

Volunteers and volunteering

A Youthline position paper

BACKGROUND

As an organisation based on volunteering, Youthline takes a leading role in creating a positive and supportive environment for volunteers. By creating opportunities for volunteers to develop their skills, there are mutual benefits for the individual and their community – this is the central concept in volunteering. As Meier and Stutzer (2008) found, volunteers are generally more satisfied with their lives than people who don't participate in voluntary activities. In fact, data from a longitudinal study in the United States show that older people who volunteer live longer than those who do not (Harris & Thoreson, 2005). Organisations such as Youthline do not consider that volunteering is simply about getting free or cheap work. Youthline believes that volunteers should be treated as staff, while recognising that the transaction is different. Volunteering has the unique benefit of having community issues addressed by a community response, and hence the people with the best understanding of those they are helping.

Although the benefits extend far beyond economics, the financial value of volunteering is enormous. An Australian report commissioned by the Department of Communities in Queensland, estimates the value of volunteering in the state of Queensland alone at \$AU13 billion (Ironmonger, 2008). This is noteworthy as Queensland, with a population of four million, is a similar size to New Zealand. Although ten years old, the most recent estimate of the economic value of volunteering in New Zealand was produced in 1999, and conservatively valued at \$2.5 billion. A new survey is planned by Statistics New Zealand to be undertaken in late 2009, and will be released in 2011, which will provide a more contemporary picture of New Zealand volunteering.

Volunteers undertake diverse activities in their communities. Some promote community health and safety, such as firefighters, St John ambulance officers, Red Cross volunteers, surf lifesavers and coastguards. Other are involved in environmental protection through ecological restoration projects. Many volunteers are involved in local sports teams, which are heavily reliant on volunteering. Still others promote community development through organisations Youthline.

In a national context within New Zealand, volunteering policy is guided by a series of government initiatives, originating from the Ministry of Social Development, and the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector. This policy is intended to promote volunteering activities within the community by recognising the unique community benefits of volunteering and better supporting volunteering. These initiatives are described below.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Government recognises that volunteers are found in a wide range of activities, that their time and free expertise is provided out of commitment to community, that they should not just replace paid workers. There should be benefits in return for volunteers. In a wider sense, volunteering is an essential element of civil society. Government expects all its agencies to take into account the needs of, to consult with, volunteers and their organisations when developing policies and services.

As part of the International Year of Volunteers in 2001, the Volunteers and Volunteering Policy Project took a detailed look at the volunteer sector, across government programmes, in communities, and in voluntary agencies. After receiving submissions to government from individuals and organisations the Government Policy on Volunteering was launched in 2002 (Ministry of Social Development, 2002). In this, it is recognised that volunteers make a vital contribution to social development, the economy and the environment. The result is a vision of a society with a high level of volunteering, where through volunteering the many contributions people make to the common good of that society are actively supported and valued.

MAHI AROHA

Supporting this policy, a complementary report describing a Māori perspective on volunteering was released by the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector in 2007. The report is entitled *Mahi Aroha: Māori perspectives on volunteering and cultural obligations*.

The idea of volunteering is one with limited applicability in some cultures. Research participants knew no term in te reo Māori that encompassed the Pākehā concept of volunteering. The concept of 'mahi aroha' (not a traditional term) is work performed out of love, sympathy and a sense of duty, not including day-to-day household maintenance, nor care of immediate family sharing your home. This better represented the viewpoint of those interviewed in the report than the Pākehā concept of volunteering (Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, 2007). Volunteering suggests free will, where most respondents stated there was a stronger compulsion to undertake mahi aroha. As described in the report:

For many Māori, mahi aroha carried out for the benefit of whānau, hapū and iwi is often seen as an essential part of fulfilling their cultural obligations to the wider collective. It is also central to their own sense of identity and for maintaining their culture and traditions. Māori language and culture, incorporating principles of tikanga, mana, manaaki and whanaungatanga, provide a rich framework for understanding Māori perspectives on and motivations for undertaking mahi aroha. Tohu aroha an expression or manifestation of love provides the overarching spiritual and temporal dimension through which mahi aroha is undertaken. (Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, 2007, p 1).

It is critical that all perspectives on volunteering are valued and recognised. Mahi aroha is distinct from other volunteering in that it is deeply rooted in tikanga Māori and is typically based in te ao Māori, supporting whānau, hapū and iwi. It is also not generally considered a choice but is carried out as a responsibility. Participants undertake between 5 and 60 hours of mahi aroha per week (Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, 2007).

GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS

To support the vision, government is committed to:

- Valuing and celebrating the contributions of volunteers;
- Ensuring that volunteers have appropriate protection under law;
- Ensuring good practice in volunteering programmes;
- Encouraging community and voluntary organisations to develop and maintain good practice in supporting and involving their volunteers;
- Reducing barriers associated with volunteering in legislation, policy and practice; and
- Supporting initiatives to increase understanding of, and to disseminate information about, volunteering.

YOUTHLINE'S POSITION

Youthline acknowledges the government's policy on volunteering and has already incorporated many of these details into our organisation. Youthline has been at the forefront of providing creative services since 1970. We have built a community of committed people to address the needs that young people have in our society. To do this we have involved young people (and others not so young) as volunteers in all levels of our organisation.

For Youthline volunteering is part of our philosophy in order to fully involve the community to solve community issues. We recognise this is not about taking a cheap option and we therefore invest in young people to ensure that all our hundreds of volunteers are professionally trained and supervised to work with a sense of well-being alongside clinical workers.

The training and development of young people as volunteers has been an emphasis since our inception. We have integrated the principles of volunteer best practice and management which incorporate the valuing and celebration of the contribution of volunteers.

Our volunteers undertake extensive training in communication and counselling skills before working as telephone counsellors. After initial training the opportunity to develop in other spheres is considerable and encouraged. Members often go on to training in group leadership and facilitation, management roles and face to face counselling work and outreach programmes working with young people.

An outcome of volunteer participation at all levels ensures that there is a two way process in which volunteers both give and receive and that there is community ownership and a voice in the shaping and provision of all our services so that they reflect the true needs of the wider community.

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