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Shaping Public Opinion: Volunteering, Government, and News Reports

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2004

There must have been something in the air last month because the intersection between government and volunteers made the news in all sorts of ways during April, and in different countries, too. The news stories were not related to National Volunteer Week, which (as always) created nary a blip on the media radar screen. Each article in itself could be discussed and dissected in positive and negative ways by volunteer program managers. That's not what I want to do here. Instead, I'd like to step back and think about what members of the general public might think after reading these sorts of stories.

A Sampling of the News Stories

The "Breaking News" item on the Energize homepage for the week of April 11th ([/hot-topics-and-news](#)) concerned a recent California state labor ruling requiring anyone who does any work on a watershed restoration project to be paid. What started as a legitimate attempt to stop contractors from avoiding the costs of expensive labor has become a blanket restriction against any involvement of volunteers in an arena with decades of volunteer participation history.

On the other side of the world, *The New Zealand Herald* ran the following story on 8 April:

Red tape halts volunteer taxi

Bureaucracy is driving a Whangarei volunteer transport service for the disabled off the road.

Northland Parafed Trust president Ian Irvine said Whangarei Parafed had been operating for 29 years but would finish tomorrow because of new regulations and compliance costs.

To carry on, the 11 volunteer drivers would have needed special licences, medical tests, first aid certificates and personal liability insurance.

"I'm not expecting that of our guys. As volunteers it's just unfair to ask."

Whangarei Parafed ran seven days a week, 365 days a year and never had a serious accident. ¹

An amazingly similar story made the KCRG-TV9 news in Iowa City, Iowa (19 April) about screening requirements for Veterans Administration volunteer drivers. ²

A different volunteer incident made the news in the *Sun-Sentinel* in Broward County, Florida (3 April):

Lauderdale volunteer program questioned

The interim city manager, who touts "business as unusual," is advocating an "executive volunteer" squad that would include people like himself, who would "work" in City Hall for free and be able to dodge Government in the Sunshine laws. In internal e-mails obtained by the South Florida Sun-Sentinel under open records law, Silva proposed the executive volunteer idea as a way to take advantage of business, budget and other expertise in the community, without sticking to the rigid open government laws that keep discussions of advisory groups open to the public. ³ ([read full article...](#))

This time, a possibly creative idea for citizen engagement is caught in the middle of a political power struggle. Volunteers should never be exploited for the political ends of an official nor to circumvent government rules. But, on the other hand, if a government leader is able to engage the help of qualified volunteers to serve the municipality, is there a problem we can't see?

This theme is echoed in the following two news stories, also written in April. The *Laurel Leader* ran a local story about its Maryland town. In this case, deploying volunteers to give parking tickets is seen as a plus by the police department, the storekeepers, the shoppers, and the volunteers – though later in the article there is some griping about the parking regulations themselves.

Volunteer parking ticketers draw praises, criticism

If you have exceeded the two-hour parking limit on Main Street in recent years, you may have noticed that the city was lax in enforcing the restriction.

Not anymore.

If you have exceeded the two-hour limit during the last few months, chances are you got a \$25 parking citation, thanks to a group of volunteers for the Laurel Police Department who have been authorized to write tickets.

"We're having fun," said Pat Walsh, owner of the Something Special coffee shop at 504 Main St. and a founding member of the Laurel Citizens' Police Academy Alumni Association. "You get a feeling of truly helping." ⁴ ([read full article...](#))

On April 23rd, politicians in Malaysia questioned community service mandates in their country, in *The Star Online*:

Reps 'feeling the burden of NS community service'

An Assemblyman questioned the effectiveness of some of the national service (NS) programmes, particularly community service, and asked the state to give its feedback to the Federal Government.

Philip Lasimbang (BN –Moyog) said elected representatives were feeling the burden when they have to allocate funds for *gotong-royong* projects such as the building of houses in villages only to have inexperienced NS trainees come and "bang a few nails."

"Some of these trainees have never even held a hammer before, so how do you expect them to work?" Lasimbang asked in his debate on the Yang di-Pertua Negeri's speech at the opening of the state assembly sitting on Tuesday.

He said certain facilities have become inaccessible to the public as they were being used by NS trainees and officials.

"For example, some athletes who are preparing for Sukma have been denied training facilities because part of the Likas Sports Complex is occupied by NS trainees," Lasimbang said.

He said feedback from the state would enable future NS programmes to be carried out more effectively. ⁵

This seems to be the eternal debate over mandates, qualifications, and mission. Is the goal to serve the public or to give NS trainees something to do? One of the elements here is also the differences and similarities between “community service” and “volunteering,” an issue highlighted in this April 15th *New York Times* article:

In Public Housing, It's Work, Volunteer or Leave

For Shaleema Malave, a resident of the Lillian Wald Houses on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the letter arrived unexpectedly about two weeks ago, and it read like a kind of draft notice.

To keep her public housing apartment, the one-page letter from the New York City Housing Authority said, Ms. Malave, a stay-at-home mother of four boys under the age of 18, would have to perform 96 hours of unpaid community service over the next 12 months. Volunteering for the Police Department would do, the letter suggested. So, too, would Habitat for Humanity, or a library, or the Parks Department.

"I'm not free to be a mother?" asked Ms. Malave, 42, as she sat with her husband and sons. "We're not breaking the law."

Starting next month, New York City will be the latest city to begin enforcing federal legislation enacted six years ago that requires all public housing residents who are not working full time, studying, disabled or over the age of 62 to perform community service every year. ⁶ ([read full article...](#))

This story hits readers on various levels: Is some required community service fair recompense for publicly-supported housing? Should people in public housing be given less right to choose to volunteer or not than other citizens? Is this a huge fuss over 96 hours a year (less than 2 a week)?

Conversely, some government entities don't even value volunteering genuinely offered as good citizenship, such as the school board in Mapletown, Pennsylvania, whose April public meeting was covered by the local newspaper, the *Observer-Reporter*:

Board asks volunteer to "back off" study

MAPLETOWN - Southeastern Greene School Board asked a resident who is preparing a transportation study for the district to halt his work after parents unaware of the project called the school to report a driver following school buses.

The board earlier granted permission for Joe Zalar to conduct a study of bus routes in an attempt to save the district money. Zalar volunteered to do the study at no cost to the district.

Board members said Thursday that Zalar was asked to halt his work after parents and bus drivers, who saw Zalar following buses in his car, called the school to report what they believed was suspicious activity.

"Parents called and said their kids were afraid," said board member Jeff Duranko. The board last Thursday asked Zalar to halt his project, he said. [section deleted]

One district resident, Tom Fox, complained to the board about Zalar's treatment, saying Zalar had volunteered to help the district but had received no cooperation and was even threatened by a board member. ⁷([read full article...](#))

I wonder whether the reporter – or most of the citizens of Mapletown – also realize that the school board members themselves are volunteers?

What Message Does the Public Receive?

None of these news stories is all that special alone and few people would have seen all of them in one month as I did. But I think we in the volunteer field have to pay attention to the effect of the mixed messages government sends to the public about volunteering, particularly through the news media.

The average citizen has no context within which to understand most of these stories and so take their cues from the reporter in each case. So if the issues are presented simplistically (or not at all), or if volunteers or employees are slightly ridiculed, how does a reader know that there's more to know? To me, the key issue is whether or not the cumulative effect of a stream of news stories like these (even if over a longer period of time) ends up flavoring the reaction of people to things like agency recruitment messages.

What do you think the answers might be to questions like these:

- Do mixed message news stories work against our recruitment messages to “become a volunteer”?

- Is volunteering understood (and valued) as an expression of good citizenship or not?
- Does the public think of *community service* and *volunteering* as synonyms? How closely connected is the term community service to alternative sentencing of law breakers?
- What is the general perception of how volunteers are treated once they take the step of offering their services?

References:

Because news stories online often disappear after a few weeks, we have posted the full text of the longer articles here on our site. They are linked from each excerpt within the Hot Topic above.

¹*New Zealand Herald*, 8 April 2004. Online at <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/storydisplay.cfm?storyID=3559308&thesection=news&thesubsection=general>

²KCRG-TV9 News, Iowa City, Iowa, 19 April 2004, online at: http://www.kcrg.com/article.aspx?art_id=80664&cat_id=123

³*Sun-Sentinel*, Broward County, Florida , 3 April 2004 . Found online at: <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/local/broward/sfl-48fteprogram,0,484546...> (no longer posted)

⁴ *Laurel Leader*, Maryland, April (day unknown) 2004. Found online at: http://news.mywebpal.com/news_tool_v2.cfm?pnPID=810&NewsID=539567&CategoryID=5845&show=localnews&om=1 (no longer posted)

⁵Star Publications, Malaysia, 23 April 2004. Online at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2004/4/23/nation/7829691&sec=nation>

⁶*The New York Times*, 15 April 2004. Online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/15/nyregion/15HOUS.html?ei=5062&en=1fcac66dcdffb83c&ex=1082606400&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1082486999-w9G6h4dp62hB4bEusXRTEw>

⁷*Observer-Reporter*, Mapletown, Pennsylvania, April (day unknown) 2004. Found online at: <http://www.observer-reporter.com/280350795890528.bsp> (no longer posted)

Related Topics: [Mandated Service](#) | [Government Relations/Codes](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Legislation](#)

Late breaking update! 26 May 2004, from Susan Ellis

Guess what? California legislators are reconsidering their 2001 law restricting volunteers and paid laborers from working together on public projects. CA Assembly Bill 2690. Assemblywoman (Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley), brought at least a dozen environmental and labor groups together to hash out the compromise that produced the bill which would be retroactive to Jan. 1, 2002. Read a local newspaper account. AB 2690 will move to the state Senate Labor Committee if it passes the Assembly. The bill must also win full Senate approval and the governor's signature.

Submitted on 20 May 2004 by Judie Ashley, Director, Resource Development, The Center for Head Injury Services, St. Louis, MO USA I recently read in the St. Louis Business Journal a story about volunteers. It raised the hairs on my neck. They boasted about having or needing at least 3000 volunteers to run the SPGA Golf Tournament here in July. What angered me is they charge the volunteer \$125.00 to be a volunteer. That includes free parking a lunch and a shirt. My question is why do they call them volunteers?

I guess I'm just letting off steam. I place a different value on our volunteers. They do not pay us to volunteer.

Should a 1099 form be given to each person paying to volunteer? After I did the addition I was floored even more.

Submitted on 20 May 2004 by Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteers, Lutheran Social Services, New York State, USA

Maybe I've become mean and nasty in my old age, but I no longer do someone else's job for them. The judge will have to find another way to punish someone other than punishing me in the process. I don't want to chase anyone, get nasty phone calls from someone who has to get in so many hours by a certain time (usually within the next couple of days). I am not interested in surly teenagers who are only putting in their time (and, whose mother has usually made the first call).

I have volunteers, both young and old, who really want to be here. Young people have a variety of reasons that they have to put in so many hours of volunteer service, but on initial contact, I let them convince me that they are motivated and interested in helping out. The volunteers that are devoting so much of themselves to our facility deserve a manager who is willing to take the time to train and supervise them. Our agency doesn't hire everyone who walks in the door. I treat my volunteers the same way. They are the best. They are dedicated and sincere. They know their job is important and needed, and their work is valued. My commitment is to the residents and the agency, not to the court or school system.

Submitted on 11 May 2004 by Dave Gynn, Volunteer Coordinator - Coleman Professional Services, Kent, Ohio

When a local restaurant closed without warning, trash remained and became a concern to nearby businesses. Legal red tape would have taken months and thousands of dollars to locate the out-of-

state owner and force a clean up. A small band of volunteers swooped in with gloves, shovels and a truck. Within 15 minutes, all the trash was gone. I say hurrah for volunteers!!!

Submitted on 7 May 2004 by Hillary Roberts, Pres., Project Linus NJ Inc., USA

Whether youth volunteers are "encouraged" or self motivated, they should be welcomed into the nonprofit sector.

Speaking for our agency, I'd rather take a chance on mandatory requirements. To interview that potential volunteer, assess their availability of time, areas of expertise is part of the energy. I fear what message it sends when we discourage participation. At twelve years of age I was grateful for the opportunity to serve my local community and learned a great deal from leadership.

Further, the nonprofit sector is viewed by the public based on how WE as participants behave. As frustrating as media coverage and public perception may be, why does the sector settle for less?

We shouldn't blame the powers that be....unified goals and definable directives can come from each of us. Wouldn't you agree that the excitement for volunteerism lies in being a part of the next evolution?

Submitted on 7 April 2004 by Sonya Watson, Winnipeg Child and Family Services, Manitoba, Canada

We have post secondary students in education and social services requiring volunteer credit-hours. The initial interview informs us whether they're volunteering 'to the hours' or not. Placements unfold accordingly i.e. short-term tutoring or task orientation vs. longer-term relationship-building. Many students remain to support youth far beyond the hours and it would be a real loss if we weren't open to this type of volunteer. I'm happy to verify their volunteer hours and provide references as part of the exchange relationship. However, mandated volunteer hours across the board at the high school level is not advisable in my opinion. I guess volunteers' maturity and conscious career decisions come into play here.

Submitted on 6 April 2004 by Merle Walker, Lake Metroparks, Ohio USA

Let's face it with any articles written by the media there can be confusion. Am I a volunteer director, manager or coordinator? Are volunteers paid or unpaid? Is my organization a private or public agency? If you get my drift this is all confusing. Volunteering is big business. Unlike the 50's and 60's, we now have "business volunteerism," "serve and learn," and yes, "mandated volunteering."

Like anything else, if you don't define who or what you are, others will and you may find yourself out of business as you once knew it.

Mandated "community service" comes to my office in the form of school, church, court, health agencies, civic groups, and youth groups, all looking to meet a requirement, all having a short term life expectancy with my agency and works well when all component parts are in place.

Being able to educate those that impact our volunteer program is key to the success of such mandated services. Communicating with social workers, probation officers, judges, counselors,

government officials etc. can help alleviate the mixed messages. Volunteerism is about forming relations in the community. Not to debate mandated volunteerism, I realize that mandated volunteering doesn't seem to be going away. So as a volunteer manager I prefer to be the one that directs the way it will be utilized toward the mission of my agency. Whether people call it community service or volunteering I had better be clear.

Submitted On 5May2004 by Carole Maddox, Public Relations Director, ECHO, Florida, USA

The majority of volunteers at our organization are committed to our mission and their volunteer efforts double and even triple our ability to provide free services and seeds to the hungry around the world.

However, when high school and college students seek to volunteer to fulfill "community service" hours requirements, our experience has been less than positive. For the most part they have proven unreliable in attendance, interested only in putting in their hours, and require too much training by staff for the return we get in service. Whoever started this had good intentions, but for us, it just doesn't work.

Submitted on 5May2004 by Linda Graff, President and Senior Associate, Linda Graff and Assoc., Inc., Dundas, Ontario. Canada.

A year ago my home town newspaper carried this headline: "Students warned to volunteer - or miss graduation" Almost 2000 students in a neighbouring region had not completed their 40 hours of mandatory community service and without doing the service they would not graduate.

Mandatory service of any sort is not volunteering but is often called that as the above headline proves. What message are we conveying about volunteering? When we offer the option of volunteering or jail time to an offender are we not saying, "Which punishment would you like to choose today?"

Governments worldwide are seizing volunteering and using it to meet political, social and economic ends. They most often do so without understanding volunteering, without understanding the implications of their programs, and without consulting those who really know about volunteering. For example, what bright spark in government decided 40 hours of mandatory service was a good idea for high school students? The work is supposed to be "meaningful". By the time the student is interviewed, screened (however much might be necessary for the setting), oriented, trained and placed, how much of the 40 hours is left to do something meaningful? IN the interim the organization bears the expense of all of the front end work to get the student involved, and the overworked manager of volunteers has to do all of the paper work for the education system ... with no compensation.

Governments are tinkering with the DNA of volunteerism, slowly but surely altering it and turning it to meet political ends. The public notion of what volunteering is and can be shifts, as Susan says. "Our" team members are rarely at the decision making table when the programs are designed. Many

of our national and provincial/state volunteering organizations and peak bodies receive so much funding from governments, sometimes in the form of fees to deliver the very programs that have the potential to do harm to volunteering, that their capacity to advocate for the movement is compromised. Is anyone minding the store?

Submitted on 5May2004 by Rosalie White, Field & Education Services Manager, Connecticut, USA

You wrote an interesting column, as usual. My organization (ARRL), the national organization for Amateur Radio operators, regularly posts Web stories about volunteer work; some of the volunteers are written about by news reporters or thanked by government. Many of these stories are about Amateur Radio emergency communications, i.e., Illinois Amateurs doing tornado recovery efforts (at <http://www.arrl.org/news/stories/2004/04/22/1/?nc=1>), who were thanked by the National Weather Service, Chicago. Or Oklahoma Amateur Radio operators (at http://www.arrl.org/news_list_off=30) handling storm-related emergency communications, which was reported in the The Daily Ardmoreite. So telling your story *does* work, and we have a senior news editor who makes it happen. - Rosalie White (Amateur Radio call sign K1STO), ARRL

Submitted on 5May2004 by Candace Stewart, Volunteer Coordinator, Long Term Care Ombudsman Program of Ventura County, CA USA

As far as our volunteer program is concerned, we are in a "pick up the slack" period. The Licensing Agencies that license and evaluate the skilled nursing and assisted living facilities in our state are being drastically cut by budget woes -- they are not even meeting their own mandates to visit annually and respond to complaints. That leaves our volunteers with added responsibility - that they willingly take on because they are so special and care so much.

Instead of "Community Service" which does connote someone ducking out of time served for doing something wrong, we should use "Service to the Community", which connotes giving back.

Submitted on 3May2004 by Marjorie Moore, Volunteer Development Coordinator, Radio Information Service, Illinois, USA

"Volunteering: Not just for hardened criminal's on parole anymore!" I think of this "Failed Slogan for Volunteer Programs" every time I read about community service requirements. I think that it is dangerous to the perception of volunteering anytime someone is required to do so in order to live in certain place, graduate, or stay out of prison. I think that gives people the perception that volunteering is something for the under skilled to do because they can't do anything else.

Articles like these discourage people from what I call creative volunteering, or using their specific skills to help an organization. You'll notice that the people being punished like the man who was studying bus lines or the people driving the handicapped, were doing out of the ordinary volunteer activities. They were not stuffing mailings, handing out programs, or some other activity that is traditionally a volunteer role. They thought about what they could do, what would mean something to them and the people they wanted to help and did that. By doing that, they got themselves caught in

political agendas. Politicians like to say "Yes! We need volunteering!" and turn around and say "No! Not that!" Its no wonder people get mixed messages about what it means to volunteer.

To really volunteer... to really find the true meaning of volunteering, people have to be motivated from within themselves and find something that really means something to them. That's what volunteering really is.

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