THE CHALLENGES OF VOLUNTARISM:
The Family Matters Project in Houston

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A CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY ACTION

The Communitarian
NETWORK

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THE CHALLENGES OF VOLUNTARISM

When Sandy Breslauer sold her small business and retired, she was surprised at how lonely she became. A sociable and spirited woman, Sandy was still involved in many activities. But now that she was no longer working, Sandy became aware of a growing distance between herself and her husband Steve. “We were just off on two different paths,” says Sandy. It wasn’t just that Steve was still working, while Sandy was not. Even activities the two had in common, like volunteering to bring meals to people with AIDS, they did separately. “There are just so few things that we do together that are fun. He did his work, I did my work, he did his thing, I did my thing . . . but basically we didn’t do anything together.”

It hadn’t always been that way. In addition to raising two children of their own, the Breslauers had for many years acted as informal “foster” parents to runaways and strung-out youths who appeared at their door after hearing about their kindness from other runaways. The kids sometimes stayed as long as five years in the Breslauers’ home. As much as Sandy’s retirement, it was the empty nest caused by the departure of their last “foster” child that forced the Breslauers to confront signs of trouble in their marriage.

Sandy and Steve found an answer to their difficulty, however: volunteering together. It began with Steve’s decision to join Sandy in learning the art of clowning. Clowning was Sandy’s fantasy, but Steve decided he should make time for something he and Sandy could share.

At their clown classes, the Breslauers created complementary clown personae: as Peanuts and Popcorn, they developed short routines where they could play off one another. At the class they learned about volunteer clowning “gigs,” and when they heard about the opportunity to entertain children at Texas Children’s Hospital one half-day a week, they jumped at the opportunity.
Every Thursday morning Steve and Sandy arrive—already made up and in costume—at the hospital’s volunteer office to fetch the B’nai Brith Humor Cart and load it up with that week’s surprises: spider rings, rubber balls, noisemakers, Chinese yo-yos, and other small toys that they buy by the gross to give to children on the wards. Together they wheel the cart to the elevator and head up to the floors. Some children are there for a day of testing, some are in for 11 weeks of chemotherapy, others for even longer stays.

Often the parents keeping long vigils need to be entertained as much as the children. Sandy has, on occasion, comforted a weeping parent while Steve played with the child—and they often receive grateful thanks from parents who are happy simply to see their child smile. Sandy describes the parents’ reaction. “When the two of us come in and we clown around, you can almost see that look of ‘It’s going to be okay, it’s going to get better.’”

One of the Breslauers’ own children died at the age of 12, and Sandy feels this experience gives them a special kinship with the frightened parents they encounter on the ward. Sandy describes one encounter in the ward playroom with a mother whose face told her the whole story. “Having been through a terminal illness with my own child, I recognized that face immediately. I . . . said to her, ‘Is one of these your children?’, and the tears started to run down her face and she said, ‘No, my child has just gone for treatment,’ and I said, ‘Why don’t you and I just walk back to the room together?’ She just needed somebody to listen to her say, ‘I’m angry, I’m scared.’ I think because we’ve been there we are able to play with the mother as well as the child. To me that’s equally as important.”

The parents and children in the hospital are not the only ones who benefit from Peanuts’s and Popcorn’s antics. Operating the humor cart has done much to enrich their marriage, say Sandy and Steve. Clowning brings out a side of Steve that Sandy loves but doesn’t often get to see; normally reserved and introverted, he becomes an enthusiastic performer when he’s in
costume. They like the sense of complementing one another, just as they did when they were raising children. And beyond the two hours they spend clowning on Thursday mornings and the 90 minutes beforehand spent dressing and applying makeup, they pass countless hours together shopping for new costume parts ("You try finding size 17 sneakers!") and inexpensive toys for the children, as well as practicing routines and magic tricks. But most of all they love the clowning itself.

"After we're here for a couple of hours, we're on a high on the way home; it's really exciting to be here with the kids, it's really a great deal of fun," says Steve. "Tremendous satisfaction and joy. We'll talk and we'll be very bubbly and so on. . . . There's a benefit to us as a team. Any time you do something together it strengthens the bonds between you." Steve pauses a moment to reflect. "It certainly has, it's brought us closer together."

The experience of Steve and Sandy Breslauer illustrates both the special gifts that volunteers bring to their work and the benefits that families can draw from volunteering together. Considerable evidence exists that serving together can help to strengthen families, the most fundamental unit of community.

But most volunteer jobs are for individuals, not families; and the story of how the Breslauers' joint volunteer position came to exist is not as simple as one might expect. Their placement at Texas Children's Hospital was created as part of a national initiative to increase family volunteering. The program is called Family Matters and it has six pilot test sites, one of which is Houston, where the Breslauers are. And while the initiative, now in its third year, is seeing some success, it has been a long time coming.

The idea of meeting social needs through voluntary action appeals to us in part because it sounds spontaneous and cheap. But in reality, nothing could be farther from the truth. Managing a successful volunteer initiative requires careful planning, skill, experience, and some-
times money. Changing long-standing systems for deploying volunteers—even an apparently small change like a move from individual to family volunteering—is a difficult and slow process. This case study, which traces the progress of the Family Matters initiative in Houston, will illustrate the difficulties of creating and maintaining good volunteer programs—and the kinds of barriers faced by efforts to move the field of voluntary action in any new direction.

A NATIONAL INITIATIVE

Family Matters was initiated in 1991 by The Points of Light Foundation (POLF), a nonpartisan nonprofit that aims to increase and improve voluntary action in the U.S. In a 1991 survey, POLF found that many agencies that use volunteers encourage families to volunteer together—while others wanted to deploy volunteer families, but reported strong barriers to doing so.

The survey, which includes about 500 nonprofit organizations, religious organizations, corporations, volunteer centers, and family service agencies around the country, defined "family" as any intergenerational unit of people who consider themselves a family.

The results were instructive. More than half of the respondents reported using family volunteers, and one quarter said that half or more of their volunteers worked in family groups. Of those organizations that employed family volunteers, 97 percent said that family voluntarism is effective and benefits families in ways beyond volunteering alone. Members of families who volunteered together found it more fun than serving alone, said it helped to strengthen family bonds, and thought of it as an opportunity to teach children values of service and community involvement.
Advantages of engaging family volunteers, according to the agencies, include a chance to obtain more volunteers at once. They also reported that families make a stronger commitment to volunteering and volunteer with greater frequency than the individual volunteer.

But alongside the strong positive response, many organizations reported troublesome barriers to family volunteering. Nearly 49 percent cited difficulty in coordinating family schedules; 42 percent said it was tough to include young children in their projects; almost 40 percent said their volunteer jobs were designed for individuals, not groups. A variety of other barriers were cited as well: transportation problems, liability and insurance concerns, and the difficulty of creating placements that offered enough variety to interest all the members of a family.

The study results seemed to outline a challenge: family volunteering is worthwhile, respondents were saying, but they needed help in getting started. To respond to this challenge, the POLF secured funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to initiate Family Matters as a three-year pilot project. Family Matters would provide money for experimentation at six test sites, where, it was hoped, useful models for engaging family volunteers would be developed; these models could then be replicated elsewhere. At the same time, the Foundation would seek to publicize these efforts in hopes of inspiring families around the country to consider volunteering together.

**There's No Such Thing as a Free Volunteer**

The Volunteer Center of Houston was selected as one of the first test sites for Family Matters. The center was awarded a three-year grant, with the amount of the grant diminishing each year to encourage local funders to adopt the program if it proved successful. In the first year, the grant was sufficient to pay the salary and expenses of a full-time coordinator for
Family Matters. The person hired for the job in Houston was Sharon Ervine, a divorced mother and a longtime participant in family volunteer activities with her three daughters.

Ervine started by calling a meeting of volunteer administrators from local nonprofit agencies to discuss ideas for the new program. Their response was far from enthusiastic.

“Parents will use us as a babysitting service,” objected one administrator.

“Families will get into fights on site, in front of clients,” said another.

“Families could never make the kind of time commitment we require.”

“Small children will only get underfoot.”

“Families will be difficult to supervise.”

“It’s just going to make more work for us.”

“All we thought of was negative, negative, negative,” remembers Patti Noser, Assistant Director of Volunteer Services at Texas Children’s Hospital, who was present at the meeting. “The idea of having younger children. . . . You have to think of job descriptions, you have to think: are there liability issues, and what about the other volunteers? What are they going to say? It just seemed like a bother, to be honest.”

The unenthusiastic reception was disappointing—but it didn’t deter Ervine or her boss, Volunteer Center Executive Director Carrie Moffitt. They knew that volunteers, while a tremendous boon to many agencies and programs, do not come without strings attached. In fact, they can raise many sticky managerial problems.
The benefits volunteers bring to organizations that serve the community are clear. First, volunteers can greatly extend an agency’s reach. They increase the number of heads and hands available to do the work the agency has set out to accomplish. They also bring a uniquely personal touch to the services provided by hospitals and shelters, food distribution networks, museums, and all kinds of community agencies. In addition, they create important links of loyalty and information-sharing between agencies, the communities they serve, and the volunteers’ own professional and personal networks. At their best, volunteers can become informal but powerful advocates for the goals of the organizations where they serve, helping to build a base of support and goodwill in the larger community.

“Volunteers are our best ambassadors to the community,” says Tyrrell Hill, Director of Volunteer Services at Houston’s M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. “I’ve heard volunteers say, ‘Don’t go anywhere else.’ The volunteers recruit patients, and they become educators for cancer prevention.”

Virginia Austin, POLF’s Vice President for Nonprofit Outreach, says volunteers are important partners in any effort to create social change. “In order to solve problems in this country today,” says Austin, “you can’t just look to government, and you can’t just look to business. You can’t just look to one segment of society, you have to look at all people. There’s a role for paid staff in agencies, but there’s also a role that volunteers can play. They extend the capacity of the organization to get its job done, and therefore to solve whatever problem it has taken on.”

But Austin also points out that people outside the volunteer community often have little understanding of the effort required on the part of paid staff to utilize volunteers effectively.

“Volunteers aren’t free,” she points out. “They aren’t even particularly cheap. And they have to be well managed. . . . All of those volunteers who come in have to be oriented about
the whole of the organization, they have to be trained, to make sure they can do their specific job, they have to have a supervisor. That's not what they call it, but that's effectively what it is—they have to have a manager. Then they have to be evaluated in some form in an ongoing way, and they have to be recognized. The recognition part is huge, because they're not getting monetary compensation."

Offering recognition—awards ceremonies, celebrations, social gatherings, press coverage and so on—must usually be arranged by salaried staff. Staff are also required for planning, recruitment, orientation, training, scheduling, communication with workers who will interact with volunteers, and troubleshooting. In large organizations like hospitals a whole department or auxiliary organization is usually dedicated to this work. Texas Children's Hospital, for instance, has a volunteer auxiliary with a staff of 14 to manage 80 volunteer placements within the hospital. In smaller organizations, the burden of managing volunteers falls on the shoulders of staffers who have other responsibilities as well.

This work is made all the more complicated by the fact that volunteers have a turnover rate significantly higher than that of paid staff. According to Moffitt, the average volunteer won't commit to more than four months and may stay for a much shorter time. When they quit or prove unreliable, clients can be disappointed. "You constantly have to be recruiting and training," says Moffitt.

In addition, volunteers can sometimes experience friction with an agency's paid staff. While volunteers can lessen the work load of regular staff, their presence can also disrupt routines and create additional burdens of supervision. A good volunteer department works to prepare staff as well as volunteers and to ensure good communication between the two.

Volunteers don't receive money, but often expect to be "paid" in another coin. They may be looking for educational gains, opportunities to learn new skills or chances for personal
growth. They may not ask for it, but they usually desire signs of appreciation, and need the personal feedback that shows them they are useful. Muffin Clark, Director of Volunteer Services at Texas Children's Hospital, calls the job of providing all these things the "care and feeding of volunteers."

"You try to meet whatever the needs of the volunteer are at the time that they are expressed," says Clark. "If you have a volunteer who has come to volunteer for you for social reasons, so that they can be around other people, they need to chat periodically. If you're a hands-on volunteer administrator, you're going to make the time to have a cup of coffee with that person when they come in or you're going to notify them of an educational component they might want to know about. . . . It might just be walking through a room and giving someone a hug and chatting with someone about their grandchild; whatever it takes to make them feel and know that you have a personal interest in them. . . . They want to make a contribution, but they're also there because they want to interrelate with other people. In my office, it's everyone's responsibility to provide that. . . . It is the biggest part of your job."

Volunteers today also expect to be put to good use—a reasonable expectation, but one that has put new pressures on volunteer administrators who have been in the field a long time. "Most of our volunteers are people that are in the paid work force," says Clark. "Years ago, it was people who were staying home, and so technically this was free time. But now, they're doing it to enhance their lives." Workers who have been trained to view their time as money bring new expectations of efficiency and visible outcomes to the volunteer workplace. "They expect more. They expect a level of professionalism, they expect their time not to be wasted, they expect to make a contribution that they can ascertain is a contribution. People today really want to see the results now."
Clark describes specific ways in which new programs can add to an administrator’s responsibilities that go beyond the added burden of supervising greater numbers of volunteers. For example, she says, imagine a volunteer-run Christmas event: food and toy distribution to disadvantaged families. Clark has found that it is easy to recruit volunteers to distribute the food and gifts and to coordinate the event itself, but very difficult to find anyone to type and address invitations.

“They’re willing to be there, they’re willing to do the training, they’re willing to do a lot, but they’re not willing to do the clerical part,” she says. “Or they might be willing to order the food and order the toys, but they’re not going to be there when it’s delivered and they’re not going to do the inventory. So somebody’s got to do that.” The part of each job that nobody volunteers for falls to the volunteer coordinator.

“And so you might pick up one little bit from this part and one little bit from that part and when you put all those together and what with your day-to-day responsibility of simple scheduling and care and feeding of volunteers, when you tack on all those extra jobs, that can be a significant responsibility.”

A final cost that the volunteer managers knew would attach to developing new volunteer programming is the time required to plan and refine new efforts. Many were already overextended trying to meet the current placement demands within their organizations and did not have time to develop new programming. “We found these people were zapped,” says Carrie Moffitt. “They did not have the energy to do this.”

Given the demands of keeping volunteer programs running smoothly in a city with a high level of volunteer energy, it is no surprise that Ervine encountered resistance to the introduction of a new initiative. The volunteer administrators who gathered at the first Family Matters meeting saw Ervine’s proposal to begin a program of family volunteering as something that
would in many cases require change at every level of established volunteer deployment systems. If it was successful, the new program might boost their numbers; but successful or not, it would certainly create new work for those staffing the volunteer programs.

**Volunteers Needed**

In fact, what was truly surprising about that first meeting, says Ervine, was that in spite of all of their reservations and objections, 24 of the 26 volunteer coordinators who attended signed up for the program. For Ervine and Moffitt, the high participation confirmed what they already believed: that volunteer administrators would find the case for family volunteering to be compelling—and that the volunteer community was ripe for new ideas.

Driving their interest, says Carrie Moffitt, was a widespread but little-discussed concern about declining interest in volunteering. As the area’s primary volunteer referral source, the Volunteer Center had observed a decade and a half of steady growth in volunteer numbers. But growth had now leveled off and the numbers had remained flat for two to three years. The response to the Center’s publicity efforts—weekly columns in both of Houston’s daily newspapers and a weekly paper, a monthly cable television talk show, and promos on the city’s number two radio station—had remained constant at a rate of 25,000 to 28,000 calls for information each year for the last few years, even as the need for volunteers was growing.

Moreover, the Center’s research showed that of the 28,000 or so who called, many did not follow up on the information they received. Of those who did, the majority did not develop a sustained commitment to volunteering.

Moffitt felt that the problem was not that the Volunteer Center wasn’t reaching enough people, but that they were not reaching them with the right message. “We had reached a
plateau of some kind," she says. "We sort of felt like we had maxed out on who we could attract through general appeals."

Agencies were feeling the pressure—they needed more volunteers. At the same time, many reported that the volunteers they did get were changing. They were busier, more goal-oriented, and had less time to commit to volunteer work than volunteers of as little as a decade earlier, who had tended to be women who were not in the work force, many of them older. The new volunteers were younger: fewer than 5 percent were over 55 years old. They had full-time jobs, which made their volunteer work difficult to schedule. And they wanted their volunteer work to serve a number of purposes in their lives—they shopped around for a volunteer experience that met their own needs as well as the community’s.

Many agencies had been slow to address these trends. The typical volunteer job that agencies were still trying to fill, says Moffitt, was "four hours long; once a week; it’s inside the agency; it takes place in the daytime, not the evening or weekends. It’s one where you just put the information out there; you don’t try to convince anyone. Unfortunately, you’d think that we’d be more advanced but we are not—most agencies’ volunteer jobs still fit that mold."

To break through the stagnation in the volunteer sector, Moffitt and her staff concluded that two changes were needed. Agencies would have to begin altering volunteer jobs to fit the needs of volunteers, and they would have to find new ways of selling voluntarism to groups that were not attracted by traditional volunteer work.
The board of directors of the Volunteer Center dedicated its annual weekend-long retreat to discussion of how to approach these two tasks. After all, the Volunteer Center was only a clearinghouse; they did not create the volunteer positions. What could they do to effect change?

Moffitt suggested that the way to begin was by thinking about their own role in a new way. For 20 years, the Volunteer Center had operated with area nonprofits and hospitals as their “clients,” finding volunteers to fill the needs of member agencies.

But the volunteers had needs, too—and these needs were not always being met. What if the Center reversed its approach and began to think of volunteers as clients? The Volunteer Center would use its clout as a labor source to encourage agencies to develop new and better volunteer opportunities. Volunteers who had enriching experiences would keep coming, and would recruit others. And the Center could begin marketing the benefits of volunteering for those who served as well as those they served.

The model for this approach, Moffitt suggested, was a successful youth program the Volunteer Center had initiated a few years earlier. Called HERO, this program had been created in response to area hospitals’ complaints of difficulty recruiting minority staff. Hypothesizing that African American and Hispanic youth were not choosing careers in the health professions because their parents and other adult role models were not working in the field, the Volunteer Center worked with area hospitals to create yearlong volunteer positions for teenagers to work in hospitals, to shadow pharmacists, chaplains, radiologists, and other professionals as they went about their jobs, and to observe surgery and tour the morgue. The program was a big success: many of its graduates went on to higher education in health-related professions. Area medical schools began offering scholarships to HERO graduates.
Moffitt took some lessons from the experiment. First, she concluded, it is possible to recruit special groups for volunteer jobs that offer specific opportunities for personal growth. This targeted program had brought in a population of volunteers the center had not fully tapped in previous years, minority youth. Second, volunteer work really could bring about positive change in the lives of volunteers.

"We learned that you can make long-term changes in individuals," explains Moffitt. "If you actually pay attention to individuals and you focus your attention on the volunteer as your primary client—as opposed to the agency as your primary client—you have a whole lot of control over what you can teach, learn, and entice individuals to do."

The Volunteer Center's board of directors decided to try to replicate HERO's success with other previously untapped groups of potential volunteers. "Some individuals need special attention," explains Moffitt: the mentally or physically disabled, families, youth, the elderly. "Those are all categories of people that we thought need a different approach, a different kind of attention—the normal volunteer job doesn't quite fit them. And so we decided to build some long-range plans around those kinds of groups."

Families seemed to be a natural place to start. Family breakdown was the issue of the day. Everybody from Dan Quayle to Bill Cosby was talking about the need for renewed efforts to strengthen the nuclear family and reassert "family values." But amid plenty of rhetoric about the nature of the problem, few solutions were offered. Perhaps something as simple as setting up opportunities for families to volunteer together on community projects would yield important results: giving families a chance to do something positive together, a vehicle for talking about values and ideals, a chance to relate to one another as equals, promoting honest and open communication, a chance to feel good about their mutual accomplishments.
Moreover, family volunteering might be just what was needed to give the Houston voluntary sector a shot in the arm. It might help meet the need for increased numbers by drawing in a pool of potential volunteers who had previously been too busy or too unsure of the benefits to get involved in volunteer work. Working parents who had rejected the idea of volunteering because they needed to dedicate precious free time to their children might get interested in serving together as a way of making family time more meaningful. Couples looking for activities to draw them closer together might join. Children and grandparents or godparents, mentors looking for ways to engage their “mentees,” and others, all might look to volunteering as a vehicle for enriching their relationships. Children might bring their parents. And, perhaps, when they grew older and had families of their own they would continue the practice, building the community’s volunteer base generation by generation.

It was this idea of building sustainability that appealed to many of the volunteer administrators who first signed on to Family Matters, says Patti Noser of Texas Children’s Hospital. The sectors of the population most inclined to volunteer—retired people and single people—did not have children and were not, therefore, acting as role models for the young.

“Back in the fifties we grew up in families that volunteered,” she says. “My mother was a ‘gray lady’ in a V.A. Hospital. So it was just a natural progression, but I think today for a lot of people it’s not a natural progression. So we thought, if we encourage it [family volunteering] and show it and give them the opportunities, a whole new segment of our community will start volunteering. And they will pass it on to their children.”

“In the long run the reason why I think special volunteer programming for families is important,” says Moffitt, “is if we want to generate more volunteers for the future we have to start with the youth.”
GETTING STARTED

The decision to build volunteer opportunities for families naturally led the Houston Volunteer Center to The Points of Light Foundation and Family Matters. In keeping with the center’s strategy, the three-year plan the Volunteer Center created to apply for a Family Matters grant included no direct effort to recruit new family volunteers until the third year. The first two years would be spent increasing “agency readiness”: the willingness and capacity of the Houston agencies that employ volunteers to successfully use family volunteers.

Sharon Ervine came to the position of Family Matters director with a background in volunteer administration. She also, through membership in the National Charity League, which encourages mothers and daughters to volunteer together, had prior personal experience with family volunteering. Her daughters had joined her in countless volunteer projects, such as collecting and distributing Christmas gifts to the poor, and preparing and serving meals for the homeless. She credits these activities with helping to sustain her and her three daughters through her divorce and the changes it wrought in their circumstances and lifestyle.

“I can remember my early days of volunteering without my family, and [my family would say], ‘Oh, she’s off to do that again.’ Almost anger sometimes, or a sense of neglect. . . . My kids grew up with swimming pools and ski vacations and all of that, and then with the divorce . . . my kids could be very angry with what they’d lost. Then being in Houston and working in places like Star of Hope and Christian Community Service Center . . . it gave us something to focus on besides our material loss and [they learned] that no matter what happened to them it could have been a whole lot worse. It gave them a whole lot of strength and insight.”

In building the Family Matters program in Houston, Ervine created a role for herself that played to her own strength, which was organizing. She would use her networking skills to bring as many volunteer administrators and community leaders as possible to the table, get
them to commit to a goal of increasing family volunteer activity, and let them work together to create a plan.

Ervine started by recruiting an advisory committee—a group of nonprofit and business executives, family volunteers, community agency representatives and others who could provide leadership and ideas as the program developed. To make their commitment as painless as possible, the committee would have no fundraising responsibilities. “I wanted their minds and their creativity,” says Ervine. “I asked them for a two-hour block once a month and I guaranteed them that they would walk in and walk out on time—never would they be kept later.” She selected potential members from the Volunteer Center’s client pool.

“I called each one and asked for an appointment. I didn’t say, ‘I want you to be on this committee’; I interviewed them. I faxed them some background information—a one-page thing: a job description, time commitment, what the expectations were that I had for them. If I got there and they hadn’t read it, that was a real signal to me that they didn’t have time to do this. I was asking people who are really busy, with a lot of obligations. Two of those I interviewed—we mutually agreed that it was not the time for them. With the others I really got a commitment.”

The advisory committee’s first job was to select community agencies to invite to be part of Family Matters’ first year. They focused on large and stable agencies and hospitals—the Texas Medical Center in Houston is the nation’s largest medical complex—because they were more likely to be able to devote staff time to developing jobs for family volunteers. They hoped that after the program had been operating for a while, smaller community-based organizations could be drawn into the program, and the more experienced agencies could act as mentors.
Ervine then invited the volunteer directors of the agencies selected by the advisory board to an “information-sharing meeting.” It was at that meeting, described earlier, that Ervine got her first taste of the barriers Family Matters faced. The reservations the administrators voiced spoke to a range of practical, administrative, and emotional hurdles that would have to be cleared, from concerns about child safety to skepticism about the ability of families to cooperate.

When it came time to end the meeting, however, 24 of the participants overlooked their qualms and signed up. They would work together to design the program and put it to work in their agencies. Because of the experimental nature of their project, Ervine named them the “Discovery Group.”

The Discovery Group did not spend much time dwelling on philosophical questions—they got right down to business. Their first question was how to count the family volunteers. “I thought they’d want to talk about development of job descriptions first,” says Ervine. “Well, they wanted the tracking issue. They had to be able to track them first before they were going to recruit—and if they weren’t going to recruit, then they didn’t need a job description.”

Although the proposal did not set any numerical target in the first year of the project, counting volunteers proved to be extremely important to Discovery Group members, whose performance was often evaluated within their own institutions based on recruitment numbers. “Nonprofit volunteer coordinators— their minds are focused and directed on numbers,” Ervine explains. “It’s not, ‘we are a program that gives direct service to homeless children,’ it’s ‘we have 500 volunteers who give 68,000 hours.’ The people out there judge you on the number of volunteers.”

The committee began work on a monthly tracking form. It would include spaces for the number of new families recruited, number of returning families, total number of individuals
participating, and number of hours of work contributed. It was extremely complicated, and
the rigors and nuances of filling it out each month inspired a flurry of phone calls between
confused and occasionally frustrated Discovery Group members. In the first two years, the
form was revised four times.

The second issue the group tackled was defining family. The working definition used by
Family Matters staff in Washington, DC was any group of two or more people who consider
themselves to be a family, and who include more than one generation. The Houston Discov-
ery Group decided to drop the intergenerational requirement, coming up with a definition of
family that was broad enough to include many groupings one might not expect. “Of course,
you have the traditional: mother, father, child. But then the extended is mentors, mentees,
foster parents, the neighbor with the kid who lives next door whose parents aren’t around and
this older neighbor takes the child under his/her wing. A 40-year-old with a 60-year-old
mother. You sort of just have to open and expand that vision.”

This decision, of course, boosted chances of success by opening up the program to many
who would be excluded under stricter guidelines. But it also was intended to send a message
to participants: Family Matters was not aimed at reinforcing rigidly traditional family values
but rather at building community connectedness by encouraging people to embrace the con-
cept of family in any way that suited them.

It was a confusing idea for some. “Volunteer coordinators who have worked with us for
a while will still say, ‘We didn’t realize the definition of family was so broad,’” says Ervine.
“They’d been told this over and over but they’re finally understanding this. That has been
interesting to see.”
LOWERING AGE MINIMUMS

Once they turned to the task of creating volunteer jobs for family groups, many Discovery Group members came up against the same problem: long-established minimum age requirements for volunteers within their agencies. In some places, there were logical reasons for the minimums; in others, the minimums seemed arbitrary.

Covenant House, a homeless shelter for runaway youth and a member of the Discovery Group, only admits adult volunteers. The program’s success in winning the trust of disaffected teens, many of whom have been abused by adults or are escaping threatening peer relationships, is in large measure due to its ethic of confidentiality. Teens who go there know that their parents and peers will not be contacted without their permission. To bring in members of their peer group as volunteers, community affairs director Gayle McMorrow asserts, would be too risky. “Sanctuary is our mission,” she says, “and too often, young people know the clients.”

In light of these issues, Covenant House chose not to change the rule barring children and teenagers as volunteers. They chose to focus their Family Matters programming on couples. According to McMorrow, the presence of loving couples, young or old, can be a huge benefit to Covenant House clients. “Many of our kids have never seen a healthy relationship,” she says. “For a young couple, age 27, to come out and volunteer is quite a statement. The kids are curious about them.”

McMorrow has also seen considerable benefits for the families who volunteer. “Sometimes we see parents whose own kids have problems. I’m sure they’re probably still working through the problems they experience with their own kids.”
The University of Texas' M.D. Anderson Cancer Center enforces a strict age minimum for volunteers in patient wards, for the protection of both volunteers and patients. ''This is an emotional place,'' says Ann Smith, who is on the 40-member staff of the volunteer department there. ''I felt an emotional jolt the first time I was here, with so many people with no hair; missing limbs; throwing up. This is not necessarily the kind of experience five- to ten-year-olds need to be involved in.''

In addition, young children are also often simply too exuberant and loud to be placed on these wards, says Smith, and family groups are too large. ''Our patients are in pain, on drugs—they don't want too much stimulation. On the floors it has to be one or two volunteers at a time.''

M. D. Anderson assigns family volunteers to programs that do not involve direct service, such as an annual card drive that brings in $800,000 through the sale of Christmas cards drawn by child cancer patients. Taking and filling orders for the cards is a popular job for volunteers, and tasks can be found for very young children to fill.

Other hospitals came up with additional creative ways of getting around such age minimums to allow children to provide direct service to clients. At Texas Children's Hospital, the nation's largest pediatric hospital, the minimum age of 15 for volunteers on the floors where patients reside serves to protect volunteers who may be susceptible to childhood diseases. Families with children 15 or older can volunteer as ''patient pals'' or operate the hospitality carts that circulate with art materials or books or toys, but families with younger children cannot carry out these tasks.

But outside of the hospital, there was no reason young children could not interact with families of patients, or with patients themselves, if their illness was not infectious. Volunteer families could act as hosts on outings with families of sick children who come to Texas
Children's from other places. "They come from all over the world," says Patti Noser, "and we have a lot of families who are on Medicaid and really don't have any resources." Families that are experiencing stress need diversion more than ever, but seldom have the time or energy to plan outings. "If we have a family who can take this family out, get them out of the hospital—as pleasant as we try to make it, it's still a hospital."

Noser's best solution to minimum age restrictions was one that Ervine urged many Discovery Group members to adopt: taking the activities off-site. It was sometimes a struggle, she says, noting that many administrators' imaginations seemed limited to what could take place "within the four walls" of their agency.

At the emergency food pantry run by the Christian Community Service Center, a minimum volunteer age of 15 was lowered by separating out tasks that involved groups working together, and tasks that small children could do. Again, it was Patti Noser, who worked at CCSC before moving to Texas Children's, who implemented the changes. "I looked at those job descriptions and I thought, 'Now this is a family activity. A six-year-old is not going to get just left at this activity while Mom and Dad go someplace else, Mom and Dad are going to be with the child. . . . There were quite a few things the child could do . . . a six-year-old knows a can of beans from a can of corn and so they're perfectly capable of getting in there with these bags of groceries and separating them. For eight-year-olds we have things like beans and rice that need to be sacked and an eight-year-old with supervision can certainly do that."

Changing incrementally over a two-year period, Christian Community Service Center lowered the minimum age for volunteers from 15 to 6 for certain jobs.
GETTING THE LITTLE ONES INVOLVED: THE GABRIELS

The experience of the Gabriel family exemplifies the benefits families can derive from involving their youngest members in volunteer work.

In the summer of 1993, Goldy Gabriel was 15 years old and worked as a hostess in a restaurant. “I complained every day, but I had the money,” she comments.

The following summer Goldy decided to forgo the money and do work she would enjoy. She signed up to volunteer three days a week as a junior counselor for the children’s day camp at Star of Hope, a 395-bed shelter for homeless families. She supervises children in recreational activities and helps out in a Bible class. The remaining two days of the week she spends volunteering at a local hospital.

Goldy came to Star of Hope at the suggestion of her mother, Jean Gabriel, who was already volunteering there as an assistant in the volunteer placement office. Goldy’s older sister Amonee, 19, had a paid job as a children’s counselor at Star of Hope. Goldy says it was their influence that made her want to get involved. And she likes it a lot better than working in the restaurant.

“I look forward to coming in each day,” she says. “It’s so rewarding. The look that people give you, it’s better than money... My friends tell me, ‘I should have volunteered at Star of Hope. You make it sound fun.’”

Goldy also made it sound fun to her two younger sisters, Angela, 10, and Lillian, 9. They began coming to Star of Hope as well to help their mother in the office, doing such chores as folding T-shirts and running small errands.
“Amonee and Goldy had these stories about what they were doing, and I’d be at home watching TV,” says Angela. Envious, she asked her mother if she and Lillian could come to Star of Hope.

At first, Jean Gabriel thought she could not bring her two youngest daughters to Star of Hope, where the minimum age for volunteers is 16. She was assured, however, that the children could remain there under her supervision. Still, she was afraid they might get underfoot, but their enthusiasm for making themselves useful at the shelter put her fears to rest. “I was surprised at their persistence,” says Jean. She says the girls show more enthusiasm and willingness to help at the shelter than they do at home.

Lillian explains why she likes helping at the shelter. “You get respect here. You have fun. You get to meet people that you never met and they turn out to be fun.” “And it’s because we’re doing it for people in need,” adds Angela. For Jean, the opportunity to bring her children to the shelter with her has made it possible to continue her volunteer work during the summer, when they are not in school—but the bigger benefit, she says, is the impact on the children. “I believe in keeping your children active and involved,” she says, “because they’re going to be involved in something.”

When asked what she is learning from volunteering, Angela answers this way. “It teaches me responsibility, self control. At home, I’d be watching TV and running around. Here I know how to carry myself and be quiet.”

By now, Amonee, the oldest, has amassed a two-page resume listing her service activities. Jean Gabriel feels it was the service experience that earned Amonee an $8,000 scholarship to Dillard University in Louisiana. “When you give in some kind of way, God gives it back to you,” says Jean.
Allowing the Gabriel children to volunteer at Star of Hope was a simple matter: the staff already knew Jean, and it wasn’t too difficult to think of things for her daughters to do, under her watchful eye. To undertake family voluntarism there on a larger scale would require considerably more planning. And indeed, two years after the start of Family Matters, family volunteering opportunities are still in the planning stages at many Discovery Group agencies. One of the drawbacks of the decision to limit Family Matters membership at first to large, stable organizations is that they can be slow to change, requiring many levels of bureaucratic approval for even the smallest innovation, as well as layers of staff who may be resistant to changing established routines. “It goes back to having the blinders on,” comments Noser. “You’re used to having things a certain way.”

**Event-Style Volunteering**

Another barrier to family volunteering in many of the Discovery Group agencies is the difficulty of scheduling family activities at a time when all family members are available. With the juxtaposed schedule pressures of school, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs for children and full-time jobs, domestic responsibilities, and other activities for parents, families can have very narrow windows of availability. The principal difficulty here is that in many organizations fewer staff members are available to supervise volunteer work at these times. Volunteer managers in the Discovery Group find themselves working longer hours and sometimes changing work schedules.

Modifying jobs to accommodate groups is also a challenge. Most existing volunteer positions are designed for one or two; some can be modified to create opportunities for more people, but the risk of not having enough work to accommodate a family of five or six is a real one.
"If you think you’re going to have an unhappy single volunteer," says Covenant House’s Gayle McMorrow, "get a mother and father and two kids to come and there’s no work or the staff is not nice to them, and you’ve got a disaster."

Volunteering for special events turned out to be the approach best-suited to many families. They want to volunteer but cannot commit to weekly four-hour shifts. They are more likely to be able to coordinate their schedules on a periodic basis for a one-day project, usually on a Saturday or a Sunday. In this respect, they mirror a growing proportion of volunteers who favor this episodic approach.

Creating episodic volunteer opportunities is not easy, however. In the context of a one-day project there is little time for training, and to maximize the value of the staff time required to plan and supervise such projects, they must recruit relatively large numbers of people, necessitating a big room or other facility and a lot of lead time for recruitment and sign-up.

The first such project that was connected with Family Matters might be seen as an example of how far Discovery Group agencies had to reach at first to come up with projects that met these criteria and were also useful to the agency. M.D. Anderson Cancer Center decided to sponsor a broad campaign to screen Houston residents for colo-rectal cancer. Area supermarkets and pharmacies distributed test kits, and 15,000 residents responded by mailing fecal smears to the hospital in sealed containers. Volunteers—190 of them, including five families—did the testing in the hospital’s lab, outfitted in lab coats and gloves.

The volunteers’ experiences “ran the gamut,” according to Ann Smith, who directed the project. At least one couple left early, complaining of the smell, although many of the other volunteers said they did not notice it. But most volunteers had a good day and reported satisfaction with the experience. Many were pleased at the opportunity to perform lab tests.
In retrospect, says Ervine, who volunteered that day with her daughters, "it was not necessarily an appropriate volunteer experience—but it was well organized. We understood what we were supposed to do. And it opened up important lines of communication and awareness."

Smith points out that one of the important benefits of such a project is not only that the community at large gains awareness of colo-rectal cancer, but the volunteers learn a good deal about the disease and become agents for educating others, urging better dietary habits and regular testing.

Because the project might not appeal to anyone who was less than fully committed, it served a secondary purpose: identifying core dependable volunteers. Those who showed up for the screening were each drawn into the project by a family member who either cared strongly about M.D. Anderson or who had a strong interest in medicine. They were people who can likely be counted on for future projects, and who might become regular weekly or monthly volunteers. This might be seen as an added payoff for the considerable time and effort required to organize the event.

"It's work for us," says Tyrrell Hill, director of the 40-member staff of the volunteer department at M.D. Anderson. "It is a burden—I should say responsibility—for the volunteer coordinators who are busy with recruitment and management and recognition of long-term volunteers to start thinking of jobs for those episodic volunteers."

Many of the most successful Family Matters volunteer jobs exist in the middle ground between a single event and a long-term commitment. At M.D. Anderson, families with children help run the Saturday morning pediatric Bingo games, which take place in the game room rather than on the wards. At Texas Children's Hospital, families with children help out with Bingo and movie nights. Training for these volunteer activities is minimal, and families
can take turns, rather than coming every week. Families also come in on evenings and Saturdays to assemble craft kits for patients who want something creative to do during a hospital confinement, and paint bright murals to decorate the walls of the wards at Texas Children’s.

NONPROFIT COLLABORATIONS

One approach that has been effective at generating family-friendly one-day service events is linking Discovery Group agencies with organizations that can recruit from their membership to deliver large groups of family volunteers for special events: schools, churches, community-based groups, and civic organizations. Moffitt and Ervine call these partnerships “collaborations.”

What makes the collaborations work is that the civic groups already command the loyalty and the interest of community members—and often are eager to engage their members in community service projects for reasons related to their own missions and goals. Schools, for instance, may take on community service projects in order to increase parental involvement or as part of a civic education curriculum; churches may sign on in order to provide communal activities for their members, to fulfill their mission of community outreach, or in order to initiate discussion of the spiritual dimensions of service.

The Volunteer Center’s role is to elicit the reasons these groups might want to serve, and then work with Discovery Group agencies to develop projects that support those goals. “We have the ability,” says Moffitt, to “sit down with them in advance and say, ‘What do you want to get out of this—teaching your children something? Is there a certain interest that you have?’ and then go out and develop something that fits them. That’s an enormous service to them. And then they can focus on the reason that they did it. Many of the groups...after a
volunteer experience... sit down and talk about it. They say what did you learn, how was it, what did you think, and they get the family involved in that discussion, the kids and the parents."

One successful collaborative partner has been the Kinkaid School, a private middle school which recently extended its student community service requirement to include parents as well. The school asked the Volunteer Center to develop family-oriented projects each quarter, some for individual families and some for large numbers of families to do together. Ervine has linked the school with several Discovery Group agencies for one-time projects. In the fall of 1994, 300 Kinkaid students and parents worked together to renovate five houses for low-income families under the supervision of the Private Sector Initiative.

For Discovery Group agencies, the appeal of collaboration is that it releases them from the burden of recruitment. "We can go to an agency and say, 'We have 100 families: what do you need done?''" says Moffitt. "And oftentimes that's the piece of information they need to open up their imagination and say, 'Oh gee, we hadn't thought about this but we need the playground renovated.' Sometimes with the resources in hand, thinking gets a little more creative."

Other collaborative efforts have included a day-long family service workshop sponsored by a coalition of churches. Eight agencies, including the Women's Home, Covenant House, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, and the Children's Assessment Center, convened at a church and set up stations where families could stop for an hour or two. Families recruited by the Lutheran Brotherhood and other church coalitions circulated about the room, each stopping at three stations to make tray favors for hospital cancer patients or do other introductory projects while learning about the agencies and the family volunteer opportunities they offer.
The participating agencies found the workshop an effective way of connecting with new families and with church groups that may produce more volunteer families in the future. "The opportunity for us," says Tyrrell Hill, director of volunteer services at M.D. Anderson, "is for finding new volunteers and new sources of volunteers. Finding where the families are." Several more family service workshops were planned for the October "Make a Difference Day" in 1994.

**RECRUITING FAMILIES: THE CORPORATE ROLE**

Another arena in which the Family Matters team began creating collaborations was the corporate sector. Most large businesses in the Houston area had a corporate volunteer program for employees, offering a potentially rich source of family volunteers. Ervine began to tap this vein by inviting the directors of these programs to form a "corporate pilot group" to discuss ways of increasing family voluntarism among their employees. Signing on were Houston Light and Power, the Shell Oil Company, Panhandle Eastern Corporation, Texaco, and Texas Commerce Bank.

Pam Malone works in the community affairs department of Houston Light and Power (HL&P), and is in charge of the ten-year-old corporate volunteer program, called "Project People." At HL&P, volunteer work is considered along with work performance when employees seek promotions. Malone says company executives see the volunteer program as a way to help the community and help employees feel good about the company they work for.

Malone says that as a public utility, HL&P has a special responsibility to be a "good corporate citizen," and that the company makes that one of its business goals. She also says that supporting volunteer work is a good way of boosting employee morale. "HL&P went through a downsizing a couple of years ago. You have to understand, utilities are something
people get into because they're so safe. When HL&P downsized, a lot of negativity came out. We needed to find things that would help to raise morale.

HL&P's interest in employee voluntarism reflects growing corporate support nationally for the idea that employee volunteering benefits both the community and the corporation. A 1993 study by the Conference Board and The Points of Light Foundation based on a survey of 1,800 corporations found that corporate volunteer programs had not only survived but flourished in an era of downsizing. Such programs, the report found, "help companies attract and retain the people they need, and help build skills and attitudes that foster organizational commitment, company loyalty, and job satisfaction." Other studies have associated volunteer programs with corporate profitability and good community relations—and point to improved work skills among employees who volunteer.

HL&P's "Project People" involves placing employees in volunteer jobs sponsored by other agencies as well as conducting its own projects: home repair for senior citizens, electrical safety classes for children, recycling employees' magazines and fighting erosion near a power plant. Volunteers report their hours (which are done outside the work day) to the community relations department, which tallies them and sends a quarterly report to each supervisor. A monthly newsletter describing at least a dozen volunteer opportunities goes to each employee. Of the company's 9600 employees, between 1500 and 2000 participate in the volunteer program.

When HL&P joined Family Matters, Malone revised the reporting forms so that employees would be credited for family volunteer hours. She began identifying, in the newsletter, volunteer placements appropriate for families, and in addition to her monthly article spotlighting a volunteer of the month, she began profiling a volunteer family of the month. The families have their photos printed in the newsletter along with an interview.
“As parents we have a responsibility to society,” senior credit representative and mother JoAnn Taylor is quoted as saying in one such article. “Some parents don’t give enough attention to their kids and they go astray. I try and spend as much quality time with them as possible. We play, work and even do their homework together. Everything we do, we try and do it together. My kids can make a difference, but the only way they’re going to do it is for me to stay behind them, pushing them and teaching them to do things for other people. They’ll look back on some of the things we’ve done as a family, and they’ll do it with their family.”

In other issues, employees point out benefits of family volunteering. A single mother of a teenager and a toddler says that while caring for the two-year-old requires most of her time, she signs up to volunteer occasionally with her teenaged daughter so that they can spend some time together doing something important and satisfying that does not involve the baby. An older couple, celebrating their first wedding anniversary, says volunteering together has deepened their relationship. Month after month these messages go out to every HL&P employee.

A LUCKY PENNY

The Delmonicos are one family that has responded wholeheartedly to the call. Both Sandy and Robert Delmonico work for HL&P. Sandy has always made volunteer work a central activity in her life. She began teaching Sunday school when she was 16, and after marriage and children she was a room mother, girl scout leader, and member of the PTO.

Robert, Sandy’s second husband and father of her youngest child, got involved more slowly, gradually letting his cooking skills be known in their church, where he now cooks for a wide variety of events. The whole family makes regular visits to a local nursing home, and
the older daughters, Kelley and Jennifer, both in college, also volunteer at their little brother’s elementary school and at the church.

Sandy Delmonico works in HL&P’s credit department and Robert in telecommunications. The Family Matters projects they have been involved in through HL&P have provided a new dimension to their volunteer experiences, they say. This summer their son Jeffrey, age eight, helped out when the family delivered free fans to poor elderly people who had no air conditioning. Jeffrey, whose volunteer work had been previously confined to his own neighborhood, had never encountered the kind of poverty he saw that day. He was curious about the many locks on the doors and windows, the houses lit by a single lamp to save electricity. “Jeffrey was full of questions after that day,” says Sandy. “We thought it was an important experience for him.”

Jennifer Smith, the second oldest daughter, wrote an essay describing her mother’s influence in shaping her own volunteer spirit. “All my life my mother has always stopped to pick up pennies, ‘Lucky pennies,’ she calls them. Much to my frustration and embarrassment she always stops no matter where she is at or who is around to pick up a ‘lucky penny.’ She always tells me in my impatience that ‘alone it may not be much, but all together it will be a fortune.’

“That is the attitude I’ve gone all through life with. Sometimes things can seem impossible but if you just take it inch by inch, problem by problem anything can be solved . . . not one person can change the world but if everyone did a little all problems could be solved.” After outlining an impressive array of service activities in which she is involved, Jennifer concludes, “I hope that through my work I can make a difference and at the same time I can show others the great need of helping to make a difference to those in need. I consider my actions a ‘lucky penny.’”
While habits as simple as picking up pennies can have a powerful influence on children's thinking, opportunities for family volunteering have given Sandy Delmonico an important vehicle for passing on her ethic of service to her family. It may also be that family volunteering can provide a special link uniting families affected by divorce and remarriage.

The Delmonicos are not alone at HL&P. In the first six months of Family Matters, 211 HL&P families—with 556 family members—have volunteered. Pleased at the program's success, company officials donated $5,000 to the Volunteer Center for Family Matters.

**Power of the Press**

Houston Light and Power's energetic participation in Family Matters is not matched throughout the corporate community. Only five corporations joined the corporate pilot group and Carrie Moffitt speaks of their progress with a sigh of resignation. "The corporations' involvement with Family Matters was really a mixed bag," she says. "We had companies that thought it was a complete waste of time."

What worked to hook in some of the companies that were initially skeptical, says Moffitt, was the promise of possible press coverage. "A couple of CEOs in our corporate pilot immediately tuned into the fact that this is a great image for the company—to have families out there. They were willing to get their own family out and have their picture taken, they told their publicist to get on the phone and put out a P.R. release to the papers talking about how they were into family volunteering.

"And it worked. And then what happened was immediately the corporations that had pooh-poohed the whole idea got jealous and competitive and got on board." Positive cover-
age for HL&P’s program in a citywide newspaper spurred other companies to take a more active approach, she notes.

In the second year, the Corporate Pilot Group decided to provide some concrete assistance to other companies that might want to get involved. They are writing a resource manual, based on their own experiences, with practical advice for developing and promoting family volunteering within corporations. They also planned a joint volunteer effort for families, a cleanup day in a historic Houston cemetery.

**Does It Work?**

Some of the jobs created as part of Family Matters are nice but might be seen as inessential: making tray favors for hospital patients and homebound elderly people; painting murals to brighten up children’s wards; and collating mailings.

Ann Smith of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center concedes that sometimes it’s tough to come up with substantive jobs for family volunteers. “Creating the opportunities is just not that easy,” she says. “Sometimes it’s creating a need. I see that as our challenge for a long time to come.”

Carrie Moffitt suggests that such projects are introductory—a chance for families and volunteer coordinators alike to wet their toes in the waters of family voluntarism before plunging in. Once they begin working with families, she feels, agencies will grow more confident and begin planning more ambitious work. “You have to start out with stuff like that,” she says. “You cannot imagine how hard it is to get people to exercise their imagination in these groups. It’s a big stumbling block for us. . . . And a big part of making their
imagination grow, making them have more confidence about this, is to get some real people in contact with them so that once they have that family there they begin to see the potential."

One and one half years into the program, the potential is beginning to be apparent. Family Matters in Houston reports having placed 2,564 families (7,893 individual family members) in volunteer jobs for a total of 78,248 hours of community service. The Volunteer Center’s book of citywide volunteer job descriptions has 81 new listings specifically designed for families. The Mayor’s Office has added a category for families in its annual Award for Outstanding Volunteer Service. The major newspapers in Houston have written about the program. A second Discovery Group was formed in the program’s second year, with 16 new agencies participating, paired as “buddies” with members of the first group so that they could act as mentors. More agencies were clamoring to be included than could be accommodated; Ervine had to create a waiting list for the overflow.

But what has been the real impact of the program? The goal set out by the Volunteer Center board and The Points of Light Foundation was to strengthen families and communities through family voluntarism. It is an outcome that is difficult to assess, and neither the Volunteer Center nor the national office of Family Matters has established a means of evaluating the program’s success or failure in this area.

Muffin Clark says one doesn’t need a long-term study to see the positive effects on families of volunteering together. The families themselves show that it is working by returning to volunteer together time and again. They tell her that even when the outcome of their volunteer work cannot be immediately seen, its impact on their family can. “If you go with your child and volunteer, on the ride home, you’re going to have something to talk about with that child. And so you automatically see a good result from what you have done. It may not be the whole picture, but there’s an immediate reward.”
VOLUNTEER MANAGERS EVALUATE THE BENEFITS

Erwine asked the members of the Discovery Groups to put the benefits of their participation in Family Matters onto paper.

"Absenteeism has decreased," wrote Jackie Cathriner of the Children's Museum. "The whole family supports your mission . . . it is easier to make one phone call and line up three volunteers—instead of three phone calls."

Marilyn Young of the Houston Museum of Natural Science commented on "a sense of pride and belonging on the part of those who are family volunteers." She also wrote that as an institution with a membership that included many families, public awareness of their family volunteer program has increased the Museum's status in the community.

Another administrator observed the teenagers in Family Matters have better attendance than those who volunteer on their own, because they are accountable to their partner, usually a parent or other adult. Another praised the "generous spirit" of families, "which makes my job easier."

In addition to praising family volunteers, many respondents had a lot to say about the value of participating in the Discovery Group. "As a new volunteer administrator I've learned from veterans," wrote one. "It has given me the opportunity to work with people sharing a positive vision, who have tried to connect the mundane aspects of managing programs with a greater world view," wrote another. "It has helped me tremendously to expand my creativity," according to a third. "Good connections with other agencies and collaborative efforts" . . . "networking opportunities" . . . "learning opportunity/paradigm shift" . . . "sharing of ideas, methods and concerns" . . . "support—knowing others whose lives and jobs are crazy, too!"
Houston has an association for the people who run the volunteer programs at the city’s hospitals and nonprofit service agencies. They meet monthly to talk about various issues in the nonprofit community—but the members of the Discovery Group report that the level of engagement that they feel at Discovery meetings is much higher, and consequently far more possibilities for collaboration emerge.

"Working together on a similar project like we are in Family Matters," says Patti Noser, "we've grown closer and we appreciate that. With other groups we have meetings each month and each one is a different topic and so you really don't have time to hone in on and refine or fine-tune one specific area; you don't have time to talk, to brainstorm, the give and take that you get at the Discovery Group meetings."

A year into the program, it emerged unexpectedly in a Discovery Group meeting that various member agencies had assisted some of the same clients. Yet many members still had little idea what the other agencies did. Realizing that it would be beneficial to clients if the agencies tried to coordinate their efforts, the Discovery Group members decided to give one another tours of their agencies.

Ervine was surprised and pleased at the development. "Knowledge and education of what people do is the first step to collaboration," she says.

In this way, Family Matters has had one outcome that was never anticipated: Bringing together administrators from throughout the voluntary sector to work toward a single goal has given them a reason to step back from long-established routines—to look at what others are doing—and to think about how they can work together to help harness and nurture civic spirit in the community.
WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Has Family Matters in Houston achieved its goals? Outcomes of the program in terms of increased family volunteering in Houston have been modest. According to the Volunteer Center's figures, an initial goal—to increase family voluntarism by 30 percent in Houston—has already been surpassed. But Moffitt cautions that the real increase is impossible to assess and may be much lower, as the baseline figures are only estimates. No attempt was being made to identify or count family volunteers before the program was launched. Still, it is worth noting that this goal was met strictly by increasing agency preparedness to accept family volunteers and building community partnerships, rather than by initiating a broad-based recruitment effort. The untapped potential of family volunteers will be tested in the third year of the program, when the Volunteer Center undertakes a publicity and recruitment drive for Family Matters.

The experiences of the Discovery Group members illustrate the difficulty of changing long-established routines and methods of volunteer management. However, those involved with the effort have almost uniformly found it to be a worthwhile experience. They like working with families; they feel the challenge of developing family volunteer opportunities has pushed them into new and fertile territory; they enjoy the give-and-take of working with the Discovery Group; and they feel family volunteering has the potential to increase tremendously in coming years.

The initial Discovery Group has seen little attrition, and when Discovery Group II was formed in the second year, Ervine had to turn agencies away. Discovery Group members are hopeful that family volunteering may be institutionalized within their organizations. "Here at Texas Children's Hospital," says Patti Noser, "family volunteering is very important to the administration. It's not even an issue. . . . They want family volunteering."
One coming challenge for Family Matters in Houston is the need to find local funding to replace the national grant when it runs out in 1996. Houston Light and Power’s $5,000 donation to Family Matters is promising, but small relative to the program’s overall needs.

Another challenge will be expanding the reach of the program beyond the major hospitals and large agencies that make up most of its current membership and establishing a presence in the neighborhoods where some of Houston’s neediest residents live. “If we’re going to make long-term change in the Houston community we’re going to have to go outside the four walls of the agencies and outside of downtown Houston,” says Ervine. “But right now, we can’t work with those small, grass-roots, low-budget or no-budget agencies that can’t send a person to a Discovery Group meeting once a month. Maybe we’re going to need to go to them.”

PASSING THE GENERATIONAL TORCH

Finally, the best indication that the program can achieve its goal of strengthening communities by strengthening families comes from the families themselves. The experience of the Thomas family provides a promising example of how volunteering, when supported at the family core, can ripple outwards through the family’s interlocked communities.

For Demetria, Ume, and Deana Thomas, volunteering means following in the footsteps of their mother Catherine, who not only works at the Volunteer Center but is also president of the education division of the National Lupus Foundation. Catherine Thomas is herself a lupus sufferer.

Catherine Thomas began taking her three daughters with her on her volunteer rounds when they were very small, because she could not afford to hire a babysitter. Now all three
are teenagers and they volunteer on their own as well as together. "We go where we're needed," says Demetria, age 17. "Like Superman. When you hear the call."

Early assignments included stuffing envelopes for the Lupus Foundation and putting information packets together at a child abuse center. At age 12, Demetria, the oldest, became a volunteer tour guide at the Children's Museum. "It was a big change from stuffing envelopes," she says. "People would say, 'Do you work here? Can you explain this to me?' It was a big responsibility."

Ume, now 15, followed Demetria's example and took the occasion of spending time in the museum district to explore. She says the experience awakened her curiosity and opened new areas of interest for her. She also says that volunteering has helped her to feel more connected to her family.

"When I was little, everyone would come home from school and go straight to their room. . . . Now we can sit down at the table as a family and eat together. We have so much more to say to each other. We talk about our volunteer work and our parents' jobs and our future and how we want to build an apartment for our parents when they get old."

The only wish the Thomas girls expressed was that they could get their father, a mechanic, to come out and volunteer with them. "I don't think he understands how much we want to spend time with him," says Ume. "But I think one day he'll snap into it and decide to come out with us."

Perhaps most striking about the Thomas girls is their efforts to get others around them involved in volunteer work as well. Deana, age 14, is trying to start a community service club at her school. And Demetria, who has a part-time job at the Gap, has taken responsibility for finding one community service project each month for her fellow employees. So far, they
have "adopted" a highway, taking responsibility for keeping a portion of the road clean, and have run in a race to benefit muscular dystrophy. The Gap doubled the $510 that they raised. Demetria is currently planning a beach cleanup.

"Volunteering has an impact on everybody," she says. "It's helping the staff learn to work together."

"It changes your personality, and it changes the way people look at you. I think if I hadn't been involved in volunteering before, with my family, I wouldn't be so gung ho about this at work."

When Deana Thomas takes her experience volunteering with her family to school and starts a community service club, or when her sister recruits co-workers at the Gap to volunteer on weekends, or when Goldy Gabriel's friends tell her they wish they had chosen to spend their summer volunteering at a shelter as she does because it sounds like so much fun, the impact of the program ripples outward. Ultimately, the promise of Family Matters lies in the possibility that it will sustain and regenerate itself by bringing new generations of volunteers into the loop.

Sandy and Steve Breslauer are hopeful. They say that the aspects of life in the 1990s that make it difficult to succeed in drawing in family volunteers are the very same factors that impel families to take an interest in volunteering together. More than ever, families are struggling to juggle competing demands: long hours on the job for both mothers and fathers, after-school jobs and activities for children, divorce, and single parenthood. The time available for families to be together becomes more precious as it diminishes, note the Breslauers, and families are motivated to find ways to use it well.
"I see a really nice change," says Sandy. "In my children's generation, who are now parents, the men as well as the women are spending more time as a family. Fathers and mothers are involved in soccer and Little League and Boy Scouts. Fathers in this generation are spending a lot more quality family time. It's going to be so helpful. It thrills me to see whole families together, whereas in our generation Dad was the breadwinner and Mom did the home stuff. I think we're going to see a new kind of voluntarism, and it's going to continue on as our children's children get older."

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ENDNOTES


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