

Exploring the Limits of Volunteerism in Public Service Delivery: Substituting Volunteer Labor for Paid Labor

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Executive Summary

If the services provided by volunteers are valuable, we would expect every public and nonprofit organization to use them to the utmost. Even in times of crunched budgets and economic uncertainty however, not all public and nonprofit organizations use volunteers, and among those organizations using volunteers, great variation exists in the extent to which volunteers are integrated into the organization and the types of services they perform. This paper presents and develops a four-factor framework to explain the extent of volunteer use by organizations.

Framework

The four main factors in the framework are the political and legal environment, organizational services, human resources, and community characteristics. Each of these four factors either push toward circumscribed boundaries on volunteer work or they put pressure on an organization to enlarge the boundaries of volunteer involvement. The combination of these shrinking and expanding forces will determine the ultimate boundaries around volunteer work at a particular organization—

how aggressively the organization seeks volunteers, the number of volunteer hours used, which tasks volunteers perform, how volunteers' tasks relate to the tasks that paid staff perform, and the extent to which volunteerism is fully incorporated into and supported by the organization.

Political and Legal Environment. Public and nonprofit organizations operate in highly political environments, and local political leaders often push these organizations to use more volunteers, especially during times of financial stress or to build greater public support. In munificent financial times, these pressures often decrease. The legal environment can limit volunteerism because of regulations on replacing paid staff with volunteers and the additional restrictions when using volunteers along unionized workers.

Organizational Services. This factor encompasses two dimensions—the professional nature of services and the variety and types of services offered in general. For many organizations, services are provided by professionals, often those with a masters degree, such as social workers or librarians. The professional nature of these services tends to restrict volunteer involvement. The type of services offered also impact the

extent to which it is feasible to include volunteer involvement depending on such issues as liability, safety, volunteer satisfaction, amount of training required, and the time commitment involved.

Human Resources. This factor encompasses three important dimensions: staff capacity (to deliver services), staff receptivity to volunteers, and volunteer management capacity. Reduced staff capacity, especially due to lay-offs or a reduction in force, can exert pressure on the organization to use more volunteers. Smaller, more rural organizations tend to have less staff capacity than larger, urban organizations and might see more opportunities to use volunteers. Staff receptivity to volunteers can serve to expand or contract the number of volunteers an organization uses (or can retain) and the ways in which the organization uses volunteers. Staff that do not value volunteers or want to work with them will find ways to limit their involvement. Finally, the volunteer management capacity of the organization also matters—volunteers do not supervise themselves. Organizations with a volunteer manager and planned out volunteer program tend to have greater capacity to use volunteers.

Community Characteristics. Previous research has shown that individual demographics are strong predictors of volunteering, and to the extent that communities reflect these demographics, we would expect to see more similar trends. For example, in wealthier neighborhoods that have higher education and more retirees, one would expect more volunteering, and in disadvantaged neighborhoods, less volunteering. Volunteers tend to be female, middle-aged and have children. Retirees are often among those available to volunteer, so areas with a higher percentage of retirees or empty-nesters will have a larger pool of potential volunteers. Organizations located in disadvantaged or minority neighborhoods often have a more difficult time recruiting volunteers. Thus, the local supply of volunteers can influence the boundaries of volunteer work.

Illustration of Framework

This paper illustrates the four factors of the framework using information about a large library system in an urban area in the South and its response to a funding crisis. The data for this analysis come from in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews with Library executives, board members, and local government leaders conducted by the researchers in

Fall 2011. In total, we interviewed 21 individuals about the use of volunteers at the public Library and the decision to double the number of volunteer hours. We use quotations from these interviews and historical data provided by the Library to illustrate the interplay among the four factors in our framework and how they defined the boundaries of volunteer work in this publicly-funded organization. Ultimately, the confluence of these factors led to an increased role for volunteers in the Library.

Implications

There are four main highlights of this framework. First, it is important to understand the importance of the political and legal environment. For many organizations, this can be the most important expanding influence on the role of volunteers. Second, organizations often react to a politically-imposed increase in the use of volunteers by seeking to buffer the professional core activities from volunteer involvement, especially when staff members are skeptical about the use of volunteers. Third, staff receptivity to volunteers has an enormous effect on the types of tasks that volunteers perform within the organization. They also greatly

influence the extent to which volunteers are happy with their jobs, which affects volunteer retention. Finally, the community characteristics cannot be ignored. The same organization when embedded in a different community might need to change its expectations for the number of volunteers it wants to use and how it will use them. Organizations embedded in disadvantaged or low-income communities will have less robust volunteer populations to pull from.

Exploring the Limits of Volunteerism in Public Service Delivery:

Substituting Volunteer Labor for Paid Labor

The larger issue facing the American political economy as it enters the twenty-first century is the macro issue of functional placement and organizational management. Distinctive characteristics of public and private sectors need to be recognized as a prerequisite to developing criteria for assigning functions between the sectors.

Moe (1987, 458)

Introduction

In his essay, “Exploring the Limits of Privatization,” Moe (1987) underscores the broader debate about the relationship between sector and service functions. Public administration scholars have illuminated portions of the sector-service relationship, with a heavy focus on private sector provision in studies of contracting (e.g., Brown, Potoski, & Slyke, 2006; Fernandez, Ryu, & Brudney, 2008; Moulton & Feeney, 2011; Thompson & Elling, 2000), and the debate continues (e.g., Walker, Brewer, Boyne, & Avellaneda, 2011). Indeed, many scholars have recognized that alternative service delivery arrangements include not only contracting but also utilization of grants, subsidies, franchises, vouchers, and volunteers (Brudney, 1987; Hatry & Valente, 1983; Morgan & England, 1988; Sundeen, 1989; Warren, 1987). In this article we focus on volunteerism as an under-examined aspect of privatization. Although Moe and many others seem to equate privatization with contracting (Hatry & Valente, 1983), we explore here the bounds of privatization in another sense: the limits of private citizens voluntarily coproducing public goods and services with paid service agents.

Paid staff employed in organizations that also enlist volunteers have long expressed a fear that volunteers might be used to perform their jobs (Scheier, 2003; Brudney, 1990). In an era when many public and nonprofit organizations are laying off paid personnel due to budget cuts and decreased tax revenues, some organizations seek to introduce volunteers on a larger scale to preserve services. To the extent that the political climate condones organizational use of volunteers to supplant paid employees, or to assume some or all of the responsibilities of these employees after they have been laid off, volunteer involvement can be seen (at least by some) as a disturbing trend in the public and nonprofit sectors.

Based on a study of a large public library system in a metropolitan unified city/county government in a southern state, this research examines the reasons for and the effects of increased volunteer involvement in public organizations. We begin with a consideration of the use of volunteers in the delivery of public services and ask the question: to what extent can and should a public organization use volunteers to assume responsibilities previously performed by paid employees? The analysis of the public library system helps us to address this question and to explore factors that provide the boundaries around volunteer work in the public sector.

Are There No Limits?

At least two trends are noteworthy to frame our discussion. The first has been the shifting focus toward New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG). The second comprises the economic trends since 2008 that have placed many public service organizations under rising fiscal stress. The former describes a general paradigm shift that has influenced indirectly the extent to which volunteers are considered ‘appropriate’ alternatives to service delivery. The latter describes a contextual dynamic that influences directly the decision to use volunteers in public organizations.

First, in contrast to traditional public management (TPM), NPM and NPG prioritize market over bureaucratic mechanisms (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000), and entrepreneurialism over managerialism (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), leading to an increased reliance on privatization, contracting and other forms of indirect/alternative service delivery. The present focus on NPG, in particular, eschews direct delivery in favor of multi-organizational, networked and cross-sectorial solutions (Osborne, 2010). In the 2010s it is not uncommon for scholars to speak of the myriad ways that private for-profit and nonprofit organizations deliver public goods and services (Moulton & Feeney, 2011; Smith, 2010)—even blurring former meanings of sector boundaries (Gottesman, 2007; Lee, 2011).

Because of the customer/citizen focus in NPM and NPG, it is perhaps not surprising that alternative service models include not only the voluntary sector and organizations, but also voluntary participation by private citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011). Although far from a new theme (Brudney, 1987; Parks, et al., 1981; Warren, 1987), Thomas’s (2012) recent book contextualizes, in part, the role of citizens in coproducing public services in NPM/NPG.

Fundamental shifts in public administrative paradigms are not the only reasons that citizen volunteerism merits attention. Recent budgetary dynamics also underscore the importance of volunteers in public organizations. Due to increasing federal and state budget cuts, including the Budget Control Act of 2011, which raised the debt-ceiling and at the same time enacted spending cuts (Stombres 2011), many public agencies are undergoing significant decreases in funding. These agencies must either determine which programs or services to cut or learn how to provide the same programs or services with fewer resources (Friend and Martinez 2010). Because human resources (employees) are often an agency’s greatest expense, many agencies have laid off employees to cut their budget sufficiently (Kelley 2011). The deficit in human resources that this action creates may force agencies to reduce programs or services (Kelley 2011). One way in which various agencies have attempted to maintain prior levels of programs and services is by recruiting volunteers to perform the work previously performed by paid employees (Volunteers: Saving libraries; running literacy programs 1976). Volunteers can be a valuable resource for agencies trying to cut their budget. This fact has raised concern from public service employees who fear that volunteers will replace them (Nicol and Johnson 2008).

As an example, one area in which volunteers have aided public agencies during times of budget cuts is in law enforcement. Volunteers can assist police agencies by performing office duties such as data entry, filing, and supply distribution, or by augmenting sworn officers in parking enforcement, ordinance violations, traffic control, special events, and other nonhazardous situations (Schmidt 2006). Such

volunteer programs have impacted law enforcement, allowing departments to extend their budgets. In one example, between 1991 and 1994, 200 volunteer deputies donated time worth \$2.5 million to one precinct, doubling the services provided to taxpayers without additional taxes (Trevino 1994). Rather than taking the place of paid officers, volunteers increased the service quality provided to the community (Schmidt 2006), by freeing police officers to focus on more urgent matters or violent crimes (McKinley 2011, p. 13). An estimated 2,100 police departments nationwide have volunteer programs (McKinley 2011).

Another area in which volunteers are used to supplement public service agents is education. Budget cuts in schools sometimes mean an increase in class size, impairing the education received by students (Saslow 1994). One way schools have attempted to prevent an increase in class size, elimination of programs, and other possible negative effects of budget cuts is by using volunteer teachers or aides (Hamilton 1993). Saslow (1994) writes that boards of education cannot purposefully lay off aides in order to replace them with unpaid volunteers, but in cases where positions have already been lost, boards can use volunteers to restore help to teachers (Saslow 1994). However, this distinction can be a difficult to make and justify.

Public libraries face similar challenges. Libraries have used volunteers for many years and for multiple purposes. Although library volunteers have traditionally performed mainly routine duties, libraries have also sought expertise in specific areas (Volunteers in libraries 1982). By using volunteers to shelve books, the Brooklyn Public Library freed its paid staff to perform other more expert tasks (Brooklyn public library 1977). Volunteers can also free paid staff to learn new skills, perform other duties, and teach new technologies (Nicol and Johnson 2008). In addition, volunteers can repair some library materials (for example, book bindings), create flyers or other publicity materials, read books or tell stories to children, and plan exhibits (Guidelines for Using Volunteers in Libraries 1971). Volunteers help to expand organizational capability, “acting as agents of change to establish new services that are later funded” (Nicol and Johnson 2007, p. 159).

This discussion raises several questions about the use of volunteers in public organizations. If the services provided by volunteers are as valuable as the literature would suggest, we would expect every public organization to use them to the utmost. Even in times of crunched budgets and economic uncertainty however, not all public organizations use volunteers, and among those organizations using volunteers, great variation exists in the extent to which volunteers are integrated into the organization and the types of services they perform. What factors explain this variation in volunteer involvement in public organizations?

Framework for Explaining Boundaries on Volunteer Work

We propose a framework for investigating the boundaries placed on volunteer work within a public organization.

Insert Figure 1 about here

As shown in Figure 1, the framework focuses on four important factors—the political and legal environment, organizational services, organizational human resources, and community characteristics. Each of these four factors either push

toward circumscribed boundaries on volunteer work, or they put pressure on an organization to enlarge the boundaries of volunteer involvement. The combination of these shrinking and expanding forces will determine the ultimate boundaries around volunteer work at a particular organization—how aggressively the organization seeks volunteers, the number of volunteer hours used, which tasks volunteers perform, how volunteers’ tasks relate to the tasks that paid staff perform, and the extent to which volunteerism is fully incorporated into and supported by the organization. This section of the paper explains each of these four factors in detail and the situations in which they have expanding or shrinking effects on the boundaries of volunteering in the organization. We draw from the literature describing the use of volunteers in public libraries to support different dimensions of the model; however, this model is equally applicable to the use of volunteers in other public organizations, such as law enforcement, education, and parks and recreation.

Political and Legal Environment. For public organizations, the political environment consists of local funding organizations, those holding political office, or others charged with public administration in the jurisdiction that have direct or indirect influence over a particular public organization. We are also mindful of the ways in which law constrains and enables public organizations with respect to volunteer use. For example, Brudney (1990) points out that politics and law often jointly shape public organizations in this regard. Public organizations can have legal restrictions concerning their use of volunteers, and that in some cases legislation must be enacted to relieve them to expand the boundaries of volunteer use. Martinez (2003) similarly notes the role of politics in shaping the controversial topic of volunteer tort liability, and the role of the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997. Indeed, empirical research (Horwitz & Mead, 2009) suggests that legal immunity protections and “the political will to protect volunteers” (p. 620) are direct correlates of volunteer rates. In the library context this issue may arise if certain tasks (working with patron records, tutoring, etc.) were transferred to volunteers because of potential confidentiality issues, safety concerns, or interactions with vulnerable populations, such as children. Although volunteers can often perform these tasks, they might require more extensive training, background checks, and liability insurance.

Beyond legal implications, the political environment can have an expanding influence on the boundaries of volunteer work when political leaders pressure organizations to use more volunteers. The impetus for this pressure is manifold, for example, to please voters or save the organization money or preserve services. In fact, we would expect that during difficult budgetary times, such as a recession, the political environment will push organizations to use volunteers or incorporate them to a greater extent. This scenario describes libraries. Because public libraries tend to receive most of their funding from city or county governments, political figures often tout the financial savings from using volunteers. For example, a volunteer program in Hurst, Texas is recognized for saving the library over \$165,000 in three and a half years (Hurst, Texas, 1983). Salt Lake County’s Library System saved \$115,864 thanks to the 598 volunteers who donated 16,414 hours (Quinn and Rogers 1991). The Metropolitan Library System of Oklahoma City determined that its 561 volunteers donated 10,671 hours, roughly the equivalent of 5.13 staff members; valued at the

minimum wage, volunteers saved the library \$35,748 (Volunteers in libraries: Reports from all over 1982). Similar contributions from volunteers have prevented the closing of library branches in the face of large budget cuts. After county supervisors voted to shut down the 19-branch library system serving Merced County, California, volunteers were able to keep three locations open (Marquand and St. Lifer, 1994). In the case of the Robbinsdale Branch Library of the Hennepin County Library, the library board voted to keep the branch open only if staffed largely by volunteers (Volunteers: Saving libraries; running literacy programs 1976). Due to diminished funding in the 1990s, the Makiki Community Library is now operated exclusively through donations and volunteers (Mathews 2011). Similarly, the Washington State Library opened two libraries completely staffed by volunteers (Volunteers Run Libraries, Work for Peace Corps 1976). The cost savings associated with volunteer use generally appeals to library funders and board members.

The political environment can also have a shrinking effect on the boundaries of volunteer work. For instance, during good economic times, there will be less pressure from politicians and the public to use volunteers to deliver public services because taxes are robust and budgets are larger. Volunteer use becomes less of a politically motivated issue in this kind of resource environment. Additionally, the presence of an active public employee union can also provide incentives to shrink the boundaries of volunteer work. Public employee unions can react against pressure from the political environment to use volunteers because of fears about volunteers taking the jobs of employees or decreasing compensation. In fact, negotiating the use of volunteers in a unionized environment proves to be more difficult and time-consuming; in unionized environments volunteer roles in the libraries were more limited (Curry, 1996). In this way, the political environment can serve to restrict the use of the volunteers and the activities that they perform.

Organizational Services. The next major factor pertaining to the boundaries of volunteer work is organizational services. This factor encompasses two related dimensions—the professional nature of public services and the variety and types of services offered. Many public sector careers are embedded within a profession, such as libraries, police departments, and social work. A large number of the tasks performed by these individuals require education and training, often at the masters degree level. This provision would preclude the use of volunteers to perform professional tasks, except in rare instances when a volunteer has the requisite education or training. The more specialized, professional tasks that the organization performs, the more circumscribed volunteer work at the organization will be. The second dimension is the variety and type of services offered (beyond the professional or non-professional nature of the services). Some tasks lend themselves to volunteer work more easily than others. For instance, repetitive tasks that do not require significant training are easier to pass onto volunteers. Other tasks might pose a greater liability, as discussed previously, or may be considered too complex or too rewarding for professional staff to delegate to volunteers. Thus, professional services and other characteristics of the services offered by the organization can have a shrinking or expanding influence on the boundaries of volunteer work.

One of the most challenging tasks for libraries that have used volunteers is determining what the volunteers will do while trying to protect the professional

nature of many of the services offered by libraries. Contrary to the guidelines set forth by the American Library Association for using volunteers in libraries, a volunteer program has sometimes replaced paid employees (Guidelines for Using Volunteers in Libraries, 1971). Particularly in a difficult economy, those who help determine library budgets may consider the myriad duties performed by library employees and ask, “Could not aides or volunteers do half the work professionals do and three-quarters the work that nonprofessionals do?” (Anderson, Brose, and Chandler 1991, p. 1). Others hope that “the money that library volunteers save will be applied to the infinite number of things to be done only by trained professionals or those workers who perform difficult or unpleasant jobs nobody will do without pay” (Cohen 2010, p. 17). According to this view, the use of volunteers would be transferring a job rather than eliminating one, yet librarians may be laid off at the expense of employees in a different field (Cohen 2010). The American Library Association and other authorities recognize, however, that although volunteers can help a library operate more efficiently and offer more services, they cannot do much of the professional work performed by trained librarians. Studies have shown that replacing paid staff with volunteers may adversely affect the services offered by the library. In one case, when middle school libraries began to be staffed by parent volunteers, checkout rates decreased by 31 percent (Nicol and Johnson 2008). These results indicate that libraries do not run as well in the absence of paid professional staff.

A 1980 survey of volunteers in the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped revealed that 73 percent of the 144 libraries surveyed used volunteers. The ALA guidelines notwithstanding, in more than half of these libraries the ALA standards for volunteer programs were not met. The main problem reported was that the volunteers performed essential services, and that the duties of employees and volunteers overlapped (Nicol and Johnson 2008). The most common criticism of volunteers in libraries is their threat to paid employees when used as substitutes (Nicol and Johnson 2008). Ironically, a successful volunteer program can not only discourage the hiring of paid staff but also perpetuate low funding, thus threatening service hours and quality (Brudney, 1990).

Human Resources. The third factor pertains to the human resources of the public organization; this factor encompasses three important dimensions: staff capacity (to deliver services), staff receptivity to volunteers, and volunteer management capacity. Reduced staff capacity, especially due to lay-offs or a reduction in force, can exert pressure on the organization to use more volunteers. Smaller, more rural organizations tend to have less staff capacity than larger, urban organizations. Conversely, increased staff capacity will reduce the pressure to use volunteers in service delivery. The influence of these forces can be seen in library services. Although most public libraries are not forced to the extreme of an exclusively volunteer staff to maintain existence, some libraries depend more on volunteer work than others. For example, smaller libraries use volunteers more often than their larger counterparts (Volunteers: Saving libraries; running literacy programs 1976). Small libraries are often entirely operated by volunteers (Nicol and Johnson 2008). Under the United We Serve national campaign begun by President Obama libraries of all sizes were encouraged to enlist volunteers to engage more Americans in service. Both the White House and the American Library Association encouraged

libraries to post volunteer opportunities online on the United We Serve website (Oder, et. al. 2009).

Staff receptivity to volunteers is another dimension of human resources that can affect the boundaries of volunteer work. As mentioned earlier, unionized environments sometimes provide the most resistance to using volunteers because of the threat of job loss or decreased wages. Even in non-union environments, staff can feel threatened by volunteers, or they may be reluctant to work with volunteers, especially if they have had bad experiences with them in the past (Schier, 2003). Staff might also be reluctant to work with volunteers because of the time costs involved in training and supervising volunteers and answering their questions. Greater staff receptivity to volunteers will serve to increase the boundaries of volunteer work, while staff resistance will tend to shrink the boundaries of volunteer work.

Some staff members remain strongly opposed to the use of volunteers in libraries. This sentiment was especially strong during the 1970s union movement in libraries (Nicol and Johnson 2008) and still continues to a lesser extent at this writing. A survey of public libraries in Suffolk County, New York reported some of the reasons why approximately half of the 28 surveyed libraries refused volunteers, including unreliability, irregular hours, and the general public's confusion of volunteers with paid staff (Volunteers: Saving libraries; running literacy programs 1976). Others point to ethical and legal issues arising from volunteer involvement. For example, libraries may be held liable for injuries to volunteers in the library, and volunteers may present a problem for confidentiality if they have access to patrons' records (Nicol and Johnson 2008). Another criticism of volunteers is that they require training and supervision and consequently, should not be regarded as free help (Nicol and Johnson 2007). One of the greatest ethical difficulties surrounding the use of volunteers in libraries and other public services is the potential for volunteer workers to replace paid workers, leaving some librarians and other government employees without jobs (Cohen 2010). In addition, volunteers raise the scepter of decreased service quality and continuity (Brudney, 1990).

Volunteer management capacity is another important dimension of the human resource pressures surrounding volunteer use. Many organizations have long accepted the myth that volunteers are a free resource. However, it takes time and other organizational resources to effectively recruit, train, supervise and retain a significant volunteer workforce. In addition, a successful volunteer program requires planning and organizational commitment from top-level executives (Ellis, 2010). Organizations that do not have the understanding or capacity to go through this planning process or provide a strong infrastructure for volunteering will tend to have more circumscribed volunteer programs and use fewer volunteers. Organizations that are fully committed and understand volunteer management best practices will tend to have larger volunteer programs and will use volunteers in more creative and expansive ways.

Volunteer programs cannot be started upon a whim. Managers in libraries must evaluate whether a volunteer program would be beneficial to their library, and then attend to "issues such as volunteer demographics, motivation, management, work tasks, and reward and recognition" (Nicol and Johnson 2008, p. 154). The volunteer program under consideration must fit with the library mission and be grounded in information and library science theory. Managers should also consider current

advances in technology (Nicol and Johnson 2008). Further, to avoid problems in volunteer programs, the American Library Association has proposed guidelines to promote a successful volunteer program. These guidelines encompass: prior planning by library staff and board; training, evaluating, and recognizing volunteers; clarification of liability, compensation, and legal issues; prohibiting volunteers from performing essential functions or replacing paid staff; assigning volunteers meaningful work that they feel comfortable performing; hiring a coordinator of volunteers; creating detailed job descriptions; scheduling volunteers realistically; and cooperating with organizations such as parent teacher associations to foster volunteer assistance (Guidelines for Using Volunteers in Libraries 1971).

Community Characteristics. The fourth and final factor relevant to the boundaries of volunteer use at an organization pertains to the demographics of the community in which the organization is embedded. Previous research has shown that individual demographics are strong predictors of volunteering, and to the extent that communities reflect these demographics, we would expect to see more similar trends (Musick and Wilson, 2008). For example, in wealthier neighborhoods that have higher education and more retirees, one would expect more volunteering, and in disadvantaged neighborhoods, less volunteering. Volunteers tend to be female, middle-aged and have children. Retirees are often among those available to volunteer, so areas with a higher percentage of retirees or empty-nesters will have a larger pool of potential volunteers. Organizations located in disadvantaged or minority neighborhoods often have a more difficult time recruiting volunteers. Thus, the local supply of volunteers can influence the boundaries of volunteer work.

Illustration of Framework using a Large City-County Library System

To illustrate the framework that we have proposed, we focus on a large public library system in an urban area in the South (referred to as “the Library” in this article). Entering 2010, the system comprised 24 locations throughout the county, including small branches in several cities. In 2010, the Library encountered a crisis: Because of the downturn in the economy, the Library, which received the preponderance of its funding from the county, faced a drastic \$15 million dollar decrease in its budget, amounting to a 39 percent reduction in its annual operating budget (Task Force 2011). With such a large budget cut, the Library, a personnel-intensive organization, had no choice but to reduce the number of staff members. In response to its budget cuts, the public Library laid-off approximately 175 staff members, or about 35 percent of its workforce. With the loss of these staff members, the Library closed four smaller library branches and dramatically reduced the number of hours the other Library locations were to be open to the public. In response to external pressures from local political leaders and the public to keep the libraries open more hours, the Library determined to double its use of volunteers to help preserve Library services.

In this section of the article, we illustrate the four components of our framework—the political and legal environment, the type and nature of services, human resource capacity, and community demographics—using information about the Library system and its response to a funding crisis. The data for this analysis come from in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews with Library executives, board members, and local government leaders conducted by the researchers in Fall 2011. In

total, we interviewed 21 individuals about the use of volunteers at the public Library and the decision to double the number of volunteer hours. We use quotations from these interviews and historical data provided by the Library to illustrate the interplay among the four factors in our framework and how they defined the boundaries of volunteer work in this publicly-funded organization. Ultimately, the confluence of these factors led to an increased role for volunteers in the Library.

Library's Political and Legal Environment. The first pressure from the political environment related to the boundaries of volunteer work was the large budget cuts the Library sustained in 2010. Because of the nature of the services it provides, the Library is a human-resource intensive organization, meaning that the bulk of the Library's budget is spent on salaries. When the Library's budget cuts necessitated a staff layoff, Library executives began to think more seriously about using volunteers in expanded ways. The Library had been using volunteers for almost a decade, but new pressures arose to increase the number of volunteers used by the Library. One Library executive described the situation this way:

So knowing that we had fewer staff we began to think, 'How can we use volunteers more?' We also had, you know, the outcry from the community where many people thought, 'Well, can't you just replace the staff with volunteers? Just go and find enough volunteers.' We knew that wasn't reality, but there was also that request from the community. So we thought 'How can we consider using volunteers more or differently than we had in the past?

The budget crisis faced by the Library had an expanding influence on the boundaries of volunteer work, meaning that the Library planned to actively recruit more volunteers.

Direct pressure also arose from local political leaders for the Library to use more volunteers. Most of the Library branches are located in one large city within the county, but several Library locations were found in small townships within the county. Each of the Library locations in these townships lost two or more days of service per week because of the reduction in budget and staff across the Library system. The leaders of four of these townships—the mayors and city managers—entered into a formal Inter-Local Cooperation Agreement with the Library. The agreement with the Library entailed one-time financial support from the townships to the Library on the condition that the Library would use volunteers to restore a day of service at each of the four Library branches located in the townships. The mayors of these towns would also appoint a Town Liaison to help with volunteer recruitment to make the initiative successful. Because the inter-local agreement specifically included the use of volunteers as one of the conditions for providing the one-time funding, additional pressure mounted on the Library to increase its use of volunteers. Overall, the political pressures on the Library in 2010 served to increase the boundaries of volunteer use at the Library. In response to these political pressures, the Library determined to recruit and train more volunteers. In fact, the Library set a goal to double the number of volunteer hours in 2010.

Interestingly, the Library's political environment has also dampened expectations for volunteer use at the Library. These expectations emerged from a Task Force comprised of community members and local leaders that was commissioned to report their observations, recommendations, and strategies for a sustainable future for the Library. Beginning in March 2011, the Task Force examined the status of the Library prior to the funding reductions in fiscal year 2011, Library funding trends, community opinion regarding the Library, alternative solutions for making the best use of limited resources, and recommendations for the future funding and operation of the Library. By comparing the Library system to 13 peer libraries of similar size or from similar cities, the Task Force determined that the Library was not overfunded, overbuilt, overvalued, or undervalued before the budget cuts. The Task Force recommended that the Library set a target of volunteer hours comprising 5 percent of total staffing hours based on comparison with peer libraries. Although the current (2012) rate of volunteer hours is approximately 9 percent, the Task Force did not believe that this rate will be sustainable after the urgency of the current situation dissipates. The Task Force asserted that volunteer assistance is not a solution for long-term funding issues, and that volunteers cannot fill long-term staffing needs. At this point, volunteer hours allowed the Library to extend hours, but the volunteers will not be able to run the Library if further layoffs occur. Thus, very direct information emanating from the Library's political and legal environment indicated that volunteers should not be used at the Library in an unlimited way, but that a reasonable cap on volunteer hours as compared to staff hours should be maintained.

Library's Organizational Services. The nature of the services provided by the Library also influenced the boundaries of volunteer work at the organization. The professional nature of Library services limited the tasks that volunteers could perform. Library science is a professional degree at the masters level that provides special training in topics as diverse as: cataloging Library materials, developing Library collections, providing recommendations to readers, and answering reference questions. As part of the process of increasing the number of volunteer hours in 2010, the Library executives consulted with staff members, asking them what tasks they felt volunteers should or should not perform to help the Library. The staff registered very strong opinions regarding what they felt were appropriate tasks for volunteers. As one executive indicated:

They don't want volunteers checking out materials, they don't want volunteers doing what librarians are educated to do. So checking out of materials, answering questions on the floor, they don't even want them answering the telephone. They don't want them to do anything with readers, story times, and reading times. That was a very hard lesson I had to learn about some of the territory. That is uniquely their job; they don't want anyone taking it.

Library staff overall did not feel that volunteers should have access to confidential patron records in the computer system, which would preclude them from checking books in and out. They also did not want volunteers answering the phones, handling money, sitting at a reference desk, or planning Library programs. Through this consultation process, it was determined that volunteers would be used primarily for

such tasks as shelving books and pulling holds, i.e., removing from the stacks materials requested by patrons.

Ultimately, the internal discussions at the Library had the effect of identifying those areas of Library work that were best suited to trained Library professionals—the professional core—and identifying other support tasks that volunteers could effectively perform. One Library executive described it this way:

We needed volunteers to do those things because we really need the staff to focus on those key things that volunteers couldn't do. So that kind of direct interaction with customers really around library business, we needed staff to do that and with such finite resource we needed their time there and not some of the things that we thought volunteers could do for us.

The end result was that volunteer activities were designed to be complementary to staff activities. These activities were determined in such a way that they freed up staff time to deal more directly with Library patrons, through such tasks as answering reference questions or planning programs. Thus, the nature of the services the Library provided, especially those services that required professional training, served to limit the types of tasks that volunteers were asked to perform.

Beyond the limiting effect of professional services, the nature and types of services offered also affect the boundaries around volunteer work. Although each of the twenty Library locations are component parts of a central Library system with a single director, CEO and Board of Trustees, there is still a great deal of variation in the extent to which each Library service is provided or used at each location. For instance, some locations have higher circulation while other locations have more demand for computer assistance or reference assistance. In speaking of Library locations in disadvantaged communities, one Library executive pointed out:

But the folks that come in would want, require, need, ask for much more one-on-one assistance from staff. So it's just different. I think it requires kind of a different model there. [Other library locations in more affluent areas are] busting at the seams with how many books are coming in.... So, those have just really needed volunteers in some different ways than a couple of our other locations.

The nature of the services offered at each Library branch can make that location more or less conducive to volunteer work. Those locations with high circulation have more opportunities to use volunteers. Conversely, locations with more one-on-one staff services will have less room for volunteers, especially given the professional nature of many of these services. Thus, the services offered at each Library location can have an expanding or shrinking influence on the boundaries of volunteer work—meaning the types of tasks volunteers can perform and the number of volunteers the branch can support.

Library's Human Resources. The third factor pertaining to the boundaries on volunteer work pertains to the human resources within the organization—staff receptivity to volunteers, staff capacity, and volunteer management capacity. After a large staff layoff, Library staff members were suffering from low morale, concerns

about the future, and worries about their job security. Although most Library executives agree that Library staff members have become more positive about working with volunteers than they were in 2010, one Library executive said:

I still see that some people are just not onboard. I still see that there are some branches, and some managers that just feel like that they don't have to do it. I still think that they are not convinced that volunteers are a good resource. They are not convinced that the staff should be binding the volunteer component. So there is still some push back from staff whether or not this is a good deal for us. And that is still an issue.

Not all staff members were equally receptive to using volunteers at their Library location. Those staff members who had had previous negative experiences with unreliable volunteers tended to feel less confident about the move to double the number of volunteer hours system-wide.

Staff capacity also serves to expand and shrink the boundaries of volunteer work. Organizations with lower staff capacity will generally seek out more volunteers and use them in more creative ways than organizations that have more staff capacity. Because volunteers are an unpaid human resource, they serve to bolster staff capacity. Many organizations seek to increase volunteer engagement after a layoff in order to restore or maintain their previous service levels. In the case of the Library, 74 percent of the annual operating budget is spent on personnel, so the 2010 budget cuts resulted in a 35 percent reduction in force, or approximately 175 jobs lost. The substantial number of employees lost at the beginning of 2010 produced a substantial reduction in staff capacity at the Library. This reduction in staff capacity served to increase the boundaries on volunteer work by creating conditions where more volunteers would be used to deliver library services. This situation was particularly acute for the Library locations situated in the four townships involved in the inter-local agreement. Without volunteers, it would have been impossible to keep the library open an additional day a week.

Volunteer management capacity forms another boundary of volunteer work. Having some knowledge of volunteer management and the infrastructure to manage volunteers (such as having a volunteer coordinator, a planned-out volunteer program, policies and procedures for the volunteer program, and volunteer job descriptions) helps to enlarge the boundaries of volunteer use at an organization by increasing its capacity to incorporate more volunteers and to use them more effectively. Organizations that do not have an established volunteer management infrastructure or that misunderstand volunteers as a free resource (Rhenborg, et al., 2009) will have less capacity to use volunteers on a large scale or to have a volunteer program that will remain effective over time.

At the time of the 2010 budget cuts, the Library had an established volunteer management program. For several years, the Library had a volunteer coordinator who would oversee the use of volunteers throughout the Library system. The volunteer coordinator created a volunteer management program, including written job descriptions for volunteers, policies for the volunteer program, and training materials. At each library location, a volunteer point person was designated—a staff

person who would be responsible for managing the volunteers at that specific location. The volunteer coordinator would train the volunteer point persons at each location and provide them with ongoing support. The pre-existence of this infrastructure at the time of the budget cuts made it possible for the library to double its use of volunteers in 2010. In order to meet the inter-local agreement made with the four townships, the Library would have to scramble over a period of about five months to recruit and train enough volunteers to provide an additional day of service at each of these locations in the townships by October 2010. Without this infrastructure in place, it is doubtful that the Library could have been successful in meeting its goals for volunteer involvement.

Despite the overall strong volunteer management capacity at the Library, the Library had to concentrate on using volunteers to meet immediate needs rather than using volunteer talents and interests in more creative ways. One Library executive pointed out that before the budget cuts:

We were really focusing on the path where we tried to say, “Volunteers, tell us about your talents and skills and we’ll try to match something.” We reverted back to the: “This is what we have and this is what we need volunteers for”....I think it’s a lot more labor intensive on the staff to find those volunteers, to find that right match, to coordinate and schedule and use volunteer talents wisely. It’s just...it’s more labor intensive on staff, I think. And so again it doesn’t lend itself to mass appeal, mass recruitment, mass training orientation. It’s very much more customized to the volunteers, which takes more time.

As this executive recounted, using volunteers in more creative ways and matching their talents to tasks at the Library would have taken a much heavier investment of staff time. That fact combined with the immediate needs of the Library to shelve books due to the staff lay-offs circumscribed the types of activities that volunteers would be asked to perform throughout the Library system.

Library’s Community Characteristics. The final expanding/shrinking effect on the boundaries of volunteerism is community demographics. Organizations positioned in less advantaged communities tend to have more difficulty recruiting and retaining enough volunteers. This condition certainly applied to the Library. One Library executive expressed a question that Library executives had asked themselves when planning for an increased use of volunteers:

Was there a natural kind of resident population near that library location that would be able and willing to volunteer during the hours that we needed them to volunteer? Not that they don’t care about their library but their...it may not work within their life schedule to volunteer when we needed them to volunteer.

Another library executive echoed this point:

I think those who have the hardest time are [lists Library locations in disadvantaged neighborhoods]. I think they have the hardest time because they have people who are working or looking for jobs, and most of us know that the

white female who is fairly educated and affluent are typically the ones that volunteer.

Because of community demographics, wide variation exists in the extent to which locations within the Library system have been able to recruit volunteers. Some locations have no problems with recruiting and have had a steady stream of volunteer applications, while other locations struggle to maintain less than half a dozen volunteers.

Implications

This article has presented and illustrated a four-dimensional framework for understanding the boundaries placed around volunteer work within an organization. This framework has important implications for the use of volunteers in public organizations. First, our study reveals the importance of the political and legal environment in creating more (or less) volunteer use in organizations. In our study the most important factor in expanding use of volunteers in the Library system was the political environment. Not only did this environment become less munificent financially, forcing libraries to make changes, but it also specified and incentivized volunteer involvement. All of our interviews, field work, and related research demonstrate that in the absence of drastic changes in the political environment, volunteer use in the Library system would have continued at the same modest level and raised no challenges. The advent of the fiscal crisis, the enactment of the inter-local agreement, and the mandate to increase volunteer use, however, altered the political environment fundamentally so that volunteerism had to be re-thought and re-engineered. Even with a volunteer program in place and presumably seeking greater volunteer involvement, our interviewees perceived little/no reason to escalate volunteer use prior to these changes. Many public organizations need the push from the political environment either to begin using volunteers or to expand their tasks. This factor helps to explain why some public organizations use volunteers and others do not—because of the expectations and directives from the political environment.

A second implication is that although organizations may respond positively to a push from the political environment to use more volunteers, they will react by striving to identify and buffer the professional core of their services from volunteer involvement. We have described the process used by the Library to identify which tasks volunteers should perform. This process began with Library executives specifying the tasks that librarians felt were most essential, requiring professional training or expertise or raising confidentiality issues. These tasks were then restricted from volunteers. In this way the professional core duties of the libraries provided a limit on the use of volunteers within the organization: The technical core was identified and buffered against volunteers. Buffering the professional core serves to limit the types of tasks that volunteers will perform for the organization. This illustration shows that a natural reaction for public organizations feeling a political push to use volunteers will be to circumscribe volunteer tasks by preventing them from carrying out more professionally-oriented responsibilities.

A third implication is that staff receptivity can potentially limit volunteer work, and that it is imperative that top-level managers seek to obtain employee support, understanding and buy-in when large changes in a volunteer program are made. Library executives have indicated that staff attitudes toward using volunteers have changed dramatically over the past year as they have used volunteers to expand service hours. Yet, some staff members feel more positively than others. Employees also vary in the extent to which they believe that volunteers should be involved in the work of the Library. In general, however, the Library executives had to work hard to get staff buy-in to a large increase in the use of volunteers and to make this a smooth transition for staff. In the initial stages, these attitudes conditioned the types of activities for which staff members were willing to consider using volunteers. Until they had positive experiences with volunteers and had seen the volunteer program work successfully, they were not willing to consider using volunteers in other ways. Our interviews indicate wide variation across Library locations in the types of activities that volunteers are asked to perform, and that these ideas can change over time.

A fourth implication is that community demographics can limit or expand the boundaries of volunteer work. Public organizations under pressure to use volunteers might not be able to recruit and retain sufficient volunteers to contribute effectively to organizational goals. The interviewees told us about the difficulties of recruiting volunteers in more disadvantaged communities.

We recognize several limitations in this research related to time, place, and service domain. As a case study, generalization must be limited. We draw upon parallel research from law enforcement and education, but we recognize that citizen coproduction of library services may have unique features. Nevertheless, we hope that this rich case study will serve as a preliminary step in clarifying the “functional placement and organizational management” (Moe, 1987, 458) of public goods and services produced by citizen volunteers. Although this research describes conditions and situations specific to the Library, the factors identified in the framework for the boundaries of volunteer work will be encountered by other public organizations—whether they have been using volunteers previously or not.

Conclusion and Future Research

Although made almost a quarter century ago, Moe’s (1987) suggestion with which this article began to consider sector characteristics in the functional assignment of the provision of public goods and services is as relevant as ever, especially in the present context of New Public Management/Governance and fiscal austerity. As a field of study, public management has done much to explore the limits of privatization in the area of contracting. However, the limits of privatization are less understood insofar as private citizen volunteers are concerned.

Based on a comprehensive case study of a library system’s increased use of citizen volunteers, we have begun to illuminate the broader question of the boundaries of volunteer involvement in public organizations. We developed a framework of four factors that affect the size of the boundaries that are placed around volunteer work, meaning the number of volunteers used, the amount of involvement (for example, hours), and the types of tasks allocated to volunteers.

These factors comprise the political and legal environment, the nature and type of organizational services, the human resource capacity and receptivity of the organization (including the capacity to manage volunteers), and community demographics. Together these factors set the boundaries around volunteer work at a public organization.

In future research we hope to explore these factors in greater detail and to examine the extent to which different public service areas are affected by these factors. We also hope to explore the effect that a major increase in the use of volunteers has on employees, volunteers, and clients of an organization. To address these and other questions, Bozeman (1988) provides a useful theoretical perspective that functional placement across sectors is fluid. As such, an institutional approach that focuses specifically on library services, but draws upon broader organization theory,¹ may be used to identify “what structures seem to perform well for particular sets of public problems” (Bozeman, 1988, p. 673). As scholars and practitioners continue to explore the boundaries of privatization, we believe that our investigation of volunteers will help to clarify the intersection of sector, function, and management in the delivery of publicly-financed services.

¹ Thompson’s (2003) classic *Organizations in Action* provides one possible approach, with its focus on those variables that concern distinguishing core functions and technologies (e.g., only professional librarians perform) and buffering functions and technologies (e.g., where volunteers may be used to buffer, rather than provide those core technologies).

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Figure 1: Expanding and Shrinking Forces on Boundaries on Volunteer Work

