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Pro bono

Rewards are mutual, but volunteerism isn't as simple as it sounds

By Kathleen Fisher
Staff Writer

Serving as a volunteer psychotherapist at the Walk-In Counseling Center (WICC) in Minneapolis didn't exactly change M.H. (Bill) Williams' life. But it did change the emphasis of his life's work.

When he first began providing free counseling in the summer of 1970, many of his clients were wrestling with the question of whether they were — or should be — conscientious objectors. That issue evolved into the broader area of life planning, specifically in regard to choosing a vocation.

As a result of that new focus Williams, while in his 50's, left the consulting firm where he had been employed to become an independent management consultant. He continued to see many clients on a no-fee or sliding-scale basis.

WICC is a successful exception among the spate of "free clinics" that sprang up in urban neighborhoods in the 1960s and early 1970s. Most of them sputtered and died as the issues of that turbulent period faded from the front pages.

But the Minneapolis center changed with the times. Founded as a place where young drug users could find cost-free and judgment-free

Gary Schoener

help, the average patient today seeks counseling for depression or problems with a relationship. While almost 80 percent of patients are under 30, WICC sees elderly walk-ins as well. The center added a speakers bureau, has expanded and formalized consulting services, and charges a small fee for providing in-service training. It also offers an assistant supervisor training course, and has established a program for victims of sexual abuse by therapists which has served 200 clients.

"I think we have a real, clear continuing role," said Gary Schoener, a psychologist who is executive director of the center. "We act as a bridge between different types of people, and we take on some pretty risky stuff. The county likes us, and the business community likes us."

And the volunteers keep coming because the center gives them something back. For Williams, now 62, it's an opportunity to work with younger therapists. For Joseph Huber, it's a way to keep his hand in therapy while he earns a living in research. For Susan Bidwell, it's a place to interact with colleagues and get immediate feedback from clients. For students and new graduates, it's a chance to be supervised by respected therapists, a sought-after item for their vitae, and an informal job bank.

National effort

Max Siegel, APA president, has called for an organized nationwide program through which psychologists would similarly offer something to their communities and presumably gain something, at least in good will, in return.

In a December letter as president-elect to state association and division presidents, Siegel proposed a National Human Resource Pool, observing that if one-third of APA members gave their community two free hours a week, it would result in a gift of some two million hours a year.

By early April, nine state associations and five divisions had responded in writing, and Siegel said he had talked to another half dozen by phone. "I can't say that it's rolling," he said of the effort. "I haven't had anyone respond negatively, but there are a lot that haven't responded, and maybe that's negative."

Some of those who did respond said in essence, "Interesting idea, but we'll have to run it by our governance structure." Siegel suggested that other state associations and divisions may likewise be polling their members on the idea before they respond.

That's the case in Maryland, where state association president Joan Roberts Field said she will probably bring the matter before her executive council.

Field said that she already provides several hours a week of pro bono private therapy, as do most of the therapists she knows. "I find that natural, since I'm a hypnotherapist and most of these people can't find that sort of help anywhere else," she said.

She also provides some reduced-fee consultation in stress reduction and retirement planning, through business and civic organizations. Such large group work would be the most efficient way to make an organized pro bono effort go the furthest, she suggested, adding that consultation with clergy could also translate into reaching a large number of people with a minimum investment of time.

The Colorado Psychological Association found in a survey returned by 97 of their members that 64 percent were providing some type of free service and that 87 percent would be willing to do so if the state association set up a formal pro bono program.

"We've been interested in becoming more social-minded and less guild-oriented," said John Nicoletti executive director. One proposal has been for members to counsel lawbreakers who are on probation with the proviso that they obtain professional counseling, but who lack the money to do so, Nicoletti said.

Richard Mikesell, a psychologist in independent practice in the District of Columbia, worked for a free clinic in Washington in the early 1970s when he was an intern at St. Elizabeths Hospital. An *esprit de corps* existed among the volunteers, he noted, because there was a common enemy, "the establishment," against which social-minded psychologists focused their energies.

Some questions

In spite of his longtime participation in no-fee and low-fee projects, Mikesell enumerated some questions which the proposal of a nationwide program will undoubtedly raise.

He agreed with Field that there are already many therapists offering free services, and predicted that APA members may raise the question, "Why impose a bureaucracy on it?" This profession should also be careful of requiring pro bono services, he added, which created a great deal of resentment when tried in the legal profession.

Dallas psychologist Harry J. Parker of the University of Texas Health Science Center is coordinating an effort to pull together a network of volunteers to perform services that would range from defusing urban unrest or counseling families who are exposed to toxic waste to helping write or pass state or federal legislation.

He was unaware of Siegel's efforts but said an increasing number of psychologists have been expressing an interest in benefitting their communities. "I think there has been a lot in the press about contributions that other professions [specifically physicians and lawyers] have made as part of their ethical obligations. Psychology is sort of a Johnny-come-lately to all this."

The Minnesota and Massachusetts associations were the only groups

Photo by Brian Robb

Volunteer counselors at the Minneapolis clinic can get advice from supervisors such as M.C. (Bill) Williams after or even during a break from their sessions with walk-in clients.

reporting that some formal pro bono services currently exist in their states. But the two programs could hardly be more different.

WICC was founded in 1969 by a chapter of Psychologists for Social Action, an organization that folded in the mid-1970s. Today its 200 volunteer professional therapists — mostly psychologists but including some persons with MSW degrees and a few psychiatrists — see approximately 1,300 clients in 2,800 sessions each year. The therapists also offer consultation services for other community agencies.

The board of the Massachusetts Psychological Association voted about a year ago to recruit volunteers for a variety of activities with the exception of direct clinical services. They now have 60 members available and 25 actively offering free service, most often consultation or in-service training to social agencies such as day care or home care programs.

Siegel believes the most difficult hurdle for a nationwide program will be administrative: How will it be coordinated and financed? While APA members who have responded to his call noted these practical obstacles, they also cited ethical and philosophical considerations.

For instance, Siegel's letter noted that the resource pool not only would serve the community, but also would be "of tremendous public relations value to the profession of psychology."

That aspect of the program made sense to one state association president, who said that many of his members are currently providing low or no cost services but not receiving any recognition for their efforts. But another president wrote that "psychologists should not publicize their collective good deeds."

'Free' therapy

The Minneapolis and Massachusetts programs have arrived at different answers to one of the most basic questions: Is "free" counseling worth anything? Won't it cheapen the profession and steal bread from the mouths of struggling colleagues?

The board of directors in Massachusetts voted to exclude pro bono direct clinical services ". . . because they pose difficult ethical and legal issues and they could present the appearance of conflict of interest with current psychologist staff positions in the general sector."

Marion Sanders, chair of the pro bono committee for the Massachusetts association, said board members were divided and would probably continue to weigh the issue. Those who voted against direct service felt it would raise complicated questions of liability and responsibility toward the patient, she explained. For instance, "If you were volunteering to work for an agency for a limited time, what would become of your patients?"

There was also a concern, she said, that free psychotherapy would take work away from the surfeit of unemployed or underworked psychologists in the Boston area. Not only might fewer patients call on independent psychologists, but mental health agencies who have money to hire psychologists could channel those funds elsewhere.

"I just totally reject any such guild notion," Siegel responded. The type of low-income clients he imagines as the beneficiaries of pro bono services could not afford private therapy, and would be far down on the waiting list of public agencies.

There is also the old and unresolved argument that patients won't "work" if they aren't paying all their budgets can bear for psychological services.

Psychologists at WICC generally scoff at that idea, but even there, the debate goes on.

"Nobody has research evidence that paying makes a client get better," said Gary Schoener. WICC offers only short-term counseling — a maximum of 10 sessions — and thus is often an entry into the psychotherapy system. "Our clients are often dubious about the product we have to offer, and we have to show them it's worth something," Schoener said.

Schoener and Sam Scher, a psychologist who has been a WICC volunteer for 13 years, noted that WICC accepts donations and added that the money-effort connection should be discussed with the client.

As for taking work away from other therapists, Schoener answers that many of the center's clients wouldn't seek counseling if WICC didn't exist. Two-thirds of them wouldn't know where to go. Others, including some middle-income clients, feel that private therapists are in an ivory-tower environment and would look down their noses at them.

On the other hand, many clients don't want to fill out the forms required by public agencies. Scher said he has counseled runaways from the state mental hospitals who are fearful of the whole system, and others who were running from the police.

Careful screening

At WICC, there is no paper work and no appointments. The client goes immediately into therapy and doesn't even have to give his or her name. Although formality is sacrificed, quality is preserved.

"We're atypical among free clinics in that we require our counselors to be professionals," said Schoener. "It's easier in some cases to get a job than to become one of our volunteers."

Applicants for volunteers fill out a four-page form in which they give WICC the right to check their backgrounds. They must have a master's degree or be in at least the third quarter of their first year of graduate study, and they are required to role play a crisis intervention session with the clinic director. In addition, they are considered "on probation" for their first two quarters of volunteer work.

Volunteers are divided into teams of four, each with a supervisor who conducts "case conferences" when the day's therapy sessions are over. Supervising psychologists must have a Ph.D. in applied psychology or a Minnesota license, as well as a year of supervisory experience.

The center is run by a 19-member board with about one-third mental health people and the rest community leaders and business leaders. About 95 percent of their financial support comes from a "purchase of service" agreement with Hennepin County. Capital improvements are financed through foundations and private donations.

Schoener called the model "highly replicable." A similar program, the Counseling Center of Milwaukee, was started about the same time, and offers direct and telephone psychological counseling as well as some legal counseling. It also runs a halfway house, Pathfinders, for runaway teenagers.

The center usually charges a nominal fee averaging $3 for sessions, however, and the direct counseling is provided by social workers or psychiatric nurses with advanced degrees. They, in turn, work under the supervision of psychologists or psychiatrists who are paid $35 an hour by a United Way Agency, Milwaukee Mental Health Consultants.

Ted Seaver, the executive director, said the excellent supervisory system has resulted in a waiting list of counseling volunteers. It is very probable the program could have recruited volunteer supervisors as well, he said, but the $35 is a "nice supplement" that has become an established policy.

Schoener has several suggestions for communities wishing to establish a similar service: See it as an experiment. Do a marketing survey and decide on a target. Don't ask volunteers for long-term commitments; six months is long enough. Establish consulting services from the beginning.

Marion Sanders of the Massachusetts association said her organization would do a number of things differently. MPA's first communications indicated that they could find each psychologist something he or she would enjoy doing, she said, and they were fairly careful to match and monitor each pair. Now, the volunteer is asked to visit the agency once, simply to determine its need.

"We're much more *laissez-faire*. I think of us less as an employment service, as I did at first, than as a computer dating service," she said. "Every case is so different that it's hard to do much besides put them in touch, let them check each other out and hope it's a successful union."

"This is terribly time-consuming," Sanders warned. "Although it's nobody's job, it takes up a large part of the activity of the regular office staff. You can't do it without a well-staffed office, facilities and a great deal of interest. And it helps to take a look at the long-term options. Some of these contacts can go on for years."

In spite of the admitted challenges of establishing free service programs, Minneapolis psychologist Williams said it would not be an insurmountable task to extend the pro bono idea nationwide.

"I know selfish and unselfish psychologists," he said. "But among the clinical people, I would say that most are not so busy that they couldn't set aside one morning a week." ■