



NEW SLOT FOR THE VOLUNTEER

A Talk With

Joyce Black and Dr. Timothy Costello

Waiting for a bus or subway that never comes, sending a child off to a school that doesn't open, or trying to keep warm in an apartment that has no heat is all part of everyday life in New York City. But, a new form of government, which New Yorkers have come to think of as "the Lindsay style," has emerged. By efficiently using an almost untapped resource known as "volunteer power," the nation's largest and most problem-prone city is surviving the urban crisis.

Back in 1965, when the Federal government first launched its "war on poverty," New York City's Economic Opportunity Committee (the local administrative anti-poverty agency) found itself inundated with offers of help from numerous individuals and organizations. Mrs. Ruth Hagy Brod, then an EOC staff member, was asked to channel these offers into neighborhood anti-poverty agencies.

The complexities of the city made Mrs. Brod's task a monumentally complicated one and an advisory committee of community leaders was soon formed to assist her in conducting a study of the patterns and potentials of volunteerism in New York City. The result of their study was this: Anti-poverty agencies were unable to absorb any significant number of volunteers, but there was a great potential for them in almost every department of city government. Out of this study, the Volunteer Coordinating Council — the first central volunteer bureau to be sponsored by city government and the voluntary sector — was born.

In December 1966, the VCC was officially inaugurated by Mayor Lindsay. Deputy Mayor Timothy Costello was named Chairman, and Mrs. Hiram D. Black (AJLA's Director of Region III) was named Co-Chairman. Mrs. Brod was appointed Director.

During the first two years of its operation, the VCC has played a vital

role in city government. To find out if similar bureaus could be used to advantage in Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, or even in Waterloo, Iowa, we met with Dr. Costello and Mrs. Black in the Deputy Mayor's office, and we asked them:

Why do you use volunteers in New York's city government?

Dr. Costello: I think there is a simple answer and a subtle answer. The simple answer is that we need to render perhaps ten times as many services as we're able to with the amount of civil service people we have. Beyond that, volunteers bring something that you cannot get from the person whose services you're buying. They bring spirit, a sense of dedication, freedom from being captured by procedures, motivation and willingness to work — sometimes under conditions where you couldn't pay someone else to work.

I don't know if this concept is original with me, but for a little while, for a long while maybe, many people felt that New York was such a big, sophisticated, cosmopolitan town, that it was nobody's home town. But that's not the way people feel now. They're beginning to feel that it is their home town; they want to be involved in it; they want to do something for it. This is true of big business and it's also true of the people living in Staten Island, Queens, or Manhattan. They want to say "I'm doing something for my city."

Mrs. Black: We hope this kind of program will be duplicated in other cities for similar reasons. Once you're involved with a city in the public sector, you understand many things that you never understood before, and you can interpret them to the community in a much better way.

Dr. Costello: Maybe the point that is being made is a lesson in civics. I don't mean just where City Hall is,

and what the Board of Estimate does, but the subtle kinds of things: Why does it take so long to get things done? Why can't you always solve a problem in the most rational way? Sometimes there are community blocks and political considerations that are quite legitimate but keep you from doing things in what my wife would say is the common-sense way.

Do volunteers need any special skills?

Dr. Costello: Volunteerism is a very, very sensitive activity requiring professional skills. One of the skills required is learning to build a demand for volunteer help that doesn't outdo your supply, and that doesn't produce a demand in agencies where volunteers don't belong and won't be properly used. The desirable thing would be to have a Director of Volunteers in every agency of city government who would report to us on what the agency is looking for. We're flooded with demands from agencies, many of which we don't want to meet because they're not suitable, and many of which we can't meet because we just haven't got an adequate supply of volunteers.

How does the VCC work with city agencies?

Mrs. Black: We tried to divide the Council's activities into two sectors, with program development in both the public sector and in the private, non-profit sector — better known as the volunteer sector. If an agency desires our advice in developing volunteer programs, we are available, and we also will seek them out if we feel that there should be a use of volunteers there. We've been very fortunate in New York because we do have an understanding administration and a Deputy Mayor who took us under his wing. The Council has to fit into a slot in the city; this type of program just can't be off on its own.

Dr. Costello: That's right, you simply can't graft it on to something that is not receptive to it. It won't work. The VCC is kind of a prototype; we're trying to encourage college students and universities to contribute their services, but this won't work unless you've got receptivity in the top level of administration all the way down the line.

Does the VCC suggest projects or placement for volunteers in other agencies?

Dr. Costello: Yes. It creates them. You've got a creative group of volunteers who suggest things either because they have an idea or because somebody comes in and says: "Look, this is what I can do; is there any place I can do it?" That's how VCC programs begin. You look for some place where the volunteer can do what he wants to do. That's pretty much what happened with Riker's Island — am I correct, Joyce?

Mrs. Black: Yes. When men are released from prison — from Riker's Island — very often they come out without anything: without a family, without funds, without a heavy winter coat. Ruth Brod was telling me the other day that she had to get a winter coat for one of the men. He couldn't get a job either, because no one wants to give a job to a newly-released prisoner. In a sense, the volunteer involved with these men is going to be involved in the buddy system. Each prisoner, when he is released, is now being met by one of our staff people and taken to a place where he is employed or trained by a union. We also find a place for him to live, and give him pocket money obtained from private sources to supplement him until he gets his welfare check, which isn't for two weeks after he is released.

Dr. Costello: This is exactly where volunteerism comes in. There is no combination of services that the city can provide which would do all of these things: that is, reach out and obtain a job, worry about whether the man has a coat or carfare, worry about where he is going to sleep or eat. Because these men sometimes fail — they don't report for duty, or they goof off — the volunteers go back and talk them into trying again. There's no service like that. You simply can't buy that kind of service anywhere.

What does the VCC do?

Mrs. Black: It does two things. It recruits volunteers, interviews them, and refers them to traditional or non-traditional settings, depending on what kind of service they want to do and what their hours are. But it also is a program-development kind of agency.

Dr. Costello: Maybe the term "marriage maker" ought to come into this picture, too, because Ruth Brod and the people around her are frequently matchmakers. There might be some group who have ideas for something to do, but they haven't got the resources. They may not have a bus to provide transportation, they may not have the money to underwrite something, or they may not have access to something. So Mrs. Brod finds somebody who has what the group needs and puts them together. For example, in Operation Suburbia, she put the families in ghettos and the families in suburban areas together, and she put the coffee house people (See Junior League Magazine, Sept./Oct. '68) together with some people who had money. The Council is always trying to spin programs off.

Mrs. Black: We act as a catalyst. And I think this is a word that we should use more and more because volunteer organizations are not going in where they're not wanted. Not only do we have to be asked to participate but we also work with the people in the inner-city by not inflicting or imposing any of our thinking upon them. This is certainly the way of the future, and it's the way they want it.

Many city agencies are troubled with quick changeover of personnel, money difficulties, and a host of other problems. Does this make it more difficult for you to find volunteers to work with them?

Mrs. Black: Not really. We do not put volunteers into a situation where there is no one to supervise and train them. The Council doesn't actually train volunteers; the training is done in the individual agencies. If we went into training, we'd have to have a couple of hundred people on the staff. We give them only a small orientation to the field of volunteerism.

Dr. Costello: Sometimes the word "volunteer" applies to a group of people who are part of the target population



themselves. That is, they have an idea, and they want to do something. So you don't send white middle-class people into that neighborhood to help those people. They are already there, they just need a little support, a little money, a little access, a little building, a little equipment, or whatever, to continue their own voluntary efforts in their community. And that's a new kind of volunteerism.

I know Ruth was very upset one day when I suggested that maybe you couldn't ask poor people to volunteer; they are too busy. And she said, "You can't deny them the opportunity to be part of a volunteer program. Now you may have to provide carfare occasionally, or a little baby-sitting money, but you've got to give them the chance to give something as well as to take something."

Have any of your volunteers had problems in the inner-city areas?

Mrs. Black: We haven't had trouble because we simply don't send anybody unless they're truly wanted and asked for. Of course, the other thing is that if we were sending some volunteer for a specific reason — into part of the Haryou complex, for example — we would most likely send a black person in who probably would be accepted. This is a complex situation.

Dr. Costello: No psychiatrist would ever attempt to treat a patient unless



the patient wanted help, and I think the same rock-bottom principle applies to volunteer assistance — you don't impose it on anyone who hasn't asked for it. That is not to say that you don't cultivate the demand. You don't sit back in your ivory tower and wait for people to come. It wouldn't happen like that. Nor would we send anybody down to Harlem and say, "Here are some people; they're eager; they talk English. Can't you use them?" No good, it wouldn't happen that way.

Does the Council do a lot of work with any of the new-line poverty agencies such as the Urban Coalition?

Mrs. Black: We have been working with Urban Coalition, and Mrs. Brod has been developing volunteer programs with them. Because it's just getting off the ground, the Urban Coalition hasn't been as involved with volunteers as they wished to be, or hope to be in the future. Eventually they want to have a pretty strong volunteer program, and they've recently hired a Director of Volunteers.

What about MEND or UPACA or any of the grass roots community organizations?

Mrs. Black: Yes, we have worked with the community organizations — UPACA is one. But don't forget we are also working within the city in public departments. When we started, we only had volunteers in the hospitals and in the schools. Now we have them

all over the place: in the Rent and Rehabilitation Department, in the Police Department, in the Mayor's Action Center — everywhere.

What do you see for the future? In what direction do you see the Council moving?

Mrs. Black: One of our goals is to have it move into other cities. Our first phase of operation is over — the phase of developing volunteer opportunities in the public sector. Now, the second phase is to more fully develop programs in which the volunteer sector and the public sector cooperate. I see the VCC moving more and more in the direction of cooperative programs. I also see it moving into more programs in the inner-city and into areas where no one has ever before thought of using volunteers.

In the future, we want a main office in the heart of the city at City Hall, and then we plan to decentralize. We'll keep our central office, but we also hope to have Borough offices. Our most recent proposal asks for funds to establish the Borough offices on a mobile basis, with a mobile unit going around recruiting and interviewing. We feel that this would be less expensive than opening an office in each Borough. We've got a lot of people in Queens who don't want to volunteer in Brooklyn or in Manhattan and vice versa. We need Borough offices in order to reach all the people who really want to volunteer. Maybe next year we can tell you that we have decentralized. Or maybe in a couple of years.

Do you feel that the Council has become a fairly needed component in city government? (You probably can't call it essential because volunteers are certainly not an essential component.)

Dr. Costello: If you talk about good government in the largest sense — involving people, and reducing the guilt that people feel, giving them the chance to contribute things that you can't buy — then it's essential. Now if you're talking about the minimum society, where you just get a minimum of services, and minimum involvement from citizens, then of course it's not essential. But in terms of good spirit, morale, and the capacity of people for getting to know the other side of life — both sides — then I think volunteerism

is essential for the health of society. No doubt about it.

Would it be safe to say that you think volunteers are becoming a more important part of society?

Dr. Costello: I certainly do. I've been reading Herman Kahn's book, *The Year 2,000*, and he says that increasingly we are not only developing primary occupations and secondary occupations, but also tertiary occupations. Woman's prime role is becoming less central to her life, and less capable of satisfying her full range of interests. Most of us are going to have to find volunteer activities in order to fulfill all the capacities and needs we have. It's going to become increasingly important, not only in terms of what the city needs, but in terms of what the individual needs.

People are getting less personal satisfaction than they used to because they're becoming mechanized or automated; the human element is taken out of them. You have that kind of a job; so you earn your living that way. But you really satisfy yourself on what you plan to do on a voluntary basis, because you've got some command of what is going to take place there.

Do you think the role of the volunteer in government will be increasing — not just in New York City, but in other cities, and possibly on the national level?

Dr. Costello: We distinguish ourselves from the national level because certainly it's hard to bring volunteers from all over the country to Washington. And the Federal government doesn't get represented in any dramatic way at the city level. I think the cities are the places where you can really do things. I would say that if we can get other cities to do what we've been doing, and if we can continue to build relationships between different segments of society by having volunteers from these various groups work together, then we've made a mighty contribution. You can legislate integration. You can kind of force it by housing. But the real integration comes when people choose to work together on a problem and solve common goals. And, this is something that can be accomplished by volunteerism alone.

Barbara Bonat and Christine Rodriguez