

Remnant of Bush's Points of Light far from volunteerism

By Glenn F. Bunting
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WASHINGTON — Throughout his presidency, George Bush persistently promoted his "1,000 Points of Light" campaign as the antidote for hunger, homelessness and poverty.

The slogan, coined during Bush's acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention, grew in popularity to become a signature of his administration. Six days a week, Bush honored someone — a so-called Point of Light — for performing exemplary volunteer work.

In 1990, while declaring that solutions to some of the nation's most vexing problems lay with ordinary citizens and organizations — not huge government bureaucracies — Bush started a private, nonprofit foundation to motivate every American to engage in community service.

Today, the lone remnant of the Bush initiative has the look of a wasteful, Washington-dependent operation. So far, the Points of Light Foundation has received \$26.6 million in federal funds — more than half its budget — while incurring a wide range of costs that amount to questionable spending, experts in the volunteer industry said.

An examination of financial records by the Los Angeles Times shows that \$22.3 million has been spent on glitzy promotions, consultants, salaries, travel and conferences. The expenses include \$5.5 million for a television advertising campaign and \$1.4 million to host a celebration of community service.

By contrast, only 11 percent of the foundation's budget has been spent to provide grants to volunteer efforts across the country.

The foundation has fallen well short of private fund-raising goals and has attracted scant scrutiny from Congress. Moreover, little oversight has been exerted by chief executives from Arco, Disney, IBM, Time Warner and other organizations who answered Bush's call to guide Points of Light. Several prominent directors lost interest and rarely attended board meetings, records show.

Despite early plans to remain a small organization, the Points of Light payroll has more than tripled to \$4.1 million. Foundation president Richard F. Schubert, hired after he resigned under pressure as head of the American Red Cross, is paid \$160,000 annually. A 13-member executive management team receives average salaries in excess of \$80,000.

"It's crazy," said former GOP Gov. George Romney of Michigan, one of 13 original foundation directors. "I think they've built up too big a budget. I've indicated my alarm and the need to cut back."

Susan J. Ellis, author of nine books on volunteerism, added: "There's been tons of money wasted... and I don't think they can show a lot of people have volunteered."

From the outset, top leaders of the foundation vowed to phase out their reliance on government money. Instead, the foundation has grown increasingly dependent on federal funds. Congress awarded Points of Light a 30 percent increase in federal appropriations in August after the

ex-chairwoman of a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that doles out federal money to independent agencies. A supporter of the foundation's work, Mikulski pledged in June that "no matter how skimpy my appropriation is, I intend to fund the Points of Light to stay the course, to keep the momentum going."

The foundation has tried to build a national service infrastructure through a combination of promotions, publications, conferences, training seminars, recognition awards and financial grants. Proponents say Points of Light provides critical support for a network of 501 local volunteer centers.

"I think they are having an impact," said Sue Vineyard, who publishes a national newsletter on volunteerism. "They are answering a need that has been around a long time."

In response to questions submitted to his Houston office, Bush praised the foundation. He said the staff and directors "deserve a lot of credit for the good work they have done through the last few years. As many of our nation's problems persist, I am grateful that the Points of Light

Foundation is finding more and better ways for Americans who want to serve their communities to do so."

Foundation administrators said they have produced impressive results given the short time Points of Light has existed

and the daunting task of solving serious social problems.

They cite such accomplishments as co-sponsoring an annual "Make a Difference" day that attracted 527,000 participants last year, encouraging more than 3,000 businesses to enlist their employees in community-service projects,

starting a pilot program in six cities that has recruited 4,000 families, and soliciting \$136 million in free TV air time to promote volunteerism.

"Do something good," implore the award-winning ads. "Feel something real."

However, Points of Light officials concede they have no hard evidence that their efforts have led to an actual increase in community service. In fact, volunteering nationwide dropped 6 percent since 1989, a recent Gallup Organization survey indicates.

From the start, many Democrats viewed the volunteer initiative as politically opportunistic for a Republican administration that was widely criticized for lacking a domestic agenda.

Nevertheless, President Clinton energized the Points of Light movement last year when he agreed to continue its government subsidy at Bush's request, White House sources said.

Since 1992, Points of Light has spent \$7 million on professional service fees, primarily for promotional work and consultants. Among the costs were \$495,888 to three consultants, \$311,534 to a Minneapolis public relations firm, and \$67,880 to a speech writer for foundation president Schubert.

It ran up \$4.7 million in travel and conference expenses, including a two-day seminar for volunteers at the exclusive Lansdowne golf and tennis resort in Leesburg, Va.

Schubert defended all the expenditures, saying he has tried to build a

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**The foundation
got \$26.6 million
in U.S. funds.
11% of its budget
went toward
volunteer efforts.**