

## 2.3 A Note On Assessing Value

As part of a growing pressure for accountability and transparency in the voluntary sector, and reflecting the increasing preciousness of limited resources, more and more volunteer program coordinators are being asked to measure their program outcomes and justify their program budget requests. That there *is* an acceptable return on volunteer involvement has historically been taken for granted, particularly when the costs of engaging volunteers were very low. Now, with increasing management standards requiring greater resource allocations (e.g., more program coordination and supervision time, hard costs of screening and training and recognition materials, etc.) and with volunteers tending to stay for shorter periods of time, organizations need to think carefully about the returns they get back from the investments they make in volunteer involvement. This is starting to become a fundamental aspect of volunteer position and program planning.

There has been a spate of efforts to assess “the value of volunteer time” or the “value of volunteer work” using the wage replacement approach. Briefly, this methodology involves multiplying the number of hours by an average hourly pay rate based on what an employee might be paid to do the same work. The resulting total is reported as the “value” of the work done by volunteers. It is not. The resulting figure is quite simply *what the organization did not pay to have the work done*. That is very different from what the work is actually worth. Consider these parallel questions:

- What is a park worth?
- What is a police department worth?

To answer either of these questions, one would *not* take the number of hours worked by the park workers/police officers, multiply their hours by their average wage and claim that to be the worth of the park or the police department. Clearly, that calculation represents what it costs to generate the value of the park/police department, not its actual value.

While a full exploration of how to fairly and respectfully calculate the worth of volunteer involvement is beyond what can be done here, we offer a caution about using the wage replacement approach. Setting aside the not insignificant question of how one could accurately assign an “average wage” to the often quite different work of volunteers in a range of differ-

ent volunteer positions (in some countries a single wage is held up to represent the average wage of all volunteer workers in the entire country!), the wage replacement method actually serves to mask the real value of volunteer involvement. Think on how you might answer the following questions. What is the value of:

- a volunteer who spends time at the bedside of a dying child?
- 400 citizens who turn out to find a little girl lost in the swamp (and they are successful!)?
- the work of a group of anglers and environmentalists collaborating to clean up a stream bed, preserve the watershed, rehabilitate the sport fishery, and thereby revive the previously failing tourist industry in the surrounding area?
- the adult literacy movement?
- teaching one student to read?
- mentoring a child who then does not join a gang or get pregnant at the age of 14?
- a volunteer fire department?
- the money collected by volunteers of the arthritis society, which is largely responsible for funding research on successful joint replacement (substitute in this example, volunteer fundraisers for the cancer society, the heart and stroke foundation, the multiple sclerosis society, the Huntington's society, the diabetes association, the local hospital auxiliary, or one of any of the other thousands of charities through which volunteers raise funds to change the world, build their community, or find a cure)?

When one spends even just a few moments considering the multiple values created by volunteer work – value to the organization, its “clients,” the volunteer him or herself, the community, civil society – the shortcomings of the wage replacement approach come into sharper focus.