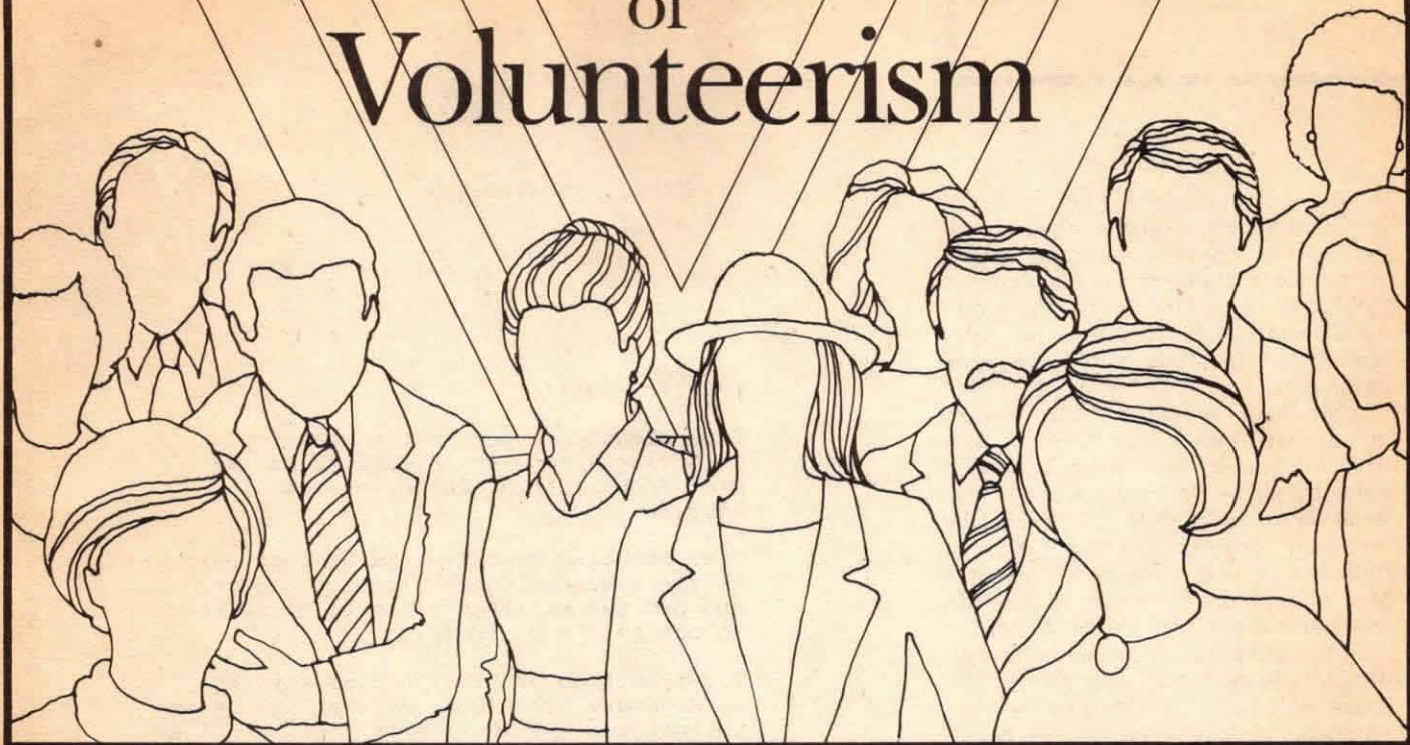


The Changing Face of Volunteerism



Their diversity and numbers differentiate them from their 1831 counterparts, but 1981's volunteers embrace finding local solutions to social issues.

by Denise Seizer

Ten years ago, the "typical" American volunteer was a married woman, between the ages of 25 and 45, with children in school. She was a high school graduate or even a college graduate from a middle-income family who did not have to work for pay because her husband's income supported the family. Her motives for being a volunteer were largely connected with "doing good."

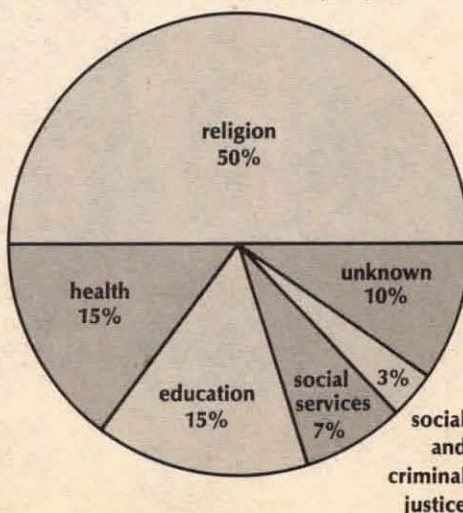
She was carrying on a long tradition in this country, as noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, based on his tour of the United States in 1831 and 1832. As have many later visitors, he observed and commented on the inclination of Americans to form committees to solve community problems. Although this early volunteerism was perhaps largely motivated by survival, the idea of contributing time and effort without pay was considered "doing good" even then.

Changing motives. Although altruism still remains a primary motivation behind the decision to do volunteer work, changes in values and lifestyles through the years have brought about corresponding changes in the reasons for volunteering.

Following President Kennedy's urging to "... ask what you can do for your country," it was fashionable to be a volunteer—and to be one in a grassroots community organization, not necessarily

backed by an institution. A government survey in 1965 found that the estimated value of volunteer activities in the United States amounted to an annual \$23 billion. At that time, 18 percent of American adults identified themselves as volunteers.

Volunteer Activity
(valued at \$70-80 billion per year)



The seventies, labeled the "me decade," brought doubts and concerns about the future of volunteerism. Yet, by 1974 the value of volunteer activities had nearly tripled—to an estimated value of \$68 billion—and by 1977, 27 percent

of American adults stated they were volunteers.

By this time it was recognized that the reasons for volunteering were changing. It was acceptable for American citizens to donate their time and services in those areas that would offer a personal return. At the end of the seventies, the major reason given for being involved in volunteer work was the enjoyment of it; wanting to help others was the second most prevalent reason. People stopped being volunteers when they believed the need for which they volunteered had been met.

The effects of recent conflicting trends on the voluntary movement have not yet been fully determined. Economic pressures sent American women to work in ever increasing numbers, reducing their potential volunteer time. Yet volunteering was seen by many American women as a first step toward entering or resuming a career.

The women's movement, too, had had mixed effects. On one hand, some prominent women were asking why women were content to work without pay, with the implication that such work was not meaningful. On balance, however, the changing needs and roles of women were positive forces for volunteerism. Voluntary organizations responded by improving their training programs, providing flexibility in volunteer scheduling, carefully describing their organizations'

needs, and redefining their volunteer jobs and recognition systems—in short, taking advantage of the newly articulated need of volunteers to do something meaningful.

Successful organizations have sold the concept—a valid one—that volunteer experience is meaningful, both from the point of view of learning and self-fulfillment for the volunteer, and from that of helping to further the mission of the organization.

The current picture. Although statistics on volunteering in the United States are sparse, it is estimated that more than 60 million Americans participate in some volunteer activity, or 34 percent of the 175 million persons aged 15 and older.

Joining the ranks of the traditional volunteers are high school and college students, searching for experience that might help their future careers; retired persons, seeking meaningful activities for their increased free time; low-income persons, helping themselves and their communities while gaining valuable training and experience; and an increasing number of businessmen and businesswomen, whose time is often donated by their corporate employers.

Perhaps never before have there been so many different kinds of volunteering. There is a new volunteer community emerging that is different from the one that was based extensively on "traditional" human services institutions.

In a recent survey of the country's urban residents, conducted by the Gallup Poll for the National League of Cities, nearly 70 percent of these adults stated they would be willing to volunteer for neighborhood activities. On the average, urban residents stated they would work nine hours per month for their cities and neighborhoods. If tapped, this resource would amount to approximately one billion hours per month.

In addition to fields long supported by voluntary services, those of schools and education, youth activities, and hospitals and health care, other fields of interest expressed in the urban resident survey were prevention of water, air, and noise pollution, city beautification, landmark preservation, and attraction of new business.

Among all Americans, the origins of volunteering in the major religions of the world are still evident: religious organizations still receive 50 percent of all volunteer services in the United States; 15 percent go toward education; 15 percent of these activities to health; 7 percent to social services and 3 percent are related to social and criminal justice (the remaining 10 percent is unaccounted for).

Tomorrow's volunteer. The volunteer of tomorrow will find a place for his or her efforts, no matter what the underlying motive and interest. Yesterday's typical volunteer will still be very much

About Girl Scouting

Girl Scouting, more than 500,000 strong in adult volunteers, offers opportunities for volunteers in many areas, including chances for policy making at the level of local and national boards of directors; finance management, including financial policy as well as direction for product sales and fund-raising training; neighborhood and troop organization, and many other positions.

All of these are in addition to the organization's backbone positions of troop leaders and assistants. Although these positions that provide the opportunity for working directly with

girls in Girl Scout troops now include more than 300,000 volunteers nationwide (60 percent of the total adult membership, nearly all women), they are in short supply—mostly because of the changing demands upon the time of women.

Girl Scout councils and the national organization are aware of the changing demands of women and their evolving changes in roles, with corresponding shifts in girls' needs. More flexibility in volunteer assignments, backed up by improved training, is resulting in an upswing in adult membership in 1981, after a slow two years.

in tomorrow's picture. But she will be joined by increasingly more Americans with diverse backgrounds and needs. Future volunteers will be men and women of all ages and from all walks of life.

Persons over age 65 will account for one of every eight Americans by 1990, and they, more than any other group, have time to volunteer coupled with a need for meaningful activities. Their numbers are projected to increase from 25 million today to 30 million by the end of the decade.

Teenagers, on the other hand, can be expected to be a smaller part of the volunteer force, as the number of 15- to 19-year-olds decreases from 21 million to a projected 17 million by 1990, and as these young people are being forced more and more to find jobs for pay.

Women, now represented only slightly more than men in today's volunteer force (52 percent to 48 percent), will continue to provide a large proportion of volunteer work. But they will be more selective in their options, because of economic necessity and by personal preference.

The voluntary movement in this country in the future will continue to thrive, as it has in the past, with changing environmental trends resulting in a different mix of types of volunteers and types of volunteer activity. The necessity of many people to spend more time working for pay will be countered by the continuing willingness of American people to volunteer for a growing variety of reasons and causes.

The increasing disillusionment with public school education will be accompanied by increased voluntary involvement of parents in their children's education. The rising interest in spiritual matters among young people will continue to supply volunteers for religious organizations. An increase in the "me

thic" will turn volunteer efforts to those activities offering a high degree of personal return.

Organizations that depend on these invaluable volunteer resources have learned that it is not enough to follow the environmental tide to ebb and flow, reactively. They have had to include futuristic thinking in their planning in order to nurture and hold their current volunteer constituencies and to extend this base by providing activities that reflect the changing needs of potential volunteers, as well as the needs of the organizations.

As early American philosophy had it that people, rather than government, should act to solve the nation's social problems, present indications are toward a recommitment of this point of view, with a trend toward returning the responsibility for problem solving to the states and local communities. The times of today indeed confirm George Gallup Jr.'s observation that volunteerism is America's best hope for the future. ■

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