

OPINION

Commentary and Letters

The Wrong Way to Encourage Volunteerism

By SUSAN J. ELLIS

PRESIDENT BUSH'S EFFORT to use his State of the Union address to harness the patriotic fervor generated by the fight against terrorism into a community-service revolution should have been an exciting moment for nonprofit groups that involve volunteers in their work.

But instead it was a surprise announcement that, no matter how well intentioned, was crafted so poorly that a lot of time and money could be wasted building a new bureaucracy with no clear benefit or rationale. More important, the president's plan was created so haphazardly that it seems almost guaranteed to discourage Americans who are inspired to volunteer.

In the speech, Mr. Bush called for each citizen to devote 4,000 hours or two years to volunteer activities. That figure, possibly determined by a throw at a White House dartboard, was not taken seriously by either the many Americans who have already contributed many more hours than that over their lifetimes or by those who have no intention of ever performing community service.

Of more consequence was the announcement of a new USA Freedom Corps that President Bush said would recruit 200,000 new volunteers and draw on the resources of several existing government units, such as AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps, along with a new entity called the Citizen Corps. In speeches in the days immediately following the State of the Union, the president pointed Americans to a Web site and toll-free phone number that would show them how to get involved.

But the president's premise that nonprofit organizations were ready for or willing to accept more volunteers was seriously flawed. No thinking or planning has been done to increase the capacity of organizations to involve volunteers more effectively, and the White House has not suggested giving organizations any money so they could focus on strengthening their systems for managing volunteers. The problem for charities is never recruiting volunteers, but rather having meaningful work for volunteers to do and the support to make volunteering a productive experience for everyone involved.

It didn't need to happen this way. The nation has spent decades building a network of professionals and organizations that specialize in volunteering and developing academic research, books, courses, and other resources on how best to manage volunteers. But instead, the White House left out of its planning most of the experts. As one of my colleagues suggested, would the president announce the formation of an innovative Department of Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, and not expect an angry reaction from the Department of Education or the teaching profession?

Perhaps most odd was that President Bush seems not to have consulted closely with two people who could have given him access to organizations with a lot of experience in volunteerism.

His secretary of state, Colin L. Powell, served as head of America's Promise, the organization created after President Bill Clinton and other living presidents joined together in 1997 at a meeting designed to stimulate volunteerism. And his father created the Points of Light Foundation, and today serves as an honorary chairman of this group, which represents more than 350 local volunteer centers. The foundation's absence from the planning table for the new Citizen Corps is especially inexcusable. The White House proposes that cities and towns form

"councils" to coordinate the new volunteer efforts—and makes no reference to any existing volunteerism resources already in place.

If more experts on volunteering had been consulted, they would have questioned President Bush more intensively on what his goals were, and suggested approaches that were appropriate to what he intended to accomplish.

The president's statements and the USA Freedom Corps Web site send mixed messages to both potential volunteers and to organizations already encouraging community service.

Is the effort intended to make volunteering part of everyone's regular routine or is it aimed at recruiting people for the intensive one-year or two-year stints required by AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps? Is the focus

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MY VIEW

President Bush is so concerned about generating interest in volunteering that he does not seem to care about whether his effort leads to any real volunteerism.

New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, never camera shy when publicizing his office's efforts to protect charitable assets, has been uncharacteristically silent about the state's heist of

plans have merged or switched to for-profit status as the health-care climate continued to evolve. Therein lie the seeds of the New York debacle.

Under New York law, when a

most of the Blue Cross plans that have converted have established new foundations or revitalized existing ones with a substantial infusion of money. They have tried to serve the public with the same level of health care—much of

sorts of special projects that philanthropy can do so well and state governments do not.

If a private foundation had been created from Empire Blue Cross, \$1.1-billion would be available in

And if charitable assets can be taxed when a group converts to for-profit status, why not when one merges with another, or sells a building at a profit? Because states and municipalities often contribute a substantial percentage of nonprofit institutions' budgets, why couldn't they put strings on that money, using charitable assets as collateral for loans that help governments balance their own budgets?

Politicians and their financial advisers may find nonprofit resources too attractive to resist. Such efforts will be difficult to thwart, absent effective political lobbying and pressure from interest groups—hardly strengths of the nonprofit world.

New York's diversion of charitable assets is bad policy and bad finance, and it casts a long shadow over the security of all tax-exempt resources.

James J. Fishman is a professor at the Pace University School of Law, in White Plains, N.Y.

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on homeland security or on improving American civil society in a wide range of ways, including advocacy on public policy, or just on the "mom and apple pie" type of volunteerism, such as working at a soup kitchen? Is the object to join a government-sponsored volunteer program or to encourage service on behalf of nonprofit organizations, such as those that participate in Volunteer Match, a private service that has a prominent link on the USA Freedom Corps Web site?

The Web site has a button that cheerfully says "volunteer now," as if all that it takes to become a volunteer in any of the various efforts is an expression of interest. Yet the president stressed such activities as volunteer firefighting, emergency medical teams, and other work requiring long, arduous training as a prerequisite. The danger in mixing all the different forms of volunteering together is that prospective volunteers will become disenchanted when they discover that many of the service "options" proposed under the president's plan require applications, screening, training, and a serious commitment.

Mr. Bush clearly wanted to motivate Americans to do something right away, so two days after the State of the Union address I called the toll-free number for the USA Freedom Corps.

An operator read to me from a prepared script and told me to expect a brochure on the program in four to six weeks. When I asked

her where she was and who her employer was, she said she was in Indiana working for a telemarketing company that had received a federal contract to help with the volunteerism project. In response to my questions about "where" the Citizen Corps was located and who was in charge of it, she admitted she did not know, and put me on hold to ask her supervisor. A few minutes later she gave me a toll-free number and said "that's AmeriCorps." When I protested that, according to the USA Freedom Corps Web site, the Citizen Corps was not part of AmeriCorps, she said: "But they can answer your questions." She could not give me a specific name to contact.

Quite obviously, this telephone bank is a front with little behind it, and a waste of federal funds. But what is equally maddening is that the White House has violated the fundamental rule of recruitment: Do not ask people to volunteer unless and until an assignment is ready for them to do. But President Bush is so concerned about generating interest that he does not seem to care about whether it leads to any real accomplishments.

Expect to hear the following type of announcement from the White House in about a month: "We are delighted to report that 1,756,324 Americans have contacted the toll-free number for the Citizen Corps." That will undoubtedly be true. But how many of them will actually connect with organizations that offer service opportunities and become active vol-

unteers? It is worth recalling that Ronald Reagan also urged citizens to volunteer in his first State of the Union address. He reported that hundreds of thousands of calls had lit up the White House switchboard within only a few days—and nothing was ever heard again about what happened to those callers.

No one is against getting more people to volunteer. But the way this effort is starting leads me to fear that the USA Freedom Corps will drain already limited funds from other volunteering needs while accomplishing none of its goals. If the president seriously wants to encourage more community service he might consider:

- Providing money to volunteer centers and other clearinghouses to become more effective at linking people who want to serve to volunteer opportunities.

- Offering incentives to organizations to hire managers of volunteers who can focus time and attention on the support needed to assure the success of volunteer efforts.

- Allowing volunteers to serve in federal agencies other than the Interior and Agriculture Departments. Currently, volunteers are barred from working in the planning or running of most of the federal government.

- Getting the support of governors so that states will support volunteerism as enthusiastically as the federal government says it hopes to do. That is not the case now. Two days after President Bush's speech, Minnesota Gov.

Jesse Ventura eliminated the well-respected, 27-year-old Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services based on the rationale that "government should not involve itself with volunteering."

- Dealing with issues confronting managers of volunteers, such as the cost and length of time it takes to do background checks on volunteers who work with young people and others who need special protection.

- Raising the mileage-deduction amount permitted on tax returns for volunteers to be equivalent to the deduction allowed for business travel.

- Requiring that volunteer involvement be included in the plans for any proposed project receiving government funds and demand that the impact of such community participation be evaluated and reported.

It is uncomfortably jingoistic to lump all volunteering under an attempt to protect freedom. Volunteering is bigger than any one political party or current event, even a war on terrorism. But if it is going to play the vital role in civil society that it should, it deserves attention and involvement from people with expertise and different points of view. Simply calling for more bodies is far from enough.

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energeze, a Philadelphia company that provides training and consulting on volunteerism in the United States and overseas and that publishes materials for managers of volunteers.