

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

FINAL REPORT

Prepared by
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GRAFF AND ASSOCIATES

November, 1998

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Project

In April, 1997, several local agencies came together to discuss the need for a supported volunteering program in Waterloo Region. The group of involved agencies that emerged has been named THE RESOURCE GROUP FOR SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING (R.G.S.V.). The R.G.S.V. divided into two sub groups: "Voting Members" which are agencies that have taken an active role in operating the current project, and "Corresponding Members" which are agencies that have an interest in the project and support it in principle, but have not been active in current work. Lists of both voting and corresponding R.G.S.V. member agencies are located in Appendix 'A.'

All member agencies of the R.G.S.V. offer programs that support people with physical and health disabilities, learning disabilities, developmental challenges, mental health concerns or any combination of the above.

Supported Volunteering Defined

For the purposes of this project, "Supported Volunteering" means ensuring full participation by people who are marginalized in our community and enabling their integration into volunteerism. Supported volunteering can entail a range of functions, including: helping prospective volunteer placement agencies know how to work with people with disabilities; providing a coach for the volunteer; and/or a centralized placement agency that both helps volunteers identify their interests and abilities, and refers those volunteers to potential placements in not-for-profit organizations in the community.

Supported volunteering can be understood to include a wide range of interventions on three levels:

- ◆ GROUP - e.g., providing training for agencies to enable them to be more inclusive
- ◆ INDIVIDUAL - e.g., support for the volunteer including providing a coach for a period of time and/or a partner either initially or on an ongoing basis
- ◆ SYSTEMIC - e.g., assisting agencies with the development of appropriate infrastructure to manage such a program

Community Issues Identified

Three major issues related to supported volunteering have been identified by R.G.S.V.:

- a) There is a lack of comprehensive integrated strategy that allows for the inclusion of all volunteers in the larger voluntary sector in our community.
- b) Anecdotal and statistical evidence indicates that more and more prospective volunteers require some kind of support.
- c) Charitable organizations are less and less able to accommodate volunteers who may require additional support, unless the support accompanies the volunteer.

Purpose

Responding to the community issues identified above, the project will seek funding to *build our community's capacity for supported volunteering services* by assessing current resources and gaps. Key components of the project include: *development of a program model to support and provide training for agencies wishing to offer volunteer opportunities*. Investigation of how the private sector might participate in the project will be a key activity.

The central purpose of OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL can be stated as follows:

To increase the community's capacity to open up new opportunities for all

persons to exercise more control over their own lives and make a contribution to this community through volunteer work.

Philosophy Statement

The activities of the R.G.S.V. will be guided by the following statement of philosophy:

The RESOURCE GROUP FOR SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING is committed to assisting *all persons* to participate in satisfying, productive volunteer experiences. Our purpose is to remove barriers to full participation by educating and supporting community members, identifying and developing resources that promote accessibility and supporting individuals to cultivate their potential.

We believe that *all persons* have the right to informed choice and equal access to fully participate in the opportunities they choose for themselves. We believe in encouraging independence, individual growth, mutual respect, cooperative relationships, and partnerships within an understanding and welcoming community.

First Phase Goals

The R.G.S.V. will approach its work in two phases, with first phase goals as follows:

ASSESS the extent to which the community is already accommodating volunteers with special needs

IDENTIFY barriers and difficulties which volunteers are experiencing

INVOLVE volunteers in all aspects of the supported volunteering model development

BUILD awareness in the community about the need to include *all persons* in volunteer opportunities because we know that with awareness comes greater understanding, greater acceptance and greater accommodation

BREAK down attitudinal barriers about the perceived difficulty in accommodating *all persons* in volunteer settings

EXPLORE innovative partnerships with the private sector

DEVELOP a supported volunteering model that would facilitate community involvement

Assets Inventory

The assets inventory component of this project represents efforts to assess the current state of supported volunteering in not-for-profit organizations throughout Waterloo Region. It addresses four of the phase one goals listed above:

ASSESS the extent to which the community is already accommodating volunteers with special needs

IDENTIFY barriers and difficulties which volunteers are experiencing

BUILD awareness in the community about the need to include *all persons* in volunteer opportunities because we know that with awareness comes greater understanding, greater acceptance and greater accommodation

BREAK down attitudinal barriers about the perceived difficulty in accommodating *all persons* in volunteer settings

Funding Received

The R.G.S.V. submitted requests for financial assistance to a number of funders. The application to the Ontario Trillium Foundation was successful. It has supported this research effort and made it possible for the R.G.S.V. to engage the services of a researcher. Linda L. Graff, Senior Associate of GRAFF AND ASSOCIATES was contracted to finalize the research design, conduct the assets inventory, prepare the literature review, write the final report, and provide general consulting assistance to the R.G.S.V. throughout the assets inventory.

Research Methods

Two distinct methods were deployed to complete the assets inventory. The first method involved a brief survey of a large number of community agencies in the Waterloo Region; the second method involved conducting focus groups with volunteers, prospective volunteers, and agency representatives.

Each of these methodologies generated detailed written reports. The reader is directed to these reports for more detail on material highlighted here.

Literature Review

To support the research efforts in this project, and to situate them in a wider context of what has been written about special needs volunteering, in particular, in Canada, the Consultant prepared a brief review of literature on the topic of supported volunteering.

2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

a) Community Agency Survey

The community agency survey aspect of the assets inventory provided brief information about the existence and form of supported volunteering in a large number of not-for-profit organizations in the Waterloo Region.

A brief questionnaire on supported volunteering was faxed to 197 agencies in the Waterloo Region. Ninety-two (48%) agencies responded representing an unusually high response rate to a survey of this nature. The total sample for the purposes of analysis was 89 agencies. The responding agencies were well distributed among sectors (e.g., social services, education, health, etc.) and fairly closely paralleled the distribution by sector of the agencies which received the questionnaire.

The responding agencies all operated volunteer programs, the size of which varied from fewer than 25 volunteers to more than 400 volunteers. Seventy-six (85%) responding agencies had involved persons with a disability as volunteers in the year previous to the survey. While the sample may be skewed in favour of those agencies that had involved special needs volunteers, the results nonetheless indicate that a minimum of 76 different agencies had engaged in some degree of supported volunteer programming in the previous year. Clearly supported volunteering is prevalent in a large proportion of volunteer organizations in the Waterloo Region. Of those 76 agencies that indicated that they had involved persons with disabilities as volunteers, 58% involved five or fewer special needs volunteers, 24% involved six to ten special needs volunteers and 11% involved between 11 and 20 special needs volunteers.

A wide range of types of disabilities were represented among volunteers in the responding agencies, with the highest numbers of disabilities represented being developmental disabilities (n=99) and mobility impairments (n=92), followed by intellectual (n= 41), learning disabilities (n=40), hearing impairments (n=39), and mental health issues (n=38). Other types of disabilities (dexterity, speech, visual, and other) were experienced by fewer than 25 volunteers. The types of disabilities experienced by volunteers active in the responding agencies were well disbursed among the sample agencies. For example, the 92 volunteers with mobility impairments were distributed among 41 different organizations; the 99 volunteers with developmental disabilities were distributed among 34 different organizations. This pattern held for other disability types as well.

Most (80%) organizations that involved volunteers with special needs did not set out deliberately to do so. They agreed to accept as volunteers persons with various

disabilities who applied to be volunteers.

A full one third (33%) of all special needs volunteers required no special support from the agencies for which they volunteered. For the 66% of volunteers who needed support of some sort, that support was provided by the agency for which they volunteered in 45% of cases, by another agency in 40% of cases, by the volunteer him or her self in 8% of cases, by the volunteers' parents in 5% of cases, and by an insurance company in 2% of cases.

A very wide range of types of accommodations were implemented for special needs volunteers in this sample. The accommodation most often noted (10 instances) was to modify or limit the demands of the position or to carefully select a position that supplies duties and demands appropriate to the skills and limitations of the volunteer. Allocation of additional staff to supervise and support special needs volunteers was mentioned by 8 respondents. Twenty-three other kinds of accommodations were mentioned by three or fewer responding agencies.

In a striking finding, 82 responding organizations (92%) indicated that they would be willing to consider placement of additional volunteers with disabilities. This represents a huge potential for expansion in supported volunteering in the Waterloo Region. Of the seven agencies that said they would not take additional volunteers who have disabilities, five of them already involve volunteers who have disabilities, indicating that they feel they are at their limit rather than that they are unwilling to consider accepting any volunteers who have disabilities.

This community agency survey aspect of the assets inventory presents a valuable baseline representation of the state of supported volunteering in Waterloo Region at the present time. The response rate to the survey indicates a high degree of interest in the topic, and the results demonstrate the great extent to which agencies in this Region are already involving persons with disabilities as volunteers. The survey also points to a significant willingness to expand the involvement of persons with disabilities as volunteers among respondent agencies. Respondent agencies have implemented a wide range of accommodations to support and enable the involvement of volunteers with disabilities, but it is important to remember that a third of all volunteers with disabilities

required no special accommodations whatsoever. Supported volunteering in Waterloo Region is largely unintentional on the part of organizations. If volunteers find their way to apply, agencies in the sample appear to be willing to try to accommodate their special needs, but few agencies have made deliberate efforts to be inclusive.

b) Focus Group Research

The focus group aspect of the community assets inventory provided more detailed information about supported volunteering as it exists among a small number of respondent agencies and as it has been experienced by a small number of individual volunteers.

Six focus groups were conducted. Three focus groups were held with agency representatives, and a total of 26 volunteer agencies participated, 24 (92%) of which were currently, or had recently, involved persons with disabilities as volunteers. Three focus groups were held with individuals with disabilities, and a total of 16 individuals participated. Thirteen (81%) of these had recently or were currently volunteering, two (13%) had tried to locate volunteer work but had met with only limited success, and one person (6%) had not yet volunteered or thought seriously of doing so.

The numbers of agencies that had not been involved in special needs volunteering, and the number of individuals with disabilities who had not pursued volunteering were smaller in these focus groups than had been hoped for. The results, therefore, do not adequately reflect the perspectives of these two groups.

i) Findings From Agencies

Key findings from focus group sessions with agency representatives include the following:

The experience of supported volunteering from the perspective of agencies was mixed. Some agencies had had good success, others said their experience was “mixed” while still others indicated that their experience to date had been “not good.” Difficulties often derived from not knowing how to work with, or communicate with, persons with disabilities and the discomfort that creates. A few agencies noted that the initial investment in involving persons with special needs did not generate sufficient return when volunteers left after only a short time.

Many agency respondents noted that involving persons with special needs absorbs extra time and resources from the agency and its staff. As a result, some staff resist the notion of supported volunteering because they are already short of time to fulfill their job functions.

Finding the right fit between the volunteer’s interests and limitations on one hand, and the agency’s needs and the requirements of the position on the other, is key to success. In most organizations, volunteers must be placed in such a way as to generate more value (e.g., work, resources, output, etc.) than they absorb. The exception to this rule is in agencies where clients also serve as volunteers. In such cases, volunteering is conceptualized as a part of the healing process and additional resources appear to be more justifiable.

Flexibility in placement design is critical. Hence, agencies need to be organized to receive persons with disabilities as volunteers. This is no different from other volunteering.

Support from senior administration for volunteering in general, and in supported volunteering in particular, appear to be critical to the success of supported volunteering. The absence of administrative support for the involvement as volunteers of persons with disabilities can create an impenetrable barrier. This is true even in organizations that serve persons with disabilities as clients. Inclusivity and openness cannot be taken for granted.

Discrimination exists in not-for-profit organizations just as it does in the larger culture. Some staff, administrators, and clients subscribe to myths and stereotypes about

persons with disabilities, and in particular, about persons with mental health issues. These attitudes present major barriers to the involvement of persons with disabilities in volunteering.

When asked what would help in the development and operation of supported volunteering, the most frequent response was “information on how to work with people with disabilities”. Unfamiliarity, fear of being offensive, and general discomfort with the unknown appear to be common. Even within organizations that serve persons with disabilities there can be an unfamiliarity with persons who have disabilities different from the specific disabilities of their client group. This sense of unease and uncertainty make the availability of ongoing support very important. Agency representative spoke of how useful it had been to have someone to problem solve with when a special needs placement wasn’t working out. Being able to call for help around communication problems was important.

Education of board and senior administrators on the value and productivity of special needs volunteering could be of use in some organizations. Such messages are likely to have a greater impact when delivered by persons from outside the organization.

Placement modification is much more successful when volunteers themselves participate in the process. When persons with special needs are able to identify their own accommodation needs and participate in the placement adjustment process, the manager of volunteers has more information to work with and the placement has a greater chance of success. Assistance in job design and placement accommodations for persons with disabilities was also noted as something that would help managers of volunteers. It is also helpful when the referring agent - often an agency that works with people with disabilities - knows some details about the organization to which the volunteer is being referred.

Agency representatives identified mental health issues to be the more difficult or scary to deal with among volunteers with special needs. There is still a good deal of ignorance and fear around mental health issues and education in this area would be of great assistance.

Not all persons with disabilities need accommodations in their volunteer placements. The most frequent accommodation requirement mentioned by agency representatives is the extra time needed in the early placement development process.

ii) Findings From Individuals

Key findings from focus group sessions with individuals include the following:

Persons with disabilities pursue volunteering for a wide variety of reasons, just like persons without disabilities. They also receive a wide range of benefits from volunteering, just like persons without disabilities. Focus group participants expressed a good deal of enthusiasm about the volunteer work they do.

Almost all focus group participants had found their way to volunteering upon the suggestion of a disability-service agency from which they were receiving service. Many had used the services of the Volunteer Action Centre to locate a specific placement.

Persons with disabilities encountered a wide range of barriers in their search for volunteer work. Problems with physical accessibility and transportation were mentioned by many participants. Negative attitudes and discrimination were also encountered by many. Insensitivity, offensiveness, and rudeness characterized much of their experience. For many, the experience had been so hurtful or distressing that the thought of seeking other volunteer work in the future was unattractive.

Several participants mentioned that overprotectiveness within their family had to be overcome in their search for involvement in volunteering.

A range of accommodation needs were mentioned by individual focus group participants, including the need for extra time to learn and meet the demands of the volunteer placement, physical accessibility, extra patience, assistance with communication, and accommodations to visual impairments. Other accommodations included assistance with reaching things from the height of a wheelchair, understanding and empathy regarding mental health issues, and assistance with the logistics and proceedings of meetings.

Individuals agreed that creative problem solving and their own participation in

placement modifications were most helpful in the creation of satisfying volunteer placements. Several participants noted the importance of defining and articulating their own needs as helpful in the placement development process.

Since many of the participants in these focus groups had encountered negative attitudes and outright discrimination in their search for volunteer work, there was wide agreement about the need for agency personnel to receive education and sensitivity training on who to work with, and relate to, persons with disabilities.

When asked what advice they would offer to others with disabilities seeking volunteer work, participants were enthusiastic in their support, and noted the need to be persistent and positive in the search. The need to be practical, know what you want, and have realistic expectations were also noted as important. Assistance in placement location and development were noted as things that would help in any future search for volunteer work.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

Supported volunteering is happening unintentionally now in many agencies throughout Waterloo Region and interest is high in extending present levels among agencies in this survey. A willingness to expand is pervasive among the majority of respondents. There is a great potential for supported volunteering in this Region. One can only imagine what might be accomplished with deliberate effort.

We have found in this research that all is not perfect, however, within the supported volunteering that currently takes place. Agencies and volunteers have both identified specific areas for development and improvement.

Finding volunteer work for people with disabilities is not easy. It needs deliberate and persistent action from the prospective volunteers themselves as well as deliberate and cooperative action from referral agents and placement agencies. It does not happen by “spontaneous combustion” and it can be hurtful and distressing for prospective volunteers when agency representatives do not understand, do not feel comfortable working with, persons with disabilities. Individuals have to struggle to locate suitable placements in agencies with accepting attitudes. Barriers certainly exist, although many could be broken down by education, sensitivity training, and a deliberate will to generate inclusivity in voluntary action.

But supported volunteering requires more than a will to make it happen. It requires resources and it requires cooperative community action.

Education, Advocacy, and Skills Development

Individuals and agency representatives concur that education about various disabilities, and how to work with people with various disabilities, would be most helpful. At present many coordinators of volunteers and other staff experience discomfort and fear because of their ignorance in these areas. Anti-discrimination and sensitivity training for managers of volunteers and for agency staff (paid and unpaid) who work with volunteers who have disabilities has been identified as a key need. Helping agency representatives to gain comfort in knowing what to ask, what to say, and how to be inoffensive would diminish fear and generate a greater likelihood that persons with disabilities will be treated with the respect and courtesy that all persons deserve. Misunderstanding, ignorance, and fear seem to be more prevalent in regard to mental health issues than in relation to other types of disabilities. Education and sensitivity

training, and educational materials and tools seem to be particularly important.

Education of agency administrators and boards about supported volunteering, the productivity that special needs volunteering can generate, and the value of inclusivity to agencies and the community is suggested.

Education and skills development in the area of creative placement accommodation would be helpful to coordinators of volunteers who seek to find solutions to the special needs of volunteers with disabilities.

It would help the placement process, and generate a greater likelihood of success in placements, if referral agents - those agencies that currently provide services to persons with disabilities - had a greater understanding of the nature of volunteering that takes place in the agencies to which they refer persons with disabilities as volunteers.

Work with the family members of persons with disabilities could perhaps lessen the struggles that some individuals encounter in achieving the independence they need to pursue volunteering. There is widespread misunderstanding and ignorance among the general public about work in the not-for-profit sector in general, and about volunteering specifically. It is understandable that family members can be concerned for the well-being of individuals who strike out on their own to find volunteer work. Disability-service organizations that refer their clients to volunteer work might help prospective volunteers anticipate family resistance and strategize with them about what can be done to diminish the blockages that family over-protectiveness can create in the search for volunteer work.

Training programs and educational materials - "toolkits" - designed for the various constituencies identified above appear to be the kinds of resources being requested by participants in this research.

Need For More Information

Two specific areas on which further information is needed have emerged from this research.

We still have minimal information about those organizations that have not involved persons with disabilities as volunteers. Why have they not done so, and what, if anything, would encourage them to do so, are key questions that remain unanswered.

We know almost nothing about those persons with disabilities that have not attempted to get involved in volunteering. While we accept that volunteering is not for everyone, it is reasonable to think that more persons with disabilities might be encouraged to consider participation in voluntary action, yet we do not know how to reach them, what deters them, and what information or assistance would motivate them into action.

These two key questions should be at the centre of any further research efforts in this project.

Liaison With Referral Agents

Historically, most efforts to understand and enhance supported volunteering have been initiated by agencies that have a mandate in voluntary action, typically, Volunteer Centres across Canada. The initiative for this Opportunities For All project has come primarily from disability-service organizations. There is a wide understanding of the value of volunteering to person with disabilities among these agencies in the Waterloo Region.

It would be useful if these disability-service agencies continue to learn about voluntary action and volunteer placement development and accommodation so that they can continue to support their clients as the latter move into volunteer positions in the community.

It would also be useful if referral agents worked closely with their clients who are prospective volunteers, helping them to identify and feel comfortable in articulating their own accommodation needs. In this way, prospective volunteers will be able to play a more active role in problem-solving in conjunction with the manager of volunteers at the agency where placement is being sought.

Achieving The Right Match

Achieving the right match between volunteers' interests, abilities, and limitations on one hand, and agency needs, capacities, and ability to adapt on the other, is perhaps the greatest variable in generating successful supported volunteer placements.

When volunteers' needs are not met, their interest and motivation wane, and they move away from voluntary action. When organizations' needs are not being met, or when the cost of involving a volunteer is greater than the productivity the volunteer will generate, the agency will not accept the offer of involvement from the prospective volunteer, or worse, place a volunteer into a less than appropriate position in which the volunteer is destined to fail.

Finding the right match is not always easy. Choosing a position from among hundreds available at any given point can be daunting, and a volunteer might need to investigate several different placements before the right one is located. For persons with special needs, the process is more complex as more variables need to be taken into consideration in the placement selection process. Placement assistance for the volunteer is almost always useful, and often necessary. In particular, achieving a mutually satisfying and productive placement for volunteers with disabilities often means blending two distinct specialty areas: knowledge of disabilities, limitations, and how to work with people with disabilities on one hand, and knowledge of, and contacts with, potential placement agencies in the community that have (or could create) the right position for each specific special needs volunteer.

When both of these specialties are combined through cooperative action among agencies such as disability-service agencies and a volunteer centre, and when prospective placement agencies in the community are open to supported volunteering and are comfortable working with persons with disabilities, the odds are very high that volunteer positions can be located or developed for most persons with disabilities. In this formula, openness, education, advocacy, cooperation, and resources combine to produce a winning outcome.

Ongoing Support

A range of circumstances can arise throughout the course of a volunteer placement that generate the need for flexibility and adjustment. Conditions in the organization can

change; volunteers' interests, needs, capacity, stamina, can change; the work itself, or the environment around it, can change; clients' needs change. All of these circumstances may generate the need for a volunteer placement to evolve over time. Managers of volunteers who work with volunteers with disabilities often express the need for ongoing support through such times. Having a resource person to call for advice, joint problem solving, advocacy, or information can make all the difference in the Manager's initial willingness to try to work with someone with special needs, and in the likelihood that the position can be satisfactorily adjusted to permit long term involvement. Therefore, success in supported volunteer programs is greatly enhanced when initial placement assistance is bolstered by ongoing support to both the placement agency and the volunteer.

To conclude, there is a clear potential to extend supported volunteering in the Waterloo Region, but resources and expertise are needed to realize that potential. As the Chairperson of the R.G.S.V. has summarized the findings of this project, ***“We must move from convincing agencies to do the right thing to helping agencies to do things right.”***

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is recommended that the current Opportunities For All Project be extended.
- Education to encourage and facilitate deliberate inclusivity in volunteering, combined with further efforts to generate cooperative action among local agencies, should receive priority in the next phases of the O.F.A. project.
- The establishment of a community-wide matching mechanism appears to be a crucial addition to the current complement of community service agencies if success rates in placement location, placement development and appropriate position accommodations are to increase. The mechanism - an agency or a program of an agency - needs to have an excellent understanding of voluntary action and placement development, and excellent contacts among Managers of Volunteers in local community agencies. The matching agency also needs to have an excellent understanding of a wide range of disabilities, and excellent skills in placement and placement accommodations for persons with disabilities. The ability to support prospective volunteers through the position selection and accommodation process will be critical, and the provision of ongoing support to both individuals and placement agencies will increase the number and duration of successful placements. The matching agency should also integrate a marketing function to increase the number of individuals involved in supported volunteering and the number of agencies willing to offer supported volunteer positions. It needs to have a mandate to serve prospective volunteers who are referred to volunteering through other agencies as well as those who are pursuing volunteering on their own. Expertise in mental health and education around mental health issues should be integrated into this partnership. Linkages to a wide range of existing disability-service agencies, the local association of managers of volunteers, and the local community college programs in volunteer management should be established.

At the present time, no single agency has either the mandate or skill sets to cover all of the above. It is recommended that a cooperative effort be launched between at least one agency with expertise in disability-service, and at least one agency with expertise in voluntary action. In the current funding climate, an interagency collaboration seems more advisable than an attempt to establish a new agency with the dual mandate that supported volunteering requires.

Special funding will need to be located to support the collaboration and its activities. Specific sponsorship, administrative leadership, and division of labour details are best

left to be worked out between the partnering agencies. Educational, advocacy, and materials development activities could be undertaken by the partners in the matching agency, or contracted out separately to existing organizations in the Waterloo Region that have relevant mandates and expertise.

- It is recommended that the Opportunities For All R.G.S.V. continue in its present form for some time into the future. A second research phase of the current project should be undertaken that is targeted specifically at persons with disabilities who do not volunteer and at agencies that have not operated supported volunteer programs. Data collected from these two constituencies will further inform efforts to enhance and extend supported volunteering in the Waterloo Region.
- This current project has included original research which will be a valuable addition to the literature on supported volunteering. Efforts should be made to communicate this information outside of the Waterloo Region.
- It is recommended that the Opportunities For All R.G.S.V. pursue possibilities of replicating this original research in other communities across Canada. The research design, methodologies, and research tools could easily be transported to other locales with little or no modification. Inter-community comparison of data would extend the body of knowledge of supported volunteering in Canada and create baselines and interest points from which supported volunteering could be extended and enhanced elsewhere.
- Exploration of sponsorship from, and partnerships with, the private sector in supported volunteering needs to be a component of future phases of the Opportunities For All project.

Appendix `A': R.G.S.V. Membership Lists