

**M**ANY OF US HAVE BEEN together in the volunteer community for much of the past twenty years. In some very real ways we have grown up together in that community. And we have seen many changes.

In the 1960s there was the emergence of the great citizen action movements—civil rights, peace, the environment—and the steadily increasing involvement of young people, particularly college students. In the 1970s those citizen action movements became more sophisticated. There was increased attention to neighborhoods and community organizations. Support structures at the local, state and national levels emerged to encourage volunteering, and more attention was given to the needs of volunteers.

Now we are at the beginning of a new decade. What will the 1980s hold? Will it be the decade in which we prove our vitality and our relevance to the needs and interests of individual citizens? Or will it be one in which we will become increasingly impotent and unimportant in the eyes of our neighbors?

Will it be a decade in which citizens gain and hold the power they need to make critical decisions about their lives and the lives of their families and neighbors? Or will there be increased dominance by overgrown power elites—big government, big corporations, big unions, even big voluntary organizations?

Most critical, will this be the decade that we shape, in which the volunteer community learns to understand, harness and apply its strength? Or will we have even greater fragmentation and deeper divisions between those engaged in service delivery and those seeking basic reform of our institutions?

Can we overcome what we already know to be weaknesses in our community—exaggerated concerns over turf, the inability to create effective coalitions, the lack of a clearly articulated political agenda—to become a dominant force in conceptualizing, planning and executing our nation's future?

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# A VOLUNTEER AGENDA FOR THE 1980s

**By Kerry Kenn Allen**

*(The following article is based on Kenn Allen's keynote address at VOLUNTEER's National Frontiers Conference in Estes Park, Colorado, May 1980.)*

Can we find the time, energy and financial resources we need to examine, understand and reform the way we act and interact with each other and with the institutions of society? Can we rise above our emotional satisfaction at being helping professionals to look coldly and analytically at our relations with our "clients" and to understand that there may be a dark side to our caring, a potentially harmful role we are playing?

Can we find a common philosophy, a politic that ties all citizens who volunteer together, whether they be in human service agencies, neighborhood groups, citizen action or self-help? Can we convert that philosophy into a realizable agenda?

Can we do all of these things? The answer must be "yes" if the volunteer community is not only going to survive but also thrive in the years ahead.

**I** SEE FOUR PRIMARY AGENDAS for us to address in the immediate future.

First, we must articulate our values as a community.

Second, we must address our relationship to the "helping establishment."

Third, we must come to grips with the internal relationships in the volunteer community.

Fourth, we must define our relationship to government. On this last priority, let me hasten to add that by including it, I in no way mean to launch an attack on government. I firmly believe that an exaggerated relationship to and dependence on the corporate sector are as potentially damaging and politically complicating as they are with government. But I believe we have the relative luxury to defer that question at least momentarily and to put our energies instead into the question of the role of government.

**First, then, we must articulate our values as a community.**

We are people of action—organizers, planners, managers, doers. Most of our time goes into doing our jobs or seeking those skills that will help us be more effective. Relatively little energy goes into defining, debating and disseminating our values. That is one reason why volunteer administration is far from being a profession and why we are far from being an integ-

rated community. Let me begin some of that needed discussion by suggesting three basic values of our community.

The first one of these is *caring*. Simply put, we are saying, "It's all right to care. It's not hokey or sloppy or unacceptable. It's all right to care about people and their problems, about the future of the nation, about such great issues as peace, development and international brotherhood."

In recent years we've even decided that it's acceptable for volunteers to care about themselves and their own needs. When I was in college, I was involved in an extremely large student volunteer effort, Volunteer Illini Projects at the University of Illinois. As students are wont to do, we spent a fair amount of time discussing our work and our motivations. I remember one night in particular we were discussing the reasons why we were all so heavily involved as volunteers.

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One person began the discussion by suggesting that we were doing it because we wanted "to help others." That idea made us all feel very good about ourselves and we quickly accepted it. Someone else, a bit more politically sensitive, suggested that a better reason was because "we want to help people to help themselves." And, not wanting to be out of touch, we all quickly agreed. But we all grew very uncomfortable when the last person spoke up and suggested we were volunteering because "we want to help ourselves while we help others to help themselves."

Fortunately, the volunteer community has gotten over its discomfort in recent years as we've come to appreciate more and more the individual needs of people that are met

through their volunteer experience. Increasingly I find that people are looking for the sanction to care, the reassurance that it's not abnormal, not uncool to care and to translate that caring into action. As a community, we practice and demonstrate that value of caring.

Our second basic value is one of *problem-solving*. This is best illustrated by the last part of my college story. After we had all satisfied ourselves about what we were gaining by volunteering, someone spoke up and said that the real goal for our efforts was "to work ourselves out of business." That is, our goal as volunteers is to solve the problems we are addressing, not just to make things better, but to actually solve problems so that we are no longer needed.

While it is admittedly idealistic, it really doesn't make such a bad goal. Yet how many of us, either personally or professionally, believe in that as a goal or would be willing to accept it if we attained it?

Volunteering is a means to some greater end. It is one strategy for the solution of problems. It is a resource of energy and people to be focused on some attainable goal. So we, as a community, represent structures and organizations that must be fluid, sensitive to the need for change and even extinction as needs and problems change.

The third value is that of *empowerment*. For most of us, volunteering is to some extent an end in and of itself. We believe that people should be involved in their communities, that they should understand and express their caring instincts, that this would be a better world if everyone was involved. But even such total involvement is simply the means to another end—empowerment.

Simply put, empowerment means having the power, the ability to participate fully and effectively in making those decisions that affect the lives of our families, our communities and ourselves. Citizens gain that power by being involved, by gaining the knowledge, skills and relationships necessary to achieve and exercise power. Saul Alinsky articulated this basic value when he wrote, "If people have the power, the opportunity to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions."

Our role as volunteer leaders and administrators is to insure that citizens have that opportunity. Yet how often do we discuss the concept of empowerment? How often do we actually test our day-to-day work against a measure of our contribution to empowerment? How often do we put aside our fear of this concept and ask ourselves the simple question, "Is what I am doing today facilitating or hindering the acquisition of power by others?"

Empowerment *must* be the dominant value of our community. If we do not believe that all citizens—no matter their life circumstances, their physical or emotional being, their income, race or education—must have power over their own lives, then we are doing a vile injustice to our society and must be eclipsed by those who do share that value.

**Second, we must address our relationship to the "helping establishment."**

Let me put the proposition to you directly: the single greatest impediment to the full and effective involvement of citizens is the resistance of the "helping establishment"—social workers, doctors, educators, bureaucrats and even volunteers in decision-making roles who have an imperialist's attitude toward those in need.

I recently had the opportunity to

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meet John McKnight, a professor at Northwestern University, and to learn more about his views on the danger of over-professionalization of human and social services. Let me quote at length from the opening paragraphs of a paper he presented recently:

Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem. A critical point in the development of the civil rights struggle was

the Black movement's capacity to declare the central issue the "White problem." A people, declared deficient and in need, unshackled their labels and attempted to lock them on their oppressors.

There was revolutionary insight in that strategy. It recognized that the power to label people as deficient and declare them in need is the basic tool for control and oppression in modern industrialized societies of democratic and totalitarian persuasions. The agents with comprehensive labeling power in these societies are the helping professionals. Their badge bestows the caring authority to declare their fellow citizens "clients"—a class of deficient people in need.

He goes on to describe the growing attack on professions by those at all points on the political spectrum, citing three reasons for it: the sense that professionals are inefficient, that they are doing less with more resources; the arrogance of professions, the fact that the nature of a profession is inherently elitist and dominant; the sense that the negative side effects of technological, specialized professionalism are so harmful to so many that the revolt is the reaction to professionally administered injury.

But he also says, "Professional reform is unlikely because our current approaches to economic growth and national stability *depend* upon the development of more professionalized service of the same kind we are currently experiencing."

And, "The basic issue is profession itself, dependent upon the manufacture of need and definition of new deficiencies."

He concludes by asking, "What is legitimate work? What is worth doing? What is good work for America's people?"

We may or may not like Professor McKnight's questions. But are we willing and able to participate in the debate to answer them?

It is clear that there must be changes in the delivery of human and social services, both because of the so-called taxpayer revolt and because what we are doing simply doesn't seem to work very well. Two questions will be critical to that change:

- What are citizens willing and able to do for themselves and for each other?

- Will the helping establishment allow them to do it?

Two more questions will confront us in the volunteer community:

- Whose side will we be on, that of the citizens, that of the helping establishment and its institutions, that of some broader notion of community good?

- Will we be able to define and maintain a working relationship with the helping establishment and with those labor organizations that increasingly represent it?

**Third, we must come to grips with the internal relationships in the volunteer community.**

By the very nature of our programs and our work, we are independent people. We jealously guard our accomplishments. As a group we are largely powerless and thus tend to defend them from all interlopers what little power we actually have cornered.

We've also allowed unfortunate divisions to grow in our community. We have looked with suspicion on those who have taken up a reform agenda. We have failed to seek ways in which support organizations can work as effectively with neighborhood, advocacy and self-help organizations as with hospitals and schools. We have failed to build practical political alliances or to learn how to collaborate effectively without threatening our individual integrities. As a result, we have abrogated much of our political leadership to large, well-financed national voluntary organizations, which have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in human services and philanthropy.

We simply must figure out how we can best interact and speak as a community. That debate must include such questions as the role of national volunteer-involving organizations, the role of resource structures, the role of local organizations and citizen groups, the question of whether or not the volunteer community will be led by paid volunteer administrators who have a

stake in maintenance or by citizen volunteers who have a greater stake in change. We may even be confronted by the inevitable union of volunteers, demanding their rights and the opportunity to exercise their responsibilities.

**Fourth, we must define our relationship to government.**

It is no secret that there is a strong anti-government mood in the country. In part this exists because government seems to have become unreasonably powerful. A faceless bureaucracy has been substituted for the power of local communities and individual citizens to solve their own problems. And in part it comes because government is ineffective and wasteful of both human and financial resources in many of the things it does.

Certainly that anti-government mood may be positive for those who are seeking basic reforms. But I am seeing a distressing tendency on the part of large, well-established voluntary organizations toward expressing anti-government sentiments in ways that, if realized, would imperil much of

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the social legislation of the past twenty years. I am seeing the glimmers of a new macho voluntary sector that wishes to assert that there is no need for government, that in fact the solution to social problems should be the exclusive domain of private organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, which are controlled by a relatively few.

I don't happen to believe that and I'm not sure they do either. Yet I hear among them more approving talk about balanced budgets, freedom

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from government interference and regulation than I do about feeding the hungry or insuring justice for the powerless.

It is one thing to be concerned about the effectiveness of government. Indeed, it is appropriate to be concerned about both the positive and the negative impact of government on the volunteer community. But it is quite another to proclaim that the government is the enemy. To do so is to ignore conveniently the origin of much of our social legislation. Do we wish to forget that it has been volunteers, private citizens, who have advocated for these programs, who recognized human needs, who have sought solutions and demanded public action? Do we wish to ignore the millions of citizens, particularly the poor, the displaced, the oppressed who are still advocating for effective public programs? Do we wish to separate ourselves from them in our rush to condemn government action?

Or do we wish to join together, in a new partnership with each other and with government and the profit-making sector to create human service systems that meet real needs, insure human dignity and empower people so that they can enjoy the same freedom we all enjoy, the freedom to meet our own needs and to seek help when and how we desire?

**I**T IS TIME TO CREATE A NEW POLITICAL coalition in the volunteer community.

One that sets aside territorial and organizational boundaries.

One dedicated to the proposition that volunteering is and must be a means of empowering citizens.

One dedicated to building a fully participatory society in which the ultimate power is in fact as well as in theory vested in the people.

Many steps have been taken toward the building of that new coalition: the efforts of Senator Durenberger and others to create a national commission to study the role of government vis-a-vis volunteering, national initiatives, such as the ad hoc neighborhood coalition, the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy, the Alliance for Volunteerism, even VOLUNTEER's own Associates program—the creation of a network of people concerned about the future of volunteering in our society.

It's happening, slowly but surely, and we in the volunteer community have a clear choice: to jump in and lead or to be left behind.

Is such a coalition possible? Can we find common philosophies, issues, needs that cut across the volunteer community, that take in direct service volunteers, neighborhood organizations, citizen action groups, self-help groups, individual citizens? Can we ask volunteer leaders and administrators to turn away from their immediate organizational and self interests, to question their own roles? Can we build an effective political constituency in the volunteer community?

If we believe in an agenda of empowerment, then we must. We must begin now, in our own part of the volunteer community, to make such a coalition real. And we must reach out to other pieces of the community and join our strengths together to make it effective.

Robert Kennedy has been dead for just over twelve years. But his words live on: "Some people see things as they are and ask why. We dream things that never were and ask why not."

If there is a challenge for the 1980s, it is simply that—for the volunteer community to come together, to dream things that never were and to ask why not.