

VOLUNTARY SOCIAL WORK

Generally, when reference is made to voluntary work, it is normally associated with the word "social". By this it is understood that this is the type of voluntary service that includes any way in which one can do something for others without economic remuneration, which is not exactly true.

In fact, voluntary work means devoting part of one's time and abilities to doing something on someone else's behalf without receiving anything material in exchange. Apart from this, there are other types of voluntary work that, though aiming to improve the situation of people, do not imply having to devote one's time and abilities to attending them directly. Here we include different categories of voluntary service such as environmental, cultural, leisure and community work.

But in the context we are currently dealing with, voluntary social work can be considered as the type of service devoted to people with special needs.

This means that what characterizes voluntary social work is precisely the fact that its focus is on giving direct attention to individuals whose basic needs, whether physical, psychological, cultural, economic, etc., are not covered.

Having established this principle we can go on to analyse, briefly and concisely, the main objectives of voluntary social work in some of its specific areas:

The unemployed: Generally grouped in cooperatives. Here, voluntary social workers collaborate in two main ways: in administrative work and helping the members of the cooperatives themselves with management.



Drug addicts: apart from what is mentioned below in relation to the care given to the sick, in the area of drug addiction, voluntary service is essential to help people understand that there are better ways to lead a satisfying life.

The disabled: (in a physical, sensorial, psychological or organic way): Basically being alongside disabled people and helping them to be responsible for their own social integration to the greatest extent possible. Providing ways and means so that they can have more opportunities and new possibilities.

The elderly: helping them to avoid getting stuck in a rut and to stimulate brain activity by offering them human company and support. In associations of elderly people, doing administrative work or helping members with bureaucracy. For people who are able to get about, opening the doors of voluntary service so that they may actively participate.

Mistreated children (whether due to direct cruelty or because of the circumstances a child may have had to live in): voluntary work is often a source of hope, bringing them a more positive and, most of all, more dignified view of the world in which they live.

Prisoners: in this case volunteers help in transforming the time in prison into a useful experience.

The sick: in health centres, at their homes or in associations, the volunteer helps in complementary tasks and paper-work, encourages patients to live and get better.

The homeless: here voluntary service offers human support together with group action, which facilitate rehabilitation and social integration.

And in each case and each situation, by discovering needs and offering his or her own possibilities. Voluntary social workers always seek to make things better for the person to whom they dedicate their contribution.

Voluntary social work has a clear complementary function to the efforts carried out by paid employees who, given their profession, dedicate their working lives to improve the lives of those in need. A volunteer must never replace professionals who are contracted to attend physically handicapped people or those with serious difficulties. Instead, and out of a sense of vocation, the volunteer should complement their work.



Each person who volunteers to offer time and skills to voluntary social work contributes the possibilities resulting from his or her own age, knowledge, skills, availability, commitment and the spirit of service which has been developed in the course of time; and this is what has to be put at the service of the person or collective with real needs.

Volunteers, in any case, should offer what the other person needs, not what they think they have an abundance of. For example, a person with a great knowledge of music who wants to volunteer for social work, once in the presence of the person requiring the service, doesn't necessarily have to teach that person music but has to discover the needs of the other, try to involve them in order to attain what they lack and help them to achieve it.

Being a voluntary worker implies helping, accompanying, comforting, listening, orienting... with a spirit of personal pledge, with commitment and responsibility.

Within voluntary social work, there is a place for everyone: men, women, adults, elderly and young people, businessmen and labourers, rich and poor... all of them should be able to find time to offer to those requiring special attention.

Young people, who can find the time for the things they are interested in, should add a part of their own life to their activity in order to help those who can not cope.

Adults, the single or those with grown-up children, should find the way and the moment to devote sometime to others and take part in organised social work.

Elderly people who have accumulated a remarkable wealth of knowledge and experience should put them both at the service of whoever needs them. By doing so they will not only contribute to the improvement of the other's situation but also they will enrich their own lives by observing the usefulness of their contribution.

There is no greater mistake than doing nothing at all because one thinks one could only do a little.

While it is true that 'the future is for the young', we can also say without any fear of being wrong that 'the future is for the elderly', because never before have elderly people had such a long future, especially if we take into account the following points:



1. -Increasing life expectancy.
2. -Because of early retirement, the number of 'younger' elderly people is constantly increasing because they are retired but they are younger.
3. -Medical progress and attention to health means that many over 60s find themselves not only in full possession of their faculties but even at the best moment of their lives.

To sum up, voluntary social work is about being conscientious and responsible. Knowing that Humanity is like a big family and that all of us -all of us!- are partly to blame for the disorder of this unfair world we have created and enjoy.

However, voluntary social work is not about working on one's own, helping those around us in whatever they need, though it can also be done, but rather it involves taking part in a non-profit making organisation with similar goals to the ones we want to achieve.

Making a decisive and committed step to offer one's services to a social activity organisation is the right way to take a real part in Voluntary Social Work; and this is what we invite you all to do.

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