

Instilling Social Responsibility Among Student Volunteers: Observations from a Successful Singapore Hospice Experience

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Abstract

The author discusses how a Singapore hospice, in working with student volunteers, successfully diverted its volunteer efforts towards building society. The program has proven to be a successful tool in inculcating social responsibility among students who opt to do their community work at the hospice as part of a Community Involvement Programme (CIP). While some not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) and volunteer hosting organisations (VHOs) do not appear to recognize the value of CIP hours and student volunteers, others have leveraged such efforts to benefit both the organisation and its clients. The hospice has gone one step beyond by turning the described program into an effective tool to instill in student volunteers a sense of social responsibility, better preparing them for active citizenship.

Key Words:

hospice, social responsibility, community-involvement-programme, student volunteers

Introduction

Not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) and volunteer hosting organisations (VHOs) have as primary goals helping build or rebuild society in specific areas that are unique or of special interest to the organisations. For example, hospices are built with the primary goal of improving the quality of life of patients and their families facing problems associated with life-threatening illnesses. Hospices around the world direct efforts and resources towards achieving these goals may it be in the area of fund management, resource allocation, or volunteer/staff deployment.

However, there are occasions when such NPOs or VHOs successfully redirect volunteer energy towards benefiting society

by venturing outside of the organisations' primary goals. This paper will discuss the experience of a hospice operating in the island-nation of Singapore in order to illustrate how this can be achievable.

The Community Involvement Programme (CIP) in Singapore

The national CIP in Singapore was launched in October 1997 to provide equal opportunities for all students in Singapore to play an active part in the life of the community in which they live, and to be active citizens who contribute towards nation-building. The objectives of CIP are to nurture students to be socially responsible and develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the community and country.

By participating in community work, students also learn the value of service and of developing enduring friendships with one another, and become more conscious of individual personal responsibilities to family, community, and country.

Beginning in January of 1998, every Singapore student from primary school to junior college must volunteer a minimum of six hours of service each year under this programme. On a long-term basis, a pupil with 10 years of schooling would have completed at least 60 hours of community service under this programme by the time s/he graduates from school.

The programme can be conducted through activities within the school such as peer group tutoring, taking care of an eco-garden, maintaining the school environment, or making handicrafts to raise funds for the needy. Other activities may extend to the wider community whereby students may perform duties in public libraries or welfare homes such as homes for delinquents, orphanages, shelters for abused children and so forth, teach computer skills to senior citizens, or enhance the environment through adopting a beach or a park which they will maintain and beautify.

However, there have been complaints from some participating students that their CIP experience, particularly at welfare homes, had been reduced to performing meaningless menial tasks. Such perceptions may result from a multitude of factors. Insufficient work being available for student volunteers, minimal supervision by paid staff, lack of creativity in the ways of working with volunteers, or simply the absence of real interest in working with volunteers are some of the most common reasons for the lack-lustre way welfare homes are organising CIP for students.

Structure of the Hospice CIP Programme

Recognising these pitfalls, the

Singapore hospice embarked on a structured CIP for student volunteers, applying the primary principles of service learning. Students who opt to do their CIP at the hospice are asked to develop specific program objectives and state the intent of their visits. The hospice manager of volunteers will, at a preliminary meeting, discuss with the student volunteer ways to achieve their objectives and methods of measuring their desired outcomes. This is normally conducted on-site at the hospice to give the student volunteer the opportunity to become familiar with the hospice and its environment.

Thereafter, a minimum of three visits comprising at least nine CIP hours is required, although many student groups have voluntarily opted to do more than the minimum. The first visit establishes the CIP experience for the student. S/he is given an orientation that highlights the work of the hospice and the holistic approach it adopts in caring for patients. Students are then given practical tips on how to go about doing the task they have identified. The second half of the first visit is a walk through the hospice wards with the assigned volunteer adult host (VAHs) who also guides them through their task.

Students receive hands-on experience during their subsequent visits, with VAHs present to give guidance and assistance when required. The VAHs are also available to provide a "listening ear" for those who have problems managing personal emotions, such as feelings of separation and loss, pain and suffering, and coping with the imminence of death which is prevalent at the hospice. These are very real issues that are faced not only by student volunteers but also by paid staff and caregivers. Students who are traumatized by the hospice experience are referred to their school counselors for follow-up consultations.

Between visits, students plan the “end-of-programme” client project, which is the pinnacle experience for CIP students at the hospice. Some of the novel projects that students have developed include celebrating a patient’s birthday by decorating his bed-station with balloons, ribbons and bows, and photographs and family memorabilia; throwing a “mother’s favourite recipe” tea party during a festive celebration whereby every dish was personally cooked by the students under a mother’s watchful eyes; and an *ice-kachang* party using the traditional techniques of ice shaving. (*Ice kachang* is a popular local dessert consisting of sweet condiments embedded under a mountain of shaved ice.)

At the last visit, time is set aside for reflection, which represents the closure of the student’s hospice experience. VAHs encourage students to share personal experiences using “feeling” words to describe emotions. They are also asked to share how they coped with these emotions. Coloured papers are then distributed for them to list the following: (a) changes they wish to see in their lives; (b) take-away lessons to share with others; and (c) resolutions.

Desired Changes in their Lives

A vast majority of the hospice’s CIP students have stated emphatically that they wish to take better care of themselves so that they could continue to enjoy life to the fullest with their families and friends, and to treasure life, family and friends more than they already were doing. Similarly, a large number of students also resolved to be less self-centred and to be more sensitive of the feelings and needs of people around them; to be more giving by leading lives that will be of service to others especially those who are more in need than themselves; to be more responsible in their actions and words and bear the consequences; and to be more

caring toward the elderly and the infirmed. A significant number of students also said they want to be more active in community work and be able to contribute towards building society.

Lessons to Share with Others

The following rank the highest of all the lessons that students want to share with others including family, friends, and fellow students: (a) importance of treasuring life and relationships; (b) the meaning of living life to the fullest; (c) the meaning of living and sharing; (d) the need to be of service to others; (e) the need to be more resilient and to be able to face challenges ahead of them such as suffering, failure, death, separation, and pain of loss; and (f) benefits of being socially responsible.

Resolutions

The most commonly cited resolutions are: (a) I want to offer my time as a volunteer; (b) I want to study hard so that I can hold a good job and be able to give more generously to the needy; (c) I want to do more good deeds; (d) I am very fortunate and want to share what I have with those who have less; and (e) I want to be a good son/daughter.

Observations Regarding Students’ Reflections

From students’ responses during the reflections, it may be deduced that they have learned some very valuable lessons that have been catalytic in their decisions to make certain changes to their lives and to resolve to take actions that can benefit or matter to others. Conversations with hospice patients often give rise to personal sharing. Oftentimes, patients voice their regrets for not taking better care of their health and for not spending sufficient quality time with their loved ones due to work and other pursuits. Poignant statements that patients

make, such as “it is too late for regrets now that I am dying”, strike and tug at the heartstrings of the CIP students and spur them on to think about their own lives and to take stock of what lies ahead of them. As a result, students realize the importance of family and relationships.

Some CIP students have not seen pain and suffering in their lives. Coming to the hospice for CIP opens up a new dimension in their world and makes them see that there are indeed people in this world who are suffering and dying of diseases that have no cure. It makes them more aware of the mortality of men. Therefore, they learn to treasure life and appreciate their purpose in life even more. In other words, they have become more socially responsible.

The resolutions they make suggest that they recognize there are needs, other than their own, that need to be addressed in society. They have also come to realize that they, as individuals or groups, can provide assistance or make contributions to society to make it more livable for others who are less fortunate than they are. From sharing at reflection sessions, one may observe how the CIP students have matured after being exposed to hardships and suffering.

Making the CIP Programme Work

The hospice CIP works for the student volunteers because it has been structured specifically to meet objectives and measure outcomes. It does not merely ‘use’ student volunteers to complete tasks that paid staff are unable or unwilling to do. The hospice values people who supervise the programme, namely paid staff and volunteer adult hosts. As a result, they are highly motivated and do the best they can to ensure the success of the programme. The following factors have also contributed to the success of the hospice CIP:

1. *Appropriate preparation of student volunteers for the hospice experience:*

During preliminary discussions, student volunteers are given information about the kind of work and types of patients they can expect to meet during the course of their CIP. They are also invited to visit the hospice for on-site reconnaissance and watch paid and volunteer staff at work so that they are familiar with the environment and can judge for themselves whether they are ready for such an emotionally charged experience. This introduction prepares them mentally and aids in preventing possible emotional traumatisations.

2. *Programme structure:* Any programme that requires participants to establish learning objectives and measure outcomes generally yields better results. Students undergoing CIP at the hospice establish their own objectives and target goals. In other words, they are entrusted with ownership of the programme which, in turn, motivates them to work hard and ensure its success.

3. *Guidance for students to achieve learning objectives:* Throughout the hospice CIP experience, VAHs are on hand to provide student volunteers with guidance and assistance. They teach students skills that are required to care for hospice patients, such as listening skills and communication styles; show students how to deal with patients who are demanding; and help students through difficult situations. At the end of each session, the VAHs conduct a short debriefing with the student volunteers to monitor their progress. This is useful since the students can bring up problems that they faced, and potential solutions and preventive measures can be discussed. A good indication and gauge of the success of the programme is when the actual outcome at the end meets the demands of the learning objectives set by the student volunteers at the outset of the programme.

4. *Time for reflection*: VAHs facilitate reflection sessions, which are normally conducted at the end of the entire programme and mark closure of the CIP experience for the students. Good closure is imperative considering the nature of the work carried out at the hospice and the effects it may have on paid staff, volunteers and care-givers, and particularly the student volunteers, who are exposed to such an environment for the first time. Besides facilitating the reflection sessions, VAHs also stimulate student volunteers to think about what more they can do after the end of the programme. Do they wish to do more and go beyond CIP?

5. *Beyond CIP*: Many of the student volunteers make a conscious decision to do more for the community and the hospice after their CIP has ended. There have been groups of students who continued to volunteer their time and efforts to the hospice. For example, a group of student volunteers produced a film based on their CIP experience and all proceeds from the *film's premiere* were donated to the hospice. Another student volunteer group organised an art and poetry competition depicting lessons they learned from their short experience at the hospice. Again, proceeds from the art exhibition were given to the hospice to support its charitable causes.

6. *Proper selection of VAHs*: The pool of dedicated VAHs is specially handpicked from the hospice's existing volunteer base. Applications for the position are stringently screened to ensure they meet predetermined criteria. Aptitude for youth work, love for sharing knowledge with youth, patience in guiding and teaching youth new ideas and concepts, and creativity and innovation in organising projects for clients' benefits are some of the prerequisites for the job.

7. *Training*: VAHs are given on-the-job training to acquaint them with the CIP's structure, procedures, and processes in order

to enable student volunteers to have an enjoyable and meaningful experience at the hospice. They are trained to conduct tours of the hospice, which comprises part of the orientation programme for student volunteers, and to facilitate brainstorming sessions with students to come up with brilliant and original ideas for their end-of-programme client projects. They are also given training to equip them with the ability to conduct the reflection sessions at the closure of the programme.

Conclusions

The structured CIP introduced at the hospice has given students the rare opportunity of experiencing real-life volunteerism in its true spirit. This experience has planted in these students the "seeds of volunteerism" which will yield long-term results that can benefit the community in the long run.

Judging from the sharing and resolutions of the students, it is safe to conclude that the student volunteers have learned valuable lessons from their CIP experience at the hospice. It can also be concluded that the hospice has succeeded in instilling in these students a deep sense of social responsibility towards family, community, and country.

How well the hospice programme has succeeded in instilling social responsibility in student volunteers is best encapsulated in the words of one student volunteer who testified that, "The Hospice has taught me that only a life lived for others is worth living and when we stop contributing to the community we live in, we begin to die spiritually." At another session, a student shared, "I really want to help make life better for people, especially those who are less fortunate. I am saying this now because I have time to reflect. Very soon I will be busy with examinations, then building my career and starting my own family. I hope

when the time comes, I will not forget this. The day in my life when I have to make the choice of the kind of life I want to lead, I want to remember to be of service to others.” Testimonies such as these clearly indicate the effectiveness of the hospice CIP in instilling social responsibility in student volunteers.

Author’s Note: This article was adapted from a paper entitled “Building Social Responsibility Among Student Volunteers” presented originally at the 10th IAVE Asia-Pacific Volunteer Conference held in November 2005 in Hong Kong.

About the Author

Michael Loh is General Manager of Heartware Network, a Singapore-based charitable youth organisation, where he directs and leads a dedicated team that engages youth to be more proactive in service and champion social causes within the community. A former manager of volunteers at Dover Park Hospice in Singapore, he is also a trainer in volunteer management with the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre and the Social Service Training Institute, an Academy of the National Council of Social Service. During his tenure as manager of volunteers, the Hospice received two major national awards including the Inaugural National Volunteer Award for Best Volunteer Management System (2001) and the President’s Social Service Award for Volunteers (2002). Mr Loh is also Founding Chairman of MOVE (Managing & Organising Volunteer Efforts), which is the official professional association for practitioners of volunteer management in Singapore.