

Volunteer Counselors: An Innovative, Economic Response to Mental Health Service Gaps

Gail Kadison Golden

Reprinted from SOCIAL WORK Volume 36, Number 3, May 1991

Since 1970, VCS Inc. of Rockland County, New York, has pioneered the innovative use of community lay people to do high-level counseling for clients with a wide range of serious social problems. The article gives the history and an overview of the mechanics and the model of work that have made this agency viable.

In 1970, a group of family court judges in New York State expressed concern that many families seeking aid through their courts appeared to be in need more of counseling assistance than of judicial remedies. Child abuse, domestic violence, parent-adolescent conflict, and post-divorce problems were only some of the difficulties for which the judges were asked to provide solutions.

In many New York counties, cost-effective and timely counseling assistance was not always available. Although many communities had mental health clinics, these facilities often were understaffed and had long waiting lists. Clients of the family court generally were in crisis and needed a counseling support service that was immediately accessible.

The judges suggested that it might be possible to train lay people from the community to provide skillful and timely counseling. Perhaps homemakers, grandparents, and retired schoolteachers would volunteer time in return for training, supervision, challenge, and a chance to serve the community. If so, then a staff of one or two professionals could develop a large cadre of available volunteers, and the counseling capabilities of the community would be greatly expanded.

A Ford Foundation grant was secured to test this hypothesis. Nearly fifty years later, VCS Inc. is an established part of the service delivery system in Rockland County. The agency works closely with the family court, schools, the Rockland Family Shelter, and other community agencies. VCS counsels residents of Rockland County and works with court-mandated referrals and voluntary self-referrals. The service has expertise in areas such as domestic violence, post-divorce problems, and parent-teen crises. The community often turns to VCS when a local problem is not being well addressed. VCS also has developed a mediation center for the resolution of neighborhood disputes, a home sharing program for the elderly, and an on-site counseling program for an entire school district.

Since 1970, VCS Inc. has trained 1,000 counselors and served more than 1,000 clients per year. The author believes that this kind of agency can be replicated in other communities where the need for service is great and funds for professional staff are limited.

Community Resistance

Initially, the notion of lay counselors was met with distrust and concern in some parts of Rockland County. Some mental health professionals saw their livelihood threatened. Others were concerned that the clients would be poorly served and perhaps endangered by not receiving professional help. It is now recognized that clients who are appropriately matched to the resources of the agency can derive great benefit from the services offered. At VCS the professional staff provides intake assessments for clients seeking services and refers to other services clients whose needs exceed the capacities of the volunteers. The

staff monitors ongoing cases and intervenes when a client's situation begins to deteriorate. Through the years, trust in the agency grew, and the fear of losing clients also diminished.

VCS Clients

Large numbers of distressed families seek a wide variety of support and assistance from community agencies and private service providers. Many clients have limited economic resources, are hard to engage, and require a great deal of outreach. Others appear to need years of patient support to work through multiple problems. These clients have become the specialty of VCS.

VCS counsels battered women, teenagers, parents of teens, men who batter, people with marital problems, people with reactive depression, and families experiencing divorce or illness. VCS also works with people who are struggling with issues of aging, caregivers of the elderly, parents who are abusive or neglectful of their children, and people with reactive anxiety.

VCS does not counsel clients in serious crisis or those who need 24-hour service, medication, or highly experienced clinical management. Very depressed people who have a history or probable risk of suicide attempts also are referred elsewhere, as are clients whose primary problem is significant substance abuse. Clients who pose a clear threat to others also are not seen by VCS. The exception is men who abuse their wives but who have no history of aggression except toward their wives. Clients with conditions that may require medical monitoring, such as anorexia or bulimia, are referred elsewhere, as are people with thought disorders, sexual perversions, or developmental disabilities. VCS also does not counsel children under 12 years of age except as part of a family group.

The Model

VCS staff teach the counseling model in lay language. The model has a solid base in object relations theory, although VCS does not teach volunteers the intricacies of the theory. VCS highlights the value of a special kind of interpersonal relationship as the base from which a client can grow and change. The work of Bion (1977), Winnicott (1965), and Bowlby (1988) provided some conceptual framework for the model of work. Bion discussed "the idea of a container," Bowlby referred to "a secure base," and Winnicott talked about the "facilitating environment."

Client Integration

VCS first teaches a counselor to act for a client as a thoughtful container, by receiving a confusing array of fragmented feelings and experiences. A counselor who becomes successful has a high tolerance level for the process. During this phase, the counselor is taught not to solve problems or to fix the individual but rather to begin to help the individual grow through the process of making sense of and learning from his or her experience. Bion (1977) referred to this interaction as a process of digestion, which the good mother does for the child; the counselor replicates this important early experience.

The counselor also is trained to recognize the value of functioning as "an attachment figure," or an individual who is perceived as better able to cope with the world and whose presence is sought when an individual is frightened, fatigued, or sick (Bowlby, 1988). This behavior is considered a fundamental human instinct.

Client Empowerment

As a client becomes more coherent and secure, a counselor begins another phase of work, addressing the specific issues that brought the individual into counseling. A woman who is being tyrannized by an adolescent child may need help in setting clear limits. Another woman who has assumed the role of caring for everyone else in the family may need help asking for things that she needs. A man who abuses his wife needs help realizing that he alone is responsible for the abuse and that with support and willingness, he can stop.

Client Success

A client who is motivated to continue counseling finally may attempt real changes in his or her life - leaving a marriage, changing jobs, going back to school, developing a talent or interest, or risking new relationships. However, VCS does not believe that this phase has to occur for the counseling to be considered useful. A client who works for a while in the first phase may gain only some measure of inner strength and psychic integrity. This accomplishment begins a modest growth process for the client, which may fall short of VCS's goal for an individual but nonetheless has value.

VCS Volunteers

The profile of a typical volunteer has changed over the years. In 1970, many volunteers were women at home raising school-age children. These women typically were college-educated, often were trained as teachers, and wanted to use some free time in a meaningful way. In Rockland County, a seemingly endless number of such volunteers was available.

Many early counselors "fell in love" with the work, went back to school for master of social work (MSW) degrees, and became social work professionals. Today, these early volunteers make up a large number of the social work professionals in Rockland County. Many occupy positions of leadership, and many are VCS volunteer supervisors.

When the women's movement and the economy motivated many homemakers to join the paid labor force, volunteer applicants became more varied. People working full-time who were thinking of career changes, people who wanted to improve their interpersonal skills to enhance their job performance, people doing work that did not use their people skills, retired people eager to remain productive, and students seeking internships for a wide variety of graduate degrees and certificates became part of the counseling service. A recent training group included two psychiatric nurses, a child care worker, the assistant to a college dean, a real estate broker, a lighting technician, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a veterinarian's assistant, two homemakers, and a teacher. Recent groups also have included an increasing number of men.

Supervision of Volunteers

When the agency was founded, the executive director met with volunteers in small supervisory groups throughout the week. As the agency continued to grow, it became clear that another supervisory system was needed. The director at that time discovered that many mental health professionals in the community were willing to volunteer an hour per week to supervise a counselor for the agency. Supervisors now see counselors whenever convenient in their own home or office and report crises or problems directly to the VCS clinical staff. Twice a year supervisors submit a written progress sheet noting the counselor's growth.

Counselors are encouraged to tape sessions. Clients are advised of this procedure at intake, and those who object are not taped. The tape recording, written weekly interview sheets, and the counselor's verbal account provide the materials with which the supervisor works.

Selection of Volunteers

The first group of VCS counselors was recruited through a newspaper advertisement that offered an opportunity for qualified adults to learn serious counseling skills under professional supervision. Today, VCS still uses newspaper ads, but many counselors now are recruited to the agency by word of mouth.

Counselors must be age 28 or older, flexible, and nonjudgmental. They must live in a stable environment and must not be in the midst of working through a life crisis of their own. Although most applicants have college and even post-graduate degrees, such degrees are not a prerequisite for the program.

Interested applicants undergo two screening interviews with two different staff members. Although many

specific qualities are sought, a vital question VCS interviewers ask themselves is whether they experience discomfort meeting with the applicant. If the applicant is highly anxious, depressed, immature, judgmental, or has difficulty following the conversation, VCS does not feel that the applicant will establish a rapport with a client.

An applicant who completes two successful interviews is accepted into a 24-hour basic training program (but is not yet accepted to do counseling). At the end of the program, each applicant has a third interview to assess the extent to which he or she has been able to understand the model of work. This interview is not a test but a dialogue. Some applicants withdraw from the program at this time because the training can raise a high level of anxiety or can trigger awareness that painful life issues have not been worked through.

Applicants who complete a third successful interview make an 18-month commitment to the agency for five to six hours per week. Each week, the counselor sees three clients (two clients if the counselor works full-time at another job) and spends one hour in supervision, one hour at an agency training seminar, and one hour writing reports.

The majority of counselors make the commitment, and commitments that are broken are most often the result of personal emergencies. This fact reinforces the need to screen carefully for stability of life situations.

Training of Volunteers

The basic training cycle is offered two or three times a year. In the first 24 hours, trainers reinforce the basic model of work and cover basic casework skills, child and adolescent development, counseling techniques, and role-playing. VCS also gives focused training in domestic violence, an issue that affects large numbers of people in the agency's caseload. VCS does not require reading. All presentations focus material for direct application in hands-on counseling situations.

After counselors complete the first 24 hours, they must continue to attend an hour of seminar training per week at the agency for as long as they see clients. Ongoing seminars include didactic presentations by agency staff and guests, case presentations by counselors, and case conferences.

VCS Volunteers versus Social Workers

VCS counselors generally begin counseling at the same level as first semester MSW students. They have a similar level of enthusiasm, anxiety, and desire to be helpful, and they are similarly inexperienced and lacking in academic theoretical background. With close professional supervision, new counselors, like new students, can prove very helpful. Their rate of skill development is generally slower than MSW students, however, because the volunteers are not immersed in the work several days a week, have fewer clients, and do not read as widely to support their work.

Thus, the author does not suggest that the VCS training program can replace a traditional MSW program. However, in communities with too little money and too few services, volunteers can offer effective assistance to clients and may prove helpful in working with chronically dysfunctional clients, who are readily identified as unrewarding by experienced workers. In Rockland County, multi-problem families and clients who have exhausted the resources of other agencies typically are referred to VCS. Volunteers with a caseload of three can work energetically with clients without suffering from the intense stress, burnout, and disillusionment sometimes experienced by social workers with heavier caseloads. They also can invest more hours per week in a case.

Because counselors do not have a wide range of clients or experiences, skill development is slow and gradual. However, counselors who remain with VCS for five or more years and who seek out a range of learning opportunities can acquire considerable skills.

Funding

The agency originally was funded by a Ford Foundation grant, which diminished gradually over several years. The Rockland County legislature then agreed to pick up the deficit. Over the years, as the agency has added programs and services, other funding sources have evolved. The Division for Youth, the Office of Court Administration, the Office for the Aging, and the Department of Social Services have funded special programs under their specific mandates. United Way allocates funds to the agency as well.

Clients in many programs pay fees on a sliding scale. Although the agency is economical in its use of volunteers, VCS has fixed costs for rent, telephones, electricity, printing, and postage. As the range of services expands, the need for space and clinical support expands. Thus, the need to raise funds through special events, corporate donations, and special grants is an ever-present reality.

Conclusion

The VCS agency model has relevance for many communities in which the need for social services exceeds the supply of service providers. The VCS model can be adapted to meet the particular needs and to reflect the talents of the community and the unique qualities of its administrative personnel.

This article at best can offer an overview, a statement of philosophy, and a description. It does not pretend to provide a complete how-to guide. However, VCS welcomes inquiries from those with specific questions or a desire for further information.

References

Bion, W.R. (1977). *Seven servants*. New York: Jason Aronson.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. New York: Basic Books.

Winnicott, D.W. (1965). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment*. New York: International Universities Press.

Gail Kadison Golden, EdD., LCSW

This article is adapted from a presentation to the Annual Conference of the National Association of Social Workers, San Francisco, October 1989.