

Positioning Volunteers for Community Leadership

Dr. Brenda Joy

Volunteering is an activity that contributes significantly to the economic activity in the United States, but it is generally ignored, and the focus is almost exclusively on paid work. This neglect is unsettling given that volunteers are essential to the provision of community services that directly impact people's lives and their communities.

Positioning volunteers for community leadership involves focusing on specific competencies in volunteer leadership. One important skill is community empowerment. In this context, to understand community empowerment as a core competency is to believe that volunteers can learn how to identify and access resources necessary for community improvement and enhancement.

In general, community empowerment refers to the enhancement of the social, political, or economic of individuals and their communities. Such empowerment is critical to volunteer leadership and enables individuals to gain control over their own lives and their community by providing members of the community access to the knowledge, skills, and resources they need.

Energizing residents living in problem communities is of particular importance for these citizens often feel a sense of helplessness and an inability to change their conditions. Empowerment can be achieved through the identification of community members' own strengths, through exchange with others, and through mutual support. Volunteers are in a unique position to help community members help themselves, because as active volunteers they know local policies and procedures and have the skills to advocate for necessary resources.

Additionally, volunteers have a track record of practices that express their own best qualities through doing work that helps others. Thus, they develop leadership skills, a sense of self-esteem, and the ability to help others favorably impact their own communities. Furthermore, research suggests that increased community participation and impact occurs when members of a community feel empowered to accomplish their own goals. By practicing community empowerment, volunteers demonstrate leadership.

In light of the knowledge and skills many volunteers already demonstrate, it is vital to realize that leadership development calls for repeated opportunities for education and training. All talent develops through interaction—sometimes over many years—between native gifts on the one hand and opportunities and challenges on the other. As literature emphasizes, volunteers make a contribution to people's lives and to their communities that few individuals ever hope to achieve.

Bio: **Dr. Brenda Joy** is a human relations professor at the University of Oklahoma. As a community activist, her scholarship focuses on leadership in the context of communities of color. She examines life journeys that are infused with meaning and demonstrate the vital nature of a commitment to action and a responsibility to contribute to society. Her research appears in peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books. She earned her PhD from The University of Tulsa. Dr. Brenda Joy was honored with the *Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women Award for Public Service*. Also, she is the founder of The Mothers Group, Inc., which is an Oklahoma-based nonprofit organization committed to increasing reading-centered households (www.themothersgroup.org). For leadership tips, follow her on twitter: <https://twitter.com/DrBrendaJoy1>