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A COMMISSION ON VOLUNTEERISM: PRO AND CON

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The following is a brief discussion of the major arguments which have been advanced for and against a Commission on Volunteerism. Most of the points outlined below have been developed as a result of discussions among national voluntary organizations as a result of the introduction by Sen. David Durenberger of a specific proposal for a Commission on Volunteerism in the summer of 1979.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to consider the idea of a Commission totally in the abstract. Few would disagree that continual examination of the field of volunteering is a desirable end, both to provide information about processes and results, and to provide direction for future activities. The specifics of that examination, however, are quite a different matter. Contending groups wish to ensure that an equitable and competent examination is conducted in proper fashion by the right parties.

The discussion which follows attempts to deal with this dilemma of specificity by listing the major arguments which surfaced in discussion of Sen. Durenberger's first version of a Commission on Volunteerism. Many of the points raised are of general concern to any mechanism which might be created to examine the voluntary sector and volunteering. The discussion is divided into four major topical areas: General Need, Public/Private Control, Timing, and Structure and Mandate.

THE GENERAL NEED FOR EXAMINATION

Proponents of a Commission on Volunteerism argue that volunteering is one of our most common and least examined characteristics. They contend that no major study of volunteering has ever been conducted in this country, with the exception of the purely demographic work done in the ACTION/Census Bureau study in 1974. Those studies which have been conducted in examination of the voluntary sector have concentrated on the organizational aspects rather than

the personal activity of volunteering. Opponents argue that the studies of the past, such as the Filer Commission, have provided a wealth of data and recommendations that have yet to be actively utilized, and which have significant implications both for the voluntary organization and the individual volunteer. Proponents point to the many areas in which gaps exist in our knowledge, particularly to such topics as the lack of information about use of volunteers by government agencies at the state and national level. Proponents also argue that now is the proper time to carefully examine the implications of governmental policies which affect volunteering, including government funding of volunteer efforts, tax incentives for volunteer involvement, and other areas.

Some opponents of a Commission have accepted the need for continued research in volunteering, but contend that a Commission is not a proper method of conduct research or to reach recommendations for change. They point to past study groups as examples of failures to provide any meaningful changes. They argue that the field has already produced enough recommendations, but has yet to produce any implementation of suggested changes. The Commission on Volunteerism, they contend, would simply be another governmental report that no one paid any attention to.

Other opponents argue the lack of need for a Commission by suggesting the ability of the present system to conduct such an examination without the creation of a new body. National voluntary organizations could conduct the policy discussions incident to the Commission on Volunteerism through convenings of its own umbrella organizations, such as the Independent Sector or the National Assembly. Proponents argue the unlikelihood of such a venture, the possible bias of such bodies, and the need for providing input from governmental bodies if we are to examine the government/voluntary relationship.

Finally, proponents argue the need for a Commission as a public relations and recognition device. Even if the Commission can accomplish very little, they contend that its creation would serve as a signal of the importance of volunteering, and provide a means of serving notice of the need for maintaining support for volunteer activities.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE CONTROL

The issue of public versus private control concerns the questions of whether the voluntary sector and volunteering should be primarily examined by the voluntary sector itself or by some outside entity. Opponents of a Commission argue strongly that voluntarism is a private matter and that efforts at government intervention should be resisted. Any examination conducted by a government-sponsored body would simply be the beginning of an effort toward government control of voluntary organizations and volunteering. Religious organizations have expressed particular disapproval of this type of governmental examination. If an examination is to be conducted, it ought to be conducted under the aegis of private organizations, with limited governmental intervention.

Proponents argue the inability of private organizations to conduct any such examination. They argue that lack of monetary resources and the difficulties of finding a neutral convening body prevent any such self-examination. In addition, proponents point the need for structured public participation in such a study. Given the extensive use of volunteers by governmental agencies and the sweeping impact of governmental policies upon volunteers, it is crucial to include governmental decision makers in any such examination.

Finally, proponents argue that the entire question of voluntary independence from government is a moot point. The relationship between the government and private voluntary organizations is already so intertwined through funding and regulations that to talk of the independence of the voluntary sector from government is to talk of a non-existent system. What is actually needed, proponents contend, is an attempt to rationally plan for mutual activity and support between two sectors that are inextricably bound together. If the present system continues, proponents argue, the government will eventually overrun private voluntary activity because no one took the time to examine the implications of this growing interdependence.

TIMING

Three areas of controversy have arisen over the timing of a Commission on Volunteerism. The first concerns the lack of consultation and planning which went into the first version of a Commission proposed by Sen. Durenberger.

Opponents argue that insufficient consultation with voluntary groups was conducted and that the views of the voluntary sector were not adequately taken into account. Proponents have argued that this might constitute justification for delaying the Commission, but is not justification for totally opposing it, and that sufficient consultation and discussion has since taken place. Proponents also contend that the Commission itself can provide the forum for examination of opposing viewpoints.

The second timing issue involves the possibility that a Commission will interfere with current legislative efforts being conducted by the voluntary sector. Opponents argue that the Commission will be used as an excuse for shelving such legislative proposals as the Fisher-Conable tax measure and the Mikulski mileage deduction legislation. They fear that the tendency will be to delay these legislative initiatives until after the Commission has reached its conclusions. Proponents have answered this argument by suggesting that the mandate of the Commission be written restrictively, and exclude any consideration of these current legislative efforts. This, they argue, would prevent any delay. They also contend that the Commission will eventually assist the bills by drawing attention to the importance of volunteering and by creating a mechanism around which support for the current efforts could be generated and focused.

The final timing issue is political in nature. Opponents argue that any Commission created during 1980 would inevitably be subjected to political pressures generated during an election year. They contend that the Commission would simply be composed of choices selected for political reasons rather than individuals with real interest and knowledge of the field. Proponents contend that this situation can be controlled by carefully structuring the requirements for memberships written into the legislation creating the Commission.

STRUCTURE AND MANDATE

A number of specific issues have arisen concerning the structure of any Commission on Volunteerism. They include the following general concerns:

1. Structure

Some arguments have arisen over the nature of the body which is to conduct the examination. Some have contended that alternative mechanisms would be more appropriate than a Commission. One suggested alternative

is that of a Presidentially or Congressionally appointed Task Force. Another might be some sort of Advisory Committee to provide on-going input into governmental policies affecting the voluntary sector.

2. Duration/Permanence

A second area of concern regarding the structure of a Commission is that of its longevity. One group contends that current proposals do not provide enough time for the Commission to conduct its activities. They argue that the Commission should be a long-lived or even a permanent body which will conduct a complete examination of volunteering and provide continual input to policy-making bodies. Opponents of this view contend that this would simply create any bureaucratic body which would be of little real help.

3. Selection of Members

Much discussion has taken place of the methods by which members of any Commission would be selected. Many fear that Commission members would be selected for political purposes and would not have any real knowledge of or interest in volunteering. Others have attempted to fashion means by which types or categories of individuals could be selected for the Committee or to suggest mechanisms by which private sector input could be gained for the selection process.

4. Mandate

Extensive discussion has taken place over the mandate of any proposed Commission. Arguments have been over whether to make the mandate broad enough to include a thorough discussion and review of the needs and potentials of volunteering, or whether to limit the mandate to areas that would not provide a threat to the independence of voluntary organizations. Some see a broad mandate as an invitation to federal interference into traditionally private concerns. Others see such a mandate as essential if an effective job is to be done. Some have suggested limiting the mandate of the Commission to an examination of the governmental role in volunteering activity. Others have suggested the elimination of tax issues from the mandate, so as to preclude interference with the Fisher-Conable effort. Obviously, the specifics of the mandate question are endlessly broad. It is apparent, however, that in discussions of the first Durenberger proposal no clear consensus on the mandate of the Commission was reached by contending parties.

5. Funding Levels

A final concern about the structure of the Commission is that of its funding level. Many have expressed concern that the funding levels in current proposals have been inadequate to conduct the needed examination or to even conduct the specific activities outlined in suggested mandates. Others have argued that high funding levels are difficult to justify in a time when direct service programs are being cut back drastically. They contend that the money can be better spent elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

This has been an overview of the principal issues raised in discussions of a Commission on Volunteerism. It has talked about those issues in general terms to allow reference to the broad concept of a Commission rather than to argue about past or present specific versions of a Commission. Unfortunately, however, it is the specific versions around which debate must ultimately focus, and for whom specific language must be developed. In an attempt to provide some assistance about the specifics of a Commission, an appendix is added to this paper. The appendix consists of a letter written by Kenn Allen, Executive Vice-President of VOLUNTEER to Brian O'Connell of CONVO, outlining options for the language of a Commission on Volunteerism. The options and discussions contained in the letter focus on the general areas which have been discussed in this paper and were developed during meetings of some national voluntary organizations who were interested in proposals for a Commission. It is hoped that the specifics contained in the letter will provide an opportunity to focus the areas of broad concern which have here been discussed.