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# Is the Challenge Recruiting Citizens to Volunteer or Making Sure Agencies Are Ready for Volunteers?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Right now a lot of national attention is being given to stimulating increased volunteering. The upcoming Presidential Summit for America's Future is focused on this topic, with hundreds of major organizations committing themselves to quantities of community service by the year 2000.

President Clinton has further called for millions of volunteer tutors to assure that no child leaves third grade unable to read. Almost all the publicity about withdrawal of government and other funding for many social service and cultural arts programs concludes with speculation about whether or not citizens will come forward as volunteers to fill the new needs.

## Here's the problem as I see it:

*No one is talking about the cost and extra resources needed to work with volunteers--or whether agencies even want them.*

All the publicity and rhetoric is on recruiting people to become volunteers or do "community service." Precious little is ever said about what it will take to interview, screen, place, train, and work with all these new volunteers. While citizen involvement is a vital and important contribution to our society, the equation is not; volunteers instead of money;--we need money AND volunteers.

In this present climate of under-funding, volunteers are in danger of being resented as a second-best solution to serious social problems. All the mentoring in the world cannot make up for lack of decently-paid jobs, schools with adequate supplies, or available health care. On the other hand, when such resources are accessible, volunteers can make the difference between success and failure on the individual level.

We also need money FOR volunteers. As one example, who is going to cover the cost of thousands of child abuse police checks (something President Clinton never mentions when he calls for adults to work with young children)? Taking on more volunteers also means more staff time and resources--and too many agencies aren't able or willing to give either. Those individual citizens who want to help neighbors in need or students who can't read will also require some method of connecting.

Even in the best of economic times, too many agencies limit volunteers to unchallenging roles. We must educate professionals to welcome and respect the skills volunteers can bring. Perhaps the Presidential Summit will give us the opportunity to do the following:

- Articulate realistic expectations about the interconnected roles of volunteers, employees, government at various levels, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Volunteers are an integral part of the community resource mix--but all the components need to expand their reach.
- Do thoughtful planning for volunteer involvement, with a clear vision as to what volunteers can contribute in unique ways--not as unpaid staff assistants, but as providers of service meeting a wide range of client needs.
- Prepare social workers, teachers, medical care givers and others to adapt their job descriptions in these new times. Volunteers should not be expected to fill in the slack while employees continue business as usual. Every profession must re-examine its priorities. This is a particularly difficult question in unionized work settings.
- Engage clients in the process of problem solving. The old paternalistic model of charity is discredited. We must be careful not to rush into such activities as mentoring under the assumption that the needs of children in poverty can be solved simply by an adult friend (as powerful a force as that relationship can be). We must learn to listen to what our neighbors think they need. Volunteers can be most effective as facilitators of self-help and advocates to prod the bureaucracy into doing its job. Not every client may want a mentor; not every citizen is best assigned to that role.

Do you agree or disagree with my perspective? What do you feel is lacking from the national discussion?

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I agree with Susan. It is too easy to call for "volunteers" without knowing the mechanics involved with developing productive volunteer programs. As one who has spent the last 10 years observing and writing about local non-profit organizations and in particular the volunteers who make them successful, I know all too well the lack of understanding of what makes a productive volunteer. And as a life long volunteer I know the commitment it takes to be a productive volunteer.

Over the past 10 years volunteers in my area, especially those connected with organizations that allow hands-on-work by volunteers (they don't just raise money any more) are taking on more and more skilled responsibilities that require some form of training. I think one of President Clinton's problems in his call for volunteers is his lack of awareness of the quantities of volunteers already in place. He treats his call as though the volunteer pool was grossly under populated. I don't really think it is as small as he might think. Then again this call for volunteers is another way to sidestep other issues that are more politically sensitive, like offering the same services on a reduced budget...where to go -- Volunteers!

*Response from: Maggi Stamm, Chronicler of non-profit organizations & volunteers, Southern California, USA*

I basically agree with Susan's position. I think that much of the political hoopla over volunteering is just that. Volunteer organizations, of course, benefit by any PR about volunteering, whether politically motivated or not. But volunteers, without financial support to the organizations that need their skills, aren't the answer to solving all of the social & environmental problems facing the world today. Government is promoting volunteerism through PR, while at the same time cutting much needed funding to worthwhile programs. Let's see a balance between providing funds/grants for programs and PR to raise volunteer awareness.

*Response from: Bruce Bechtold, Developer of Volunteer Information Mgt.(V.I.M.)*

I think this forum is an exciting new development for volunteer administrators and those seeking to enhance volunteer involvement in their organizations. The Summit left me with many of the same questions about what it really takes to connect eager people who want to help with the important causes in their community. We are trying an experiment here within Stamford Health System.

"WellConnected" is a 24-hour automated telephone menus system that allows callers to browse current volunteer opportunities in Stamford Health System. It is also the name of our new marketing program that has as its vision to make volunteering more convenient, accessible and rewarding for all parties involved. In the fall it will offer a monthly newsletter, monthly newspaper ads, drive-time radio spots and a web site. All of this requires money and teamwork. Not every agency could mount this kind of internal and external marketing campaign. If we are to effectively accomplish a paradigm shift in the delivery healthcare in this area (and country), we must necessarily expect to leave "business as usual" in volunteerism behind, as well. We have a team of former executives working on "WellConnected" helping with the infrastructure, marketing and funding. This support plus that of a number of generous corporations who want to give money where it will really make a difference are the driving forces behind "WellConnected".

I applaud the organizations struggling without volunteer managers to make volunteerism work. I want to say to their boards and leadership, though, that it is time to put their money where their long range goals are and hire a consummate professional volunteer manager who can mobilize resources,

both human and financial to help bring the dream to reality. Volunteers can do awesome things but they need support, coordination and recognition.

*Response from Bonnie Jennings, Stamford Health System*

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