



....exploring issues of the day....

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Re: Ethical Volunteering – job losses and the use of volunteer labour

We would like to thank those people and organisations that responded to our letter of 23 March 2007. However we were disappointed by the overall poor response that our enquiry engendered.

We believe there are issues around the use of volunteer labour that desperately require clarity as the scope for abuse of volunteers, paid workers and the ethic of volunteering becomes more apparent.

The lack of replies confirms the confusion surrounding volunteering. It has even been suggested to us this is a deliberate grey area. The danger of ignoring the issues around volunteering is that we will create a divided society where the financially secure increasingly move into the more desirable occupations as volunteers displace persons that require an income. This convinces us that **all** organisations involved with volunteer workers in any capacity should have clear guidelines as to what is and what is not appropriate.

Some organizations have published guidelines on the involvement and management of volunteers. Of those we have read, all stress that volunteering work should not substitute for, or lead to a loss of, paid employment.

However in the current climate it is difficult for organisations to resist the financial pressure to manage more and more services by the use of volunteer labour. Nor do the problems stop there.

Volunteering has a long and honourable history emphasising the

best of human nature and has delivered many benefits to individuals and communities. However there is an unthinking complacency whereby volunteering is simply regarded as a 'good thing' in all circumstances. This is not always the case.

We risk damaging the spirit of volunteering if it is increasingly tarnished by inappropriate use or exploitation. We have noticed that there is an increasing expectation for people to 'volunteer' in order to get experience before being able to join certain professions. This is coercive and favours the better off. Also, there is a proposal to 'pay' young people to volunteer. Is this really volunteering or simply a way around the minimum wage?

Conflicts arise in the voluntary sector where paid employees manage unpaid volunteers. This mitigates against the volition of true volunteers who want society to improve to the point where their "fire – fighting" role becomes unnecessary. If your income is dependent on a salaried role in the voluntary sector you are hardly likely to make yourself redundant!

As charities and the not-for-profit or "third" sector become more like businesses it becomes difficult to ascertain if the volunteer is being used appropriately or as cheap labour. Consider how the charity shops now have so many advantages over those trying to make a living in the second hand goods market and yet much of the money raised is going to pay people who run those chains.

We are perturbed by the use of "mandatory volunteering" (surely an oxymoron) which includes various forms of community service in which the primary motivator is external to the individual. For example: where a school or college student is required to provide a certain number of hours of community service to a nonprofit organization in order to graduate; a student uses a volunteering experience to apply skills learned in the classroom to meet a requirement to pass the class; a person convicted of an offence is sentenced to provide community service as part of the court's judgment; and where businesses require employees to provide a certain number of community services. In recent years, mandated community service has been on the rise in our correctional systems. The fact that this may offer a more humanitarian

approach and has been given the “active citizenship” spin doesn’t detract from the obvious cost cutting imperative.

All ‘non-voluntary volunteers’ affect those already active in the voluntary sector and many argue that they are expected, often with no additional funding, to manage these functions for the court, welfare and educational systems. Although it is by no means a universal sentiment, this quote reflects the strength of one persons reaction:

Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteers at Letheran Social Services in New York, now vets all volunteers and refuses to supervise those volunteering under coercion "....I no longer do someone else's job for them. The judge will have to find another way to punish someone other than punishing me in the process. I don't want to chase anyone, get nasty phone calls from someone who has to get in so many hours by a certain time (usually within the next couple of days).... My commitment is to the residents and the agency, not to the court or school system.”

We conclude that the issue of volunteering, the confusion, the polarised reactions and lack of clarity says much about our world of work and reward. Leaving us to agree with James Robertson when he states, “there is not a satisfactory long-term resolution to the conflict between the employment rights of people in today’s conventional jobs and the human right of people to be able - in a more fully developed society - to direct their own work in accordance with their own values and priorities, provided that in doing so they don’t prevent other people from doing the same.”

Yours faithfully,

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