EXPANDING THE TOOLBOX: The Use of Volunteers by Public Children Service Agencies in Ohio

Scarce research has examined the use of volunteers by public agencies, and very little is known about the use of volunteers in child welfare. This brief presents key findings from a study about the use of volunteers among 12 public children services agencies (PCSAs) in the state of Ohio. Structured open-ended telephone interviews were conducted with directors (or designated staff) at PCSAs in the metropolitan and major metropolitan counties in Ohio (100% response rate). Findings revealed that nine (75%) agencies used volunteers in either direct or indirect service roles. However, there was a general pattern of low volunteer use, with only one (8%) agency reporting high levels of volunteer use in both direct and indirect roles, two (17%) agencies reporting high levels of volunteer use in indirect roles only, and six (50%) counties reporting low overall volunteer use. Improved community engagement and public awareness of the mission of PCSAs emerged as the most commonly perceived impact of volunteer programs. The lack of staff to coordinate volunteer activities was the most commonly perceived barrier to incorporating volunteer programs. Emergent best practices including the importance of designated staff, training and consistent fiscal support are discussed, as are implications for future research.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF VOLUNTEER STUDY

The Schubert Center for Child Studies at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in collaboration with the Public Children Services Agency of Ohio (PCSAO) conducted a study about the use of volunteers by Public Children Service Agencies (PCSAs) in major metropolitan counties in Ohio. The study is descriptive and exploratory, and is not intended to test the barriers to and impacts of volunteer programs. Through this study we hope to encourage a dialogue regarding the use of

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volunteers by PCSAs and provide examples of successful volunteer programs for county PCSAs interested in expanding their volunteer utilization.

Volunteerism is defined as uncoerced, unpaid work done in an organized setting to help or benefit another party (Wilson, 2000). Public volunteerism has been discussed for its potential to improve cost-effectiveness of public agencies, to tap into citizens' skills and expertise, and to encourage coproduction, the active engagement of citizens in the delivery of public services (Sundeen, 1990; Wilson, 2000). Existing research suggests that public volunteer programs tend to be poorly resourced and widely variant in their application of best practices (Brudney, 1999; Brudney & Kellough, 2000; Choudry, 2010). Limited examinations of volunteer program outcomes show that the degree of staff resources dedicated to volunteer coordination is associated with higher perceived benefit (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). However, few studies have focused on volunteer programs in the specific area of child welfare. These studies tend to focus on standalone programs or particular practice areas (e.g. mentoring) and often consider programs run by private nonprofit organizations (e.g. Mech & Leonard, 1988; Osterling & Hines, 2006).

The Importance of Fostering Connections with Teens

Adolescents are overrepresented in the foster care system and are at risk for adverse adult outcomes, such as low educational attainment, unemployment, criminal justice involvement, early parenthood, system reinvolvement and substance use (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Massinga & Pecora, 2003). While the goals of permanency and safety remain central for older adolescents in foster care, older youth are in need of a fuller range of services to support their transition into adulthood, and these services can also advance strong connections and other permanency connections. In efforts to meet the needs of this population, PCSAs face resource shortages and sizeable budget cuts, particularly during the recent recession (Patton & Krueger, 2012). Volunteers offer a potentially cost-effective avenue to better serve these young people. However, the extent to which PCSAs utilize volunteers and the pertinent issues surrounding their involvement has not been systematically studied.

The current study seeks to develop knowledge in this area by addressing the following research questions:

1) **What is the use of volunteers** by Ohio PCSAs and how are programs administered?

2) **What are barriers to** using volunteers?

3) **What is the perceived impact** of volunteer use?

The study focuses on programs administered directly by PCSAs, rather than on those through contracts with private agencies.

METHODS

Data were collected by a doctoral student researcher with experience in child welfare through structured, open-ended telephone interviews with directors (n = 7) and other designated staff (n = 6) at 12 PCSAs in the metropolitan and major metropolitan counties in Ohio (100% response rate; one interview included two respondents). The participating agencies represented counties with populations ranging from 213,350 to 1,296,287 (M = 545,508) and with 60 to 1,666 children in placement (M = 687; PCSAO, 2012). The interview protocol included both open and closed-ended questions about the use of volunteers, areas of use, management of volunteer programs, barriers to volunteer programs and perceived impacts of volunteer programs. The interview protocol was piloted with a Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services staff person to ensure question clarity and understandability.

Respondents were recruited through a letter introducing the study from the principal investigator, shared via email by PCSAO. Interviews typically lasted about 30 minutes but ranged in length from 15 minutes to an hour. Interview notes were thematically coded for analysis. CWRU's Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Limitations to this report include potential lack of complete knowledge among interviewees of the volunteer activities in their agencies, the possibility that interviewees gave socially- or politically-desirable responses, and potential inconsistencies in how interviewees interpreted questions (e.g. in how agencies self-defined "volunteer"). Time was also a limitation for the many busy directors and other employees interviewed. The external generalizability of this report to other localities within the state of Ohio and elsewhere is unclear.

FINDINGS

Overall, 9 agencies (75%) reported using volunteers in some capacity and 3 reported no volunteer use. Agencies reported using volunteers from a variety of population groups (e.g. high school and college students, religious organizations, retirees, foster care alumni and foster parents).

Three overall categories of volunteer usage were identified:

1. High-use of direct and indirect roles (n = 1).

2. High-use of indirect roles only (n = 2)

3. Low-use of direct and indirect roles (n = 6).

TABLE 1: VOLUNTEER USE BY ROLE IN PCSAS USING VOLUNTEERS (N = 9)

		Indirect Roles	
		Low	High
Direct Roles	Low	6	2
	High	0	1

Direct contact roles for volunteers included face-to-face activities with youths such as babysitting, mentoring and chaperoning. Indirect roles included non-contact activities such as sorting donations, staffing events and serving on advisory boards. High-use agencies reported scheduled and organized use of over a hundred volunteers per year, while low-use agencies reported sporadic volunteer use, lack of agency capacity to engage volunteers, or low numbers of volunteers (e.g. fewer than 10 per year).

Distinctions in Types of Volunteer Usage & Strategies for Engagement

The high direct and indirect use agency utilized more than 500 volunteers per year in a number of roles, including gender-specific, Afrocentric, college-preparatory, and general mentoring, a volunteer service advisory committee, gifts and donations sorting, and a number of ad hoc roles (e.g. piano teachers). This agency's program is staffed by six full-time volunteer coordinators and is overseen by a director and supervisor. As such,

it manages well-developed volunteer application and screening, orientation and training, and supervisory processes. The two high indirect use agencies each allocated part of one staff member's time to coordinate volunteers. Despite minimal staffing, these agencies reported utilizing high numbers (e.g. "several hundred" to 400 per year) of volunteers to process gifts and donations. A number of strategies were used to accommodate budget limitations, including restricting roles of volunteers (e.g. to indirect roles), focusing on specific groups (e.g. law enforcement volunteer groups with whom agencies had established relationships), and diligently maintaining a volunteer calendar and database.

The six low-use agencies dedicated part of one staff member's time (n = 4) or had no designated staff (n = 2) for volunteer coordination. One low-use agency relied on a carefully cultivated core group of about six volunteers to babysit foster children during parent meetings, as well as volunteers from a local church and university to staff family game nights and recruitment events and organize donated goods. Although this agency operated on a small scale, it systematically recruited and trained its volunteers. The remaining low-use agencies used volunteers in very limited capacities (e.g. a pilot program utilizing a single VISTA volunteer as a mentor or occasional gift-sorting) or described more sporadic use of volunteers.

Public volunteerism has been discussed for its potential to improve cost-effectiveness of public agencies, to tap into citizens' skills and expertise, and to encourage coproduction, the active engagement of citizens in the delivery of public services.

Notably, there was some variation in the definition of volunteers as some agencies considered student interns to be volunteers while others did not. The two agencies without a designated staff member to coordinate volunteers reported challenges in engaging community members wishing to volunteer or donate. The remaining agencies that reported no volunteer use (n=3) either expressed ambivalence over the need to use volunteers in the face of potential liabilities or expressed a desire, but lack of resources, to effectively use volunteers.

Mentoring services were identified as an especially important supportive service for older adolescents and some PCSAs relied on volunteers to provide this service. Mentoring was offered by ten agencies, but only two PCSAs offered mentoring through PSCA-run volunteer programs. The remaining eight PCSAs offered paid (n = 4) or unpaid (n = 4) mentoring through contracts with trade schools, universities and nonprofit service providers.

Perceived Benefits of Volunteers

Respondents described benefits of volunteer programs including the facilitation of youth successes, community engagement and awareness, and expanded agency capacity to support youth, families and staff. The perceived impact of improved community engagement and awareness was mentioned the most frequently (n = 5). Respondents described a lack of understanding in the general public about the difficulties of child welfare work and the effects of child abuse. Volunteer programs were described as a way for agencies to connect with community members and to begin to educate them on these issues. One volunteer coordinator described her agency's volunteers as "ambassadors" of the PCSA who can speak intelligently about the agency in the community. Community connections can also enhance services available to youth by helping agencies connect with new resources, such as an employer who is willing to mentor a foster youth or a potential foster parent. The promotion of permanent relationships through mentoring was reported as one of the most notable benefits for young people and their future success. Because volunteer mentors have time and are not restricted by paid employment arrangements or particular placements, they can become a permanent and positive presence in the foster youths' lives. Furthermore, volunteer programs can facilitate youths' involvement in enrichment activities by providing agencies the mechanisms to screen and train a wide array of individuals (e.g. musical instrument teachers, scout leaders). Finally, volunteers allow agencies to provide services and offer tangible supports that would otherwise be impossible. For example, agencies credited volunteers with processing tens of thousands of gifts around the holidays, an activity that cannot be funded with tax dollars. These gifts offer instrumental support for families and children and provide staff and families with a tangible sense of people's good will.

TABLE 2: PERCEIVED POSITIVE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERS (N = 9)

Theme	Number of Agencies Reporting
Permanent relationships	5
Future adult success	3
Normative enrichment activities	3
Community engagement	7
Public awareness	6
Tangential supports	4
New tools/expanded capacity	3
Staff and foster parent support	5

Barriers to the Use of Volunteers

In closed-ended responses, the lack of a staff point person was the top barrier to the use of volunteers, followed by the lack of fiscal resources, and too many competing priorities. Similarly, resource barriers (financial and staffing) dominated qualitative discussions. In addition, respondents discussed political barriers to staffing volunteer programs in a climate of budget cuts and layoffs, as well as concerns about confidentiality, safety, risk and liability. Seven respondents said expanding or initiating a volunteer program was merely a matter of "figuring it out," doing the necessary preliminary planning and analysis. Four agencies expressed ambivalence or a lack of desire to expand their volunteer use. These agencies expressed satisfaction with their current model, a desire to focus on sustaining

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current volunteer activities, the belief that there would not be enough work for a full-time volunteer coordinator, or uncertainty about whether the investment in volunteers would pay off. Issues respondents identified to consider further included: volunteer roles that would not interfere with those of paid staff, potential conflicts with union contracts, and concerns regarding family privacy, confidentiality, and the primacy of biological family relationships.

TABLE 3: MEAN PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS (N = 12)

Perceived as "Low" Barriers	
Community support/interest	.44
County leadership support	.63
Retention difficulties	.75
Confidentiality concerns	.78
Perceived as "Moderate" Barriers	
Lack of staff interest	1.00
Laws and/or regulations	1.22
Administrative burden	1.33
Perceived as "High" Barriers	
Liability or safety concerns	1.56
Lack of staff time	1.56
Too many competing priorities	1.67
Fiscal resources	1.67
Lack of staff volunteer point person within the agency	1.75

Note: 0 = not a barrier
      1 = somewhat of a barrier
      2 = a large barrier

Emergent themes and best practice implications for PCSA volunteer programs

Several promising practices emerged through interview analysis that maximized the positive impact of volunteer use in child welfare:

- The importance of dedicating sufficient staff to coordinate and supervise volunteer programs. One director warned of the dangers of providing no capacity in this area: "If people want to help and volunteer, and the agency does a poor job of mobilizing, they will feel undervalued."

- The importance of diligent background checks and screening as essential to ensuring safety. Although these checks take time and may be perceived as invasive, they can also act as a natural screen for less-committed volunteers.

- The importance of constant recruitment and engagement, thorough orientation and training, and clearly-defined volunteer roles. Orientation and training can be used to supplement public knowledge of the child welfare system, address unrealistic expectations, and support appropriate boundaries.

- Volunteer appreciation, feedback and ongoing support as critical to retention.

- In the case of mentoring programs, proactive termination planning to safeguard the child from potentially experiencing traumatic loss.

- Program longevity backed by committed and sustained funding as a supportive factor to allow programs the sufficient time to develop, avoid waste, and in the case of mentoring programs, support stable and long-lasting relationships.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH AREAS

This study both reinforced and expanded upon existing literature on the use of public volunteers and mentoring programs in child welfare systems. Although there were a few exceptional agencies with high volunteer use, this study identified an overall pattern of underutilization among the 12 metropolitan PCSAs in Ohio. Where volunteers are used, models of volunteer administration varied widely. Some agencies restricted volunteers to indirect roles, such as donation sorting and event staffing, while others used them in direct services capacities as mentors, babysitters, chaperones and camp counselors. While the single agency with high-, direct-use employed six full-time volunteer coordinators and their supervisors, the remaining agencies described managing volunteers on "shoestring" budgets, dedicating a portion of one staff person's time to coordinating activities. As a result, these agencies restricted volunteers to particular roles, utilized particular groups, or limited opportunities for the public to engage with the agency. The two agencies that utilized volunteers but had no designated staff to coordinate volunteer activities reported difficulty managing public volunteer and donation requests.

Counties who successfully leveraged resources for volunteer engagement reported positive impacts to children, foster and biological families, staff, volunteers themselves and the broader community.

- First, volunteer mentors can provide young people in the child welfare system with permanent relationships that support adult success. However, few agencies provided direct-contact volunteer opportunities that would allow for these benefits.

- Second, the utilization of volunteers allows agencies to "expand the toolbox" of services that they offer youth to include a wide variety of normalizing enrichment activities and "quality work" that case managers, saddled with mandated activities and high caseloads, may not have time to provide. Volunteers can also conduct activities, such as fundraising and donations coordination, for which policy prohibits tax dollar use.

- Finally, as the literature on coproduction suggests, the use of volunteers provides an important opportunity for child welfare agencies to engage with the community.

The most common perceived barrier to expanded volunteer programs was the lack of resources, particularly the lack of designated staff. In addition, respondents mentioned political barriers to volunteer activities related to the economic recession. Somewhat ironically,

while volunteers may help improve cost-effectiveness, respondents perceived that the political climate of budget cuts and layoffs makes it difficult to politically justify investing in volunteer programs.

Furthermore, while this study uncovers potential barriers and impacts of volunteers based on respondents' perceptions, there is a need for more rigorous research examining the outcomes of volunteer programs. Cost-benefit analysis to assess whether volunteer programs enhance agency's cost effectiveness and capacity is another important area for research development. ∎

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