluded out of volunteering[6]. While risk management strategies need to be considered, in this model, risk management would be considered in balance with a social inclusion perspective. There would be a recognition that while there are situations where screening is necessary (for example, not allowing a sex offender to volunteer with children), often times, screening serves to exclude community members already facing barriers to volunteering (for example, someone who is non-status who can't do a police check). There would be recognition that life is inherently risky, that innovation is risky and that the safe route is not necessarily the best route.

What Next?

This paper is just a beginning attempt at scratching the surface of this conversation, a conversation that needs to go deeper with more people who are passionate about changing how we do volunteer management. Please contact Paulina Maciulis at pmaciulis@ocasi.org with your comments – disagreements, critique, ideas, suggestions etc. This can be the beginning of change.

Bring this perspective to your organization, and get the people at the top on board. Discuss with them about the importance of volunteerism in terms of promoting civic engagement and social inclusion, and present to them the link between social inclusion/exclusion and traditional volunteer management practices. Find a way for your organization to reflect creatively on your organizational principles and practices working with volunteers.

Lastly, we need to talk to funders about this new potential of embracing volunteer management as a tool for civic engagement and community development. When funders make this connection and buy into the importance, we can advocate for funds to support this important work. However, this is a long term vision and the funds may not be flowing for a long time yet. We cannot excuse ourselves from creative thinking and changing our practices because of lack of money.

Let's get re-inspired by volunteerism, as a tool for social change. Remember, the United Nations proclaim that volunteering "… *contributes to a more cohesive society by building trust and reciprocity among citizens*." This is important work not to be taken lightly. This is work that is inspiring.

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[6]See this definition of screening: "Screening of applicants refers to the range of procedures and processes used by organizations to carefully scrutinize individuals who apply for paid or unpaid positions in order to choose the best candidates, and to weed out, as far as possible, those who are incompetent or have the potential to do harm." (Gallagher, 2000, p.7)

Traditional Volunteer Management Practices:	Volunteer Management from a Social Inclusion Perspective:
Decide on recruitment based on agency needs for volunteers	Meet with community members who want to volunteer, find out their strengths and develop space for their involvement
Recruit and screen to find the "best" person for the "job", and turn away people who don't meet criteria	We need to make every effort *not* to turn people away from getting involved in their community. We need to continuously work towards creating spaces for involvement.
Volunteer managers role is to keep track of volunteer needs and to fill these needs with volunteers	Volunteer managers play a dialogue role across an agency, listening to agency needs as well as volunteer needs/hopes for involvement and challenging staff to think creatively about volunteer involvement
There should be a clear separation between volunteers and clients	Participant-volunteer models can encourage leadership development and empower community members
Some volunteers can be more work than help. Do a cost-benefit analysis to see whether or not we are getting our "times worth" in investing in volunteers. Recruit, screen and select volunteers who will be "worth our time", who are self-starters, hard workers, reliable, etc.	Volunteering can be a very important experience for those who experience barriers to paid work and participation in society. Volunteering can boost self-esteem, reduce social isolation and is often a space to build new relationships. This is difficult but important work of community agencies.
Volunteers are given a specific task or "job" to do, depending on their qualifications.	Volunteering can be more fluid, so that community members feel free to get involved in new ways, to ask questions, to observe, to help out spontaneously.
Volunteers need to fit the needed qualifications in order to be accepted as a volunteer. Ex. A newcomer with poor English skills would not be appropriate as a children's tutor.	Explore ways to open up spaces for learning. Ex. Three-way volunteering is a model that opens up spaces for the newcomer to partner with another volunteer to be a children's tutor.
Volunteers are trained so that they can do their volunteer job better, more efficiently, and without needing support.	Volunteer training can be focused to provide community leadership training, to support and inspire them to take leadership and actively participate in their community. .

*Appendix B – Thinking Outside the Box – Other Volunteer / Community Engagement
Models:*

Supported Volunteer / 3-Way Volunteering:
Supported or 3-Way volunteering has traditionally been effectively used in setting up a
way for people with physical disabilities to volunteer. However, I think this model could
be used to also allow space for people who face English-language barriers to volunteer.
Basically, it means that a volunteer who faces barriers can be matched with another
volunteer who can help them with their volunteering as a team. For example, if a
newcomer who has a teaching background and wants to volunteer as a Children's Tutor
but their English is not strong, they could be matched up with another English-speaking
volunteer to do their tutoring together. Through this, the volunteers are able to provide
extra support. This is also a good model for volunteer retention because it provides an
expanded role for longer-term volunteers, who might otherwise get bored

Virtual Volunteering:
Connected to project-based volunteering, virtual volunteers can do a lot of project-based
work from their own home, like research, writing up a newsletter, getting the word out
about your program, etc.

Family Volunteering:
Family volunteering is looking at ways for families to volunteer together, which provides
a wonderful opportunity for family members to be together while contributing to
community or to a cause they hold dear. Two advantages of opening up spaces for family
volunteering are: 1. it reduces barriers for parents to volunteer who don't have access to
childcare, and 2. it provides a valuable way for parents to introduce their children to the
values of reciprocity, caring for others and being part of community.

Participant-Volunteering:
The Meeting Place and our EPC seniors program are two examples of participant-
volunteer programs at St. Chris. Participant-volunteering means that instead of creating a
divide between clients/participants who traditionally receive help and volunteers who
give help, instead, participants are encouraged to both receive and give help in the same
setting. This model is empowering to participants who are encouraged to take a
leadership role in a setting where they feel comfortable.

Mentorship:
Mentorship often means a specific program where staff take on a mentorship role to
newcomers who want to learn more about their job and develop social networks. Similar
to student placements, while the "mentee" may or may not be considered a volunteer, the
main focus is put on the "mentee" learning from the staff in their day-to-day work,
through work shadowing.

<u>Appendix C – Questions To Think About in Working With Volunteers:</u>

Why has your organization decided to take on volunteers (or not)? Is it to fill a gap not filled by paid labour, or is it to encourage community involvement, or both?
What role do volunteers play in your organization? Are most of your volunteers doing manual labour or front-line service work, or do you have ways to involve volunteers at a "higher" level, for example, in advocacy, research etc?
How do you think volunteers see themselves in relation to your agency? Do they see themselves as members or partners of your organization, or as 'helpers'?
Who makes decisions about who can volunteer and who can't volunteer at your agency? Who is the gate-keeper and how is this responsibility negotiated?
How does your Volunteer Coordinator see their job? Do they see themselves as administrators, as gate-keepers, or as community development workers? How are they positioned in your agency, in terms of their supervisor, their responsibilities etc?
Who makes up your volunteers? How diverse is your volunteer base? Do your volunteers reflect the community, in terms of cultural diversity, age, class etc? If not, why is that?
What impact do you think volunteerism has on the wider society, beyond your organization? What impact do you think it would have if more people engaged in volunteering?
What skills, capacities and relationships do your volunteers develop while at your organization? Is there a volunteer development program/plan active in your organization?

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