THE ALIVE CENTER (A LOCAL INFORMATION & VOLUNTEER EXCHANGE):
AN EVALUATION OF THE YEAR 2003-2004

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By
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Volunteerism plays an important role in modern American society with benefits

accruing to the community and individuals who volunteer. This thesis evaluated the first

year of operation of the ALIVE Center (A Local Information and Volunteer Exchange)

by addressing four objectives of the program with data obtained from the ALIVE Center.

To meet its first objective, the ALIVE Center maintains a current database of local

human service organizations. The second objective, to establish a resource center and

provide referrals and information to 1,000 people, was achieved. The third objective of

maintaining a website was also met. Matching over 200 volunteers with local service

programs, the fourth objective, was easily exceeded. Thus, each of the objectives was

clearly met, indicating that the initial year of operation of the ALIVE Center was

successful.

The ALIVE Center (A Local Information & Volunteer Exchange):

An Evaluation of the Year 2003-2004

As a means to facilitate the involvement of volunteers in Bowling Green and Warren County, Kentucky the ALIVE Center (A Local Information & Volunteer Exchange) was created in August 2003. The Center serves as a resource for those interested in volunteering by referring them to local service providers who can utilize their efforts. The ALIVE Center provides youth in the area an alternative to suspension program. Rather than serve a school suspension, those youths participate in community service. In addition to providing resources to volunteers, the center serves as a centralized location for those in need to seek out essential human services. This thesis details the evaluation of the first year of operation of the ALIVE Center. A review of the literature on volunteerism is presented followed by a detailed description of the methodology and the results of the ALIVE Center first-year evaluation.

In the United States today there is an ever-increasing demand for volunteers as a means to improving our communities. With the calls for welfare reform and mounting budget deficits, an increase in volunteerism is one way that Americans can take action. Now is a critical time in the recruitment and organization of new volunteers as the Baby Boomer generation approaches retirement age (Kornblum, 2004). As this generation leaves the workforce and has more time to devote to activities such as volunteerism, there is an opportunity to make a substantial difference in communities nationwide. Even now older adults are making a difference, as an Association for the Advancement of Retired People survey indicated 48% of working adults over age 45 claim to volunteer (Kornblum, 2004).

Given the increased reliance of government on volunteerism as a way of supplementing social programs, it is very important to facilitate the matching of willing volunteers to agencies in need. Americans have responded to this demand, with some estimates putting the percentage of adults who volunteer as high as 56% and youth at 49% (Phoenix, Miller & Schleien, 2002). In fact, among the most industrialized nations of the world, the United States had the second-highest percentage of adults reporting they regularly volunteer (Penner, 2004). The total dollar value of this volunteerism has been estimated as high as $226 billion per year, with 19 billion hours of time spent volunteering (Penner, 2004).

Even with such a high percentage of volunteers, there is still a need for more volunteers. One example of an organization in need of volunteers is the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. Big Brothers/Big Sisters provides at-risk youths with mentors for 12 or more months. These mentors regularly spend time with the youths throughout that period, with a supportive relationship expected to develop between the two. Research (e.g., Gerson & Glastris, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002) has found that participation in the program has reduced initial drug use in the youth by 46%, cut initial alcohol use by 27%, increased school attendance rates, and reduced the chances of the youths hitting others. Despite being well-known, funded, and having documented results, there are thousands more children nationwide waiting to be matched with volunteers (Gerson & Glastris, 1997). If a program with such a reputation has trouble meeting its demand for volunteers, the problem for lesser known programs is likely much worse.

In addition to recruiting new volunteers, organizations must also be sure to use them effectively. With proper direction and training, volunteers can increase the value of

services provided by professionals (Henderson & Silverberg, 2002; Smith, 2001). If the new volunteers do not feel they are appreciated or being utilized effectively, they may choose not to volunteer again, at least with the same organization.

Although once thought of primarily as a way to help one's community, there are now indications that volunteerism has benefits for the individual who volunteers as well. Those who volunteer have an opportunity to meet new people and develop new skills. It has also been suggested that those who are often socially excluded can benefit from volunteering even more. For example, disabled individuals who volunteer can use it as a way to be included in the community and challenge stereotypes of themselves as simply beneficiaries of aid (Smith, 2001).

Although the individual benefits of volunteerism may keep people coming back for more, so to speak, the benefit to their communities can be much greater. It has been suggested (Henderson & Silverberg, 2002) that volunteerism generates social capital that has many positive outcomes for a community. "*Social capital* is a new term used to describe the links and connections made by individuals through volunteering as well as other activities. Social capital denotes the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them" (Henderson & Silverberg, 2002, p. 29). Life in communities with social capital can be improved because it strengthens existing relationships and can create new relationships among new groups of people.

When volunteers from a community are involved in planning projects and take ownership of their problems as well as their solutions, they can make it a better place to live (Henderson & Silverberg, 2002). This concept was the basis for one of the first

youth community service-based programs, the Chicago Area Project (Penn, 2000). This project involved volunteers and organizations throughout the community and led to decreased levels of delinquency among the participants.

Research (e.g., Penn, 2000) indicates there are several reasons a community service program may be effective in reducing juvenile delinquency. Several variables have been linked to increased levels of delinquency, among them a lack of strong ties to conventional society. A community service program would help in this situation by involving the youth in their community, thus creating those ties. Another predictor of delinquency is poor performance in school. In the case of the ALIVE Center, participation in the volunteer program may be beneficial by enabling the students to maintain their grades. While serving a suspension, their grades could fall below passing and cause them to give up on their studies. Social disorganization, or a lack of cohesion among family, friends, and groups within a neighborhood, is another variable that has been linked to delinquency (Penn, 2000). Involving the youth in local organizations as a volunteer can help create those bonds and reduce the social disorganization.

Penn (2000) examined two programs involving youth community service as deterrents to juvenile delinquency, Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Quantum Opportunities Program. The Big Brothers/Big Sisters program indirectly involved community service, with many of the Bigs taking their Littles to service activities within the community. Quantum Opportunities had a specific requirement of 250 hours of service per participant. As already mentioned, the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program has had success in reducing initial drug and alcohol use, reduced truancy, and improving academic performance. Although community service is not a requirement for participation in the

program, many of the activities between Bigs and Littles do include service. Since the Bigs already have an interest in volunteering, as proven by their participation, they often involve their Littles in other activities such as a church group or homeless shelter. Participating in community service with someone they consider to be a positive role model can also make their perception of service as something positive, rather than a punishment. This more positive perception can increase their chances of participating in volunteer activities on their own.

The Quantum Opportunities Program was designed to help disadvantaged youth by encouraging participation in educational activities (e.g., tutoring), developmental activities (e.g., life skills training), and community service (Penn, 2000). Each participant was required to attend high school and complete 250 hours in each of the three areas. There were financial incentives for each hour completed and reaching the 250-hour goals; the money was placed into an account that could be used for college, job training, or other approved educational expenses. The program was found to have an effect on arrest rates (-28%), plans to complete a four-year degree (35% of participants vs. 11% for a control group), dependence on welfare (47% of participants remained on welfare vs. 58% of the control group), and employment (14% of participants were not employed or in school vs. 48% of the control group).

Overall, Penn (2000) concluded that community service alone does not reduce delinquency. Although he indicated that such a program could be successful, there was no evidence of such a program in the relevant literature. Although service may be a contributing factor, more research must be done to point conclusively at community

service as a way to reduce juvenile delinquency. Perhaps future analyses of the ALIVE Center's programs will help to provide this link.

The ALIVE Center serves as a clearinghouse of information to guide and assist the public and service providers in making referrals for volunteer service. An increasing number of and increased usage of nonprofit agencies throughout the Bowling Green/Warren County area prompted a need for one centralized agency to facilitate the union of volunteers with the service providers who need to utilize volunteers.

Focus group and survey research conducted by the United Way of Southern Kentucky in 2001 (Phelps, 2003) found that there was a need in this area for one centralized point of contact for human service recipients and service providers. The major recurring finding in this research was a lack of a central source of information for all human services and a lack of awareness by the public of the services available. A central office was needed for those looking for help and agencies needing to make a referral. Furthermore, four independent community coalitions representing many sectors (including education, government, health and human services, civic organizations, law enforcement, churches, businesses, and families) echoed the need for a community information, referral, and volunteer center.

Accordingly, the ALIVE Center was created in April 2003 and opened its doors on August 1, 2003. The ALIVE Center provides a central location for identifying organizations in need of assistance and people who wish to contribute their time and energy to their community. In addition, The ALIVE Center serves as a centralized location to seek help from nonprofit agencies for individuals and matches potential volunteers with agencies and projects throughout the community. The ALIVE Center has

also opened its doors to various groups throughout the community by providing meeting space and equipment.

The primary objective of the ALIVE Center is to offer the public complete and accurate information about human services available in Warren County and to provide support for volunteer activities. This primary objective was operationalized in four specific objectives addressing database creation and management, a community resource hotline, an ALIVE Center website, and the matching of volunteers. The four objectives were:

Objective 1: Maintain a database of human service organizations in Bowling Green/Warren County, with a listing of the services available and up-to-date contact information.

Objective 2: Establish a resource center with a community information "hotline," and provide information and referrals through personal communication to 1,000 individuals or agencies over a one-year period.

Objective 3: Maintain a website to provide online access to local resources, to highlight relevant human service information, such as changes in programs or personnel, and to promote upcoming community events.

Objective 4: Match 200 volunteers (with at least 40 being youth under the age of 18) with opportunities to serve programs and projects in the community.

This report details the evaluation of how well the ALIVE Center met its four specific objectives for the year 2003-2004.

Method

The data for this evaluation were obtained through cooperation with the ALIVE Center staff through meetings and subsequent communications via e-mail. Databases were maintained by the ALIVE Center staff using standard spreadsheet software. The calculations consisted of simple descriptive statistics.

Results

Objective 1

Maintain a database of human service organizations in Bowling Green/Warren County, with a listing of the services available and up-to-date contact information.

Results. The Information Coordinator and staff of the ALIVE Center have worked to maintain a current database of all the human service organizations in the Bowling Green/Warren County area. The criteria used to determine whether or not to include an organization are (a) nonprofit status and (b) service in Warren County. Some of the organizations included in the database also serve areas outside of Warren County.

As of September 24, 2004 the current ALIVE Center directory contained listings for 298 different agencies. For each agency, the directory contains the agency name, a description of the services provided by that agency, and contact information for the agency. The information listed for each agency is provided by the agency itself. Information can be updated via the ALIVE Center website or by calling or e-mailing the ALIVE Center. Each agency is contacted once a year by the ALIVE Center staff to review the content of the listing and verify contact information.

Information contained in the directory can be accessed via the ALIVE Center website at www.alivebg.org or through personal contact with the ALIVE Center staff. Appendix A contains the form agencies can use to be added to the directory.

The ALIVE Center has done a conscientious job in identifying and including human service organizations in the Warren County area. Their efforts to follow up with each agency in the Warren County area should ensure that the list is an accurate, current, and comprehensive listing of appropriate agencies. Clearly, Objective 1 has been met for the year 2003-2004.

Objective 2

Establish a resource center with a community information "hotline," and provide information and referrals through personal communication to 1,000 individuals or agencies over a one-year period.

Results. The ALIVE Center facility is located at 1818 31-W Bypass in Bowling Green, Kentucky and is housed in a stand-alone building with a private parking lot. The ALIVE Center is operated by a four-person staff that is available on site during business hours, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Information can be obtained by visiting the center, over the phone, or through the ALIVE Center website. The ALIVE Center contains both a large and small conference room for use by local groups or agencies. Furthermore, the ALIVE Center offers an inviting, welcoming atmosphere, which should encourage citizens to utilize the center facilities.

To determine the number of people and agencies served by the ALIVE Center over the 2003-2004 one-year period, several different data sources were examined. The sources included a daily log of all calls and walk-in inquiries received by the center, a list

of meetings conducted at the ALIVE Center, and a list of agencies that had borrowed equipment from the center.

For the 2003-2004 time period, 624 people or agencies sought information or referrals from the ALIVE Center via calls or visits to the center. (Note: The ALIVE Center database contained data since its opening August 1, 2003. As the objective was stated for a one-year time period, the data reported are from September 1, 2003 through August 31, 2004. Since its opening on August 1, 2003, the ALIVE Center reported 908 inquiries for information or referrals.) The database included the date of the inquiry, whether the inquiry was made by an individual or an agency, and the reason for the inquiry. The call list entries included 388 calls from individuals and 236 calls from agencies. The name of the agency was not listed on all entries; thus the inquiries are not categorized or tabulated by agency or agency type. The purpose of 354 of the listings was to obtain information, the most common reason for inquiry. The next most common purpose for calling was volunteerism, with 70 listings.

There were 188 meetings held at the ALIVE Center from September 1, 2003 through August 31, 2004, and more than 2,585 people utilized the meeting facilities at the ALIVE Center during this time period. The actual number of meeting participants is higher than this figure albeit unknown, as number of participants was not recorded for 16 meetings during the year. During the 2003-2004 time period, 58 different groups held meetings at the ALIVE Center. The groups that used the meeting rooms most often included Caveland Educational Support Center (16 meetings), I CAN (12), and KY-ASAP (10).

In addition to allowing agencies to hold meetings in the ALIVE Center's conference rooms, agencies may borrow equipment to use at other locations. Between September 1, 2003 and August 31, 2004, tables and chairs were borrowed from the ALIVE Center on 31 different occasions. Equipment was loaned to 18 different agencies during this time period. The Best Center for Independent Living, Inc. and SOKY Regional Farmers' Market each borrowed equipment on 4 different occasions, which was the most frequent rate of borrowing of any of the agencies. Thus, ALIVE Center equipment is being used by a significant number of agencies in the Warren County Area.

Objective 2 targeted a utilization rate of 1,000 individuals or agencies over a one-year period. If the total number of people and agencies served by the ALIVE Center is considered, then the goal of 1,000 people or agencies was easily met. The total number of people that used the conference rooms, people and agencies that sought information from the ALIVE Center, and groups that borrowed equipment is approximately 3,240. (Note: It is not possible to determine how many of this total are repeat customers.)

Objective 3

Maintain a website to provide online access to local resources, to highlight relevant human service information, such as changes in programs or personnel, and to promote upcoming community events.

Results. A website for the ALIVE Center has been established at the address www.alivebg.org. The website contains a listing and other information for all Bowling Green/Warren County service organizations and supports groups. In addition, the website contains information about upcoming community events, workshops, and conferences. There are links to be used by the public and service organizations for such things as grant

opportunities. An interactive feature on the ALIVE Center's website allows for a search of the Human Services Directory. This feature allows anyone to seek out specific agencies listed in the directory by keywords or subject.

Furthermore, the website contains a number of interactive features for use by local agencies and individuals in need of information or services. Local nonprofit agencies and individuals can register with the ALIVE Center. Once these agencies or individuals have registered, they can reserve meeting rooms and equipment through the website. Agencies listed in the directory may update their agency information via the website. Once an individual has registered, he/she can sign up for volunteer opportunities. When an individual signs up for a volunteer opportunity listed on the website, his/her contact information is automatically forwarded to the agency where he/she wants to volunteer. If any person or agency wishes to contact the ALIVE Center staff, there is also a "Contact Us" e-mail link to facilitate the contact.

At the current time there is no counter on the page to track how many people visit the site. There are plans to add one in the next phase of projects for the center. The counter would be a useful addition to the website that would facilitate the documentation of how often the website was accessed.

The ALIVE Center has a very functional website that effectively provides access to agencies and provides a mechanism for matching volunteers with agencies in need. Agencies may update their information on the website, which should help in ensuring the accuracy of the website. Community events are posted on the website. The ALIVE Center website clearly meets the standards set forth in Objective 3.

Objective 4

Match 200 volunteers (with at least 40 being youth under the age of 18) with

opportunities to serve programs and projects in the community.

Results. To evaluate whether or not the ALIVE Center met its objective of

matching 200 volunteers with projects in the community, records maintained by the

ALIVE Center were examined. The adult volunteers were tracked in one database, while

the youth volunteers were tracked in another, separate database. The youth volunteer

database contained data from November 2003 through May 2004 (i.e., 7 rather than 12

months).

The ALIVE Center provided 593 adult volunteer placements from September 1,

2003 to August 31, 2004. Some 226 of those placements involved repeat volunteers; thus

the total number of adult volunteers during that time period was 367. It speaks well for

the ALIVE Center that many of their volunteers return for additional placements for

volunteer service.

The youth volunteers were referred by the Alternative to Suspension Program in

both the Warren County and Bowling Green City school systems. Between November 5,

2003 and May 5, 2004, Warren County Schools sent 547 referrals to the ALIVE Center

for volunteer placement. Through these placements, the students volunteered for a total

of 1,322 hours. The majority of the placements (490) were for 2 hours each. The

remaining placements (57) were for 6-hour placements. To protect the identity of the

juveniles, each student was identified only by his/her initials. Consequently, it was not

possible to determine how many different juveniles were referred by the ALIVE Center.

The Bowling Green City Schools sent 165 referrals to the ALIVE Center between November 7, 2003 and May 20, 2004 for volunteer placement. These 165 referrals were for 80 different students. Through those placements, the students volunteered for a total of 215.5 hours. The most common length of placement was 1 hour (69), followed closely by 1.5-hour placements (63). There were 21 placements for 2 hours, 8 placements for .5 hour, and 2 placements for 3 hours.

The ALIVE Center far exceeded the objective for the placement of volunteers throughout the community for both adult and juvenile volunteers. The total number of volunteer placements was 1,305. Because we could not determine which Warren County School juvenile volunteers were repeat volunteers, we cannot determine the total number of individuals who were matched by the ALIVE Center. Without including any of the Warren County School volunteers, the 367 adult and 80 youth volunteers from the Bowling Green Schools surpass the 200 volunteer criterion in Objective 4. Furthermore, youth volunteer data were available only from November 2003 to May 2004; thus it is likely the total number of youth volunteers over the course of a year would be even higher.

The Objective 4 criterion of 200 volunteer matches (including at least 40 juvenile matches) was easily exceeded by the ALIVE Center in its first year of operation. It is likely that the great potential of the ALIVE Center for matching volunteers with community opportunities was not initially appreciated when the criterion was set for the first year of operation. Unless there is something to indicate circumstances will change in 2004-2005, it is recommended that a more challenging objective for matching volunteers be set for next year.

Discussion

The initial year of operation for the ALIVE Center proved to be very successful. Each of the four evaluative objectives was clearly met for 2003-2004. The ALIVE Center appears to have done an excellent job documenting its services to community agencies, groups, and volunteers. The data in each of the relevant databases are well maintained and well managed. This database provides an important source of information for operating the ALIVE Center, marketing purposes, and for evaluation of the ALIVE Center's performance. ALIVE Center operations are housed in an easily accessible facility that is well maintained by the Center staff. Records indicate that the facility is visited frequently by individuals seeking volunteer opportunities and by agencies seeking volunteers. Furthermore, the ALIVE Center is becoming well recognized in the community as a common place for meetings. Local agencies utilize the ALIVE Center as a resource for borrowing equipment.

Wolfe (2004) found through surveys administered to the Coordinators of local Family Resource Centers that the vast majority were aware of and utilized the services of the ALIVE Center. Ninety percent of the 20 Coordinators reported being familiar or very familiar with the services provided by ALIVE, and 70% indicated they received information from ALIVE weekly or monthly. Given that these Resource Centers provide service to those in need on a daily basis, their knowledge and continued utilization of the ALIVE Center will increase its visibility in Bowling Green and Warren County.

The ALIVE Center website is very functional and contains a number of interactive features that increase accessibility to ALIVE Center information and volunteer opportunities. The high rate of utilization of the ALIVE Center by volunteers and

agencies further reinforces the perceived need for a central office to coordinate information for human services and to match volunteers with agencies in need of such assistance. In its first year of operation, the ALIVE Center has done an excellent job meeting this need for the public.

By helping to meet the demand for volunteers in Bowling Green and Warren County, the ALIVE Center is helping to improve the quality of life of local residents. Organizations that provide volunteer services should now be able to spend less time recruiting volunteers and more time delivering their services. The increase in the availability of services can generate more social capital, benefiting the entire community (Henderson & Silverberg, 2002). Through the alternative to suspension aspect of the ALIVE Center, hopefully there will be a decrease in the level of juvenile delinquency. If this program can help even some of the youth involved develop stronger ties to the community, maintain or improve their academic performance, or increase the cohesion within neighborhoods, then such a decrease may occur.

Although the ALIVE Center has done well in achieving its objectives, there is still room for growth. As research suggested community service viewed as a punishment may not be effective as a way of changing attitudes (Penn, 2000), perhaps more of those juveniles involved could be included in the planning of service projects. With supervision, perhaps the youths could be encouraged to choose an appropriate project they feel will benefit their community. Some follow up with the participants of the program may also prove advantageous in determining any benefits of participation in the program. Closer tracking of the youth volunteers may also be helpful so that rates of recidivism may be examined.

Another way the ALIVE Center could improve would be to track the volunteers referred to human service agencies to report how much involvement the volunteers have with each organization. This practice would be a way to measure the extent of impact those referrals have.

In the United States today, volunteerism is an important part of our society. Not only can volunteerism benefit our communities by enhancing needed services but also benefit individuals when they choose to volunteer. The ALIVE Center facilitates the matching of volunteers with agencies that require volunteers in the Bowling Green/Warren County area. An evaluation of the ALIVE Center's initial year of operation indicates that it has been successful in providing a useful service to both volunteers and organizations in need of volunteers. As the ALIVE Center becomes more widely known, it will become an even more important part of the community and hopefully improve the quality of life for local residents.

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Appendix-

Information Sheet for Potential Listings

ALIVE Center
1818 31-W Bypass
Bowling Green, KY 42101
(270) 782-0082 Phone
(270) 782-0922 Fax

Human Services Directory Information Sheet

Agency Name:	
Service Description:	
Service Area:	
Cost:	
Hours of Operation:	
Contact Name:	
Address:	
Phone Number:	
Fax Number:	
Toll Free Number:	
Email Address:	
Website:	
Volunteer Opportunities	