

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Mixed Messages from Government: Lessons from Minnesota

Mixed Messages from Government: Lessons from Minnesota

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

February
2002

What a difference a month makes! Thirty days ago I reported good news from Minnesota about the formation of MAVA as a wave of the future for our field (<http://www.volunteerism.com/quarterly/02oct/02oct-mava>) Now, unfortunately, Minnesota is center stage for some bad news. After 27 years of true leadership in our field, the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services has been summarily closed by Governor Jesse Ventura in his goal to cut 10% of his budget. Its last day was the 31st of January.

Executive Director Bonnie Esposito was blind-sided by the news, having received absolutely no warning. Further, Ventura axed the Office purposely during the holiday break of the state legislature, making sure that no politician could interfere with his "executive" decision. MOCVS staff had exactly 4 weeks to close shop and all lost their jobs. All prior commitments have been cancelled, including the offering of office space to MAVA. One of the many casualties of the closing is the extensive lending library of several thousand volunteerism materials that the Office had amassed over the years. A home needs to be found for the collection and we can only hope that Minnesotans will be able to retain access.

Since Minnesota has such an active network of volunteerism folks, they sprung into action. Despite the immediacy of the deadline, MAVA and its members wrote and called the Governor and everyone else they could think of. Protests were sent from outside the state, too, by myself and numerous other supportive colleagues. But to no avail. (Given Ventura's in-the-limelight style, he probably enjoyed the attention.)

The only reason given to Bonnie for the termination, apart from the need to save money, was that Ventura felt "it was not the role of government to deal with volunteering." And therein lies the Hot Topic!

Mixed Messages

We are living in a climate of mixed messages from government. On one hand, government officials extol the virtues of volunteering and express their wish to encourage active community engagement. Increasingly this desire is echoed around the world. On the other hand, all too often this is political lip service hiding the actual desire to divest government of service functions. Regardless, if the public sector wants the private sector to carry more responsibility for community building, it needs to be done in partnership, not through government abdication of any role in the process.

In the United States we have a new Office of Homeland Security that is openly discussing ways that citizens can get involved (after praising the outpouring of help after 9-11). We have a President who exhorts Americans to volunteer in his State of the Union address and wants to mobilize "armies of compassion." We are increasing the budget of the Corporation for National Service. So why does one Governor think it's wrong to have a state office of volunteer services?

Just before we posted this essay, reactions started to fly to the new USA Freedom Corps. See my [addendum to this hot topic](#)....

The mixed messages run deeper than that, of course. Despite all the call for volunteers to come forward in the nonprofit sector, volunteers who work in government settings are generally ignored. Yet the scope of volunteer service on behalf of government is staggering: schools, prisons, libraries, courts, parks and recreation, firefighting, etc. This is absolute fact, yet too many government officials must assume these contributions occur by spontaneous combustion, not by plan. Clearly Governor Ventura doesn't think his state departments need any help at all in this area. Would he have eliminated his personnel department?

The U.S. federal government does the opposite. They fund the Corporation, but then do not allow volunteers to work in federal government offices! Yes, this is true. Only the Departments of Agriculture and Interior have specific exceptions voted by Congress for certain programs. Volunteers are good enough for everyone else, I guess, but not for national government work.

What Can Government Do for Us?

There are many successful models around the world for national government involvement in volunteerism, with Canada and the UK at the top of the list. In the July 2001 issue of *e-Volunteerism*, Steve McCurley and I discussed what various international governments are doing now and what they might do to support volunteerism (<http://www.e-volunteerism.com/quarterly/01sum/pov4>). Although we were dealing with the national level, it seems to me that state or provincial government has a number of vested interests in the work we do - and some key roles to play. For example:

- Data gathering and research: Who else is in the business of collecting information on the life of citizens? We expect government to count us, track labor and industry data, measure student

achievement, and other items of public records. Why not contributed services?

- Policy setting and enforcing: Issues such as insurance coverage, legal liability, equal opportunity and accessibility, tax incentives, and other concerns are squarely in the government domain and need to be interpreted/formulated for their impact on volunteering. Volunteerism is a specialty needing informed legislators and other officials.
- Assuring that citizens who volunteer on behalf of government programs are welcomed and appropriately coordinated.

What Do We Want?

So the questions this month are:

- Do we feel that government (in general) and state/provincial government (in particular) has a role to play in supporting volunteering?
- What is that role?
- How and to whom do we express our wishes for government involvement?

Related Topics: [Government Agencies](#) | [Government Relations/Codes](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Legislation](#) | [Trends and Issues](#) | [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#)

Additional comments from Susan Ellis

On 31 January, I sent a letter to CyberVPM and PRO-VM, a long list of colleagues and to the White House regarding the establishment of the USA Freedom Corps. It is so very relevant to the Hot Topic that I had written only a few days earlier that I decided to include it in this hot topic--[the letter](#).

Posted 28Feb2002

Submitted by Amy Cline, Volunteer Coordinator, Ohio

I prefer to see the glass as half full and would respectfully ask my colleagues to guard against jumping to conclusions before we take the time to see the entirety of the big picture.

In response to the perceived lack of information regarding the Freedom Corps, the www.whitehouse.gov website homepage has a Freedom Corps link that provides a 33-page outline of the plan: goals, strategies, and who's in charge. The perception that existing volunteers are not being consulted is inaccurate from my perspective. Greater Cleveland's Forum for Volunteer Administrators (with 80 volunteer management representatives) is already being asked for input and involvement from our Governor's Community Service Council. To quote their request, "The Ohio Community Service Council is committed to working with the existing infrastructure and experts in

volunteer mobilization and will be proactive in convening discussions on how best to do that within the guidelines and regulation's that we must follow."

Points to Ponder...While I sympathize with the volunteer frustration in Minnesota, has anyone considered the possibility that the Governor of Minnesota made the decision to reallocate the state budget funding of his volunteer initiative because he knew that Freedom Corps funding for state programs would be coming from the federal government? Could the Freedom Corps initiative be the "glue" that binds volunteer programs together in a nationally-organized network that volunteer professionals have been trying to cultivate for years? This is an opportunity. As volunteer advocates, let's not waste time worrying "what it may or may not be"...let's get involved to ensure "what it is."

Posted 27Feb2002

Submitted by Timothy Keener, Acting Chair/Admin. TDD America, Oregon, USA

To Bonnie Esposito:

I completely relate to this Catch-22 of speaking of compassion whilst pulling the carpet out from under you. Seems the message of volunteerism is a profound one and its significance traces to the country's founding, but...those that pontificate from high places have never done any and so have no depth or weight or truth to their statements. This is not to detract from the truth of volunteerism, only the veracity of the speaker. I'm an administrator of a small nonprofit in Oregon and know all too well the meaning and delight of true volunteers when I can recruit them. What puzzles me most is, I think people would get behind and support volunteer efforts especially now with the vast amount of communication technology and a dire shortage of skilled volunteers to meet the need. I have been a volunteer for many years and will continue to for as long as possible "God willing", to the disability community especially the deaf. I would say metaphorically that your organization suffered in a sense a terrorist attack of the dirtiest sort--bureaucratic summary execution.

Posted 20Feb2002

Submitted by Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteer Services, Lutheran Social Services, Jamestown, NY, USA

Having survived many government initiatives over the past 30 years, my response to the latest from President Bush, and for that matter, Governor Ventura, is to just smile and carry on. My youngest volunteer is 2; my oldest is 91. Life will go on. Volunteers are necessary to the life blood of this country and as we all know, volunteers are not so easy to legislate, regulate, or manipulate. They will find volunteer opportunities whether we recruit and train them or not. We are all professionals and have seen what happens when volunteers run amuck. Good luck to all those white tower initiators!

Posted 20Feb2002

Submitted by Rustie Brooke, NYC/IYC, New York

Ho, ho, ho? This cartoon adds a twist to this discussion: <http://www.tmsfeatures.com/comicpage/?f=20020201eddan-a.gif>

Posted 18Feb2002

Submitted by Craig Malina, Co-Founder -- iV3 Media, Bay Area, California, USA

As a relative newcomer to the world of volunteering, I have been more than impressed with the commitment and efforts of organizations that are trying to provide meaningful experiences for both the volunteer and community. As a newcomer to the politics behind volunteering -- I was shocked to learn (although not entirely shocked) from this letter that the president's initiative was launched without the consult of the people who bring critical expertise and passion to the message of volunteering.

Regardless though of the lack of substance behind the government's call to action, and the incomprehensible exclusion of so many talented people who could have made a true difference with the additional funds that was used to erect this flimsy platform, I believe that we need to spend our energy on what we can do, together as a group, to put forth a new model for national volunteering that is focused on meeting the volunteer's desire for a meaningful experience and purposeful action!

As I look at it, we can either fight tooth and nail for some scraps from a government that has already purposefully excluded the organized volunteerism voice -- or we can spend our time joining forces to DEMONSTRATE a successful working model, and how inadequate the government program is in comparison. The infrastructure and people are there and now we have more motivation to work together as a organized group to provide a single simple message and path for people to get easily involved with meaningful community volunteering. I hope that we can all move beyond the obviously insulting way the government is treating so many devoted leaders so that we can respond swiftly to the new challenges we face.

Posted 14Feb2002

Submitted by Kurt Zilley, Volunteer Director, AccountAbility MN, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Last Friday, Feb 8, I attended the "wake" for MOCVS at General Mills Headquarters. It was an opportunity see many other volunteer professionals stand in support of MOCVS and all of its work. It was also a time to highlight the beginnings of MAVA and to recognize now, more than ever, that volunteer professionals must stand up and be heard. President Bush's call to action is not the first time that our profession has been excluded from plans, ideas, and implementation of volunteer concepts and programs. Too often it the case that volunteer professionals are called in to "get some people for this program" without having input or voice in the actual process or program. The volunteer profession must be looked at and respected as the first call advice and consultation for any volunteer program initiatives. When government, business, etc. needs expert opinion on the economy they go to an economist. We need to display, flaunt and sell our professional expertise in order to make us the first call for help and guidance when any entity wants to develop ideas in the volunteer field. AVA, state and local agencies must work together to make our voices not only heard but recognized as the experts in the field.

Posted 12Feb2002

Submitted by Charles Checkley, MAYFLOWER RSVP - VISTA , Plymouth, MA.

With all the emphasis on "Homeland Security" and "No Child Left Behind," I believe the most efficient use of whatever money the government is planning to spend should be invested in growing/expanding existing organizations, like RSVPs. They are already established with a very efficient and active volunteer recruiting program. Why reinvent the wheel when there are many existing volunteer organizations, many funded by the government, already in place? These organizations are capable and willing to take on an additional challenge, especially when it directly affects not only the local community but everyone in it -- like being prepared for any and all emergencies (natural or terrorist initiated.)

Posted 12Feb2002

Submitted by Shwn Shurm, Virginia Youth Service Council, Virginia

Don't cut volunteer centers because it is the backbone of how people can help the less fortunate.

Posted Feb12,2002

Submitted by Leigh Wintz, CAE, Executive Director, Soroptimist International of the Americas

It is not only the Volunteer Centers and agencies that use volunteers that were concerned over President Bush's call to volunteers, Service Clubs were also concerned that he didn't recognize how so many of our organizations are already responding and stand willing to do more. It would seem obvious that the President should encourage volunteers to join existing groups that are already organized and able to offer their time, talent and treasure NOW without taxing an infrastructure not able to accommodate them. Service Club Leaders sent President Bush [the linked letter](#) just to remind him that our long history of service makes us even more relevant today and eager to take on the challenges of the changing world we live in.

Posted Feb11, 2002

Submitted by Judy Rust, Minnetrista Cultural Center/Oakhurst Gardens, Muncie, IN

Maybe government should not have to legislate volunteerism and it should come from the heart. But we all know that if people think that they are part of a group where all are working together and are not alone more people will become involved. It takes everyone working together to make a difference, this world is not as simple as it used to be 50 years ago when you knew everyone in your community and you all worked together for a common cause. Not so today. Having a community resource, the backing of government and someone to share the bigger picture and the results of the efforts is very motivating. We hope that government will choose not to speak one way and act another.

Posted Feb06, 2002

Submitted by Audray Landrum, Special Projects - Tyler/Smith County DOVIA, Texas

Volunteer leadership, we need you now. Many of us would like to be helpful in the face of these bizarre decisions. Please give us a list of options to pursue, locally and nationally: sample letters, addresses, e-mails and phone numbers; orchestrated efforts no matter how small the voice will have an effect.

"I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. I will not refuse to do the something I can do." - Helen Keller

Please lead the way to helping us help ourselves!

Posted Feb04,2002

Submitted by Denny Barnett, AVA Board President,

The closing of the Minnesota Office is not only a gigantic blow for Minnesota, but to volunteering and to the profession. Equally frustrating and outrageous is the method in which it was done. Even the WWF does not allow hitting below the belt! Regarding the State of the Union message and Freedom Corp... I am always happy to hear a call to action to be of service to others...especially from the President. However, there were/are so many unanswered questions. I have written to President Bush on behalf of AVA to express the concern that volunteers need and deserve the leadership and supervision of qualified and competent managers of volunteer resources. The letter will be posted on the AVA web site.

Posted Feb04,2002

Submitted by Frank S. Bublitz, Volunteer Specialist, American Red Cross, Michigan

I am furious with the President for the way that this effort is being slapped into place. I may be too angry to think clearly. But I do have a devil's advocate statement to make as well. I work for a large organization and believe that my organization and other large volunteer agencies are already overextended and unwieldy. Our humanitarian programs, some of whom are built on neutrality and independence from government control, also should not interact too closely with the government. They must also be free to serve the community in a way that their donors and leaders see fit. Government control of an agency for volunteers is not the way to go.

Posted Feb04,2002

Submitted by Alice DavisJohnson, Administrator, Bureau of Prisons, Washington, DC

As the Administrator of the Volunteer Management Branch of the Bureau of Prisons, Department of Justice, I understand and feel first-hand the problem with these mixed messages. Our office has been in existence since November 1991. We have more than 30,000 volunteers that provide services to inmates within our institutions and community corrections facilities. We also allow college students to provide administrative services and gain work experience with the Bureau of Prisons. Unfortunately, we are continuously the recipients of threats to close our office. What's most interesting to me is that during this time of so many inmates in correctional facilities, we are being considered as unimportant or nonessential to their successful re-entry into communities. There are too many mixed messages here. Perhaps, the speech writers for the President and staff from the Office of Faith-Based and Community Services should visit our offices. We can certainly share much information about the incredible and horrific barriers we face daily. For more information on the Bureau of Prisons' Volunteer and Citizen Participation Programs go to www.bop.gov. Click on links, then volunteer work.

Posted Feb04,2002

Submitted by Dotty Metcalf, Volunteer Program Director, Breaking Free, Inc., Indianapolis, IN 46226

I know that Volunteers of America of Indiana has 75 paid employees and 12 volunteers. That is not an opinion, just an observation.

Posted Feb04,2002

Submitted by Melissa Eystad, President, World Spirit Consulting, Wisconsin USA

I am personally distraught by what is going on in Minnesota, and now nationally. It's as if we are becoming "invisible" as a field overnight. Politicians are systematically dismantling the infrastructure for volunteering in the U.S., while extolling the virtues of being a "caring society" out of the other side of their mouths. If we can't stand up together and confront this trend, our work to gain credibility as a profession will, I fear, be a lost cause. Let's get to work!

Posted Feb03,2002

Submitted by Joan E. Thompson, Mayflower RSVP, Inc., Plymouth MA; USA

I believe Gov Ventura has a perception of "Volunteer" and "Volunteering" that is shared by many outside our field: Individuals, acting alone and without any particular operational structure will find a way to mend society's ills. People everywhere feel motivated "to help." But motivation, alone, does not deliver results. Action does. When orchestrated to bring about targeted results, action produces expected and predictable results. If "Homeland Security" and "Leaving No Child Behind" ever succeed it will be because operational systems are designed and implemented that engage people effectively. Such systems orchestrate volunteers and paid staff, alike, to work together to bring about the changes we need. If it is in the Public Interest to expect volunteers to staff such efforts, it is in the Public Interest to invest public money in experienced Volunteer System Designers who craft and support the systems in which volunteers will be effective - with results that continuously improve. As an RSVP sponsor, I can only hope that the Government Performance & Results Act will be enforced to insure the effectiveness (recorded and reported) of the U.S.A. Freedom Corps and the new Defense Department budget as it is to measure the impact of Senior Corps Volunteer Service Activities.

Posted Feb03,2002

Submitted by Cyrilla , Founder/President, Missouri

Response to original hot topic (Minnesota):

We are also a not for profit organization who sole depends on volunteers. I personally wonder what he would do if he was the founder of a not for profit??????? When people like him sit in their big houses, have maids, waiters, etc. do everything for them but "the bathroom things" they have NO idea what it is like out here trying to get volunteers now days and even to keep them long enough to recognize them on volunteers week each year. It is a sad, sad day when people like him think places like yours isn't worth funding. It sounds also fishy at the timing of it also! We feel sorry for you to have to have a Governor like that.

Posted Feb03,2002

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, United Nations Volunteers, Germany

Local, state and national government absolutely have a role to play in supporting volunteering. But not to promote volunteers as free labor ("hey, let's cut government programs and just leave it to volunteers!") No, volunteers represent community investment and involvement. They represent citizen action and endorsement. Without volunteers, I believe its difficult for any community-serving program, NGO or government-run, to express truthful credibility. Government should be actively encouraging and supporting volunteer involvement in local, state and, YES, national government organizations, as well as within nonprofit organizations. They should be providing funding for volunteer support and management, passing legislation that encourages and supports volunteers, and looking to organizations that involve volunteers -- rather than lobbyists -- for guidance on a variety of domestic issues. Government should NOT be launching yet another volunteerism drive. Shame on Jesse Ventura, a! nd shame on George Bush, for using the issue of volunteerism strictly to further their own political causes. The number of people who volunteer for nonprofit organizations probably far exceeds the number of people in any one political party -- I hope these people start exercising their political will on the issue of volunteerism!

Posted Feb01,2002

***Submitted by Susan Ross, Coordinator of Volunteer Services,
City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks, Boulder, Colorado USA***

Response to addition to hot topic (Freedom Corps):

I suggest we all sign up to be on a local "Council" and then ask them the hard questions from inside! It will be interesting to see if they will consider being a professional volunteer manager as suitable qualification for serving!! I plan on finding out.

Posted Feb01,2002

Submitted by Susan Camp, Student, School of Public Administration, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Response to addition to hot topic (Freedom Corps):

Kudos, Susan, to you and the other respondents! I totally agree with you. As I watched the President's State of the Union address and he announced the new Freedom Corps, my first thought was, what's wrong with what we already have? I also thought his call for 4000+ hours of volunteer time from every citizen over their lifetimes was interesting. Who is doing the data collecting? So far, not the government!! I agree that the government has a role in supporting volunteering, but creating new organizations at the drop of a hat for political gain is not that role. I agree with what you said in your Hot Topic and previous articles concerning the role of government in data collection, research, funding and support. In fact I quoted your information in my very first paper as a grad student. Do you think this will be the topic that pulls everyone together so our voice WILL BE HEARD in Washington?

Posted Feb01,2002

Submitted by Marlisa Mizerak, Volunteer Coordinator, Eagle County Health and Human Services, Eagle, CO

Response to addition to hot topic (Freedom Corps):

Thank you for your articulate posting about the new Freedom Corp. My office-mate, who runs our RSVP program, and I have been sitting in our corner of the world wondering about these exact same things.

We really feel like no one in the Administration cares about what professionals, who deal with these issues every day, think about this. And I feel like it is using current patriotic sentiment to gain points in opinion polls. Sort of a "wag the dog" thing.

On the bright side, we had one call from someone who was inspired by the President's speech to start volunteering.

Again, thanks for saying what many of us are thinking, but couldn't put into words!

Posted Feb01,2002

Submitted by Jackie Norris, Executive Director, Metro Volunteers!, Denver CO

Response to addition to hot topic (Freedom Corps):

Thanks, Susan....we at the volunteer centers are extremely concerned about the huge omission of volunteer centers as a local resource. It comes at a time when we have been working with and through Points of Light to obtain funding for local volunteers to be a key connection and resource for all this new activity from the White House (even before the State of the Union speech) around increased volunteerism...and expansion of Americorps. There've been many many hot emails flying back and forth over the past 36 hours.

As volunteer centers, we expect POLF to be our national voice, especially considering that they have ongoing relationships with the people making these decisions, such as Andy Card, White House Chief of Staff, who used to be on the POLF board of directors. Where was POLF in this planning process? Once again, they--and we--were left out. And we at the local level have been let down."

My "large volunteer center" affinity group (to whom I forwarded your email) is outraged about this. I think there will be some major follow-up and fallout from this typical and obvious lack of planning with the volunteer community... Just when we think we might be making progress, we go backwards!

I went to the Freedom Corps website and signed up to be in the "Citizen Corps" just to see what I would get (a welcome message), and to be on the communication list to see what they're putting out. I think some of it is a little scary ("TIPS"....terrorist information and prevention service? spying on our neighbors?) Your 1-800 experience just confirms how little they understand about what this kind of effort really takes.

However, at least from the volunteer center angle, I think we have a strong group of smart people who are not going to let this go until we've made our voices heard, and something gives....I'll keep you

posted on our activities.

Posted Feb01,2002

Submitted by Sandy Duncan, DVS, Cabell Huntington Hospital, Huntington, WV

Response to addition to hot topic (Freedom Corps):

This morning on the way to work, my husband and I were discussing this very issue. I asked, "What about the volunteer organizations that already exist? This could do us more harm than good." One problem that we have in this community is that there are so many new/short-lived volunteer organizations popping up all the time, that people almost resent being asked to volunteer.

But the most troublesome aspect of this whole thing is item #4! I am sure that the President's intent is honorable, but you cannot just create an organization, wind it up, and let it go! We have some of the most knowledgeable people in the Volunteer Biz contributing to this list, and if THEY were not consulted on this, who was?

Susan, can you coordinate "write to the White House" initiative to which we can contribute in an organized manner?

Note form Susan: We have notified the White House that this discussion is going on and will continue to publicize it to anyone who will pay attention!

Posted Feb01,2002

Submitted by Bonnie Esposito, Former Director, Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services, Minnesota, USA

Response to original hot topic (Minnesota):

Just a quick note since I'm off on vacation in a couple minutes. I DO believe there is a role for government in the support of volunteer efforts and citizen initiatives. Despite the recent attack by our Governor, Minnesota has a strong history of supporting volunteerism not only in the private sector but through state and local government as well. The outrage to our closing has been overwhelming, and in the last few days every major newspaper, TV and radio station has interviewed me. I believe there is a will in the community to involve government as a partner in promoting and supporting citizens as volunteers. It's just a shame that one shortsighted elected official has the power to make such a drastic change in our state.

Sign up for our Newsletter

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

