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## Once in a Millennium Opportunity

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Whether you think the year 2000 or 2001 is the start of the new century, all the digits of the year will change on January 1, 2000, so this New Year's Day marks something special. The excitement of a new millennium generates all sorts of reminiscing backwards and forecasting ahead. Let's use this period of reflection as an opportunity to to ask some genuinely hard questions about volunteer involvement in our organizations--what have we really accomplished and where do we want to go?

Create a "New Millennium Think Tank" or task force, convene focus groups, conduct surveys. Make it clear that you are not asking for an ordinary volunteer program evaluation. The year 2000 alerts us to the fact that it's not "business as usual." Enormous changes are occurring in all aspects of public and private life. Success in the 21st Century will require revision and reconstruction of many of our traditional methods of providing service to our consumers and in mobilizing volunteers.

In most evaluation studies, the questions most commonly asked relate to the quantity and quality of service. The underlying assumption is that the services are important to perform in the way they are being performed. With the warning bell of the century change, your objective this time is to assess the fundamental principles under which you operate. You might be very good at something, but if it no longer needs to be done, you are not giving the best service.

Here's a question to get people thinking:

"If we were starting our organization from scratch tomorrow, what would we do differently?"

Here are a few more specific questions to help people think "out of the box":

1. What is the most relevant thing volunteers do now? (Based on what criteria?)
2. What is becoming less relevant, even if we're good at it?
3. Has our organization experienced change and do we expect more? (On the assumption that everyone answers yes:) What changes do we anticipate?
4. Given the changes above, how do we expect employee roles here to change?
5. Given the changes above, how do we expect volunteer involvement here to change?

6. Who are our constituents and what will they need in the years ahead? Is this what we provide now?
7. What factors or obstacles limit or slow innovation here?
8. Why do volunteers join us now? What's keeping them away?
9. What are three tangible things can we do to be more effective at welcoming community participation?

Your "New Millennium Think Tank" might also gird its loins, summon courage, and lurch on some sacred cow. Are there skeletons in your organizational closet that no one has been willing to challenge for some time? Here is your chance to place anything and everything on the agenda. For example:

- Is there an auxiliary or other group that has been aging in place and has been allowed to atrophy? Can the year 2000 mark a resolve to open discussions about what needs to be done so that the organization is not held back by an outdated support group?
- Are volunteers filling some assignments out of tradition, but the situation today truly calls for paid staff? This is especially important for services that started as occasional but are now in constant demand. Another example is the type of assignment requiring 40-hour or more "coverage"--at a time when fewer volunteers want to commit to unending weekly shifts of time.
- Are you limiting the variety of volunteers who join up because of lack of enabling funds, inflexible training schedules, or other institutional obstacles? What really can't be changed versus what is no one willing to change?
- Is there a reason why so much separation exists between board members, fundraising volunteers, and frontline volunteers? How can the organization take a holistic approach to "community resource mobilizing"?
- Are we afraid of taking risks? What would our founding volunteers have thought of that? Which risks might be acceptable to take because the consequences of doing nothing are worse?

One approach to tackling these and other hot potato subjects might be:  
"We have met the Y2K Bug...and it is us!"

In your responses to this Hot Topic, please share how you will use the century change to best advantage on behalf of volunteers.

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**Submitted by Jan Masaoka, , California**

Another great idea from Susan Ellis. It's a Christmas gift!

**Submitted by Jayne Cravens, Virtual Volunteering Project, USA**

What a terrific topic! I fear, however, that many agencies will be reluctant to ask these very provocative questions of staff and volunteers, out of fear of what the answers might be... a pity, since exploring the answers to these questions would lead to improved services and improved experiences for volunteers, staff and clients. Of course, answering these questions would also lead to change, something many people find downright painful, organizationally speaking.

**Submitted by Dee Dee Mayer, VoVolunteer Home Care, Lutheran Services Northeast, Tipton, PA, USA**

Good stuff- Susan! Sending copies to all field staff now so they'll have good input/discussion for next staff meeting!

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