

Consideration of Community Service Workers Assisting Voluntary Organizations in Disaster Relief

Community Service Programs

Under the recently enacted Welfare Reform Legislation, States must to reduce their welfare rolls by 25% this year and by 50% before 2002 or face severe financial sanctions. Optimally, this reduction will be accomplished through finding unsubsidized employment for the welfare recipients. Realistically, it will be impossible to move this many people into the job market and the alternative is participation in "work related activities". States and counties will be designing programs where public assistance recipients may be required to "earn" their welfare checks by performing Community Service. In order to meet the legislative requirements, a Community Service job must:

- *be at a government agency or a non-profit organization*
- *build the client's transferable skills that would lead to an unsubsidized, paid job*
- *NOT displace existing workers* (The assignments should be unmet community needs that would not have otherwise been performed.)

There are a number of similarities between the CSW program and the Temporary Public Employment (TPE) program that has been previously accessed by voluntary agencies after disasters (such as the Freezes in California). *However*, TPE workers can only work on public property and cannot be used to help clean out or repair private homes or churches unless there is a public health hazard. In TPE the emphasis is on reducing unemployment and performing essential recovery jobs that would be the responsibility of local government. In CSW, the emphasis is on increasing the skills and long term employability of recipients of public assistance. Work could be performed on public or private property for the recovery effort.

What does this mean to VOAD?

Recent years have brought more disasters affecting greater numbers of people who require assistance from voluntary agencies. Many valid needs are left unmet because of the difficulty of recruiting and maintaining volunteers on location for extended periods. It might be possible to expand the work pool by utilizing Community Service Workers from the affected area. This is an outline of the potential benefits and possible risks of this idea. If carefully designed, this type of program could be of benefit to all parties including: the disaster victims, voluntary organizations, welfare recipients and the local economy.

Considerations

1. *How could Community Service Workers be used in the relief effort?*

Just like any convergent volunteer, they could come with a variety of potential skills. Presumably the local county Department of Social Services will have been working with them on job search and should have some information on their capabilities. Workers with special skills or knowledge could be requested. Some examples might include:

- Members of the local immigrant communities might assist with translation and information on local cultural or religious groups that could improve outreach.
- People who know their way around the area (particularly in rural areas) could accompany volunteers for damage assessment and/or home visits.
- The more physically fit could assist with debris removal or home cleanup.

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- Mothers could assist with childcare while disaster victims apply for assistance or seek resources.
- Cooking and serving food to victims and relief workers.
- Caring for lost pets (walking dogs, feeding and cleaning)
- Distribution of flyers, assisting with mailings, phone follow-up, etc.

2. *What kind of people are could be in the CSW Program?*

There are many reasons that people may be receiving public assistance. Some are skilled people who have been displaced by the economy, can't find childcare, or have some minor disability that has put them at a disadvantage to other job applicants. There are also many welfare recipients who have had minimal or negative experience in the job market. However, after 3 years of aggressive "work first" policies, it can be assumed that those welfare recipients who are still unemployed face significant obstacles. They are *not* the typical volunteers that voluntary organizations are used to recruiting and working with. They are not necessarily helping by choice and they are not there as volunteers. It would be imperative that voluntary agencies set in place a structure for screening Community Service Workers before acceptance.

Consideration should be given to screening, training and supervision in such a way that the risk is minimized, while still giving the worker a chance to perform meaningful work. Some considerations might include:

- Many welfare recipients have a lower level of *education and literacy, or learning disabilities*, which have placed them at a disadvantage in the job market. They are sometimes embarrassed and may not readily admit to this limitation. Attention should be paid during the screening process and if possible, workers should be given a few options so that they can choose a job that is comfortable. Assignments that involve reading maps or forms should be given only to those who feel capable.
- Many of the CSW pool may be single parents. If the worker has small children, it is necessary to clarify *childcare arrangements*. The County may provide a subsidy for childcare, but the worker should be told what to do if their arrangements fall through, particularly if it is unacceptable to bring the child to the job.
- *Clarity of expectations* and capabilities is essential on both sides. Some recipients of public assistance (food stamps and general assistance) are adults with no dependents who are unable to work for some reason. Sometimes this reason involves *substance abuse or mental illness (current or previous)*. It must be clear from the start, that voluntary organizations are there to do a job, and cannot be distracted by the need to deal with erratic or unreliable behavior. While many of these people do have skills that could be utilized under the proper circumstances, these might not be the proper circumstances. It would not be unreasonable to tell the Social Services Agency not to send anyone with a known history of criminal activities, substance abuse, or mental illness.

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- Consideration should be given to *identification on the job*. No organization wants an "unknown quantity" representing them in the community. Someone who may be totally unfamiliar with the organization's ethics or beliefs could inadvertently cause embarrassment (such as someone with Adventist Community Services nametag lighting a cigarette outside a distribution center). On the other hand, people will need some ID and authorization to move freely on the job. Possibly a specially designed tag that says "Community Service Worker Worker's Name working in cooperation with Voluntary Organization's Name".

3. *What would this cost?*

Depending on state policies, the local government might be the "employer of record", assigning workers to various jobs and handling accounting and payroll from a centralized location. It could be handled like "on-the-job-training", which would ideally either lead to permanent employment or increase the workers employability for the future. States and counties would be hoping to find an employer that would pay at least a portion of the wages and benefits, but they would most likely have the ability to cover all costs if the arrangement served both the worker and the community after a disaster. The expense to the voluntary organization would then be largely in arranging supervision and record keeping.

4. ***What if Community Service Workers get hurt? Do they have insurance?***

Most welfare recipients have Medicaid (MediCal in California). Theoretically this should cover the cost of their medical bills if they are injured. It would *not* cover the non-medical expenses if they were incapacitated (temporarily or permanently) on a job. As employees, they would also be enrolled in any state disability program. Other special arrangements might be negotiated. It would be imperative that the arrangements include total insurance coverage before a voluntary agency could take the risk. A member of a church or voluntary organization is less likely to sue the organization if he/she is injured, than someone who is working to maintain public assistance benefits.

5. ***What if they hurt someone else or cause damage while under the supervision of a voluntary agency? Who is liable?***

Liability might be more of a risk, because it would depend on who was responsible. If the voluntary organization was not properly supervising the worker or did not provide adequate training before sending him/her out, the liability could be considered theirs. Even if the County did not disclose significant information or the worker did not follow instructions, the voluntary organization could be involved in a lawsuit. No one can be fully protected from being sued. This is why extra care must be taken to screen, train, and monitor the Community Service Workers, especially when they are new.

6. ***Why should the state or county work with Voluntary Organizations in a Community Service Program after a disaster?***

There are several reasons that the local Social Service Agencies might be interested in participating in such a program:

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- Federal law provides increasingly strict quotas for moving people off of welfare each year. States and Counties that are unable to meet them will be penalized. Even though most areas lack sufficient entry level jobs for welfare recipients, they are still required to meet ever higher weekly hours of work requirements. Social Services will have to find and fund appropriate “work equivalent” activities for them. Because of the extra risk and supervision, many commercial enterprises are not willing to reduce their efficiency or profit margin with an unknown and unproven person. Voluntary Organizations are accustomed to training and working with relatively short term and untrained individuals.
- Under the right circumstances, Community Service Workers could gain valuable skills that could later be used to obtain employment. Those with minimal work experience would also be exposed to different groups of people and learn how to work with others.
- If voluntary organizations must leave the area early, the local government will ultimately find itself responsible for much of the work that is left undone.
- Some local governments will undoubtedly use Community Service Workers directly for clean-up, road repair, etc. But supplying voluntary organizations with help will expand disaster relief programs offered to residents while increasing the ratio of welfare recipients in work related activities. Collaborating with voluntary organizations will also be much cheaper for the Counties than utilizing their own paid staff to supervise. Local government staff will probably have many other extra duties created by the disaster.

7. Why should voluntary organizations open themselves to possible risk and problems by becoming involved with welfare recipients?

There are several potential benefits to participating in such a program:

- While there is always an abundance of eager help immediately following a major disaster, it has been difficult to get people to stay for more than a few days (or weeks). These recipients of public assistance could be gradually incorporated into the operation, maintaining the strength of a dwindling force of volunteers.
- Local transportation might be needed, but there should be no expense of T&M which can become prohibitive with out-of-town volunteers. (Presumably these would not be disaster victims and would have a place to stay.)

8. What responsibilities would the voluntary organization have in exchange for the help of Community Service Workers?

Unless statewide agreements could be initiated, this would probably be negotiated with each local County Social Service Agency. Some likely requirements would include:

- Careful record keeping - Community Service Workers are mandated to work between 24 - 32 hours per week in order to continue receiving public assistance. The voluntary agency would undoubtedly be expected to keep track of attendance and hours worked for each person, and submit these records on a regular basis to the County. Carelessness in this area might result in a family losing benefits for a period of time.

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- Evaluations - Because the ultimate goal with all welfare recipients is to bring them closer to employability, written performance evaluations would probably be necessary (either monthly or at the end of the job).
- A single contact person - A specific person from the voluntary agency would have to be assigned to coordinate and oversee this program. Ideally, it will be a person who will be on the job long term, and it is essential that when there is turnover, Social Services has continuity. Carefully choosing this person and clearly documenting procedures, schedules, requirements, and County contacts will help avoid confusion as it gets further from the date of the disaster.

9. ***What other issues or problems might be encountered with this program?***

Voluntary agencies have already encountered local concerns that existing jobs will be replaced with volunteer labor. This would be especially true if CSW workers were being paid to work on private property. In order to avoid problems, clear criteria should be established to assure that those individuals who are benefiting would have had access to no other source of help (low income, uninsured, elderly, etc).

10. ***Theft, looting, unethical behavior and other discipline issues are not common concerns for voluntary organizations.***

Without stigmatizing the Community Workers, it will be best to create work opportunities that are not conducive to temptation. It will also be necessary to have a detailed orientation and clear written guidelines for appropriate dress and behavior for various activities. Things that would appear obvious to group members or long term disaster volunteers may not be obvious to a person from a completely different background.

Because of the nature of disaster relief work, workers with voluntary organizations often quickly gain the trust of victims. Access to personal information and property must be protected with care, in order not to open the victim to further losses down the road. Rules of confidentiality should be emphasized. Inappropriate behavior with vulnerable disaster victims such as romantic involvement, borrowing money, moving in with them, etc. should be clearly prohibited. Ideally, a "buddy system" would be used, where a voluntary organization member would routinely be accompanying Community Service Workers on assignments.

11. ***Would each voluntary organization have to establish a structure to access and utilize Community Service Workers, even if they only want a few people?***

It could be possible to arrange for one local non-profit or service agency to be the centralized "Employer" that could accept requests and coordinate all record keeping. Ideally, this would be a National VOAD member, such as the Volunteer Exchange, so that some standardized policies and procedures could be established in advance. An alternative would be to seek out a local service agency with experience in job training, or placement in that county or city.