The Roles Volunteers Can Fill in Community-wide Efforts

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Abstract

Community-based organizations are often asked to meet the complex needs of their communities by joining with other organizations to address these issues at various levels of engagement. As Gray (1989) has noted, this is often a "process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (p. 5). The coming together to address complex community problems often requires a great deal of time and commitment on behalf of each organization. Volunteers can be an important link between the home organization and these community-based initiatives. This article examines the roles volunteers can play at different levels of community-based efforts, the responsibilities of volunteers in diverse roles, and the extent to which volunteers can represent the organization at each level. The article concludes with the discussion of the implications for organizations that wish to engage volunteers in communitywide efforts.

Key Words:
collaboration, partnership, committee roles, capacity building

This paper has two objectives pertaining to the work of volunteers on behalf of organizations in communitywide efforts. First, it provides a description of the multiple levels of linkages among community groups (Borden & Perkins, 2003; Himmelman, 2004; Houge, 1993) and delineates the common roles across various levels of linkages. Second, the capacity of volunteers to perform common roles when overlaid within the specific levels of linkages is examined in terms of whether volunteers can adequately represent their organization.

Importance of Communitywide Efforts

Increasingly, today's communities are being asked to address complex issues with fewer resources. These complex issues include: rising rates of poverty, shortfall of money for public education, increasing numbers of youth spending larger amounts of unsupervised time, increasing crime, teen dropouts and others, while seeing the available funds to address these issues decrease. Communities recognize that many social problems are influenced at multiple levels and thus require a comprehensive examination of the issues through a communitywide effort, such as collaboration (Connell & Kubisch, 2001; Donnermeyer, Plested, Edwards, Oetting & Littlethunder, 1997; Jason, 2006; Kegler, et. al., 2005; Perkins, Borden & Knox, 1999; Silverman & Williamson, 1997; Wandersman & Nation, 1998).

Given the complexity, these issues cannot be solved by any one individual, organization, or governmental body. Bringing together different groups offers an opportunity to "create new leaders, expand social and organizational networks, add to knowledge and skills and enhance a sense of community" (Kegler, et. al., 2005, p. S32) while addressing important issues. More recently, communitywide efforts have been

seen as a way to build important social capital (Mitchell, Stone-Wiggins, Stevenson, & Florin, 2004) that has deteriorated over the last quarter of a century (Putnam, 2000). Given the importance of community groups, we believe that volunteers can play an important role within a communitywide effort enhancing the work of their home organization, bringing important skills to bear on critical issues, and creating opportunities to learn and gain new skills. However, not all communitywide efforts are alike nor have the same purpose. In an earlier article, Borden and Perkins (2003) outlined the various levels of linkages within a community and whether volunteers could adequately represent their home organization. This next section is a brief summary of those levels.

Levels of Linkages

There are five levels of community linkage (aka communitywide efforts), including networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration (see Table 1; Borden & Perkins, 2003; Himmelman, 2004; Houge, 1993). Networking, the first level of linkage is defined as the sharing of information among organizations on a specific topic (e.g., disaster relief, employment opportunities, and child care referrals). The purpose of Networking is to provide an opportunity for dialogue and common understanding, to act as a clearinghouse for information, and to create a base of support for a specific issue. The second level of linkage, Cooperation, is defined as the matching and organizing of existing programs and services with the purpose of meeting identified needs, limiting duplication of services, and ensuring that tasks are completed. An example of Cooperation is a voluntary association comprised of multiple organizations that meet to organize their services to better

coordinate the volunteer efforts within the community. (See Table I)

The third level of linkage, Coordination, is defined as the integration of resources whose purpose is the development or creation of new projects/programs to address a common issue. An example, of coordination would be youth organizations partnering to create a joint budget to support a common brochure listing the activities available through each organization. The fourth level of linkage, Coalition, is defined as multiple organizations coming together and pooling their resources from existing systems for the purpose of working together on a prescribed issue for a minimum of three years. For example, a group may form a Coalition to increase the availability of after-school programs for youth by pooling their resources to sponsor AmeriCorp members to provide much needed support to local youth programs. The fifth and final level, Collaboration, is defined as multiple organizations coming together to act as a new entity with a shared vision and the power to impact the participating organizations. The purpose of Collaboration is to accomplish shared and impact benchmarks, to build an interdependent system to address issues and opportunities. An example of a collaborative effort is the Family Violence Collaboration, formed to address family violence by including such groups as social services, law enforcement, hospitals, schools, judicial system, and others. This collaborative effort determined that in order to better serve and assist victims of family violence, local law enforcement system reporting needed to change. Therefore, new reporting procedures were established and sent by the collaborative to local law enforcement agencies to be implemented.

Common Roles Across Levels of Linkages

As noted in the previous section, each level of linkage has a specific purpose that offers organizations the opportunity to work with other organizations to better meet their own goals and objectives. According to Himmelman (2004), there are common roles that representatives of organizations play in the linkage processes. These roles include: convener, conduit, advocate, community organizer, technical assistance provider, capacity builder, and facilitator. The convener role is the individual who brings representatives from the different organizations to the table for initial discussion which may result in further action. The role of conduit involves serving as the fiscal-agency for funding pass-through for the level of linkage. The challenge in this role is to remain independent rather than become the defacto leader.

The advocacy role involves individuals or organizations representing persons that are the focus of the group's effort. The role of community organizer involves ensuring that the appropriate people are involved in the decision-making process at that particular level of linkage. Technical assistance provider is another common role that involves human and technical resources made available to the group to advance and sustain the group's efforts. These resources may involve: data retrieval and analyses, legal expertise, strategic planning expertise, and grant writing expertise. The capacity builder role within groups involves keeping the group focused and targeted on the prioritized issue, rather than straying from it. The facilitator role entails that of a servant leader, that is, the individual focuses on helping the group work more effectively. Facilitation involves advancing the dialog from ideas to action through a group decision-making process that is fair and inclusive of all partners.

Levels of Linkages, Roles, and Volunteers

Volunteers can be utilized in many of these roles to expand the reach and capacity of an organization to maximize their involvement within various communitywide efforts or levels of linkages. Using volunteers to support an organization within a particular level of linkage first requires the identification of the various common roles that the volunteer can play at each level. The volunteer's responsibilities change dramatically as the level of linkage becomes more complex moving from networking to collaboration.

Networking, the first level of linkage offers volunteers a number of potential roles. Volunteers can serve in the following roles within a Network:

- Convener - facilitates sharing of information through meetings with groups, agencies, organizations, and individuals pertaining to particular identified issue of concern to the home organization;
- Advocate - provides information to the network about the home organization's identification of specific population's needs;
- Community Organizer - identifies others who might be interested in engaging in an ongoing sharing of information; and
- Technical Assistance Provider - facilitates information gathering pertaining to identified issue and services being provided.

At the networking level, volunteers offer a community-based organization the opportunity to be involved in numerous information sharing conversations within the community about important issues. Volunteers will need to be able to attend meetings on a regular basis, be very well-versed regarding the vision, mission, and goals of the organization, and be able to accurately report back to the organizations the results of the meetings.

The second level is that of **Cooperation**. Cooperation offers organizations the opportunity to work more collectively with others to increase programs and services. Volunteers can serve in a number of different roles at this level:

- Convener **-** calls together organizations addressing a similar group or need to limit the duplication of services and increase the efficiency of each organization;
- Conduit **-** acts on behalf of the home organization as a liaison for the communitywide effort to identify and garner potential resources and possible funders;
- Advocate **-** provides information pertaining to the organization's vision, mission, goals, and services;
- Community Organizer **-** ensures that all the appropriate organizations are involved in the decision-making process related to coordination of programs and services;
- Technical Assistance **-** provides individual expertise and technical skills as appropriate in terms of the types of services provided and the types of services needed;
- Capacity Builder **-** guides the group discussion and coordination to stay focused on the identified needs and matches them to organizations' services;
- Facilitator **-** ensures that the conversation is inclusive and all organizations participate equally in discussion and decision-making.

The roles in this level require volunteers to have a strong in-depth understanding of the home organization. Volunteers may be asked to identify programs and resources that could be linked. They also must be able to take on new tasks and complete these in a timely manner within the framework of the home organization.

The third level of linkage, Coordination, strives to integrate resources and allows for the possibility of the development of new programs. Volunteers at this particular level are able to serve in the following roles:

- Convener - organizes and facilitates opportunities to discuss possible ways to share existing resources and address common issues;
- Conduit - serves as the distributor and coordinator of new resources and joint budgets;
- Community Organizer - identifies and extends invitations to potential members of the communitywide effort that should be involved in the process;
- Technical Assistance - provides individual expertise and technical skills related to the identified needs, promotes the sharing of resources, and communicates information pertaining to the work of the group between the organization and the group and within the home organization.

Volunteers at this level face increasing challenges as they can no longer adequately represent the organization except in the roles identified above since at this level participants are often asked to take part in discussions requiring decision-making authority of the home organization. Moreover, this level becomes much more time consuming and may preclude the ongoing involvement of some volunteers.

The fourth level of linkage, Coalition, is defined as the involvement of multiple organizations coming together and pooling resources from existing systems for the purpose of working together on a prescribed issue for a minimum of three years. The role of volunteers at this level includes:

- Conduit - serves as the distributor and coordinator of new resources and joint budgets (may be seen as more neutral

than that of a paid staff member of an organization);
- Community Organizer - identifies and encourages the inclusion of other potential members of the communitywide effort that should be included in the group process, and facilitates a sub-committee of the larger group.
- Technical Assistance - provides individual expertise and technical skills as appropriate and related to identified needs, promotes the sharing of resources, and communicates information pertaining to the work of the group between the organization and the group and within the home organization.

This level is quite complex and the role of volunteers is limited. Volunteers will need to possess expertise in facilitation skills in order to successfully navigate the roles within this complex level. In order for this to be effective, the organization and the volunteer must have long-term experience with one another and a relationship involving high levels of trust.

Collaboration, the fifth level of linkage, requires agencies to come together and develop a new entity that has a shared vision and the power to impact the participating organizations. Because of the power to impact home organizations, the role of volunteers at this level is quite limited. In our 2003 article, we argue that since collaborative efforts cannot be successful if those involved do not have the power to make the necessary decisions to move the effort forward, the use of volunteers is neither feasible nor recommended. However, there are two roles that volunteers may be brought into as a co-representative for a specific home organization:

- Community Organizer - ensures that potential key people are invited to be members of the collaboration (the volunteer would be a person with an in-

depth understanding of grassroots community leaders);

- Technical Assistance - provides individual expertise and technical skills that members of the collaboration are lacking.

Collaboration is the most complex level for organizations to be engaged in and has long-term implications for the work of the organization. These efforts often require the organization to redefine or refocus the work of the organization. As noted above, volunteers may be involved in this role on a limited basis providing specific support to another representative of a home organization.

Organizational Support for Volunteer Role Assignment

Today's organizations are being asked to be more involved within their communities; however the demand for this involvement often exceeds the ability of the staff. Volunteers represent an underutilized resource for organizations to expand their reach and capacity to participate in community wide efforts. Therefore, understanding the potential roles that volunteers can play within a communitywide effort offers organizations the opportunity to participate more widely and more efficiently in these efforts. Having volunteers serve on community teams provides the organization the ability to be recognized as a part of the solution addressing important community issues, the opportunity to participate more widely in collaborative grant opportunities, increased opportunities to better serve clientele, and offers broader community recognition.

Although volunteers offer community-based organizations a strategy for expansion of their organizational reach into community efforts, "volunteers must be recruited; they must be screened and given orientation to the agency; they must be assigned to

positions and afforded training as necessary; they must be supervised, motivated, and accorded appropriate recognition; they should be evaluated to assess the efficacy of their placement for themselves as well as for the organization" (Brudney, 1994, p. 279). Moreover, it is essential that the volunteers have a clear description of their roles and responsibilities within the communitywide effort of the organization that they are representing. The degree of volunteer management required by the organization increases at each successive level of linkage from network to collaboration and the role changes for the volunteer. Communication between the volunteer manager and the volunteer becomes more complex and necessary as the level of linkage increase in complexity. Volunteers within a community organization can strengthen and expand existing work by representing the organization and becoming vital members of communitywide efforts at their various levels (i.e., networking, coordination, cooperation, coalition, and collaboration) whether in the role of convener, conduit, advocate, community organizer, technical assistance provider, capacity builder, or facilitator.

Volunteers offer community-based organizations one way to expand their influence without the addition of paid staff. Given the financial limitations facing community-based organizations volunteers can truly enhance and strengthen the work of the organization. However, volunteers are not paid staff and thus must be well-trained to understand the overall mission of the organization, their ability to make decisions on the part of the organization, and their role in communicating the results of the meetings in which they have participated. Without proper training and ongoing support, volunteers may find their role confusing and the organizations may find that the role of the volunteer neither

supports nor enhances the mission of the organization. Clearly, there is a need for organizations to establish regularly scheduled communication sessions to ensure that volunteers are appropriately representing the organization and that the volunteer is receiving the necessary support to be an effective liaison for the organization.

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Table 1
Community Linkages – Choices and Decisions

Levels	Purpose	Structure	Process	Volunteers Skills Needed	Roles for Volunteers
Networking	• Dialog and common understanding • Clearinghouse for information • Create base of support	• Non-hierarchical • Loose/flexible link • Roles loosely defined • Community action is primary link among members	• Low key leadership • Minimal decision making • Little conflict • Informal communication	• Good communication skills	• Convener • Advocate • Community Organizer • Technical Assistance Provider
Cooperation or Alliance	• Match needs and provide coordination • Limit duplication of services • Ensure tasks are done	• Central body of people as communication hub • Semi-formal links • Roles somewhat defined • Links are advisory • Group leverages/raises money	• Facilitative leaders • Complex decision making • Some conflict • Formal communications within the central group	• Excellent communication skills • Function as a member of the central body • Able and willing to take on and complete tasks	• Convener • Conduit • Advocate • Community Organizer • Technical Assistance • Capacity Builder • Facilitator
Coordination or Partnership	• Share resources to address common issues • Merge resource base to create something new	• Central body of people consists of decision makers • Roles defined • Links formalized • Group develops new resources and joint budget	• Autonomous leadership but focus in on issue • Group decision making in central and subgroups • Communication is frequent and clear	• Excellent communication skills • Excellent decision-making skills • Take on a role in the group • Must be able to complete tasks	• Convener • Conduit • Community Organizer • Technical Assistance
Coalition	• Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems • Develop commitment for a minimum of three years	• All members involved in decision making • Roles and time defined • Links formal with written agreement • Group develops new resources and joint budget	• Shared leadership • Decision making formal with all members • Communication is common and prioritized	• Excellent communication skills • Excellent decision making skills • High degree of trust between volunteer and organization • Excellent knowledge of the home organization • Excellent interpersonal skills	• Conduit • Community Organizer • Technical Assistance
Collaboration	• Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks • Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities	• Consensus used in shared decision making • Roles, time and evaluation formalized • Links are formal and written in work assignments	• Leadership high, trust level high, productivity high • Ideas and decisions equally shared • Highly developed communication	• Represent director of home organization • Excellent communication skills – oral and written • Good negotiation skills	• Community Organizers • Technical Assistance

(Modified chart from Houge (1994) Community Based Collaborations-Wellness Multiplied)

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