

Good News for a Change

By Marvin Stone



Any number of readers ask why we don't print more good news. We reply that we welcome the opportunity when it arises. Now comes a letter from Charlotte Bosserman of Seattle, who makes a similar inquiry. She believes that the volunteer and self-help activities of her city, in the climate of a drought of federal money, make good news. We agree.

Although she recognizes that many other communities, too, are trying hard, Bosserman suggests that Seattle's efforts set a good example. She reports that churches and farmers donate to free-food banks for hungry families and that volunteers transport handicapped persons, distribute plants and seeds, create parks on unused city lands, run day-care services, serve as teachers' aides and operate an interracial scholarship fund that helped 98 students last year. The Council of Churches is enhancing its aid to the unemployed and elderly. Seattle's mayor has formed volunteer committees to help with the problem of reduced finances—especially in finding housing for the needy.

To these efforts we can add volunteer work all over the U.S. to aid law enforcement. Many are in regular unpaid service in police departments. Thousands take part in unarmed neighborhood patrols that cooperate with police.

"As I study history," writes Bosserman, "it seems to me this country was developed by cooperative effort. . . . Never was there more need for us to share our talents, skills and compassion for people."

That is exactly the idea behind President Reagan's call to businesses, private organizations and individuals to pitch in. "I have a distinct feeling," he said, "and have for a long time, that we have drifted, as a people, too far away from the voluntarism that so characterized our country for so many years. And we have, in a sense, abdicated and turned over to government things that used to be functions of the community and the neighborhood."

It would be hard to say with certainty whether or not the old barn-raising spirit of early

America has declined. There remains ample evidence that it is still alive, at least to some extent. According to a new survey by the Gallup organization, 31 percent of adult Americans volunteer for 2 hours a week or more in some kind of public service, 10 percent for 7 hours or more.

A Roper poll puts the percentage of volunteers at 25 percent, but finds 85 percent of adults agreeing that it is "important for the community life that a lot of useful work be done by volunteers." As the need for such help grows urgently evident in months ahead, this odd gap between conscience and performance will offer room for expansion of effort.

A lot of thought is being given to the roles of businesses, unions and foundations. This is one facet of the wide-ranging examination of volunteering that has been kicked off by the American Enterprise Institute through its Center for the Study of Private Initiative. A conference in Washington last week heard a few examples of what is being done, particularly in providing jobs and job training, and in making it possible for retired people to use their know-how in community work.

Independently of the AEI undertaking, Willard C. Butcher, chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank, has told his ideas of what a corporation can do. His company gives nearly 7 million dollars a year for public aid, but, as he says, the pocketbook is not enough; people are needed. He observes that one proper field for corporations is providing "trained personnel, financial guidance and management expertise . . . in a programmatic way to areas like municipal financing, school boards, pollution control, public recreation and the like."

Nobody is pretending that private efforts, at best, can quickly fill the holes left by withdrawal of public funds. The suffering that may lie ahead for some is bad news. But the people, by working in concert, can accomplish much. And there is good news in the power of this effort to bring Americans together.