

# The Able Volunteers Programme

By Peter Bates

During 2001 the NDT ran the 'Able Volunteers' programme. This was a year-long research programme that investigated inclusive volunteering opportunities for people with mental health problems or learning difficulties. What do I mean by inclusive opportunities?

## Fully Included?

Many people with learning disabilities or mental health difficulties spend all their lives surrounded by others who have a similar experience. This can be very supportive at times, but many people live inside their support group every day – and they haven't chosen the other group members! One way to think about inclusion is to use traffic lights....

- The red light represents segregation – such as volunteering as an advocate in your own day centre.
- Amber is partial engagement and represents those arrangements where people use ordinary places, but in a group. For example, a group of service users form a gardening crew to maintain the gardens for neighbours who can't get out.
- Green is full inclusion - individual placements where people are shoulder to shoulder with people who have no apparent disabilities.

In January 2001 I emailed all the volunteer bureaux on the National Association of Volunteer Bureaux website as well as many NHS Trusts and Social Services Departments and invited them to apply to be part of the Able Volunteers programme. Our requirement was that each project had to have supported a minimum of 15 people into fully inclusive opportunities in the past year. A total of 21 agencies replied and between them they had supported 1,000 people in this way. We selected six projects to work with in depth. Our six case studies are the projects in Edinburgh, Halton (near Liverpool), Leicester, Cambridge, Chelmsford and Somerset. They are a mixture of rural and urban, large and small, new and longstanding projects. The work is being done in collaboration with the Institute of Volunteering Research in London, the University of Salamanca in Spain and a mental health service in East Germany. Funding for the Able Volunteers programme has come from European funds to combat social exclusion.

Here are six key messages that come out of the research.

1. Many volunteer-involving-organisations will offer opportunities to mentally ill people if those organisations are given support. There is a rights issue here too. The Disability Rights Commission believes that volunteering is covered by the Disability Discrimination Act and is eager to prove it in law, so organisations that involve volunteers have no right to discriminate against people on the grounds of disability. However, the finding from the *Able Volunteers* programme is that many organisations are willing to engage with volunteers who have learning disabilities or mental health problems if only someone will provide a bit of support.
2. Focused effort is needed to include volunteers who need additional support. It doesn't just happen. There has been a debate in volunteering circles about whether bureaux need a dedicated worker or whether working with mentally ill people should be an ordinary part of the mainstream activity of the bureau. Every project that applied to Able Volunteers and claimed that they had supported 15 or more people with mental health problems or learning disabilities had a dedicated worker or dedicated time. It doesn't happen on its own.
3. People who need support can make a major contribution to the community. People with learning difficulties or mental health problems are creating newsletters, serving tea, selling books, getting food to homeless people, changing light bulbs and caring for children.
4. Supported volunteering works when this relationship with the health and social care system is clear. One Supported Volunteering project recruited an ex social worker, others recruited a nurse to join the management committee, met with a doctor from time to time, or drank coffee with a care assistant. There is a clear boundary between the care system and volunteering, but Supported Volunteering workers visit day centres, call into residential units, introduce themselves and try to keep up with the constant changes in management structures at the Trust, PCT, and social services authority.
5. The people know best. The six projects all say that they are looking for ways of involving volunteers who need support in running and managing the project. The lessons learnt about how to share power in services are in great demand in the voluntary sector.
6. Creativity. Finding a place for someone who has no use for words or who has a fluctuating attention span is tricky and demands imagination. I recall one volunteer who was doing a great job in the community centre canteen, but the toaster kept getting jammed when he tried to use it. He talked to everyone about this toaster, got really upset about it and nearly gave up the volunteering. Reassuring words seemed to have no calming effect at all. In order to welcome people who need extra support, everyone has to be inventive.

A whole range of findings came out of the work and *A Real Asset*, a manual on how to establish and run a Supported Volunteering project, will shortly be available from the NDT, Albion Wharf, Albion St, Manchester M1 5LN. Below is a sample of the issues that have been explored.

### **Assessing a possible site**

Once a potential volunteer has identified the kind of tasks she wants to do and the time of the week that she is available, the Supported Volunteer worker works with her to locate a possible placement. Most bureaux kept a database of volunteering opportunities, but these often had sparse information. The people interviewed in the *Able Volunteers* programme indicated that, once time and task had been matched, the next important thing was to find a pleasant environment. The following checklist of questions helped people to get a sense of the culture of a possible site. These factors often made the difference between success and failure of a volunteering position.

- Does it feel harassed or relaxed here?
- Is there time to talk?
- Is the spotlight on people or profit?
- Attitude to discriminated groups?
- Rigid allocation of duties?
- A learning organisation?
- Response to poor productivity?
- Can you identify one person to provide support?

### **Beliefs about Risk**

Many people in the project wanted to have a theoretical conversation about risk, but I asked in vain for accounts of things that had actually gone wrong, apart from one person who had accidentally allowed a caged bird to escape in an animal sanctuary, and another person who had shouted at their volunteer manager. Supported Volunteering projects suggested that health and social services have become rather preoccupied with formal risk assessment and clinical governance. The following checklist provides a set of values statements about risk assessment.

- The person themselves is the best judge of when they feel safe or unsafe.
- The person's story belongs firstly to them and is not the property of professionals or anyone else.
- Current feelings, behaviour and happiness are more important than the past in assessing risk.

- Risk is intimate – people will be unlikely to discuss their real feelings of safety or danger with a stranger or fill in a form about something that is so personal.
- For 'Safe' read 'Satisfying'. The riskiest lifestyle is to be unfulfilled, isolated and bored.

### **Support strategies**

Here are a few of the ways in which people were actually supported in the projects.

- Nurture the hesitant – lots of people who need support and ask about volunteering are hesitant and could be written off as not ready to volunteer. If we nurture that faint flicker of enthusiasm then they might get going and make a real contribution.
- Volunteer partner –some people want a buddy or volunteer partner to go and work alongside them in the work. This approach was suggested in a publication on volunteering in 1997 and has spread so much that many volunteering agencies assume it is the best or only way to provide support. In the *Able Volunteers* projects only a tiny proportion of people wanted a partner.
- Neutral ground – many people who have used health and social care systems are keenly aware of the signals sent out by offices, desks and the trappings of bureaucracy. Successful supported volunteering projects find neutral ground on which to meet potential volunteers. Lots of meetings happen in coffee bars, rather than offices, for example.
- 'Preparing to volunteer' courses work if the groups are small and the material is suitable.
- Support group or special events. From informal coffee bar groups to barbeques, single event volunteering and celebrations, a range of ways to support people can help people keep going and provide a welcome to newcomers.
- Recognise the value of the work – what difference does my voluntary work make? Make sure people know the result of their labours and it helps them to feel worthwhile.
- Natural supports. Every group has informal or natural arrangements to support its members. Ensure that the professional supports gradually give way to the natural supports so that the person is contributing to the community s/he has joined and can benefit from it too. One volunteer had a paid worker with him every day he worked at the museum, but other staff at the museum did not talk to him very much, since his support worker was there.

## Cross Agency Mentoring

Some Supported Volunteering staff have fixed up mentoring arrangements to look after their own mental health and improve their skills. While busy senior staff in health and social services organisations may initially think that giving time to the local volunteer bureau is time lost, a moments reflection will show how it is an 'invest to save' initiative. One of the *Able Volunteers* projects helped over 250 people with extra support needs to engage in volunteering in the past year, so offering an hour a month may be very cost effective. Before formalising a mentoring relationship, it is worthwhile exploring the following issues:

- Who is the time for?
- What skills do you want in a mentor?
- What do your managers say?
- Will there be a mentoring contract and records of meetings?
- When would client information be passed over?
- Would the mentor ever talk to the mentees line manager?
- How will you close down the arrangement?

## Future Challenges

Supported Volunteering has a fifteen year history but very little has been written about best practice and most projects have been financially insecure. As a result, there is room for a great deal of development over the next decade or so. A few of the key issues are set out below.

Government initiatives to combat unemployment have promoted volunteering as work preparation, and guidance notes often set out a description of volunteering that sounds eerily like a job description - volunteers need to be punctual, obedient and productive. In contrast to this, lots of people volunteer in their leisure time. How can we create volunteering opportunities for people who don't appear to do much, want to be casual, and are mostly out to have fun?

How can we welcome everyone? Some projects have a zero rejection policy. Anyone who wants to volunteer is ready now, and we don't have to wait until they get fixed. All we have to do is find creative ways to harness their energy. For example, Supported Volunteering projects can take desk top publishing work for charities into secure ward settings or invite residents to write campaign letters for environmental lobby groups.

Current Supported Volunteering projects are isolated – no one knows how many such projects exist – and few of the projects were connected to a national or international knowledge base for their practice. Three key resources are immediately available. Firstly, materials on social inclusion

show why we need to support people in the mainstream of life. Secondly, the discipline of careers guidance (not counselling) provides an ethical framework on what to do in interviews. Thirdly, jobcoaching offers a detailed analysis of how to give just enough support for people to fully participate.

Supported Volunteering is a four-way partnership involving the volunteer, the manager of the volunteer-involving organisation, the Supported Volunteering worker and the carer. If volunteering is going to work, then each of the four partners have obligations and we would do well to make these clear.

The growing focus on social inclusion and community participation demands that health and social services build alliances with a range of organisations in the community. Day centres are increasingly moving aside to make way for day opportunities in the community, and support should be available so that people can participate in whatever activity makes sense to them – including volunteering. This demands a close alliance between people who understand mental distress and those who understand volunteering. Evidence from the *Able Volunteers* programme suggests there is both sufficient demand and sufficient benefit for every service in the country to fund at least one whole time post in a local volunteer bureau.