

COSTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT: Lessons from Ontario Hospitals

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COSTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT: Lessons from Ontario Hospitals

Introduction

Volunteers make an important contribution to the quality of patient care in hospitals and help to provide support for increasingly overburdened hospital staff. While this volunteer involvement is generally seen as beneficial, voluntary effort is often regarded as a free resource. In fact, hospitals that use volunteers have to manage them as they do any scarce resource. Well-managed volunteers contribute significantly to the welfare of the hospital, but they are not without cost. This report describes the costs and contributions of professionally managed volunteer programs in hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area.

The research process

To establish the costs and contributions of professional volunteer programs in hospitals, we surveyed 31 hospitals in Metro Toronto and the regions of Durham, Peel, and York. Our

The benefits of professional volunteer management

- For every dollar that hospitals in this study spent on professional management of volunteer resources, they derived \$6.84 in value from their volunteers.
- The average cost of volunteer management per hospital was \$185,405. The net value of volunteer hours per hospital was \$1,053,543.
- Volunteers contribute to the quality of patient care by spending time with patients, providing compassion and emotional support, and supporting families of patients.
- Volunteers help reduce staff workload by supporting patients, staffing information desks, training other volunteers, and managing volunteer programs.

study was restricted to hospitals with volunteer programs consisting of 100 volunteers or more and at least one paid staff person to manage volunteer resources.

The hospitals in our study had an average of 468 beds each. Two-thirds of the hospitals described themselves as acute and general hospitals. The rest described themselves as providing long-term care, rehabilitation, or psychiatric or other services. The number of

volunteers at each hospital ranged from 125 to 3,240, with an average of 700 volunteers per hospital. The average annual hours volunteered at each hospital was 70,515. The volunteer population at these hospitals was predominately female (74%), white (76%), out of the labour force (75%), and over the age of 54 (57%).

We conducted in-depth personal interviews with the manager in charge of volunteer resources at each hospital. We also surveyed, by telephone, an average of two staff who work closely with volunteers at each hospital. In addition, we surveyed volunteers at each hospital using a self-administered survey, to which we received a total of 805 responses.

Findings

Professional management of volunteer resources

Before the professionalization of volunteer management, hospital auxiliaries coordinated volunteers at 84% of the hospitals we surveyed. Volunteer auxiliaries continue to exist at nearly 60% of the hospitals in our study, while 24% reported that their auxiliary departments had recently disbanded. Only five of the hospitals where auxiliaries still exist reported a good and productive relationship between the auxiliary and the hospital's department of volunteer resources.

With the advent of professional volunteer management programs at hospitals in the last decade, auxiliaries began to play a more limited role, generally in fundraising and, in some cases, in managing hospital gift shops. Professional managers of volunteer resources now co-ordinate and manage all volunteer activities that involve patient care and that take place on hospital premises, with the exception of those mentioned above.

The hospitals surveyed reported an average of 3.4 paid positions and 2.8 unpaid positions to manage and/or co-ordinate volunteer resources. Managers of volunteer resources were, on average, well prepared for their position. Over 77% had some university-related education in volunteer administration and 84% had participated in volunteer administration courses or seminars from non-university sources.

What do managers of volunteer resources do?

Managers of volunteer resources are responsible for the recruitment, screening, training, placement, supervision, recognition, and retention of volunteers in their organization. They are also charged with resolving any conflicts that may arise among volunteers, or between volunteers and staff or patients. Managers of volunteer resources in hospitals must ensure that the duties assigned to a volunteer do not infringe upon the duties performed by hospital staff, many of whom are unionized. They are always on the lookout for opportunities to place volunteers in ways that will enhance the quality of patient care and provide assistance to staff.

What are the costs associated with professional volunteer management?

It costs money to run an effective volunteer program. The bulk of the expenses allocated to volunteer management at the hospitals surveyed were for the salaries of the professionals in charge of volunteer resources, and the costs associated with running an office.

Salaries averaged \$64,216 for directors of volunteer resources, \$41,712 for managers, and \$22,169 for other positions. The average total payroll for professional management of volunteer resources was \$145,711, including benefits.

Costs and Contributions of Professional Volunteer Management

We asked managers of volunteer resources to report their costs for office supplies, volunteer recognition, travel, technical support, uniforms, printing, catering, training and staff development, advertising, communication, etc. The average spent on these items per hospital was \$32,903.

In addition to the time required by managers of volunteer resources, staff in the departments where volunteers are placed must also devote time to training and supervising the volunteers who work in their departments. The average annual cost per site for this departmental supervision and training was \$6,791.

This brings the average annual cost of the volunteer programs at the 31 hospitals in this study to \$185,405.

What is the return on investment of a professionally managed volunteer program?

The dollars invested in a professionally managed volunteer program returned benefits to the hospitals in our study. Volunteers contributed an average of 70,515 hours annually at each site. This represents an average of 101 hours per volunteer per year, or the equivalent of 42 full-time positions per hospital (based on 35 hours a week, 48 weeks a year).

Table 1	
Related costs for volunteer hospital staff	
Average salaries per hospital for volunteer management staff:	\$145,711
Average cost per hospital of office expenses for volunteer management:	\$32,903
Average cost per hospital of other staff time for volunteer training:	\$6,791
Total:	\$185,405

Table 2	
Net value of hospital volunteers	
Total value of volunteer hours per hospital:	\$1,238,948
Minus costs of volunteer program per hospital	–\$185,405
Net value of volunteer hours, per hospital	\$1,053,543

Volunteer hours can be valued in several ways.¹ If we estimate what it would cost hospitals to replace volunteers with paid staff, using the average wage rate of hospital care workers in occupations close to those undertaken by volunteers (e.g., providing assistance in patient care, social services and clerical work, etc.), the average value of volunteer hours at these Ontario hospitals was \$1,238,948.

In addition to this return on the money invested in professional volunteer management, volunteer involvement brings other, non-monetary benefits to hospitals. These include the impact on patient “quality of care” and staff workload, the involvement of volunteers as donors to the hospital for which they volunteer, and, indirectly, the role that volunteers play as goodwill ambassadors for the hospital in the communities from which the hospital draws its resources and clients.

Professionally managed volunteers contribute to patient quality of care

All of the hospitals in our study have in their mission statements identifiable goals related to the quality of care they provide.² Volunteers enhance the quality of care by providing many services that are essential to the comfort of patients and their families.³

We asked managers of volunteer resources to state what they thought were the essential components of quality of care. Components most frequently cited as being provided by volunteers were:

- spending time with patients and establishing patient trust;
- providing compassion and emotional support, which helps to reduce patient anxiety; and,
- providing support to the families of patients.

¹ Volunteer hours can be valued using various means: replacement value, opportunity cost, reasonable compensation, and appropriate industry wage rates. See our full report, *Volunteers in Hospitals: Scope, Trends, and Value* (Handy & Srinivasan, 2002) for estimations and a detailed discussion.

² Increase in quality of service is one of the primary objectives of hospitals in the eight research and teaching hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area (A. LeBrash, personal communication, May 2000).

In other words, quality of care is primarily perceived as activities that involve personal contact between volunteers and patients and their families.

In programs that involve volunteers, managers of volunteer resources ranked the overall contribution of volunteers to patient quality of care as 9.0 (on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means not at all important and 10 means indispensable). On the same scale, staff ranked the contribution of volunteers at an average of 8.43. Volunteers ranked their own contribution at 8.70.

In their comments, staff noted that increasing pressures on them due to changes in the healthcare system have meant that they have less time for non-essential interactions. Volunteers mitigate this depersonalisation by being “excellent listeners, relaxed and not fast-paced, and safe to speak to and disclose problems to.” The role that volunteers play in reducing patient anxiety is clearly an important component of quality of care.

The impact of professionally managed volunteers on staff workload

The last few years have seen acute shortages in nurses and other professional hospital staff. Staff have repeatedly reported burn out and stress because of their own increased workloads.

Managers of volunteer resources at the 31 hospitals studied were asked to rank the contribution that volunteer tasks make to staff workload on a scale from 0 (low) to 3 (high). Figure 1 shows the volunteer tasks with the largest impact on staff workload.

Staff were asked to rate the effect that volunteers had on contributing positively to their workload. On a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 means not at all and 10 means indispensable), they ranked volunteers’ contributions at 7.91.

³ It would have been ideal to interview patients to establish the contribution of volunteer programs to the “quality of patient care.” However, hospital protocol does not allow for this. Therefore, we relied on information provided by managers, staff, and the volunteers to determine various aspects of contributions volunteers make.

Among the comments gathered from staff were the following:

“We are so interdependent on our volunteers and value them as our best resources and we need to give feedback. We brag about it. We would be paralyzed without volunteers.”

“Absolutely could not survive without them.”

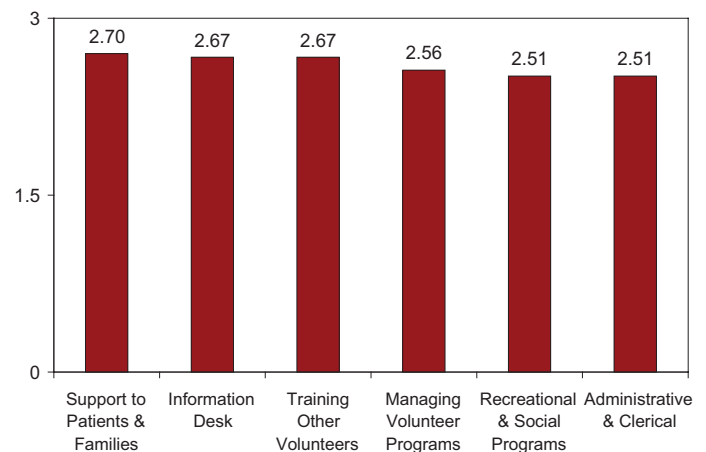
“I am so pleased with the quality and commitment and seriousness of volunteers for healing hearts.”

Other benefits provided by professionally managed hospital volunteers

One of the benefits recognized in other studies is the higher propensity of volunteers to donate to the organization in which they volunteer. The 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001), for example, found that volunteers were significantly more likely to be donors than were non-volunteers. The vast majority of the hospitals in our study (86%) reported that nearly half of their volunteers donated money to the hospital.

Figure 1

Volunteer tasks ranked by greatest impact on staff workload



Hospital volunteer programs also raise the profile of the hospital in the community and garner support for many of the outreach programs that hospitals conduct for education, recruitment and fundraising purposes. In addition, volunteers reported that their volunteering experience gave them an opportunity to learn new skills and gain experience, making them more productive members of the community. Finally, social networking among volunteers and staff builds social ties, which is thought to be an important factor in strengthening communities.

Challenges facing professional managers of volunteer resources

The demographic and economic changes of the last few decades, combined with changing healthcare needs, have led to hospital volunteer auxiliaries being complemented or replaced by professionally managed volunteer programs. No longer does the typical volunteer stay involved for years or even decades; the present-day volunteer is more likely to devote a limited number of hours a week for an average of five years.

New immigrants who want experience in the Canadian health sector, students, and more male volunteers have changed the volunteer pool in hospitals. As well, the presence of labour unions in most hospitals, issues of medical liability and other institutional constraints require that this new volunteer pool be as “professionally managed” as paid employees. Volunteers need to be recruited, screened, trained, supervised, retained, and recognized for their contributions, just like their paid counterparts.

Managers of volunteer resources frequently find themselves doing the same work as their counterparts in human resources, but with much less institutional support. They see a need to increase professionalism within their field and acknowledge that this will require more training in human resource management. This, in turn, may increase the efficiency of volunteer programs in retaining and recruiting volunteers, which will be particularly important as demands on the healthcare system increase and the volunteer pool continues to change.

Conclusion

The contribution that professionally managed volunteer programs make to hospitals is significant. Formal hospital volunteers contributed approximately 70,000 volunteer hours to each of the 31 hospitals studied. Estimates of the value of their time, derived from four different methods, average over \$1.26 million per hospital per year against an average investment of \$185,405 to staff and run a professionally managed

program. This represents a cost-benefit ratio of 6.84. In other words, for every dollar that the hospitals in our study spent on professional management of volunteer resources, they derived \$6.84 in value from their volunteers. Clearly, volunteers represent a valuable resource, especially for hospitals whose budgets are vulnerable to reductions by government.

References

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