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Turbulence at the State Level

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

June
1998

When the Corporation for National and Community Service mandated that, in order to receive federal dollars, each State would have to form a "Commission on Community Service" to administer the funds, some states immediately connected this new Commission to their existing State Office on Volunteerism. Others didn't see the connection and evolved separate entities. But recently, several states have taken steps to merge their Commissions on Community Service with previously-established State Offices on Volunteerism.

Is this a trend? And does it matter to those of us in volunteer administration? *I say yes and yes.*

Before I espouse my concerns, any of you that aren't familiar with the history of these two groups might want to read my [brief history of the emergence of state offices and commissions](#). The history might surprise you.

All right, here are the concerns as I see them:

1. The mergers seem driven by a desire to streamline government and save money--certainly not by a vision of volunteerism. When the two structures are merged, full-time service programs dominate because they are connected to a visible funding stream. But AmeriCorps and VISTA are the tail wagging the dog. It's not that these programs aren't worthwhile, it's just that *numerically* they deal with such low numbers of participants. I'd like to see the most time and attention paid to the width and breadth of everyday volunteer action across a state, rather than focusing efforts on just a few stipended workers.
2. In every case in which the work of a Commission and a State Office has been combined, support and services for the volunteer community becomes very low priority, often without a designated staff person. So, in essence, the State Office disappears but the governor/legislators don't have to take any heat.

3. Experience also shows that AmeriCorps and VISTA overshadow not only general volunteer-related issues but also the Corporation's other components, particularly the various "Elder Corps" programs and the Learn and Serve/K-12 programs, which are most interconnected with the wider volunteer community. Without fitting into a guiding vision of state volunteerism, Commission staff tend to allow the Department of Education to oversee Learn and Serve projects as their professional specialty, while the Department of Aging deals with Elder Corps. So, in practice, the state Commission funnels federal money but then takes a hands-off stance. So another opportunity is lost to fit these programs into the bigger volunteer picture.

By the way--I am not necessarily against these mergers and believe that we can make the situation work to our benefit in the long run, but only if we recognize what the factors are, and can articulate what it is we WANT at a state level.

Now it's your turn.... Maybe you want to cogitate on what you think is needed on the state level for the entire service field.

(Apologies to our non-U.S. readers for a topic so American in focus. But maybe you'd like to share what's going on politically at the provincial or national level in your country.)

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Submitted by Lucas Meijs, The Netherlands

Interesting to see that these governmental restructuring influences volunteerism in many countries. In the Dutch situation, the provincial level has become a major concern for national multi-level volunteer organizations. What happened? In the seventies, national government provided funds for all kind of associations (sports, youth, religious, rural areawomen, gay.....) to set up national support structures. This led to the introduction of many small support offices (every organization it's own) at provincial level with small jobs for paid staff to help local chapters.

After some years a nice very fragmented support-system was created. But national government decentralized its funds to the provinces. The provinces first just gave the money to the organizations, which of course had started provincial chapters. But soon provinces discussed the inefficiency of having 20 to 40 small offices with very fragmented use of people and resources. So they started integrating them. But every province had its own way. In one province the paid staff only relocated to a new building but kept their old jobs. In other provinces paid staff relocated but were also told that they maybe used to work for scouting or the youth organization of the Dutch Reformed Church, but now they should switch. That would make them more accountable to the province. So the Roman Catholic Scouting paid staff woman was supposed to support the Dutch reformed church youth clubs. Nice idea!

In the end there are about twelve different provincial ways of supporting local volunteer chapters. Now the problem becomes complicated because the local chapters usually are part of a national organization. The national organization used to support local chapters with both national paid staff and provincial paid staff. But how to coordinate and plan your nationwide support if every provincial support system works different? At this moment large national organization look for resources of their own to rebuild a provincial support.

Submitted by Mary Foley, President, Virginia Volunteer Center Association, Virginia, USA

Thanks for a great article. Your timing is perfect since I believe most states are updating their Unified State Plans. In Virginia, we did ours several months ago, and I can finally speak about it without entering the supreme anger zone ! In Virginia, the State Office of Volunteerism was already in place at the inception of National Service and openingly took on this new venture, staffing it separately as a department of the Office. The State Office has never lost it's vision but what disturbs me so is the department of "National Service" has missed the vision and opportunity.

To me, volunteerism takes on many looks depending on the needs of the individual community, whether it's the episodic volunteer, the court-ordered worker, elements of welfare reform, mandated school service outside of Learn and Serve etc, etc. There is such an opportunity to market all aspects of volunteerism if we keep the vision alive and ditch the turf issues. This is America, talk is free ! and money talks, but wouldn't it be more fun and creative to look at the power of volunteerism as a whole instead of little minded bureaucrats protecting their individual turf issues ? The opportunity is for us all to step outside the box and dream about taking existing networks and building on them.

Submitted by Debbie Thompson, Volunteer Coordinator, Faith Lutheran Church, Illinois, USA

I think that you are right. Although the organization can be put together and made useful for all volunteers and agencies to utilize, I believe that the states are too short sighted in how they look at volunteerism.

In the rural sections of IL Americorps volunteers are actually making better money with their stipends than some of the full time paid people in the towns they serve. It is very hard for anyone to see these people as volunteers rather than college students who are looking for a way to pay off their student loans and gain work experience at the expense of local people that can use the extra money.

My own view is that if the states spend the majority of their time and energy working with these programs, the non-paid staff volunteers could easily lose their voice in the legislative arena.

We have worked very hard to become a professional organization and to be supportive of the needs of the volunteers in non-profit and for-profit corporations to lose the fight to keep that voice alive and healthy.

How the office is structured does not matter, but we must not lose our voice for the grassroots volunteers that keep our churches, schools and hospitals working as efficiently as possible. If it wasn't for these volunteers, our quality of life in the city, country and suburbs would suffer.

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