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# The Choice of the Citizen: Pay Taxes, Do Without, or Volunteer

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I ended 2009 with a Hot Topic titled "[When the Ax Falls: Budget Cutting and Volunteers](#)." In the year since then we have all continued to deal with a disastrous world economy, out-of-control national debt, rampant unemployment, and governments everywhere forced to cut services. Apologies for beginning 2011 on a down note, but it's time to acknowledge some key ethical considerations – and contradictions – facing the volunteer community.

Consider this end-of-year news story out of California: "In Pleasantville, It's Volunteer versus Union," explained by Pete Peterson, Executive Director, Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine's School of Public Policy. In a nutshell, war has been declared between the various labor unions in the Petaluma school district and anyone trying to volunteer in the schools out of concern for student needs. "Caught between the volunteers and the union, district leadership is forced into an Orwellian role as referee – seeking to pacify [both], while important positions that could be taken by local residents remain unfilled because of the budget cuts."

Let's examine the principles that are at stake here because, although the rhetoric may be spiraling out of control in this California community, the situation will continue to present itself in many places. In the tug of war between paid-jobs-are-the-highest-good and taxpayers-have-the-right-to-volunteer, the leader of volunteer involvement is caught in the middle (and the one most likely to be torn apart).

## Business vs. Public Jobs

Paid jobs are central to individual survival and to maintaining a country's economy. No argument here. But there are important differences between for-profit, nonprofit, and public sector employment we cannot overlook: the source of revenue, who really controls spending, and consumer choice are critical factors in creating and keeping jobs.

The stakeholders in the business world are distinct groups of people. Employees do the work. Often represented by labor unions, they can agitate for better working conditions and higher pay. The company's owners (stockholders) and top managers can negotiate how income will be distributed. Customers of the business choose whether to buy its product or service, get by without it, or make it themselves. The company succeeds or fails based on how well it meets the needs of the market or convinces people to buy.

But this is not how government operates. It is understandable that public employees want job security and more money, but organized labor cannot apply the same job-protection tactics that work in business. They must accept a fundamental fact: no public service official has control over the amount of revenue available through taxes. It's *legislators* who levy taxes, decide what government services will be mandated, and appropriate funds. Further, government moves at a glacial pace. New legislation does not affect operations until months or even years after it is signed.

The "owners" of government are the taxpayers who have three options for managing government: they vote approval or disapproval of the legislators to whom they have delegated decision-making powers; they pay their taxes honestly; and they engage in active, participatory democracy. The latter can be done in many ways, one of which is choosing to volunteer to help deliver public services.

Taxpayers are also government's "customers" who ultimately decide how many public services they want to "buy." If the citizenship isn't willing to pay more taxes and is willing to live without or with less services, employees have to be laid off.

Ultimately, a for-profit business can go bankrupt and a government can default and close down. This ends all jobs in either setting.

## The Role of Volunteers in Public Services

"The business of business is business." The bottom line rules and individuals *make a profit*.

This is anathema to government. Leaving aside corruption or officials on the take, the purpose of government is to provide services *for the good of the community*. As both the owners and consumers of government, taxpayers have the right to act in the public sphere, beginning with voting for or against taxes to pay public employees. Reducing the size of the government payroll, however, does not change the need for services.

In some cases, for-profit companies or nonprofit agencies can fill the gap when government cannot – but only if there is a market of paying customers or available funders and donors. Or we learn to do without. Or...we take personal responsibility for making sure that critical obligations are met. Even if the ultimate goal is restoring funding and re-hiring, some citizens cannot sit back and wait, especially at the expense of children and people in real need. So taxpayer volunteers roll up their sleeves.

When a public labor union protests the work of volunteers it is elevating the demands of its workers – themselves taxpayers, it should be noted – above the rights of all citizens to give their time in service to their community. I realize that this is a simplistic distillation of many issues, but the ethical questions seem clear:

- Many government services are fundamental to maintaining the quality of daily life. Is it ever legitimate to effectively shut down government services to meet the demands of its employees at the expense of the governed?
- What is role of society when it comes to employment? Does everyone have a right to a job and does the citizenship have an obligation to make sure this happens?
- In the California story, labor officials openly state their opposition to *any* volunteering in the public schools even if motivated by helping children. When are ends more important than means? Whose needs take priority and who decides?
- If taxpayers are willing to give time and talent to ensure the delivery of critical government services – with the caveat that such citizens are capable of performing the work properly – how can they legitimately be barred from doing so?
- In the United States, the Fair Labor Standards Act is generally (mis)quoted in these sorts of situations. The FLSA was originally enacted in 1938 to apply only to for-profit business, largely to limit child labor and institute minimum wage and overtime pay levels. It has been amended no less than 47 times since<sup>1</sup>(including extended to apply to state and local government). Is it time for the volunteer community to challenge how the FLSA is being interpreted in terms of volunteer participation in *public sector* and *nonprofit* employment?
- When did holding a job with government become a right superseding the rights of taxpayers to step forward in an economic crisis? To whom are public employees accountable?

Peterson states it all succinctly at the end of his article:

*As local government budgets creak under the weight of the "new normal", we are beginning to see this "[falling] back" happening again throughout the country. For public sector union leaders the question will be: are you part of the solution, or part of the problem?*

I'm sure I've touched some nerves out there. So now it's your turn to share what you think –or are torn between.

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**Submitted on 15 January 2011 by Mary Quirk, MAVA, Project Manager, Maplewood, MN US**

The [Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administrations \(MAVA\)](#) recently did a survey on the status of volunteer programs in Minnesota. Although it does not address the ethical questions raised in this excellent article, it does provide related data. We were surprised to find that only 6% of respondents

reported that program staff in their organization indicated they perceive volunteers as a threat to their jobs. Further more, almost as many organizations (17%) reported that staff were taking on roles previously done by volunteers as the volunteers taking on roles previously done by staff (20%). Interesting to this article, one comment was a concern in a school of paid staff taking duties previously done by volunteers. However, for those organizations where staff were concerned over volunteers taking jobs, the concerns were complex and serious as indicated in this article. The findings that most volunteers only did parts of paid positions, or filled in temporarily, provides data to allay concerns that there is a one to one replacement of staff by volunteers. The fluidity the survey found between staff and volunteers roles support the importance that the questions raised in this article are addressed so that the fluidity between roles of staff and volunteers can accomplish the greatest good.

**Submitted on 12 January 2011 by Shane, Citizen and Student, USA**

This article is well written and somewhat persuasive, and I do agree that there is more of a need for unions in manufacturing and for-profit industries than for state workers. However, to place excessive blame on unions for the economic problems confronting our communities is a fallacy of logic that has existed in this country for a long time. Pitting the middle class tax payers in the community against the state-service-workers is not the answer. To pit "the social interest" vs. unions is yet another red herring. It just conveniently diverts attention from the real problem in the U.S.: individualistic greed on the part of those with the most responsibility to pay taxes. The central problem here is that the wealthiest 10% of the population hold over 80% of the nation's wealth; with the "middle class" paying over 90% of the taxes. That's why the gap between the rich and the poor is consistently growing. Look it up on your own; it's an unfortunate irony that will never be covered by the mainstream media.

**Susan replies:** Thank you for your response, which was a reaction only to the labor union part of my Hot Topic. I was not "blaming" unions – in fact, the theme of the essay is the role of the *citizen* who has to decide between paying taxes or figuring out another way to get the services needed. My point is actually independent from trying to solve the causes of our current crisis; the question I raise is how do we cope with meeting genuine needs that can't be put "on hold" while we wait to straighten out the financial mess? Sorry, but I feel that government paid jobs are not sacrosanct and that "public servants" can be employees or volunteers. It has to be a right of a taxpayer to step in and fill budget gaps when the need is great. I should note, too, that it's also activist volunteers who are working BOTH to cut taxes and to restore them. Democracy at work.

**Submitted on 11 January 2011 by Donna Phillips, Washington County Sheriff's Office, Volunteer and Intern Resource Coordinator, Hillsboro, Oregon USA**

I am a lifelong volunteer. I also manage volunteers in a law enforcement agency. We have about half as many volunteers as we do paid staff and we do not have an issue with our union. Our reserve officers ride beside our regular deputies – as partners that we could not afford to pay for otherwise. Our credentialed volunteers serve specific roles: medical staff and a psychiatrist on our SWAT and

hostage negotiation teams, a pilot along side our paid pilots for drug interdiction, two electronic surveillance monitors, and more.

Yet we will not replace paid staff, union or non-represented, with volunteers. First, it is unethical to deprive families of wage earners. Second, even more important, there is no way we could recruit enough qualified volunteers to replace, reliably and safely, the hundreds of highly trained staff it takes to serve our streets and jails. Honestly, people, just whom do you believe will volunteer a minimum of 160 hours per month to supervise criminals inside a jail? Whom do you think will be willing to daily go inside the vermin-infested homes of drug addicts, see the abused and neglected children of such homes, be first on the scene of horrific traffic accidents, or face an armed, mentally unstable person? Add to that the fact that our own agency employs the highest standards possible for staff performance and conduct. A total volunteer workforce – laughable.

**Submitted on 11 January 2011 by Edward Callahan, CVA, Philadelphia, PA**

It is great to see some discussion about this topic! I agree with some of what has been written here. Not ALL services provided by the government and conducted by public servants can be or should be provided by volunteers ALL of the time. It is important to note/remember that volunteerism isn't just about people doing something for free. Volunteerism is about seeing a need and individuals mobilizing to help fulfill that need, regardless of circumstance. Every citizen has a responsibility at one level or another to vote, lobby or become actively engaged in their community. I think the best quote to sum this up is: "Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in." --Marjorie Moore

With that said, we must also remember that volunteerism is about community and involvement. In communities where services are cut or underfunded we all have our part to play. Those of us who are professional volunteer managers must also remember that volunteerism is about motivation and results. If in any community a service is under funded or staffed and people are willing and able to help support it either short-term or long we must weigh the benefits versus the risk. This country was built by volunteers. Ambulance stations, hospitals, churches and other community organizations were started by groups of concerned citizens. It seems as though history must repeat itself if we are to continue to desire these types of services for us and our children.

**Submitted on 7 January 2011, Anonymously**

The idea that unions in this country are powerful is ridiculous. Unions have been systematically attacked by business and conservatives for decades. They are not powerful anymore, which is one reason why the gap between the rich and the poor is widening to an alarming rate. I don't agree with this particular union in the article, but unions are very necessary to keeping a viable middle class in this country. Volunteers are not going to be able to take over basic services in a reliable way. I would

not want my child being educated by volunteers. I would not want "volunteers" in charge of police matters or financial matters either. We have to pay some taxes. We can't get something for nothing.

**Submitted on 6 January 2011 by Wendy, Mount Holly, New Jersey**

What a timely article. However, in the questions you posed, you neglected to posit the basic one: what is the role of government in society? If you believe, as I do, that it is government's role to provide citizens with services such as fire and police protection and public education, then it stands to reason that these services should be adequately funded as well as staffed by professionals who are trained and fairly compensated to do the work. Apparently, however, this belief is no longer accepted by many tax payers, who want to keep "their" money rather than fund essential services that communities currently take for granted. When people and/or politicians with these beliefs de-fund the government so that it is no longer able to provide needed services, there are only 2 alternatives: to contract with private for-profit professionals, or to fill these positions with volunteers.

I am a life-long volunteer myself, and also a professional volunteer manager, and I believe that our citizens' enthusiasm for volunteerism is an essential part of what makes this country great. But I do NOT believe that volunteers should be used as stand-ins for public service sector professionals in order to let governments off the hook on providing citizens with critically important public services. And that's assuming that we would even be able to staff them adequately this way. I would suggest that given current trends, we will have only ourselves to blame if that volunteer snow plow operator decides not to show up the next time we get a major snow fall.

**Submitted on 6 January 2011 by Lauri Wettling, Volunteer Coordinator, Hospice, Columbus, OH**

Please. The unions dictating the use of volunteers. Where did they get the authority to do so? Or should I say who gave them that authority? Recruit eligible volunteers for whatever is needed and forget the unions. When funds are available jobs will be created and filled.

**Submitted on 5 January 2011, Anonymously**

When have we the people let the unions get so powerful that they prohibit people from volunteering when there is a need not being met because of budget cuts? I can't believe the people in these areas are letting the unions dictate what they can and can't do as a private individual. Are people still under the rule of Jimmy Hoffa? (my bosses will not like this!)

**Submitted on 5 January 2011 by Carol, Director, Volunteer Resources, Canada**

It is with fear I respond to this very hot topic. I think it is the responsibility of the government of both our great nations to provide at least the basics of education in a safe environment in all of our neighbourhoods. Extra assistance for students, general interest classes like astronomy, gardening, cooking, sports and arts - rather than be dropped entirely could be offered by (trained, screened, etc, etc, etc) passionate volunteers. My boys greatly benefitted by a local astronomer who talked about

space and the stars - these programs could be better than a teacher trying to teach multiples of topics. One of the sayings we have here in Canada (besides Eh) is Wayne Gretsky isn't qualified to teach hockey.

**Submitted on 3 January 2011 by Edward Callahan, CVA, Philadelphia, PA USA**

This was a great piece! Being a Philadelphian you may understand the same frustration I had recently over the fire stations being shut down to help save money. An EMT myself I am well aware of the large amount of people who are willing to volunteer for this type of service. It happens everyday throughout the suburban areas and if managed correctly I can see no reason why the City of Philadelphia could not do the same. A sort of auxiliary fire/ems service could also assist with city events and major disasters. There are endless possibilities. The problem however is the opposition from the union. It is sad to see that these forces are preventing individuals from being able to help when there is such a critical need. Just my two cents.

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