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# VOLUNTEER CENTERS

## *Leaders, Models, Resources for Our Volunteer Community*



By Kerry Kenn Allen

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The mission of the Volunteer Center is to help solve problems and meet needs by promoting effective and creative volunteering and by maximizing community resources.

A Volunteer Center serves as an advocate and catalyst for volunteerism, provides leadership and support for volunteer efforts and is the central clearinghouse for volunteering in its community.

- There are over 380 Volunteer Centers in the United

States, serving an estimated 100,000 private organizations and public agencies.

- They are in 94 of the 100 largest metropolitan areas and, as a total group, reach roughly 60 percent of the American population.

- Volunteer Centers refer or place an estimated half million new volunteers each year who, based on national studies, are likely to provide more than 100 million total hours of service in a given year, worth at least \$800 million to the nation.

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**T**his issue of *Voluntary Action Leadership*, our 47th, is very special. It is the first issue that is completely devoted to a single topic. Quite literally, every article, every feature and every word of this issue, from cover to cover, are about Volunteer Centers, their work and their contributions to America's volunteer community.

Why give this attention to a single organization within the tremendous scope and diversity of volunteering? The answer lies in the unique role of Volunteer Centers and in their importance to the future of volunteering.

First, they are *leaders*, pioneers in recruiting and placing volunteers, in working for more effective management of volunteers, in making volunteering a "household word."

Second, they are *models*, demonstrating for the total community innovative and effective ways to reach out to new people, to involve them with the maximum impact and to apply volunteering to the difficult human and social problems our nation faces.

Third, they are *resources*, organizations with the expertise, skills and

knowledge needed by both private organizations and public agencies, by the for-profit workplace as well as not-for-profit service providers, by civic associations, neighborhood groups and advocates of social change—resources to help mobilize the time, talent and energy of all Americans.

Volunteer Centers are relatively young organizations, even by the standards of a nation that is itself barely more than 200 years old. In cities like St. Louis, Boston and Indianapolis, the oldest Volunteer Centers date back some 50 years. Eighty-five percent of the now more than 380 Volunteer Centers have been created since 1970!

In the beginning, they were "volunteer bureaus," modest local agencies, often within a larger structure, devoted to encouraging people to volunteer and helping them to do so by listing the jobs that needed to be done and making referrals based on a matching of needs and interest. And, from the earliest days, there was the Association of Volunteer Bureaus, dedicated men and women who had a vision of what volunteering in the United States could be and who saw the importance of local leadership

organizations to the realization of that vision.

With the creation of the National Center for Voluntary Action in 1969 came the concept of the "voluntary action center" to be the focal point for voluntary, private sector problem-solving efforts.

Now, in the 1980s, it's the "Volunteer Center," a multi-faceted, aggressive, locally controlled organization that is part promoter, part trainer, part consultant, part placement agent, part creator of new solutions to new problems: leaders, models, resources for America's growing volunteer community.

**T**hroughout this issue, you will see examples of how Volunteer Centers add to the scope and effectiveness of volunteering in their communities. For an overview, however, consider these major contributions Volunteer Centers have made to volunteering just in the past decade and a half:

- Volunteer Centers have pioneered in the use of media to educate the public about the importance of volunteering





and to recruit volunteers for specific jobs. Working together nationally, they helped open the door to the now common public service announcements sponsored by professional athletics.

- Volunteer Centers have shown that everyone can volunteer. They were the first to reach out in a comprehensive way to people in transition—from institutions, incarceration, illness, divorce or bereavement—and use volunteering as a tool to help them regain control over their lives. They have demonstrated new ways to involve the physically disabled, the unemployed, youth and families.

- Volunteer Centers have always served the *entire* community, modeling for other community resource organizations the importance of responding to all organizations and all forms of voluntary action, not just those that fit within federated funding drives or other community coalitions.

- Volunteer Centers have demonstrated the impact volunteers can have on problems. They led the way in mobilizing to fight rubella and in early campaigns against illiteracy. They have responded to local emergencies and to emerging needs, today working on such diverse and difficult problems as the battle against hunger, homelessness, AIDS and poverty.

- Volunteer Centers have led the way in the development of programs and structures to support managers of volunteer programs and leaders of voluntary associations—from local “DO-VIAs” to corporate volunteer councils to ongoing programs of training and technical assistance through communi-

ty colleges to professional recognition of management competence.

Most importantly, perhaps, Volunteer Centers have made the concept of volunteering come alive to millions of people nationwide through aggressive marketing and public education. They have created classes on volunteering in the public schools. They have established local awards programs under the sponsorship of elected officials. They have made National Volunteer Week a nationwide recognition. Their logo, the red heart designed and used by VOLUNTEER, has become the national symbol of concerned, involved citizens volunteering their time, talent and energy to help others.

**T**he 380+ Volunteer Centers that exist today represent a broad variety of organizational forms and program priorities. Some 226 of them have formally joined with VOLUNTEER to create a new, stronger national network of local Centers, linked together and cooperating in new ventures to promote and support more effective volunteering.

Approximately 70 percent of all Volunteer Centers operate as independent not-for-profit organizations, receiving some percentage of their funding, usually for their core budget from their local United Way. Approximately 20 percent of all Volunteer Centers operate as divisions or programs of their local United Way, often with distinct advisory boards and identities. The balance, about 10 percent of the Centers, have no relationship with United Way, either due to their conscious policy deci-

sion, their newness or their affiliation with a branch of municipal or county government.

In September 1984, VOLUNTEER’s national board of directors, responding to the recommendations of the Volunteer Center Advisory Council, approved a policy statement calling for Volunteer Centers either to be independent organizations or, in cases where this was not feasible, to have “structural integrity” in their relationship with a parent organization.

“Structural integrity” within another organization has been defined as

- existence of an elected advisory committee that is clearly and significantly interlocked with the board of the parent organization;

- public identification of the Volunteer Center by a name that differentiates it from its parent organization and that includes the word “volunteer” or some derivative of it;

- ability by the Volunteer Center to define and develop its own constituency and to establish its own service priorities;

- ability by the Volunteer Center to develop its own goals, objectives and workplans within the context of the overall guidance of its advisory committee and the management structure of the parent organization;

- ability of the Volunteer Center to develop and directly advocate for its own budget and financial resources; and

- existence of appropriate professional staffing and leadership.

Using these guidelines, and based on the experience of Volunteer Centers that already operate under them, it is



clear that *Volunteer Centers* can make yet another significant contribution to the volunteer community—as models of collaboration and partnership both as independent, peer organizations and as integral parts of larger community-wide organizations.

Nor are Volunteer Centers strictly American structures. There are 84 in Canada, 290 in Great Britain, 200 in Holland, 35 in France. They can be found in Hong Kong, Japan and Australia. As interaction among these countries increases, the Volunteer Centers will have the opportunity to lead in the development of relevant and useful international linkages that can spread the values and ethics of volunteering worldwide.

**F**rom this distinguished past, will there grow an equally distinguished future? There is every indication that it will be so. As George Romney, chairman of the board of VOLUNTEER has pointed out, volunteering is the most fundamental act of citizenship and philanthropy there is in our

society. Without volunteers, there would be no need for nor any way of operating fundraising drives. Without volunteers in governance and leadership roles, there would be no voluntary organizations to deliver services. Without volunteers, there would be no one to fight for the rights of the powerless, for the needs of the poorest, for the dreams of justice and peace for all.

But volunteering does not just happen in our complex, fast-paced, rapidly changing world. Its future depends on many factors: on the values and priorities we each live out in our daily lives, on the ability of people to be involved, on the existence of effective structures to help people overcome the barriers to involvement.

Many organizations, both local and national, will contribute to sustaining our national heritage of volunteering through their own programs and outreach. But the central leadership role must be played by those organizations that have taken as their sole mission the promotion and support of more effective volunteering.

At the national level, VOLUNTEER fills this role. Locally, it is filled by the Volunteer Centers.

This issue of *Voluntary Action Leadership* fills several roles.

It is a *celebration* of all that Volunteer Centers have meant to the growth and vitality of volunteering in our nation.

It is a *case statement* of their value to their communities and to the nation.

It is a *resource guide* for those seeking the kinds of help and support Volunteer Centers can offer.

It is a *preview* of the future leadership that Volunteer Centers, with the proper support and development, can give to our continuing efforts to build a society that offers opportunity, safety and justice for all our citizens.

We at VOLUNTEER are immensely proud of the Volunteer Centers and the voluntary association that links us together. We are pleased to be able to share with you this unique view of one of America's greatest resources, the creative leadership of those who believe in the power of individual citizens to make a difference.

## What Makes A Volunteer Center Effective?



Here are the characteristics of the best ones, as described by the Volunteer Center Advisory Council:

- It has a creative and dynamic director, with a strong and qualified supporting staff—both paid and volunteer.
- It has a board of directors that is actively involved in the direction and management of the Center, and which represents the interest of all sectors of the community.
- It seeks to establish contacts and networks through all segments of the local volunteer community. It views itself as the central focus and information exchange point about volunteering locally.
- It has a broad and innovative outlook

toward program development and operation. It views recruitment and referral of volunteers as the minimum program effort for the Center, and is willing to undertake any volunteer-related project determined to be needed in the community.

- It seeks to involve the businesses and labor communities through sponsorship of volunteer programs based in the workplace.
- It seeks to enable agencies to make better use of volunteers through provision of training and consulting services, and through sponsorship of a local network of volunteer program administrators.
- It seeks to broaden the concept of vol-

unteer utilization by agencies through demonstrating innovative uses of volunteers.

- It seeks to promote the concept and worth of volunteering through community-wide recognition and public relations efforts, and through constant contact with local media.
- It seeks to develop a broad base of funding support, including United Way, grants and contracts with local and state government, corporate support and self-generated revenue.
- It participates as an active member of the nationwide network of Volunteer Centers in cooperation with VOLUNTEER—The National Center.



# Functions of a Well-Developed Volunteer Center



## 1. Volunteer Recruitment/Referral/Placement

The Volunteer Center acts as a catalyst to help persons interested in volunteering respond to community needs through volunteer work. The mainstay of a Volunteer Center, this function includes recruiting, referring and placing citizens interested in volunteering on behalf of community agencies and nonprofit organizations in need of volunteers. The Volunteer Center may target specific populations, such as youths, older people, handicapped individuals and minorities, for volunteer recruitment.

## 2. Consultation and Training

The Volunteer Center provides consultation and training to nonprofit agency staff and board members and to volunteer program administrators through seminars, workshops, individual consultation and technical assistance. In the 1980s, Centers have placed emphasis on providing special training for nonprofit boards of directors and for leadership in nonprofit organizations,

as the survival of these organizations depends on how the volunteer board is able to shoulder an organization's responsibilities, particularly in fiscal and legal areas.

## 3. Promotion

Through available publicity vehicles, such as TV, radio, newspapers, bulletin boards, Volunteer Centers seek widespread awareness of the meaning of volunteering and the benefits to community and volunteer.

## 4. Recognition

Volunteer Centers acknowledge the contributions of their community volunteers by coordinating volunteer recognition events with organizations and agencies that involve volunteers.

## 5. Resource Information on Volunteering

As the central clearinghouse for volunteering in a community, the Volunteer Center acts as a resource for information on volunteering—whether the request is for national statistics or details

on a local program.

## 6. Program Development and Community Planning

As a Volunteer Center gains a foothold in the community, it becomes increasingly responsive to areas of local need, often networking to bring various resources together to meet those needs.

## 7. Advocacy

The Volunteer Center is the community's advocate for volunteering, the volunteer and good volunteer management.

## 8. Program Administration and Support

Volunteer Centers administer, help develop and provide technical assistance and support to important community-wide programs concerned with volunteering, such as Retired Senior Volunteer Programs (RSVPs), Corporate Volunteer Councils (CVCs) and Directors of Volunteers in Agencies (DOVIAs).



Harriet Naylor was my first boss when I came to the National Center for Voluntary Action (now VOLUNTEER) 12 years ago. She helped stimulate me to understand better the breadth and depth of the volunteer experience, both for individuals and for society as a whole. The work of Volunteer Centers (then called Voluntary Action Centers or VACs) was near to her heart.

When she died last year, Hat left a tremendous legacy of individuals and organizations that had been touched and motivated by her unfailing optimism about the future of volunteering. In her memory, we want to share with you these words from a presentation to the First Community Workshop on

Voluntary Action Centers in September 1970:

I want the VACs to enlist and help motivate more *different* people as volunteers. If volunteering is a basic human right, then how do we find ways for all humans who want to serve, who would be benefited from serving, to find a place to serve?

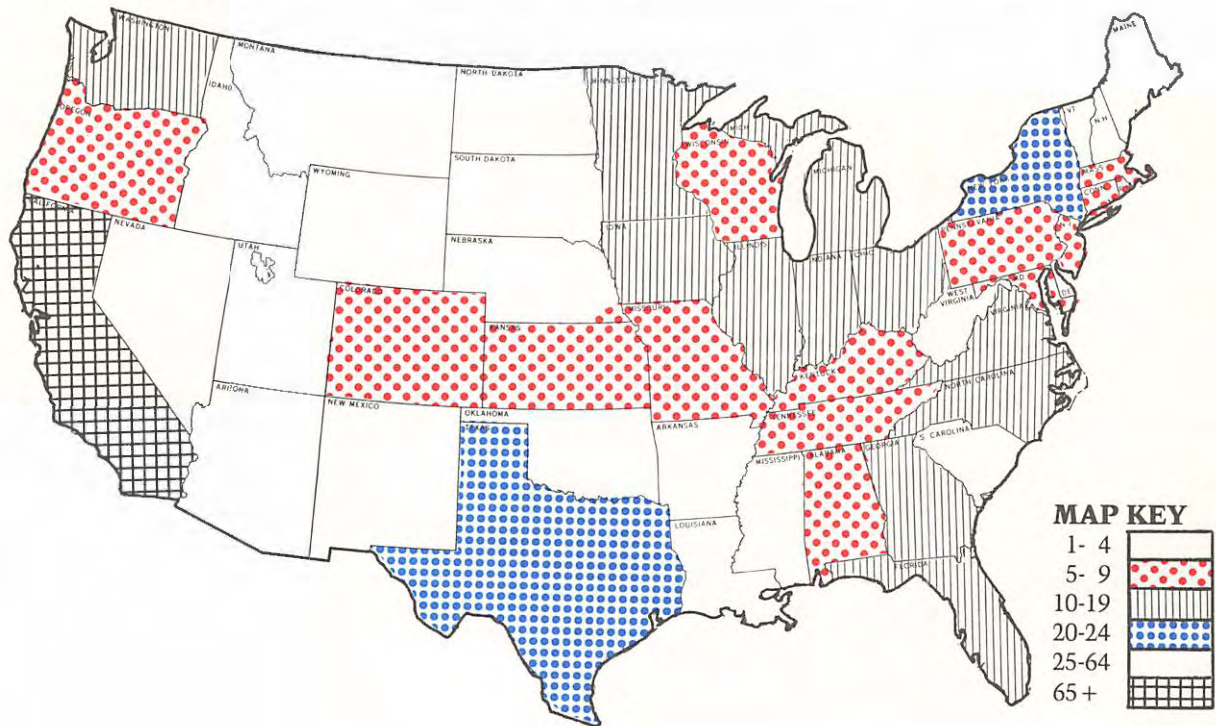
I see the VAC as a hub of activities, not an umbrella, a place where relationships will intersect in a community, and a catalyst for all sorts of adhocacies.

In many ways, the work of Volunteer Centers will remain a vibrant tribute to Hat Naylor's work and dedication to the volunteer community.

—Kenn Allen



## More Than 380 Strong Across the Country



## Volunteer Centers in Partnership



By definition, Volunteer Centers must work in active partnership with other organizations if they are to fulfill their mission of leadership and mobilization. Here are some of their most important partnerships:

- With VOLUNTEER.** Serving as the hub of the national network of Volunteer Centers, VOLUNTEER—The National Center provides a broad range of information-sharing, training and technical assistance services, and helps build public awareness of the work of local Centers. Over the past 15 years, some 150 Volunteer Centers have been involved in special national demonstration projects, often funded through national pass-through grants from private foundations or government agencies. Over 125 Volunteer Centers annually attend The National VOLUNTEER Conference.

- With United Way.** Roughly 80 percent of all Volunteer Centers receive a portion of their local funding from a United Way, representing the United Way's commitment to support for volunteer recruitment, referral and support services. About 20 percent of the Volunteer Centers are operating divisions or departments of a United Way.

- With the Association of Junior Leagues and National Council of Jewish Women.** AJL and NCJW have been active advocates for the development and growth of local Volunteer Centers, with a number of their local units assuming major leadership roles in the creation of new Centers. In many communities, these organizations provide ongoing volunteer and financial support.

- With other Volunteer Centers.** Recognizing the value of interaction, sharing and joint planning, Volunteer Centers in at least 20 states meet on a regular basis with one another. Formal associations exist in Alabama, California and Nevada, Florida, New York, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia. California has created two regional associations—north and south—and the New England Volunteer Centers recently formed its own regional association.

- With government.** A number of Volunteer Centers have served through the years as local sponsors for Retired Senior Volunteer Programs, Foster Grandparents programs and VISTA. In addition, Volunteer Centers work closely with local government to enhance the involvement of volunteers in public agencies.