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VOLUNTARISM — VOLUNTEERISM

First: Please realize that it is a natural part of any profession to spend time defining its terms. There is not yet total agreement on the following definitions, but these are "Susan Ellis' editorial opinion" on the consensus of what each means.

Second: The word "volunteerism" is not yet in the dictionary (though reports have it that one or two of the newest dictionaries have begun to list it --sometimes as a cross reference to "voluntarism!"). Do not let this bother you. Dictionaries do not create words, they document words already in use. Many of the words we take for granted today did not appear in the dictionary for years after they came into common usage. "Volunteerism" is a word— it has been in print in articles and organizational titles for more than a decade. If you explain this to newspaper editors, etc., they will print the word you use and won't edit it into "voluntarism" because they think you can't spell!

"Voluntarism": Anything in a society done voluntarily. In the United States, this includes, for example, all of religion— since we do not have a State Religion nor mandated tithing, etc. Everything we think of as being in the "voluntary sector" is part of voluntarism. However, except in the most philosophic of terms, government agencies are not part of the voluntary sector, since they are mandated by law and funded publically.

"Volunteerism": Anything relating specifically to volunteers and volunteering.

Why is this distinction important? Two major reasons:

1. Since government agencies recruit and involve many, many volunteers, (example: courts, prisons, welfare programs, aging services, etc.), if we only say "voluntarism," we leave out this whole segment of the volunteer community. The term "volunteerism," on the other hand, allows us to speak of the entire volunteer community, regardless of setting. Corporate employee volunteers can also be accommodated in the term volunteerism, without muddying the waters about the connection between profit-making firms and non-profit making groups.
2. There are quite a number of voluntary agencies that do not utilize volunteers in the delivery of services. They all have a Board of Directors, who are of course volunteers, but otherwise the agency operates only with salaried staff. This means that those agencies are indeed part of voluntarism, but have no interest in or connection to volunteerism.

Using the two terms allows us, therefore, to focus clearly on exactly which topic we mean. Some like to say that voluntarism refers to the setting, while volunteerism refers to the people who volunteer. However you explain the differences between the two terms for yourself, it is important to get others to specify whether they mean the voluntary sector or volunteers. They are NOT THE SAME THING!