

VOLUNTEERS — THE "GLUE" HOLDING THE SYSTEM TOGETHER?

by Julie Smith, Administrative Assistant, Volunteer Development and Youth Programs, Sister Cities International

Volunteers are the "glue" that hold the system together, said George Gallup, Jr. Citing four downward trends in U.S. society that can be reversed by volunteers, Gallup made the opening address, "The Public Blueprints for a Better America," to the National Conference on Citizen Involvement held at the YMCA Conference Center, Estes Park, Colo.

Gallup's speech, which was sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, utilized a recent survey on volunteer influence. He found these trends: continued voter apathy; increased alcohol abuse among both adult and youth; economic illiteracy; and the growing crime rate.

Several trends in volunteering which will effect patterns of community service were also noted by Gallup: (1) volunteers indicated that they prefer to focus on their own neighborhoods. The most inviting projects will be neighborhood-specific over the next decade. (2) Age groups do not like to be segregated. Thus, multi-generational projects will become increasingly popular. (3) Flexi-time will impact the face of voluntary service. Thus, approaches can be made to business and labor leaders for "release" time of employees for community service.

Gallup stressed the need for a collective action in volunteering, one that is responsive to the needs of our

society. He cited the general decline in the quality of education in the public school system and, tandem with that, the often adversary relationship between parent and teacher/administrator, particularly as it focusses on the behavioral patterns of the student. The urban situation will require volunteers in the schools, and it is thought that the most productive volunteers will be drawn from segments of the population other than parents of students in the schools.

Noting these changes in traditional roles in our society, where will these volunteers come from? Gallup suggested that the National Service Program concept (a Draft alternative) could make citizens age 18-24, a major part of that volunteer force. "Senior citizens" and retirees are other viable sources of volunteer talent and energy.

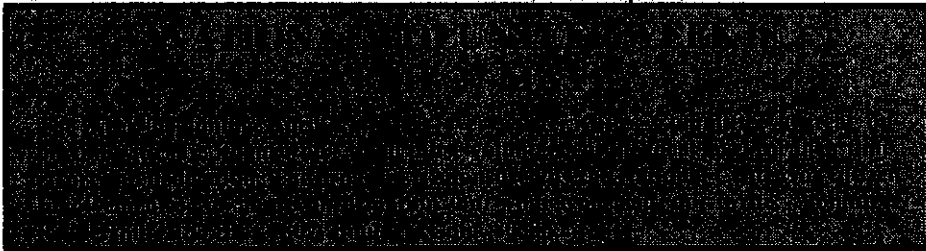
Gallup suggested that a National Academy for Service (which would give professional, governmentally funded training for "service") could be implemented. He also suggested that a provision should be made on tax return forms, particularly aimed at the tax payer filing the "short form," so that volunteer activity expenses can be easily computed. These deductions would allow for

time, as well as cash/financial donations.

All the speakers expressed a common need for personal "payoff" and the necessity to network volunteer organizations.

In many communities, skillsbanks, sponsored by a variety of organizations and agencies, provide both these necessary components—a skillsbank is a reservoir of people identified with and by their specific skills and talents.

Eleven demonstration Voluntary



Action Centers are receiving \$7500 per year from a grant by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to establish and continue community skillsbanks. A skillsbank manual will be published in early 1981.

The bottom line for a successful skillsbank seems to be sufficient funding for start-up, inter-agency/organizational and service respect, and the desire for cooperation and the willingness of the volunteer and his/her agency to use the skillsbank once it is established.

In future years, as individual skills are refined and time for generalized voluntary participation with minimal payoff disappears, it seems essential that any organization which draws its human resources from the voluntary community needs to be keenly aware

of the importance of using volunteer time to the very best potential. A well run skillsbank can do this for any group. They are the "yellow pages" for volunteers.

Mott-funded skillsbanks are located in Monterey, Ca.; Pensacola, Fla.; Wailuku, Hi.; Flint, Mi.; New Brunswick, N.J.; Winston-Salem, N.C.; Toledo, Oh.; Portland, Or.; Philadelphia, Pa.; Knoxville, Tn.; and Elmira, N.Y. Additional information may be obtained from the National Center for Citizen Involvement, P.O. Box 4179, Boulder, Co. 80306.

The state of volunteering for the '80's is healthy. Volunteers are available and if this Gallup poll mirrors us well, the willingness, enthusiasm and talent needs to be fed with results and nurtured with encouragement. The potential for turning around the four downward trends cited by Gallup, as well as for positive community, national and international impact, exists. We should be excited and challenged to be a part of it.

In closing, Gallup noted that his polls show that the patterns of voluntarism in the next decade or two will be closely tied to the religious trends of our society. He sees a growing "spirituality" among the young people and he noted the "electric" church (media), has the potential for major impact on our lives. If used appropriately for good; this medium of communication can sway viewers to increased beneficial voluntary participation and greater social outreach in their own larger communities.