

An SRV Look At Volunteering In A Food Pantry

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FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, I have been a volunteer at a neighborhood food pantry two blocks from my home. My Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1998; Race, 1999) training has helped me to understand much of what I see and experience as a volunteer at the pantry. In this article, I will briefly describe the food pantry, and then share some of what I have learned from an SRV perspective.

The pantry is run by a church and is located in three rooms of the church's former school building. Its mission is to give food to people who live in the neighborhood, or in neighborhoods where there is no pantry available. It is an emergency food pantry, which means that people can come for food once a month, and that the amount of food given out is not intended to last the entire month, but to tide single people and families through a difficult time.

People of all ages and ethnicities, speaking many different languages, come to the pantry. They come because they are poor and need food. People come who are retired, physically or intellectually impaired, new to the country, laid off of work, not able to find work, or are working but struggling to survive in this economy. Approximately 1200 to 1400 people come a month, of which 400 to 500 are children. Over the past several years, the numbers of people coming to the pantry have risen dramati-

cally, and will likely continue to do so into the future.

ONE THING I LEARNED surprised me, although it probably should not have. The pantry is an informal, loosely organized service run entirely by volunteers. Yet I saw some of the same patterns of service-mediated devaluation at the pantry as I have at the most organized, bureaucratic services staffed by paid "professionals."

The most prominent pattern of social devaluation which I have seen is that the physical setup and the typical routines of the pantry are highly likely to cast most of the people who come for food into the devalued role of burden of charity. For example, when people come into the pantry, they go up a flight of stairs to one of those doors that is essentially cut in half horizontally; the top half opens while the bottom half is left shut and locked. The volunteer stands on one side of this door; the person on the other. This physical setup symbolizes the barrier between "us" and "them." Much of the rest of the process reinforces this dichotomy.

People have to show a government-issued ID to a volunteer, which is checked against a file card to make sure they live in the neighborhood, and that they have not yet come in for food that month. The volunteers pack one or two bags of food for the person, depending on how many people are in their family. Few volunteers ever ask the person what they want for food. The people cannot see the shelves of food, as the shelves are out of sight from the door. The person needs to sign a form, indicating that they

received the food. Only then are they handed bags containing their food.

Whatever the reasons for this setup, from the perspective of the person, I am sure it is potentially a highly degrading process. Many people who come to the pantry are already embarrassed or ashamed by their need for help. Having their government-issued identification checked, not being allowed to see or choose their food, having to wait in line with other poor people, and so on, makes it highly difficult for them to retain their dignity.

THE PEOPLE WHO COME to the pantry truly do need food, because they are poor. Giving them food, even the relatively little that we are able to give, is at least partly addressing a relevant need. But the way that it is done sets vulnerable people up into socially devalued roles, and so at the same time, they are denied some of the good things of life and are even further wounded. Most are further isolated from the valued core of society. They are not meeting people in valued status in valued locations and in a valued activity when they come to the pantry. Their status in society is not enhanced but rather degraded by their manner of getting food. Their self-image is lowered.

Most are not given the opportunities to develop their competencies; for example, by having relationships with other people who are not poor and marginalized. Most of the people coming in for food do not form mutually respectful relationships with the volunteers, even when they come month after month.

Much of the physical setup and many of the routines also negatively affect the perceptions of the volunteers about the people coming in for food. I have spent some time outside the pantry with many of the volunteers, and the ones I have gotten to know are good-hearted, friendly people. Yet at the pantry, I have seen many of these same volunteers yell at people who do not speak English. I have heard them make jokes about them behind their backs; for example, that people are driving home from the pantry in their expensive cars to their nice houses. The implications are that they have money but will not spend it and so steal food from the truly poor, and that they are too lazy to work.

Some of the volunteers objectify what they are doing and so in a sense treat the poor people coming in for help as objects, as being in the object role. For example, some volunteers refer to people as numbers indicating how many are in their family, e.g., “who is the 3?” Such actions and attitudes mask the humanity of the people coming to the pantry. Not all the volunteers act in these ways of course, but enough do to be significant.

I have heard volunteers gripe that they are sure that the people who come in to the pantry are lying about how many children they have to get more food, or are going to several other pantries besides ours, which many of the volunteers consider “cheating.” Yet the amount that people get at our “emergency” pantry, or any other for that matter, is hardly ever enough to feed a family for more than three or four days. Most single people and families I know who are

significantly poor would have to go to more than one pantry to feed themselves or their families, if they had no other means of getting food in a given month. Besides, someone who truly did not need to go to a pantry to get food, most likely would not go. The cost of social stigma and disrespect that they would pay, plus the long time spent waiting in line and the relatively little food they get, simply is not worth it.

TO REITERATE, what I believe is happening at the pantry where I volunteer, and many others, is that the devalued role of burden of charity is crafted and perpetuated. Most of the pantry service practices communicate, encourage and almost invite the volunteers to believe the common stereotypes about poor people, i.e., that they are lazy, cheats, immoral, drains on the economy, and so on. These negative perceptions then get translated into hurtful treatment.

One personal benefit of the loose organization of the pantry has been that I have been able to craft a role for myself that is at least a little more coherent with some of the principles of SRV. Because there really is no set way that people have to be given the food, sometimes I can do things in ways that are somewhat more role-valorizing for them. For example, I tell people what we have on the shelves and then ask what they want for food. In the hallway outside the pantry, I put out food on tables for people to take as much as they want of, without having to ask me or another volunteer.

After checking with the food bank where we buy most of the food that we give out, I

was able to change the “requirement” that had been in place for many years that volunteers write down the government-issued social security ID numbers for each person whom they signed in. This partly lessened the bureaucratic nature of getting food. Another slightly more role-valorizing option which I have taken advantage of a few times is to give out coupons which were redeemable at a local grocery for food. These were not deviancy-imaged coupons meant only for poor people; typical citizens could and did use them as well.

I try to take the time to chat with each person who comes in. Such openness has been amply rewarded with the opportunity to get to know a few of the people a little better. I gave Papa a ride home once and heard about his life in Haiti. Now when we see each other on the street, we stop and chat. Helping John up and down the stairs with his food gave me the time to find out that he had been a college professor and was still quite sharp, despite his disheveled appearance and all his hard years living on the street. His advice to me about continuing my education was very incisive. Their stories, and others', humble me in appreciation of our common humanity and vulnerability. They also stare me in the face when, despite my efforts, I too buy into the negative stereotypes and the devaluation of poor and needy people, which happens more than I like to remember.

AS A HELPFUL POINT OF COMPARISON with the services offered by the pantry where I volunteer, which is typical of many food pantries in the US at least, I will share two

generally more role-valorizing examples of offering food and hospitality to the poor. First, another pantry which I knew of used a traditional “site-based” approach, but in many ways offered a more positive and role-valorizing alternative to the pantry I volunteer at. People who came to that pantry checked in, and then were given a shopping cart to go through the aisles and pick out the food they needed. There were limits to how much they could take of each food item, but these limits were told to the people up front and they were expected to manage it themselves. These practices were both more image- and competency-enhancing.

As a second example, my wife and I have gotten to know a family in our neighborhood who is almost totally dependent on government money for their survival. As many such people do, they often run out of food toward the end of the month because they do not have enough money. Every month or so, they will come by our home when this happens. We offer them a meal and some groceries to take home. This is a positive vision of at least one possible addition or even alternative to the food pantry model, one which is also more role-valorizing. It still addresses their need for food but is also enhancing to their image (i.e., they are neighbors getting help from neighbors) and their competencies (i.e., they have opportunities to build a relationship with us, and we with them).

THIS ARTICLE was just a brief look at some of the issues at the food pantry, both positive and negative, from an SRV perspective.

SRV has been a useful tool which has helped me to: identify with the people who are coming to the pantry and what their lives have been like; better understand the positive and negative aspects of the service offered by the pantry; and carve out a role as a volunteer that is coherent for me.

References

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