

[News and Hot Topics](#) » A Utopian View of Volunteerism Professional Organizations

A Utopian View of Volunteerism Professional Organizations

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November
2002

This month's Hot Topic has been percolating in my mind for a long time, but it was brought to the surface by a "critical mass" of conversations at recent conferences in quite varied locations, all concerning the same issues:

- What are the roles of our field's various professional societies and resource organizations, both in relation to each other and in terms of local, state/provincial, or national levels of operation?
- As a practical matter, how can such varied entities co-exist – and further the efforts of volunteers - without competing with each other and confusing both members of the profession and the public at large?
- How does an individual practitioner decide which (and how many) to join?

Ontario, Canada and Minnesota, USA have worked hard to develop collaborations among various volunteerism associations and agencies. See a full discussion in [e-Volunteerism](#). On November 15, I'll be facilitating a meeting in Pennsylvania of the presidents or directors of 23 different groups in our state to discuss current and potential relationships. So it seems like a good time to present my dream. What follows is "Susan's Utopian View" – my wish for how we would structure ourselves to work towards common goals in non-competitive, mutually-supportive ways.

Thanks to Internet technology, I can present this Hot Topic in clickable layers. Read as much or as little as you wish!

First, I present my [fundamental principles](#) that are the cornerstone of my Utopia and ask you to add your own thoughts and perspectives.

Then I outline the ideal division of responsibilities at the:

Local level

State/provincial level

National/international level

I also show how [setting-specific organizations](#) fit into the overall picture.

Fundamental Principles

In my Utopia, everyone (individuals and organizations) operate within the following fundamental principles:

1. We all exist to further the work of *volunteers*.
2. Each level of association does what members of the level below can not do on their own.
3. Each level is responsible for assisting in the development of more resources below it.
4. Each level is responsible for:
 - Being informed about volunteerism at its own level and being willing to contribute data to aggregate studies/reports.
 - Connecting local issues with issues affecting a broader population.
 - “Translating” information from the level(s) above to apply to local issues.
5. Each geographic level has two components: professional membership associations and nonprofit (or government) volunteerism resource agencies. The professional associations are focused on strengthening the profession and the individuals who are members – to which the status of volunteerism in general is obviously important. The resource agencies are focused on strengthening volunteerism in general – within which a strong corps of professional practitioners is a vital, but not the only, concern.
6. The professional associations are run by their members, but they engage advisors with skills beyond volunteer management. The agencies are run by a wide spectrum of community representatives, but volunteer resource managers are seen as a vital constituency.
7. Educational opportunities, new written materials, and other resources are created at all levels, but everyone commits to:
 - Checking what has been done before and reading existing research, books and articles.
 - Creating material with a sense of obligation to a wider audience than one agency, locality, or even country.
 - Sharing material – with due credit to the source – as widely as possible.
8. Every practitioner holds a membership in every level of association (local association, state/provincial association, and a national). In addition, the practitioner is a member of parallel associations that are setting-specific. Is this overkill? No, because each association builds upon the next. However, the dues are linked so that the person can join at one access point and automatically be connected to all the other levels (where available).

So, these are my Utopia's fundamental principles. Do they match with the principles you would espouse? What changes or additions would you make? Remember, this is Utopia - you can dream!

or continue reading:

[Local Level](#) | [State/provincial level](#)

[National/International Level](#) | [Special Settings](#)

Related Topics: [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#) | [Volunteer Centers](#)

Submitted on 19Nov02 by Fran Cook, Director of Volunteer Ministries, Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA

I think coordinating organizations is a task in itself. It happens in the community all the time. One group is seeking jobs, another is offering transportation, another is making inexpensive day care available. It takes someone to put these all together to make it happen. So what is the solution to getting people to work together and not duplicate services? I don't have an answer.

Submitted on 5Nov02 by Carole B. Symonette, Board member, United Way Midland, and several other non-profit organizations, Midland, Texas

First, Susan, thanks for taking up this weighty subject!

As a professional who has moved between federal/state funded programs and local non-profit agencies, my greatest frustration comes from knowing first-hand that for every federal/state funded program a community-based locally funded initiative must be formed to take up the slack! (Translation: meet the needs of folks who don't fit to the letter the eligibility requirements imposed by state and federal funding.) Examples abound. But for starters: regional councils on alcoholism and drug abuse must be augmented by the public school-driven drug free youth programs. The list is endless. The local programs always struggle for funding and volunteers. The taxpayer dollars fund both levels of effort. There will never be enough money and services will never be delivered in the most cost-effective and productive way. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to get on your soapbox.

Submitted on 5Nov02 by Sal Alaimo, Girl Scout Council of Northwest Georgia, Georgia, USA

I agree with Susan's principles, when I remind myself that this is a Utopian environment. Trimmed budgets have forced many nonprofit employees to make choices for which organizations they want to be members of. I would add a key component that should drive our choices but also enable the Utopian environment to run efficiently. That component is the constant effort from organizations on all levels to offer value to their members. Members should regularly offer feedback to the organizations to foster and encourage this offering of value. When organizations are only interested in your membership fee and having you attend their conference, this behavior should not be acceptable. Organizations should be communicating with their members to find out what they value and providing it.

Sign up for our Newsletter

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025