Parent Coaches' Experiences and Insights Into a Youth Soccer Program

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Municipal governments continue to struggle with decreased funding. In order to offset depleting funds, agencies rely on volunteers to provide resources to the public. In youth sport programs, parents provide much of the support, and it is estimated that 90% of youth sport coaches are parents. Given that parents have been instrumental in youth sport programs, the purpose of this study was to understand parents' experiences and insights associated with volunteering by using a youth soccer program located in a mid-sized town in Illinois as a case-study. Specifically, the study was designed to examine (a) parents' motivations in volunteering, (b) challenges parent coaches faced while volunteering, and (c) parent coaches' recommendations to agency personnel. Using a qualitative approach, 11 parents were interviewed. Findings indicated that parents were motivated to volunteer in order to help their children, and several expressed a desire to give back to their community. The primary motivation and benefit for volunteer coaches was their relationships with the children. Relationships with other adults in the program were also significant, but they tended to be secondary. Challenges in volunteering included working with the children, parents, and agency staff. Recommendations included providing incentives to coaches, conducting player assessments, ensuring that recruited volunteers share the agency's philosophy, and addressing volunteer concerns.

M unicipal governments and park districts offer various youth sport programs to the public. Yet, these public organizations have been forced to operate on increasingly tight budgets. Prior to the 1970s, many public agencies enjoyed adequate funding to meet the growing needs of their citizens, but tax reforms forced a new age of austerity. During the 1970s and early 1980s, municipal governments across the United States faced reduced public funding due to significant decreases in tax revenue (Backman, Wicks, & Silverberg, 1997). This also forced competition for tax revenue among the various social services, where park and recreation services were deemed unessential in comparison to other services including police protection, health services, and fire protection (Crompton, 2009).

Currently, many municipal governments continue to struggle with decreased funding. For instance, in the state of Illinois, the governor halted "$180 million in parkland grants in March [of 2015]" ("Raunder suspends," 2015, para. 4), and $146 million parkland-related grants were also suspended for the development of park facilities and open space for parks. Despite such decreases in public funding, many municipal governments across the state are still expected to meet the significant, and often growing, demand for services by their constituents. Thus, municipal agencies, such as those found in Illinois, have had to develop different approaches for designing and delivering services demanded by the general public.

One approach that has been utilized to offset costs is the reliance on volunteers in program and service delivery. Researchers have stressed the importance of volunteers in everyday service provisions (Silverberg, Marshall, & Ellis, 2001), community-level voluntary associations (Putnam, 2000), and state- or regional-level parks and recreation associations (e.g., zoos, museums; see Caldwell & Andereck, 1994). In youth sports, volunteers may take the form of various community members, including local high school or college students, teachers, or parents. In the case of parents, they have been noted as providing much of the transportation, "league fees, equipment, and spectatorship" for youth sports, and are "thus integral to the existence of youth sport programs" (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008, p. 505). Some parents also provide the crucial service of coaching youth teams that facilitates the overall operation of a program while also being personally involved with their child (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). As many public parks and recreation agencies would not be able to operate without volunteers, volunteerism has been a much discussed facet among leisure practitioners and researchers.

Consequently, it is critical to understand individuals' experiences and insights with volunteering in order to improve recruitment and retention efforts. Given that parents have been instrumental in

youth sport programs, the purpose of this study was to understand parents' experiences and insights associated with volunteering by using a youth soccer program located in a mid-sized town in Illinois as a case-study. Specifically, the study was designed to examine (a) parents' motivations in volunteering, (b) challenges parent coaches faced while volunteering, and (c) parent coaches' recommendations to agency personnel.

Defining Volunteerism

Volunteerism has been conceptualized in several different ways, and researchers have discussed the various dimensions involved. For the purpose of this study, Stebbins's (2004) definition will be utilized in that "volunteering is uncoerced help offered either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay done for the benefit of both other people and the volunteer" (p. 5). His definition reflected the four volunteer dimensions conceptualized by Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth in 1996.

Cnaan and colleagues (1996) summarized various volunteering definitions and developed four main dimensions: free choice, remuneration, structure, and intended beneficiaries. Free choice indicated that engagement in the activity was not coerced or obligated but rather a conscious decision by the individual. Free choice appears to be an integral component of volunteerism as studies in which the research participants were forced to

volunteer demonstrated less than optimal outcomes. For instance, Stukas, Snyder, and Clary (1999) discovered that students who were forced to volunteer were less likely to want to volunteer in the future.

Remuneration referred to no pay to low pay or a stipend (Caldwell & Andereck, 1994; Knoke & Prensky, 1984). Scholars have disagreed on whether financial payments disqualify the experience from being categorized as volunteering (e.g., Wilson, 2000). Some scholars argued that individuals who choose to perform work with a meager wages should be considered quasi-volunteers.

The structural dimension of volunteering described whether the activity is formal or informal. Formal volunteerism is "proactive, involving planned time and effort with established or formal organizations" (Tang, 2012, p. 186). This type of volunteering may include being involved in a city-sponsored special event. Informal volunteer opportunities are "sporadic and reactive, and usually involves friends and neighbors" (Tang, 2012, p. 186). This type of volunteering may include helping to pick up trash in one's neighborhood.

The last dimension, intended beneficiaries, entailed who will benefit as a result of the volunteering. The beneficiaries of volunteering could be strangers, close friends or relatives, or oneself. Indeed, with respect to personal benefits, researchers have cited numerous reasons why individuals volunteer, including improving

job-readiness skills (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010; Musick & Wilson, 2008) and enhancing knowledge sets (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010; Kay & Bradbury, 2009). Some individuals volunteer in an attempt to improve or develop social interactions and interpersonal relationships with others (Mccorkle, Dunn, Wan, & Gagne, 2009). Some research also highlights the impacts to community residents, friends, or relatives that volunteering may have (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Additionally, intended beneficiaries may be helpful in understanding the experiences of parent volunteers as they may initially get involved as a way to help their children, but ultimately may also receive significant personal benefits.

The Role of Parent Volunteers in Youth Sport

Although participation in youth sport has decreased in recent years, it is estimated that 21.5 million children aged 6 to 17 participate in U.S. youth sports (Kelley & Carchia, 2013). It is also estimated that approximately 7.5 million youth and interscholastic coaches are needed to instruct these youth (National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education, 2014). Of this figure, roughly 4 million are volunteers. Although coaching positions are fulfilled by teachers and high school/college students (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010), some of the latest figures indicate that approximately 90% of youth sport coaches are parents (Busser & Carruthers, 2010). Due to

parents' instrumental role in youth sport programs, municipal park districts may benefit from understanding this population's volunteer patterns as well as their motivations and challenges to improve recruitment and retention efforts.

Demographic patterns in volunteer parent coaches. Several factors can impact parents' choice to volunteer. Notable is how the children in the household can influence parents' volunteerism. Households with children living at home are comparatively more likely to volunteer (Wuthnow, 1998). In this group, parents who have older children are likely to volunteer more hours than parents with young children (Damico et al. 1998; Schlozman et al., 1994). Further, households with school-age children are more likely to volunteer if parents are married versus if a parent identifies as single (Sundeen 1990).

Further, Cuskelly (2008) reported that the 35-54 year-old age cohort is the group most likely to be involved in youth sport volunteering. This is not surprising, Cuskelly explained, because this age group is the one most likely to have children who are of the age to play youth sports. In addition, the 35-54 year-old age cohort is also the group most likely looking to extend their own involvement in a sport (beyond participation) to a level that includes volunteering. Nichols and Shepherd (2006) discussed the importance of identity to former sport participants, noting that those players no longer able to physically participate often look for ways to maintain

their involvement in some fashion (i.e., volunteering). Such efforts to extend sport participation may be true for many parents who participated in a particular sport as a youth and young adult and now wish to see their child(ren) participate in the same sport or activity.

Examining drivers and motivations in parent coach volunteerism regarding youth sport. In the context of parent volunteers, the interest in volunteering is frequently tied to having a child on the team. Although this is not always the case, most people who volunteer do so because their son or daughter is involved on the team or has been in the past (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough 2009, 2015; Messner, 2009). In Weiss and Fretwell's (2005) study on parent coaches' interactions and relationship with their children in a youth soccer league, coaches reported being motivated to volunteer in order to interact with their child and having the child present was of importance. Parents also reported that they would not be volunteering if their child were not playing. The motivation to volunteer when one's child is involved in an activity seems fairly obvious. However, researchers have also noted the increased frequency with which parents cite their enjoyment with helping not only their own child, but also other children on the team (Dorsch et al., 2009).

Many parents may not begin volunteering as a way to have fun and develop social networks, although research has shown that these social networks are important benefits that become valuable ties in their own right. In Weiss and Fretwell's (2005) study on parent coaches in a youth soccer league, coaches reported that they were able to meet "other parents and kids on the team" as well as be better acquainted with their child's friends. One study discussed the importance of parent peers and the resulting opportunities to socialize as a key ingredient for improving the quality of parent's experiences in youth sport (Dorsch et al., 2009). In other words, many parents initially get involved to directly help their child, but through their involvement have a fulfilling experience by helping and socializing with other children on the team.

Parents may also find themselves volunteering for other reasons, such as gaining leadership skills. The opportunity to take a leadership role in a voluntary capacity serves as a way of developing new knowledge, skills, and abilities. Researchers have noted the importance of such leadership roles, including developing skills transferrable from leisure to civic settings (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Glover & Hemingway, 2005). Furthermore, such skills can potentially transfer into the professional arena to better equip people to do their job or perhaps even provide them with the skills needed to acquire a new job. Nevertheless, Glover and Hemingway (2005) pointed out that the types of skills and knowledge gained as a result of volunteering highly depends on the tasks completed and the specific setting in which the volunteering takes place.

Challenges to serving as a volunteer parent coach. Similar to other sport volunteers, parents face different challenges when serving as volunteer coaches. Major obstacles pertain to lack of time, inability to make a long-term commitment, and the financial cost of volunteering (Hall et al., 2006, as seen in Barnes & Sharpe, 2009). Parents with young children, especially those with multiple young children, may be balancing several activities with their children in addition to their own professional and social lives. The inability to make a long-term commitment is related to the first challenge in that parents may already be stretched thin in terms of time, energy, and resources. In Weiss and Fretwell's (2005) study, parent coaches reported having difficulty coaching three full seasons because of lack of energy and time.

Related to lack of energy are the additional responsibilities and expectations that stem from volunteering (Cuskelly, 2004, 2008), which may become a social and psychological burden. In the youth sport context, this could include things such as the added stress of preparing practice routines as well as managing potentially difficult interactions with players, parents, other coaches, referees, and league administrators. These difficult interactions may extend beyond the playing field, and, thus, an additional cost of volunteering includes the added stress of responsibilities. Financial cost of volunteering can also serve as a constraint. Barnes and Sharpe (2009)

discussed occasions where highly active volunteers were paid small stipends that helped offset the difference of what these people could make if they worked. Respondents noted that although the stipends were small they made them feel appreciated *and* encouraged them to continue to be an active volunteer.

Finally, parent coaches may find themselves constrained with the increased professionalization of youth sport (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly, 2008; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nichols & Shepherd, 2006). The private sector has had a significant influence on volunteer management to the extent that youth and voluntary sports are increasingly operated like businesses that require specific business-like skills (Barnes & Sharpe, 2009; Cuskelly et al., 2006). This formalization can be helpful in some ways because it likely leads to increased efficiency and a more formal, structured way of operating. However, in their study of rugby club administrators in Australia, Cuskelly and colleagues (2006) discussed the displeasure some people expressed with increased professionalization. Reasons for this displeasure included volunteer efforts that seemed too much like work or, similarly, a highly formalized volunteer commitment that required excessive amounts of time and energy. Further, some individuals were excluded or felt pushed out as volunteers because, despite their long tenure as a volunteer with the organization, they did not possess enough business-like skills in order to successfully navigate the

contemporary volunteer leadership terrain (Cuskelly, 2008; Sharpe, 2006).

Consequently, given the large number of parent volunteers needed to ensure that youth sport leagues continue to be offered, municipal park district officials will benefit from better understanding volunteer experiences and insights for youth parent coaches. Specifically, this study was designed to examine (a) parents' motivations in volunteering, (b) challenges parent coaches faced while volunteering, and (c) parent coaches' recommendations to agency personnel. The project focused on parents who volunteered for a youth soccer program in a Midwestern city. By examining these questions, it will be possible to inform recruitment and retention efforts by practitioners.

Method
Study Context

The study was conducted in a mid-sized Midwest community with a population of approximately 42,000. The community is also home to a large university. The youth sport programs sponsored by the park district relies heavily on volunteers to serve as coaches, coordinators, and team administrators. When insufficient numbers of parents volunteer to coach, the athletic coordinators must find other individuals in the community to assist in these roles (G. Cales, personal communication, 2010). The athletic coordinators often hire college-aged students who have sport-specific experience to fill the void of volunteer coaches.

Although many of these students have a good working knowledge about the sport they are coaching, many do not have experience working with younger children. Thus, the athletic coordinators would like to pull more from the pool of potential parent volunteers who have a vested interest in their child's sport participation and who are more familiar with relating to younger children.

The first author's involvement in this process began in January 2010 after attending a meeting with agency officials regarding potential ways to improve the program. These meetings continued for several months. During one of the meetings the athletic coordinators discussed the difficult challenges they were facing, including a limited budget, scarcity of volunteers, and challenging coaches and parents. In an effort to explore these issues, the athletic coordinators helped with the recruitment of parent volunteers for this study to elicit feedback on their experiences and insights.

Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

The goal for recruitment was to obtain volunteer coaches who represented various ages, genders, and experience levels among parents. The athletic coordinators contacted current and former coaches via email and asked if they would be willing and able to be interviewed to discuss their volunteer involvement. This resulted in coaches making contact with the research

investigator, but most of this population was more experienced, older, and entirely male. Athletic coordinators further suggested others as being "good people to talk to" because they were either new coaches, younger coaches, or female. In all, a total of 20 individuals preliminarily agreed to participate in the study, but ultimately only 14 total people were interviewed. Given the purpose of this study, the three coaches who were not parents were excluded from this analysis. Thus, this paper focused specially on the experiences of the 11 parent coaches.

Despite the desire to recruit volunteers who varied in age, gender, and experience levels, the majority of the study participants were male ($n = 9$; see Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). In general the participants were White/Caucasian and married. Study participants were also well-educated: five held a Bachelor's degree, three held a Master's degree, and three held a Doctorate's degree. The 11 participants ranged from ages 28 to 44 (Table 1). Study participants reported volunteering for varying degrees of time, but the majority reported having considerable experience coaching for the agency. At the time the study took place, 10 reported still serving as parent coaches, and one individual had formally coached but had plans to begin coaching again once his younger child was old enough to join the league. Some of the volunteers were people who used to have children in the sport programs, but whose children were now grown and no longer

participated. Thus, these volunteers provided useful insights through their long-term involvement as a volunteer and former parent volunteer.

Interview Protocol

The interview questions for this study focused on the overall experience of volunteers, especially parent volunteers, in a youth sport setting. These questions built off of the core research questions that examined: (a) parents' motivations in volunteering, (b) challenges parent coaches faced while volunteering, and (c) parent coaches' recommendations to agency personnel. These questions were developed after a thorough review of the literature as well as through discussions with park district staff. The questions were shared with park district staff before the first interview to allow for feedback.

The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 1990). Parents were probed about their decision to be involved with volunteering, constraints faced prior to and during volunteering, benefits associated with volunteering, and general experiences associated with volunteering. As such, the following questions were developed for interviewing study participants:

1) How and why did you first get involved in coaching/volunteering?
2) Did you feel obligated to volunteer because your son/daughter was on the team?
3) Did you experience any barriers or obstacles when initially trying to

volunteer or perhaps later on in your volunteer experience?

4) Have you met new people as a result of your volunteering with the youth soccer program?

5) How many new people (e.g. parents, coaches, staff, etc.) do you know through volunteering with the youth soccer program?

6) Have you made new friendships as a result of your volunteering?

7) Do you get together with any of these new friends outside of the soccer program?

8) What has it been like working with (other) parents on your team?

9) What are the best parts about volunteering?

10) What are some of the more challenging aspects of volunteering?

11) What has it been like working with the agency staff and others around the league?

12) Have you had any negative interactions during your time volunteering at this agency? If so, has the negativity affected you outside of your time at the agency?

13) How would you describe the character of this league?

14) What have been some of the best lessons you have learned as a coach/volunteer?

15) If there was something that you could improve, what would it be?

16) Describe the officiating – too soft, too strict, knowledgeable, inexperienced, instructive?

These questions represented a general interview guide. As discussed by Patton (1990), the importance of having a general interview guide is not about having a strict set of questions that are asked in the same order to every participant. Rather, the focus is on covering the range of important issues while adapting the order to each individual interview. Indeed, many of the interviews flowed from one topic to the next, sometimes with little prompting. To be clear, the first interview question listed above was the same one initially proposed to all study participants. However, as discussed later in the Findings section, the responses to that opening question frequently spawned several other thoughts or topics that the participants wished to discuss.

The first author conducted all of the interviews for this study, face-to-face, at a time and location mutually agreed upon with the participants. Most of the participants asked to meet at their place of employment or in their homes although some interviews took place at the first author's home and office, coffee shops, and a local park. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 3 hours, with an average time of 1 hour and 17 minutes.

Data Analysis

An inductive analysis was used to interpret participants' narratives and identify

emerging themes related to the research questions (Creswell, 2005). Specifically, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using Express Scribe software shortly after the interview was conducted. Brief member checks were conducted with participants via email, but no significant changes were recommended. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym during transcription to help protect their confidentiality.

Further, at the completion of each transcription the first author wrote or tape recorded a short summary of the major points the participant had raised during the interview. For the purposes of this study, two main forms of memos were used: code notes and theoretical notes. Code notes described basic impressions of the data, including any differences or similarities observed from one transcript to the next. In later stages of data collection and early analysis these notes were much broader, suggesting potential connections between categories as well as some that could be combined. Theoretical notes included memos that summarized the researcher's thoughts and ideas about the data.

As an illustration, the first transcript was read and memos were inserted at the end of the transcript. These memos were read before the second interview in order to modify questions in the semi-structured protocol as needed. Participants' responses that stemmed from these changes were highlighted and tracked. After the second interview took place, it was transcribed and

read, and a memo was inserted at the end of the transcript. The protocol for the next interview was modified accordingly once again. After repeating this process with the first three transcripts, the transcripts were re-read and emerging themes were highlighted. For future transcriptions, the text aligning with these themes were highlighted. Thus, each new transcription had its notes categorized under the previously identified themes. The transcripts were re-read after every third interview (i.e., 3rd, 6th, and 9th interview). When interviews and subsequent transcriptions were finalized, each transcript was read again. Areas that aligned with the identified themes were highlighted, and the data was double-checked against the themes once again at the end of reviewing all the interviews. A final read was conducted with close attention to the memos and how they aligned with the themes that had emerged. No new themes had been identified by the last few interviews conducted. Finally, themes were analyzed to identify the connections between them, and relevant topics were drawn together.

Repeatedly going through the data allowed for the opportunity to address any lingering problems. In some areas the transcriptions were difficult to hear or understand, so these tapes were evaluated at the end for further clarification. These efforts were almost always successful and provided crucial additional information. By the time the transcriptions were completed, the preliminary analysis of the findings had

already been identified. By then lower order themes had already been identified. Similar themes were grouped next to each other and, where relevant, combined into a higher order theme.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Guba (1981) outlined four main criteria for trustworthiness of data: truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability), and neutrality (confirmability). Krefting (1991) and Shenton (2004) built upon Guba's (1981) four criteria for evaluating trustworthiness of qualitative data. To help establish credibility both Krefting and Shenton recommended iterative questioning. This approach was used by repeating questions from multiple angles to ensure a true or valid framing of the data. Furthermore, Shenton noted the importance of debriefing sessions between the researcher and his or her colleagues. To address this strategy, the first author periodically met with his colleague, the third author, who provided feedback on both the methodology and content of analysis that helped guide subsequent interviews.

Krefting (1991) and Shenton (2004) also described strategies for establishing transferability. Based on conversations with the athletic staff and observations, the findings from this study provide a solid 'baseline understanding' from which future studies can compare (Gross, 1998, as seen in Shenton). The strategies for establishing dependability rest largely on the researcher's ability to provide detailed descriptions of the exact methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991; Shenton, 2004). To establish dependability in this study a detailed description of the research processes is provided. Confirmability is the last factor for establishing the trustworthiness of the data. Guba (1981), Krefting (1991), and Shenton (2004) all recommended reflexivity as a strategy for managing confirmability where the researcher examines his personal influences on his work.

Results

The study's purpose informed the interview questions, and the responses to the questions informed the three major themes that aligned with the objectives. The first theme, "The Decision to Coach," encapsulates the reasons individuals in this study chose to volunteer. The second theme "The Most Challenging Aspects," relates the difficulties associated with being a volunteer coach. The third theme was "Program Improvements Needed" which discusses the changes that participants would like to see at the agency (see Table 2).

The Decision to Coach

The initial question posed to each study participant was, "How and why did you first get involved in coaching or volunteering?" Specifically, participants responded to this question and expressed a personal philosophy behind volunteering, an interest in volunteering as a way to help their

children, and sometimes due to a lack of better options. Several participants discussed volunteering as a way to give back to the community. Such feelings were often rooted in an upbringing that emphasized volunteering and other civic-minded behavior. One parent, Ned-a 45-year-old volunteer with 7 years of experience, shared the following for his reasons for volunteering: "[My mom] was always volunteering at the school, at the church" as well as "it's something that I see as my responsibility to pay back. And, 'cause if we don't support the park district programs for the kids, we're not going to have them." Ned's comments reflect a commitment to volunteering that was modeled by his parents and also point to the necessity of volunteers in order to provide recreational opportunities for his children as well as other people's children. Another participant mentioned a similar commitment to volunteering that was instilled by his parents and continues to influence his thinking as an adult:

> Volunteering is, the community's given a lot to me. I've been here a long time. So I need to give back to the community. And if I'm not willing to give back to the community, why should I expect anyone else to do it? So I try to give back and hopefully by my example others will join in and recognize that they should be giving back as well. And through more volunteerism in the community we'll get

more done. For the community [and] for the kids. – Neil

Volunteering as a way to help their children. Many parents stated that they volunteered because their children wanted to play soccer, and they were looking for a way to be more involved in their children's lives. Alex, a 43-year-old volunteer with 6 months of experience, explained that he volunteered as a way to spend time with children. Others, like Steve (a 31-year-old with 3.5 years of experience), took that feeling a step further to include their knowledge of soccer: "I got into coaching because my kids wanted to play sports. And I knew enough about the sports they wanted to play that I felt comfortable leading more than just them. I felt comfortable leading other people's kids [too]." Steve made a point to say that if his child was interested in basketball that he would not become a basketball coach because he did not know enough about the sport to be an effective coach. However, a few participants had volunteered to coach despite little if any previous soccer experience. Uta, who coached with her husband and fellow study participant Brad, explained that they volunteered as a way to spend time together as a family. And Bev described her volunteer coaching as mostly a matter of being able to help so that her child could have the experience.

Nearly every participant noted that working with children and seeing them improve was the best part of volunteering. For instance, Steve said, "There's nothing

like seeing someone who's been struggling to get it. And the light goes off." Many participants discussed similar instances in which children learned, improved, or exhibited some kind of growth on the soccer field and beyond. Several coaches also described how rewarding it was to help children build their confidence through playing soccer. Nolan mentioned his own rewarding experience in helping children improve their self-esteem and self-confidence through soccer. He explained that several children on his team were overweight; Nolan worked with these children to play to their strengths on the soccer field. Nolan reported that by the end of the season these children were doing fantastic on his team, contributing to form an intimidating set of defenders.

Many participants discussed the importance of being a positive influence to the children on their team. Some, like Uta, discussed this positive influence in terms of being a good role model. Steve discussed his desire for being a positive influence on the children in terms of helping them build character. Steve described his own difficult upbringing and thus the need for emphasizing character not just to his own children, but to all of the children on the soccer team. Several interviewees mentioned a similar interest in volunteer coaching that centered not just on their own children, but also helping other people's children. Bev said, "I mean I was doing it more just for my kid. But in the end it was nice to be there for all the kids."

In addition to the importance of working with all children on the team, many of the participants also described the significance of coaching soccer such that the lessons taught on the field would transcend beyond just soccer. Neil explained that he wanted the children on his team to learn something beyond just the sport, he also wanted them to develop a love for sport that would carry throughout their lives. For some other coaches it was a matter of teaching life skills. For example, Rex explained that he recognized that it is unlikely any of the children on his team will go on to play professional soccer. However, he added that, "I think there are very valuable things kids can learn about cooperation, teamwork, leadership, following. There's a lot of life lessons that can come out of that." Steve, another volunteer coach, discussed similar off-the-field lessons, saying "Yea I may use soccer to do it but it's all about coaching them how to succeed and be honorable men and women in life."

Necessity due to a lack of better options. Several participants discussed that their initial involvement as coaches was due to the poor quality of a college student coach they had witnessed during their child's first season playing soccer. According to many of the parent participants, the park district gets college students who are ineffective at leading soccer practices and games for teams of children. Neil explained his dissatisfaction with the college student coach of his child's

first team, saying "[The college student coach had] absolutely no idea how to play the game, no format to the field, no nothing. And the kids weren't learning anything other than, kick the ball at the goal. It was horrible. And he clearly had no management of the kids or understanding of the sport." Ivan added that the college student coach of his oldest child's first team was well-meaning but he/she barely emphasized learning the basics of soccer. Ivan went on to explain that his experience on the sidelines that first season was insightful in that he witnessed several parent volunteer coaches of other teams that were extremely effective in teaching the basics of soccer. Ivan concluded that he felt he would have to get involved as a volunteer coach in order for his son to have a positive initial learning experience with soccer. Therefore, many of the parent volunteer coaches grew so frustrated with the quality of the coaching that they decided to step up and coach themselves.

The Most Challenging Aspects

Participants in the study described a number of different challenges associated with volunteering. Many participants described challenges having to do with fitting coaching into their already busy lives. More specifically, parents described difficulties in three main areas: dealing with children, parents, and the agency staff.

Difficulties adjusting to coaching. First, many participants described challenges and difficulties having to do with fitting coaching into their already busy lives. For instance, Alex mentioned several times the difficulty he had with coaching because of his already substantial work and family demands. He had coached as an assistant for one season and then as a head coach for another, but had to step away from coaching because of the demands at his job. Another volunteer coach, Brad, mentioned that he worked 10 hour days before each of their practices and it was often a challenge getting to practice on time. Julie mentioned a similar challenge of fitting coaching into her schedule, but said that now that she has coached regularly it is easier because she can plan her schedule, in part, around coaching. Lastly, Bev mentioned the significant amount of time she invested in preparing for each practice. Bev was one of the few study participants without a soccer background and thus she said her preparations often consisted of at least two to three hours each week outside of practice time.

Challenges with children. Julie mentioned that working with children can be frustrating, especially as you try to seek the balance where "you don't scold them. But you also don't let them get away with everything." Steve discussed the challenge in dealing with children when you do not know much about their background or their family. For instance, he explained that some children might be dealing with a divorce in the family or simply a bad day at school. Regardless, such situations, he said, could have a negative impact on a child and thus

make it difficult to connect with them and get them to focus on the soccer field. Another volunteer coach, Ivan, made an interesting statement, saying that children were both the best and worst parts of volunteering. Ivan pointed out that he liked having a positive impact on children, and he thought "kids are hilarious!" However, he also described the frustration of dealing with children who wanted to argue all the time or did not want to follow his instructions. Ivan further elaborated, saying the challenging times were especially hard because:

> You have to deal with your own kids, that sucks enough. But then you're with a kid, and you think to yourself, You're not even my kid! Why am I doing this?! …You're sucking the energy out of me! … It'll put you in a bad, bad funk. Kids can get you. … But it's because I love kids.

Challenges with other parents.
Challenges with other parents was also mentioned by participants. Jim bluntly stated "Honestly parents are the worst. That's the worst part about volunteering," largely because some refused to hear his feedback about their children's poor behavior on the field. In his experience, these parents had attitudes just as bad as their children. Thus, Jim experienced difficulty communicating with several parents that only made his on the field experience that much more difficult. As Jim put it, "And it sucks! Cause you kind of volunteer your time and you have to deal

with parents that want to complain all the time." Nolan also expressed frustration in dealing with parents because he felt many did not take the soccer program seriously. For instance, he described several situations in which children would miss a soccer practice or game for a sleepover or some other activity. Nolan explained that this made his life difficult in terms of planning lineups and having enough children on hand to field a team. Nolan also felt it was disrespectful to him because he was a volunteer, giving his time and not getting paid, and thus parents should be more diligent in bringing their children to practices and games.

Challenges with the agency. Another challenge discussed by parent coaches was dealing with agency. Neil's frustration with the agency was echoed by many different participants in the study. Steve, Ivan, Nolan, and Bev all described how the agency seemed lazy and uninterested in doing anything other than the status quo. Ivan explained that dealing with the agency staff was frustrating "Cause it appears they don't give a shit." For Ivan this was especially difficult because he had a lot of parents complain to him about the quality of the soccer program, some of whom assumed he worked for the agency. He explained that he did not work for the park district, but made sure to relay those concerns, as well as his own, on to the agency staff. However, he believed such feedback was never acted upon because he never saw any changes in the program or with the agency staff

themselves. Ivan noted, "Cause they don't want to make it good. They just want to get by and go home." Nolan discussed similar frustrations with the agency staff, saying that it felt as though they simply ran the soccer program to do it and get it over with. This was not the way to run a professional organization, Nolan noted, and he used several examples from the neighboring park district as ways to do things better.

Besides just laziness, study participants expressed frustrations related to the lack of organization in the agency soccer program. Brad noted that the park district in the neighboring community was much more organized than the agency. Ivan lamented the lack of organization at the agency because he had heard several parents express their interest in going over to use the neighboring park districts' programs because they were better organized. Alex, who had never coached before, mentioned that he felt the agency could have done a better job in having all of the paperwork, t-shirts, and other such items organized for each coach ahead of time. None of these things were adequately taken care of before the season and Alex explained that made his life as a volunteer that much more difficult.

Several other study participants complained about the lack of the updates on the park district's weather hotline. The hotline is supposed to be updated each time there is questionable weather to alert parents and coaches about the cancellation of practices or games. However, multiple volunteer coaches noted that the weather hotline was routinely out of date. Julie mentioned that when the weather hotline was not updated that she would then get calls from parents asking her if a practice or game would still continue as scheduled. This lack of organization was particularly frustrating to some, including Ivan and Nolan, because the agency staff was being paid to do this work while the coaches were all volunteers. Nolan correctly pointed out that even the referees on game days were being paid, but he felt like as a volunteer coach, he was one of the individuals doing the most work to help make the program run.

Almost everyone with an inside knowledge of the agency stated that they had already given at least some, if not all, of their feedback to the agency athletics staff. Frustratingly, the agency staff rarely, if ever, utilized the information they were provided in order to improve the program. Steve discussed his frustrations after providing many different ideas and opportunities for improvement that were never implemented. Relatedly, Nolan said he had provided feedback numerous times to the agency staff, and was even told that his ideas were under serious consideration. But then when none of his idea were implemented, he felt like "Why bother?!" Thus, the volunteer coaches who were in a position to help improve the agency were quite frustrated because they felt their feedback was not being taken seriously. As Nolan put it, he wished that the agency would take the initiative to ask him for his feedback. But,

he noted, he stopped expecting anything from the agency athletics staff:

> Just don't count on them for anything. Don't count on them for any kind of… assume that the only thing they will provide will be the field, on the day, the field, the refs, and the balls. The rest, you have to organize everything. You have to sometimes I would have to check the schedule with the weather, but I would email everybody the morning about that.

Several other study participants expressed similar frustration with the lack of accountability on the part of the agency.

Program Improvements Needed

Despite all of the frustrations voiced by these volunteer coaches, many were still interested in finding ways to see the program improve and succeed. Steve and Nolan were adamant about the importance of doing player assessments, where each player was evaluated based on a common set of drills or exercises. Doing assessments allows for a distribution of talent across all teams to ensure competitive balance. Nolan explained that the neighboring park district did assessments every two years and that this was an effective model for redistributing players to maintain balance as well as to have each player interact with a wide array of other players and coaches in the program.

In addition to assessments, a few participants also described the need to improve the volunteer coach recruitment process. At the time the study took place, the agency was constantly seeking volunteers and thus would take almost anyone who expresses interest. However, Steve noted, "they should do more than just accept everyone that says, 'I want to coach.'" He said the problem with this strategy is that no one spends time to figure out if each coach has a philosophy or approach that matches the agency's philosophy, which focused on learning the basics of soccer, sportsmanship, and teamwork. Some felt that the agency never worked to actively enforce their philosophy.

A final aspect that participants wanted to see improved was the effort by staff to retain volunteer coaches. Complaints about this aspect of the program related to the lack of effort by agency staff to maintain contact with coaches, conduct periodic check-ins, and show appreciation to the volunteers for giving their time. For instance, Bev, a first-time coach with no previous soccer experience, was extremely frustrated that the agency staff did not do more to stay in touch with her during the season. She explained, "I'm doing it for my daughter, that's why I finished doing it. But if you really want to keep people I feel like they [need to] do more to keep people. Right now I don't think they're doing anything." The lack of effort or a poor job by the athletic staff may deter some individuals from coming back to coach again.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand parents' experiences and insights associated with volunteering by using a youth soccer program as a case-study. Specifically, the study was designed to examine (a) parents' motivations in volunteering, (b) challenges parent coaches faced while volunteering, and (c) parent coaches' recommendations to agency personnel.

According to Stebbins (2004), "volunteering is uncoerced help offered either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay done for the benefit of both other people and the volunteer" (p. 5). This was evident when analyzing parents' motivations to serve as volunteer coaches. Primary reasons for coaching involved parents' personal philosophy behind volunteering, a desire to help their children, and a lack of better options for coaches. Some parents mentioned contributing to positive community outcomes, which the literature has noted as a major motivation for volunteering in some individuals (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Parents were also interested in having an impact on their family members. For instance, participants discussed the importance of teaching children to play the sport of soccer and helping them develop their soccer-specific knowledge. Parents also discussed broader benefits they hoped to instill in children through their coaching efforts, including teamwork, cooperation, sportsmanship, building confidence, and

social skills. When their children outgrew the program, some parents continued to volunteer in order to help other children. These findings are not surprising given the literature documenting that individuals may volunteer to help someone they know and wanting to have an impact on children's outcomes (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010; Busser & Carruthers, 2010; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Additionally, as evidenced by this study, most parent volunteers were so focused on the children having a positive experience, that they do not consider the benefits for themselves. Yet, most parents experienced at least some social benefits as a result of their volunteer experiences.

Major challenges that parents experienced dealt with interacting with children, other parents, and agency staff. For instance, Ivan explained that sometimes children can be particularly difficult on the soccer field. He went on to say that this behavior could affect him in his life outside the soccer field, too. Others also shared stories regarding the difficult interpersonal dealings with other parents. In the case of the study participants, they mentioned that parents would sometimes allow their children to miss practice or games, which would have an impact on whether the team had enough players to enter a competition. Other parents disagreed with coach's decisions. The tension between coaches and parents has been acknowledged. Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, and Wall (2008) reported that many parents perceived their knowledge of the specific sport being played

as greater than that of other parent peers. The result of these perceived differences was tension amongst parents and spectators in the stands. Those who believed they knew more about the sport felt some other parents were making uninformed critiques of the referees, strategies, or other parts of the game. Put a different way, parents and fans who were perceived to possess less sport-specific knowledge (such observations were made by parents as well as the researchers through participant observation) contributed to an awkward and uncomfortable bleacher environment for some parents.

Parents in this study also mentioned facing challenges with agency staff. Most participants agreed that the athletic staff, and the soccer program in particular, were not well organized. However, reactions to this disorganization were mixed. Some participants appreciated the hands-off approach, noting that they did not like the highly regimented nature of the soccer leagues in which they had previously played or coached. Other study participants were more critical of this lack of organization, saying they felt the staff could have done more to help prepare and equip new coaches to be successful. The coaches who expressed these frustrations tended to be the ones who were newest to the sport of soccer. Some also mentioned the lack of appreciation they felt from the agency, and some commented that their suggestions were ignored. These concerns prompted

recommendations in order to improve the retention of parent volunteers.

Management Implications

As several participants explained, volunteers play a crucial role in the ongoing operation of youth sports leagues at the municipal level. Thus, volunteer recruitment must be seen as a vital component of youth sports. Study participants described three things they thought would better prepare and attract potential volunteer coaches: formal training and certification; fee waivers or stipends; and more agency support.

Formal training and certification. Foremost, several participants called for more formal volunteer training and certification process. Training and certification may be especially important for coaching soccer because, as several participants noted, they did not grow up playing the sport. As a result, these individuals did not have an extensive background in playing the sport which would have helped them coach more effectively. Therefore, the agency should look to adopt a formal training and certification process for youth sport coaches that helps build their coaching confidence in the sport as well as gives each coach a tangible benefit (e.g., certification).

Despite the fact that some parents have previous involvement in a sport or activity, it is often important for parents and coaches to undergo volunteer training. Researchers have routinely recognized the importance of good coaches in creating a positive

environment for children in youth sport (Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002). Furthermore, these same researchers identified the need for good training for coaches to ensure they promoted the values and principles of their specific league. Volunteer training is a crucial aspect of youth sport because it helps outline positive youth development principles (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005), which helps align parent volunteers and coaches under a common set of goals that reinforce the agency's mission. In turn, focusing on an agency's mission is important in municipal parks and recreation settings because these agencies often emphasize effort, cooperation, and inclusivity over competition and winning. Thus, creating an inclusive youth sport environment requires careful and deliberate training that helps set the tone and expectations desired by the agency. Ultimately, these volunteer training efforts highlight the fact that the mindset and approach to working with children in youth sport is just as important as the actual lessons and techniques that are covered on the field.

There are many different agencies and organizations in the United States that deal with volunteer training for youth sport. Three of the most prominent organizations for youth soccer are the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO), the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS), and the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA). The AYSO utilizes several core philosophies in their approach to youth soccer, including an emphasis on positive coaching and player development (American Youth Soccer Organization [AYSO], 2011). These principles are stressed at all levels of the volunteer soccer organization, from league administrators to coaches, parents, and players (AYSO, 2011). The NAYS emphasizes a training program for league administrators and coaches as well as parents to ensure they all play a positive role in the child's development (National Alliance for Youth Sports [NAYS], 2011). Interestingly, the NAYS was formerly known as the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) but changed its name in 1993 to reflect the broader importance of training not just for coaches but administrators and parents too (NAYS, 2011). The PCA was founded in 1998 at Stanford University and its focus is on training coaches to become a "Double-Goal Coach"; this approach entails focusing on winning as well as teaching life lessons through sport involvement (Positive Coaching Alliance [PCA], 2011). The PCA (2011) incorporates parents into the mix by having them stress the positive life lessons that their child(ren) can gain from sport activities. All of these organizations recognize the importance of training not just coaches, but also league administrators and parents, in order to set expectations and help ensure the emphasis is on positive youth development principles.

Fee waivers and remuneration. In addition to training, a financial remuneration would help attract more

volunteers. Cnaan and colleagues (1996) discussed remuneration as one of the four dimensions in their definition of volunteering. In this study, participants explained that a small stipend would be a welcome benefit for their volunteer service. The stipend would not have to be much, but it would go a long way towards making the volunteer coaches feel appreciated for their time and effort. If a stipend is not a feasible option, then several participants also brought up the idea of a fee waiver for their child's registration. Fee waivers were utilized in the neighboring park district and would potentially be an effective tool to help attract and retain volunteer coaches.

Agency support. Organizations utilizing parent volunteer coaches will also need to provide support to these volunteers. In the case of this study site, the fact that agency staff had not acted upon any of their suggestions reflects poorly on the athletics staff as well as the agency as a whole. In many cases municipal parks and recreation agencies have end-of-season evaluations as well as general feedback forms, but feedback should not be limited to just one of these few formal formats. Instead, staff at municipal parks and recreation agencies should be open to feedback at any time. Creating a list to track such feedback would not be difficult, and would provide a reference point to demonstrate what changes have been made. Individuals who are unwilling to hear or solicit such feedback are likely not fulfilling the core duties of their position.

Study Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of this study. The participants in this study were soccer coaches, and, thus their experiences may not directly translate to other youth sports. A few individuals in the study coached other sports such as baseball or basketball, and indeed a few of them discussed their experiences related to these other sports. Ultimately, however, this study focused on volunteer coaching experiences for the sport of soccer. Lastly, the sample of people interviewed for this study represented a highly educated group. The study site is home to a large, public university so it is not surprising that some people in the sample have multiple degrees. However, the plethora of undergraduate and graduate degrees likely means that the findings from this study do not apply to the general population.

There are numerous areas of opportunity for future research that stem from this study. Studying family dynamics might be fruitful in better understanding people's decision to volunteer. Several participants noted they would have been unable to volunteer if it had not been for the support of their spouse. Additional research will need to be conducted on the gendered nature of volunteer coaches, as Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009) warned about the phenomenon where "most men volunteers become coaches and most women volunteers become 'team moms'" (p. 49). In this study, only two mothers served as coaches, and one did it alongside

her husband. Future studies could examine the unique challenges women may face in choosing to serve as a parent volunteer coach for their children.

Given the lack of volunteers at this public agency as well as in many other communities (Cuskely, 2004), it would be beneficial to further explore the factors that influence coaching decisions. It would also be interesting to investigate the benefits of long-term relationships built through youth sport connections. In this study, the individuals who reported the most social connections tended to be the ones who had been involved with the program the longest. Thus, it seems that longevity with an organization is important for developing and maintaining social connections. However, the exact benefits of these connections or relationships are still unclear. It would be interesting to speak to several long-time volunteers with such relationships to understand the specific benefits they have realized as a result of developing and maintaining these kinds of social relationships.

Volunteer social networks are one potential avenue for future research. Barnes and Sharpe (2006) discussed volunteer social networks in their study of a Canadian community park, noting that the volunteers did their work not just to benefit the agency but because it benefitted themselves. Such volunteer social networks likely exist in other communities, and the exact conditions for such networks are worth further examination. The findings from this study did not demonstrate a social network amongst volunteers, but the concept is worth exploring in future studies. For instance, senior citizens and retired people who volunteer at community centers likely have different experiences than do parents with children in youth sports.

Conclusion

The use of volunteers has become an effective, and oftentimes necessary, method for carrying out public programs and services. Specifically, municipal parks and recreation agencies have increasingly had to rely on volunteers in order to conduct basic programs and services. This reliance on volunteers has significantly increased with the recent economic woes. This study highlighted the benefits and motivations of individuals who chose to volunteer for a public parks and recreation agency. The findings demonstrated that there is the potential for positive, rewarding experiences as a volunteer. Future research should continue to explore the positive, as well as negative, effects of volunteering on the individual, especially as they relate to social impacts.

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Table 1

Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Sex	Time Spent Volunteering (years)
Steve	31	Male	3.5
Ivan	37	Male	3.5
Alex	43	Male	0.5
Neil	44	Male	15
Nolan*	49	Male	10
Rex	39	Male	1.5
Ned	45	Male	7
Brad	38	Male	4
Uta	37	Female	4
Saul	41	Male	4
Bev	28	Female	0.5

*Note: Reflects the only former coach.

Table 2

Study Results

Response category	Higher order themes	Description	Lower order themes
Motivations	**Civically-minded**	Participant shows concern for the public good and expresses this through volunteering	"[My mom] was always volunteering at the school, at the church" as well as "it's something that I see as my responsibility to pay back." "'cause if we don't support the park district programs for the kids, we're not going to have them"
	Children-centered	Volunteering is driven to help their children or other children in the community	"I got into coaching because my kids wanted to play sports. And I knew enough about the sports they wanted to play that I felt comfortable leading more than just them. I felt comfortable leading other people's kids [too]." "[The college student coach had] absolutely no idea how to play the game, no format to the field, no nothing. And the kids weren't learning anything other than, kick the ball at the goal. It was horrible. And he clearly had no management of the kids or understanding of the sport."
	Necessity	Parent expressed the need to fulfil a gap due to lack of volunteers	

Response category	Higher order themes	Description	Lower order themes
Challenges	**Transition**	Parents expressed difficulty adjusting with the demands of volunteering	Substantial work and family demands
	Children	Parents expressed difficulties interacting and working alongside children	"You have to deal with your own kids, that sucks enough. But then you're with a kid, and you think to yourself, You're not even my kid! Why am I doing this?! …You're sucking the energy out of me!"
	Parents	Parents expressed difficulties interacting and working alongside parents	"Honestly parents are the worst. That's the worst part about volunteering."
	Agency	Parents expressed difficulties interacting and working alongside the agency	"Just don't count on them for anything. Don't count on them for any kind of… assume that the only thing they will provide will be the field, on the day, the field, the refs, and the balls. The rest, you have to organize everything."
Recommendations	**Player assessments**	Parents expressed the need to have players assessed for skills and abilities.	Neighboring park district did assessments every two years.
	Recruitment	Agency should improve their efforts to attract quality volunteers.	"They should do more than just accept everyone that says, 'I want to coach.'"
	Volunteer retention	Agency should improve their efforts to retain volunteers.	"They [need to] do more to keep people."