

[News and Hot Topics](#) » [How Volunteer Action in 2018 Can Focus Us for 2019](#)

# How Volunteer Action in 2018 Can Focus Us for 2019

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January  
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As regular visitors to this Energize Web site know, I've been missing in action professionally almost all of 2018 since my sixth year of cancer treatment brought me new tiny paths to navigate off the main highway of health. But I have navigated those paths successfully and am very happy to be facing the new year with new treatments to pursue. Hope and very good friends make a world of difference! Thanks to all for your strong support - especially my fantastic Energize team.

With 2019 beginning, my staff wanted me to write about prospects ahead for our volunteer management field. Yet, as I sit at the computer, my mind keeps looking backward before considering the mysteries of the months to come. So, I hope this Hot Topic gives you, too, a chance to look back and ahead.

## Volunteers Had Impact in the Past Year

2018 was a pretty horrible year in many ways (as I watched via television while recuperating and regaining strength). No matter your political persuasion, the U.S. Trump presidency has been disruptive. Public and global policy is experiencing upheaval. The lawsuits and sentences march on. At the same time, the Middle East has been realigning in new political ways, with continued violence. Plus, what have Russia, North Korea, and China been planning? Not to mention the turmoil in the United Kingdom around leaving the European Union and the current cost-of-living protests in France.

The weather around the world has been dramatically destructive: hurricanes, volcanoes, huge forest fires, and other natural disasters have been deadly, destroying homes and whole towns, and depleting resources of all kinds.

I'm sure each of you can revise and add to the "short" list of problems above, but very few people will create an equally long list of internationally good things. Except for *leaders of volunteers*! Why? Because *volunteers* were so visible (if not necessarily thanked) for the thousands of actions they took in response to the needs that arose. Here are just a few examples:

- No matter where in the world, each natural disaster left thousands of people in deep trouble, first trying to survive the immediate effects but then attempting to rebuild their lives. Yes, paid emergency workers were all on duty and worked endless hours. Added to these forces came numerous other trained workers to join in the battle, some paid but many donating their time. Meanwhile, thousands of other *volunteers*, whether they were unharmed neighbors or people who traveled to help on site, arrived to go through destroyed areas to search for missing people and dead bodies, bring victims to shelters, make and serve meals, collect clothes and other needed items, and more. In some areas, the paid workers have moved on, but volunteers have kept going because many of the problems need long-term help.
- It was also quite a year for citizen advocacy. I can't remember as many huge marches and handmade posters since the 1970 anti-Vietnam protests in the United States. In 2018, the causes ranged from #MeToo protests against rich and powerful men sexually abusing or harassing women, to anti- and pro-Trump campaigns, to American voter-registration campaigns in efforts to affect the politics of newly-elected officials, to disturbing racial and ethnic hate protests. Whatever your personal beliefs, never lose sight of the fact that such events are organized by and attended by *volunteers*. Sure, there may be a few paid managers, but such large gatherings cannot occur without many people who organize them, promote them, serve as peace/security workers, and show up to carry the signs and show affiliation. Political protesting has also been organized in many countries, also through volunteer advocates.
- I'm not sure about other parts of the world, but in the United States at Christmas time, it is impossible to avoid television/radio/Internet sources without seeing ads bought by large nonprofit organizations to ask for financial contributions. Absolutely, these groups are vital and do need money, but most of them also have and need more competent and committed *volunteers* whose efforts provide services beyond the things money can do alone. The organizations rarely thank or try to recruit new volunteers in their "we need contributors" appeals (even if volunteers are the people staffing fundraising activities!).

This section could have many other international events listed. By all means, use the *Comments* area below to add more and also to report on (and applaud) the wonderful things volunteers have done for your cause in 2018.

## What about 2019?

Although I cannot predict the future, I still can promise that great, good, disturbing, and horrible things are going to happen. Let's hope for more of the first two. Regardless of what's good or bad, I

predict with solid certainty that volunteers are going to be part of all of them. What does that mean for those of us who encourage and lead volunteering?

First, it means that we need to be involved in making past and current volunteering visible and welcomed – including both those people whom you recruit and manage, as well as other people who help your organization. Are the members of your board of directors paid? If not, they are *volunteers*. What about the people who run your fundraising campaigns? More *volunteers*? Are there any unpaid consultants, advisory board members, student interns, and others who are never really publicly thanked or invited to continue to *volunteer*? Make sure they are all appreciated – which should give you the determination to draft possible recognition press releases for your organization to use in all sorts of public outreach.



One idea for making past volunteering visible (which I first proposed in [a 2000 Hot Topic](#) in advance of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) run by the United Nations in 2001) is to encourage everyone to begin honoring the role that volunteers played in starting, running, and then assisting their own organizations. See the *Look Back to Look Ahead* project steps at “[Steps for Sharing Your Volunteerism History](#).” If you do any of this, please let us know! The concept can also be used by associations of volunteer service managers and/or volunteer centers for their own communities.

Next, pay attention to public actions that in some way support your cause. Should you mobilize your organization’s *volunteers* to write letters/texts to legislators on their opinions? Attend a community meeting on the protest, armed with questions to ask? Participate in a rally or a protest march? Send thank-you notes to politicians and funders who did the right thing? Why not? Your employees may not be permitted to take such actions, but volunteers are private citizens and voters with the right to express their support of issues.

Finally, work hard to build and improve your local association of volunteer service managers and volunteer center. Unless we work together, we cannot have visibility or power. Do not wait for some national or local organization to take the lead here. They will do what their funders want. What do *you* and your local colleagues need? And are you all willing be *volunteers* yourselves to get it done?

Much of what happens in 2019 will not be caused by us. But we can and do react, even if that means doing nothing. What will you do as a leader of volunteers? How can you help them to be as effective as possible, both in their work for your organization and also as outside agents of your cause?

Happy New Year!

- *What demonstrations of volunteer power did you see in 2018 and what do you predict for 2019?*
- *What would you like to do in 2019 to build our profession?*

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on January 5th, 2019*

*Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.*

A funding appeal that credits volunteers for achievements for which funding is sought from the general public may be counterproductive. It's one thing to say that dinner costs \$1.50; you can ask for \$15 for 10 dinners, but how do you credibly beg for money for what's free?

Money is fungible; volunteers are not. I'd keep the appeals separate. The positive responders will largely be separate.

As a volunteer, I tend to resent recognition. If you're responsible for overseeing my work, I want feedback with specifics, but I don't want a certificate or a victory party invitation. Moral: Ask first. If you like my work, the best thing you can do for me is to use more of it, and only insofar as it's useful. Hypocrisy is cheap and common (it's "awesome" you came, etc.). But go ahead and tell the world of what the organization accomplished, including the part that relied on my work. And where disclosure is required then disclose. I wrote a 90+-page manual for sale by a nonprofit and researched, wrote, edited, designed, and reproduced almost all of it; some other people helped, but in the list of contributors I put my name last. The manual was a success.

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*Submitted on January 7th, 2019*

*Susan Ellis, President, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Thanks for your thoughtful response, Nick. Everything you say is reasonable, but not totally accurate. Too many organizations do not even keep records that are compared between who gives money and who gives time and who gives BOTH. The integrated numbers are actually pretty amazing, especially if you look at family members who volunteer where the "patriarch" gives a large check. My major point, however, is the usual total lack of mention of the truly thousands of hours volunteers provide to many organizations doing very specialized and not just "helpful" work. The audience for this Web site is mainly leaders of volunteer services and I want them to urge more visibility of how money, time, contacts, and actual things ALL contribute to the accomplishments of the organization. They don't have to do this all the time, but even a few times a year would be nice. Don't "resent" recognition -- I agree with you that parties and awards only work for some people, but true appreciation for something accomplished without a paycheck in return seems valid and very nice. Keep volunteering -- and thank you!

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*Submitted on January 7th, 2019*

*Carla Lehn , Consultant , The Lehn Group , Sacramento California , USA*

Motivating and inspirational topic, Susan. Great to have you and your voice available to us again. All the best to you in this new year.

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*Submitted on January 9th, 2019*

*Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.*

Seeing the overlap may well be eye-opening, I believe you, but not only do organizations I've known not compare, they have almost no record of volunteer work done and by whom. Rosters and mastheads are usually limited to paid people. Rarely, I'll see a category for volunteers, but not showing their responsibilities, because responsibilities are acknowledged only for paid people. I've been highly valued and trusted by people I directly worked for while their lateral colleagues had little idea what I did; had they known, their resentment of me would have skyrocketed, and did when word got out, including among volunteer board members (who see other people's work as competition), so I monitored group dynamics and kept my profile down.

The overlap plays out in another way: among the volunteers most valued by paid people are those viewed as potential donors, who are then encouraged to donate funds and discouraged from volunteering (one tactic being to deliberately make the office look too chaotic for people who are successful businesspeople so they'll be only donors). Volunteers who are relatives of key people (e.g., big donors and CEOs) are treated with kid gloves; when others are not welcomed, the donors' families seem superproportionate. I remember a task set aside for a CEO's mother so she'd have something to do, whereas I thought we'd always find things to do.

My resentment has especially to do with civil rights organizations where I'm not a natural constituent. Private words are fine; they're often specific and informative. But positing me as a model when I'm advantaged by birth works against the very people I'm hoping my work will strengthen, undermining the whole reason for my volunteering. I'd rather honor someone who did what they could even if it was less than I did. On the other hand, being accused in a later book of a 1-year misdemeanor that no one committed or came close to committing is typical (and I don't think the author, a lawyer, believed his own written words), and I resent the accusations, too: volunteering can be much worse than thankless. You're right that leaders must tout achievements or lose credibility; for me, the balancing act is difficult.

Volunteer leaders, I argue, should have higher rank and should force other departments to do more than they could without volunteers, by using volunteers, and then recommend pay

raises for those department heads who accomplished more by using volunteered services, and for that they need specific data to persuade CEOs in executive employee reviews.

Correction of me: I asked how to beg for money for freebies, but I missed the point: one can describe volunteers serving the \$1.50 dinners and fundraise for the dinners, kitchen maintenance, etc., because the total budget is lower and the helpers are passionate. To reach potential donors who are less committed to the organization per se, the emphasis has to be on the enlarged fulfillment and higher aspirations, the labor cost-cutting being distantly secondary.

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*Submitted on January 25th, 2019*

*Shefali Trivedi, Executive Director, Giving DuPage, Wheaton, IL, US*

This posting was shared with us by Chris Linnell:

I've been a member of the Nonprofit Steering Committee of Giving DuPage for 15 years and thought the DuPage Interfaith Service Council would be perfect for the January Hot Topic. This new initiative described below by the Executive Director of Giving DuPage is so inspiring and hopeful! The feedback from the first meeting has been outstanding and my hope is 2019 will begin a new perspective on faith-based service!

"New for 2019 is the DuPage Interfaith Service Council inspired by Giving DuPage, the DuPage County Volunteer Center located in Wheaton, IL. Here's an excerpt from the invitations sent to faith-based colleges, houses of worship, and religious organizations involved with volunteer service in their communities.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE DUPAGE INTERFAITH SERVICE COUNCIL?

Houses of Worship have long since been the model for community volunteerism with best practices centered on service. What if we promoted greater collaboration between faith and service organizations? This council will explore this idea to create positive lasting change in our community.

#### WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THE MEETING?

All things flow from intention. Here's a few outlined goals for this first meeting:

- Meet & network with religious leaders across all faiths
- Learn about local community & volunteering resources
- Discuss the nexus of faith and service
- Identify opportunities for the faith community to provide service leadership
- Determine interest, purpose and direction for the council

The conversation from this initial meeting was insightful, enlightening, and yes, energizing! Next steps include a spring meeting at a local mosque with more dialogue to continue. Perhaps the most profound question of the meeting was: "What can we do together?"

Volunteer service recognized by a diverse and supportive council of faith-based organizations can unite together to explore what they can do...that's new for 2019! "

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*Submitted on January 31st, 2019*

*Nick Levinson, New York, N.Y., U.S.A.*

You touch on an interesting point: The organizations that tend to be more effective at using volunteers in the U.S. are all-volunteer organizations, nonprofits in which the CEOs are unambivalently in favor (almost none are), child-centered organizations (try telling a parent they can't see their precious one, so parents are welcomed but steered aside), and houses of worship (not including religiously-led 501(c)(4) organizations and the like, as they act like most nonprofits, limiting volunteers). The only reason that occurs to me for the houses of worship is that other houses of worship do it, and nonprofits tend to look to similar nonprofits for their models.

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*Submitted on January 30th, 2019*

*Gerald (Jerry) ..., presenter, consultant, blogger, independent contractor, NYC, New York, USA*

Susan, great to see you back in the saddle.

Yes, volunteers showed up during 2018 – to make a positive impact. I was impressed by the young people from Parkland High School and the #NeverAgain movement. Full disclosure, I participated in a NYC March For Our Lives event (outgrowth of Parkland youth). Full disclosure, I participated in the NYC Youth Over Guns march and rally. I was blown away by the young people (volunteers) who spoke at the end of the march. They shared personal stories of gun violence (gut wrenching) – here in NYC the speakers were primarily youth of color. The young speaker, who was barely tall enough to reach the microphone, moved and inspired me!

For 2019 I look forward to the grassroots movements and wish them success. They are sure to deal with fractions as previous movements did – the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Movement, the (then) Lesbian and Gay movement, etc. We have witnessed this with the third year of Womens Marches. May all these movements listen to concerns, learn, and thrive.

For the profession, I look to effective succession planning (local, state, and national professional associations). And the long running issue - making the profession appealing enough so our talented colleagues don't leave the profession for a more lucrative, appealing, and or rewarding job.

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*Submitted on February 1st, 2019*

Nick Levinson, New York, N.Y., U.S.A.

The factionalizing likely helped the movements you cited. In each movement, dividing hurt existing organizations and their fundraising but it attracted more support to a movement and led to enlarging the total base, strengthening leadership, heightening the visibility of evolving core issues, enriching fundraising, and opening more room for volunteers.

One way to keep volunteer leaders is to promote them within the hierarchy to do volunteer leadership with increased responsibility to selecting work to do and leading other departments to use volunteers.

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