

Eight Important Trends Facing Volunteerism. . .Are You Prepared?

By Susan J. Ellis, President, ENERGIZE, Inc.

Each year, as our *Volunteer Energy Catalog* goes to press, I use this opportunity to identify current "hot" issues in the field of volunteerism. Here are my top picks for the trends percolating as of September 1996 that I hope will be "news you can use".

1. Near-paranoia about legal liability and the desire to avoid risk too often dominate decision making about what volunteers are permitted to do and how they do it. Worst-case-scenario thinking results in limited volunteer roles, cumbersome screening processes, and costly and time-consuming background checks. Risk management for everyone's safety makes sense; obstacles to needed volunteering do not. And there is a case to be made that much volunteer work is inherently risky, since the causes and populations volunteers serve are often those with the least mainstream supporters.
2. With all the publicity about Americorps and National Service, the real news is the impact of the Learn and Serve/K to 12 programs (funded from the same source as National Service) which are becoming genuinely entrenched in school systems. Because educators themselves have seized upon "community service" as a way to produce "school reform," curriculum-based service programs and even mandated hours of service as a requirement for graduation are proliferating. Regardless of the debate about "involuntary volunteering," service-learning is introducing many young people to a wide range of community agencies. And all this has the unexpected – and potentially very long term – benefit of introducing boys to direct service work in fields heretofore considered female service arenas.
3. The vocabulary of our field continues to evolve, with more groups divesting from the word "volunteer" in favor of more supposedly modern phrases such as "community service" or "civic involvement." Whether called pro bono work, activism, lay ministry, or corporate social responsibility, the common denominator is doing something for the common good without concern for personal financial profit, which brings us back to "volunteering." There is also some evidence that a backlash by volunteers themselves is reinvigorating the original term. One benefit of vocabulary shifting is discovery: we can point out that our organizations value and put money towards "fund raising", so why not do the same for "people raising"? Expressing the concept of volunteerism in different words can shed new light on our attitudes about it.
4. We are still in the early stages of cyberspace in terms of volunteerism. Opportunities continue to proliferate for electronic access to new prospective volunteers as well as our colleagues around the globe, but we are now more realistic as to the limitations as well as the potential of this astounding medium. New techniques of "distance learning" through cyberspace have the potential to revolutionize our forms of volunteer training, off-site supervision and support, and volunteer "newsletters" (especially for national organizations burdened now with huge printing and postage costs).
5. The widespread trend toward budget cutting, downsizing, and retrenchment in both the

nonprofit and for-profit arenas is causing employee unrest and malaise, unwanted job hunting by people at the managerial level, and move towards self-employment. A two-edged sword, these changes also have potential to increase volunteering, as people seek new skills and the self-esteem of helping others. We are also seeing the illogic of agencies eliminating the position of director of volunteers, followed by a search for more volunteers!

6. Technology is a boon and a curse. Computers, faxes, cellular phones and other devices certainly allow us to do things faster and even with less cost (e-mailings), but also add more stress as they increase the pace of work. While we are able to communicate instantly across time zones, the technology raises its own thorny issues for volunteer projects, such as the negative impact of "caller I D." on confidential hot lines.

7. Inter-agency collaborations are springing up everywhere, sometimes leading to mergers. Although often driven by funders looking for evidence of cooperation, such collective action can help consumers by avoiding duplication and offering "one stop shopping" for multiple services. Collaborations and mergers affect volunteers in all participating organizations but volunteers are infrequently considered or consulted. Whether volunteers end up in strong support, as an opposing force, or with divided loyalties depends on whether and how they are integrated into the planning.

8. We may never go back to the supposedly "traditional" family of the 1950's, yet many volunteer efforts are organized around this outdated model. Divorce, single parenthood, and caregiving to aging parents are only a few factors to which successful volunteer programs will adapt. Volunteer opportunities that respect people's limited time, welcome children to come along, and meet the social needs of adults to make new friends of both sexes (not to mention safer ways to meet a potential date!) will be the ones that attract today's volunteers.

To assess how these trend affect your setting, answer the following: Have I seen any indication that this trend has begun in my community? How, or why not? Is this a trend that has potential to help our volunteer services and, if so, how can I make sure we are part of it? If it worries me as having negative implications, how can I prepare for or even prevent its impact? How can I keep informed about it?

ENERGZE, INC. sells books, training materials, and software for volunteer managers. To be on Energize's mailing list, call 1-800-395-9800 or e-mail: ENERGIZESE@aol.com .

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Hot Topic of the Month

Is Volunteer Management Really a Profession?

By Susan J. Ellis

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I've been in the field of volunteer administration for over 25 years and have seen many changes--most are positive ones. But some questions are still unanswered, particularly whether or not we can identify our work as a "profession."

Too many of us still "fall" into volunteer management positions, either as a stepping stone towards another career goal or by the unexpected addition of the tasks of volunteer program development to existing job descriptions. Some of us then discover we really love this work and have an affinity for it. We wind up making a long-term commitment to volunteerism. But at any given time, our field is dominated by people who view volunteer management as a job and not as a career--certainly not as an identity. They will move on (and often up) as soon as a better job opens to them.

So what makes a line of work a "profession"? The literature about professions in general provides some guidelines. All professions have:

- a clear educational path into the practice.
- an agreed upon vocabulary and set of principles.
- expectations of those both inside and outside the profession as to standards of competence.

I'd add that when one is a "professional," membership in that profession is an identity that moves with one regardless of the settings in which one works at any time. So a lawyer is a lawyer whether employed in a law firm or as legal counsel in a hospital. A social worker is a social worker whether in direct client service or in administration. A teacher is a teacher in school and at a summer camp.

Is a volunteer services director a volunteer services director in her or his own mind regardless of job held? regardless of setting? Do you affiliate more with health care, justice, or cultural arts than with volunteerism? Is your goal to move up the ladder in your setting even if it removes you from working with volunteers--or do you envision yourself in a bigger and better volunteer management position regardless of the agency?

This issue takes on very real dimensions for the support mechanisms common to professions:

1. Professional Societies

In other professions individuals expect--as a matter of course--to affiliate with their professional society at every level--local, regional, national, international. And the cost of annual dues--often high by our standards--is a cost of being in the profession--paid by the individual if necessary. In volunteerism, we struggle to "convince" colleagues that joining a DOVIA, state association, or national association is "worth the money." If you need to ask "how will this help me in my job?," you don't get it.

2. Collective Action

Professionals recognize issues confronting all practitioners and understand the value of concerted action. Through professional societies and special interest groups, they position themselves as experts and tackle legislators, funders, the media, and anyone in a position to make decisions necessary to their field. No other profession would have allowed something like the Presidents Summit to ignore its central role without a fight or even a murmur! Clout is won, not bestowed.

3. Literature

Professionals expect to engage in continuing education. Education puts them into the profession and they take pride in keeping up with current issues. Books and periodicals are bought (often using a home address and personal funds) because maintaining a reference library is considered important. Also, professionals want to gain peer recognition and to share their own ideas by being published. In volunteerism, too few people purchase books and even fewer write them.

4. Education

All around the country, colleges and universities have tried to offer coursework on volunteer management. With very few exceptions, courses for academic credit have failed for lack of enrollment. Only continuing education courses have an audience but rarely for subjects other than "nuts and bolts." Someone in a job wants to know "how to"; someone in a profession also wants to know "why."

No one will buy you professional status. You either have it or you don't. But it is different from competence on the job. It means affiliation with a field and a willingness to work together to build that field.

So...what are we? Do you think volunteer management is a profession? Why or why not? Does it matter?

Read People's Responses

Let's Hear What You Think

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Susan Ellis's Biographical Summary

Susan Ellis is President of ENERGIZE, Inc. and is recognized internationally as a leader in the volunteer field. She continually assists a wide variety of clients throughout the United States and Canada to create or strengthen their volunteer corps. Since 1992, she has expanded her work to Europe, speaking at four Volonteurope conferences and helping clients throughout the United Kingdom and Sweden.

Susan is the author or co-author of nine books, including *The Volunteer Recruitment Book*, *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*, and *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*. She writes the national column "On Volunteers" for *The NonProfit Times* and is on the faculty of the Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations (Wisconsin), currently developing distance-learning materials for volunteer management. She is a past editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* and still serves on the Senior Editorial team.

She was the recipient of the Association for Volunteer Administration's 1989 Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Service Award. Susan is active in a variety of local, state and national associations.

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June 1997 Hot Topic

Why Is It Labor Unions vs. Volunteers?

By Susan J. Ellis



This month's hot topic is often discussed in whispers and in private, and rarely confronted openly: labor union resistance to volunteer involvement. In the belief that any topic can be discussed and examined, I am willing to risk controversy and even anger. But more than anything I hope my editorial will bring this discussion out of the back room; please share your reactions with us all.

I should start by saying that I respect the historical importance of unions which truly improved the conditions for working people everywhere and I continue to see their value in maintaining the quality of work life today. Furthermore, I believe volunteers should not be used to replace the jobs of workers. My frustration with unions is in their response to creative volunteer development. They often see the development of any volunteer position as a direct threat to their jobs, not recognizing that it is entirely possible to be in favor of 100% employment and 100% volunteering.

Although it is impossible to adequately cover the entire scope of this issue in one commentary. I would like to start the discussion by introducing three thoughts on this topic.

Volunteerism played an integral part in the rise of unions and the development of jobs in America

The union movement could not have grown without the help of thousands of volunteers. Union leaders began as volunteers, for the most part, organizing workers during off hours and losing pay while protesting conditions. Even today labor unions rely heavily on the contributed services of shop stewards and other local organizers, as well as sponsor many charitable projects in which union members serve their communities.

In addition most jobs in the non-profit sector and government originally began as volunteer positions. Traditionally, volunteers have created more jobs than anyone else. They prove what work is necessary to do full time. Furthermore, volunteers are usually the strongest supporters of additional funding because they see the important work employees do.

Volunteers usually take on tasks not jobs

Despite fears that volunteers will be used to replace paid staff, it would take 10 or more volunteers working in shifts to replace one persons' full-time job--and the coordination headaches would be enormous.

When volunteers are introduced into a setting, they offer the opportunity to reallocate tasks and free paid staff to do work that requires consistency, continuity, and perhaps specialized training. Ideally, employees retain accountability for getting all their work done, but now can delegate the doing of the tasks to volunteers while moving on to different work themselves. Unfortunately, this is exactly what unions fight. Do their members understand that their leadership is demanding status quo rather than opening up new assignments?

There is often confusion between saving *jobs* and saving *tasks*. Unions are reluctant to allow any change in the job descriptions of their workers, again out of fear that this will lead to job elimination. This position is doomed, and for many more reasons than volunteer involvement. Today's world is changing so rapidly that no one can expect to do their work in the same way forever. From technology to diversity to legal issues, the work place is in a state of flux--perhaps permanently. Unionized workers must be willing to redefine their tasks to keep up with advances in technology, cope with changing client needs, and react to new mandates.

The focus should be on what is best for the people being served

Which leads me to the last point (for this essay at least!). Labor unions historically organized in profit-making environments to challenge top executives and stockholders who were getting rich off the labor of low-paid workers. When unions moved into government and nonprofit organizations, their confrontational attitude about "employers" was transferred whole, without any consideration as to who controlled the purse strings or who gained personally. Just who is the "enemy" in a setting that serves the public and gets its revenue not from sales but from taxes or donations? How can there be any validity in arguing that volunteers have no right to help organizations for which it is perfectly acceptable to give cash? Why shouldn't taxpayers be willing to "tithe" time to some government programs in order to maintain acceptable levels of taxation?

Lost in the shuffle is any consideration of what is best for the people being served. I have had many encounters with union members. One incident that remains particularly vivid involves a union member (wearing a union tee-shirt to a staff orientation meeting) who, when asked what she would suggest as a way past the impasse of limited resources and the needs of children in the area, shouted: "I don't care; it's my job that matters!"

It is not unreasonable to ask unions to recognize that funds are being cut for many services--or that the needs for services are increasing faster than funding. First we must cope with providing services. Then--or simultaneously--we ought to be advocating and lobbying together for adequate funding. This is a job that volunteers do amazingly well!

What do you think?

- What is your perspective on the issue of employment "versus" volunteering?
- Do you think there should be a difference in union attitudes when organizing in a nonprofit or government setting?
- Have you experienced union resistance to volunteers? How? What did you do about it?
- How can we work together with labor unions to gain a better understanding of both points of view?

Other People's Responses

Other Hot Topics

- A proposal for five additional goals after the summit
- Is the challenge recruiting citizens to volunteer

or making sure agencies are ready for volunteers?

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May 1997 Hot Topic

A Proposal for Five Additional Goals after the Summit



By Susan J. Ellis

We have just witnessed an amazing spectacle: intensive, national publicity focused on volunteerism! Yes, there was expensive hoopla and glitz, but there were also moments of true inspiration. What kept going around in my mind during the Summit (which I covered as a media representative for The NonProfit Times) was that the five goals set for volunteers to help youth were wonderful, but didn't go far enough. The Summit proposed to focus volunteering on mentoring, a healthy start, employable skills, a safe environment, and opportunities for youth to serve others. These are unquestionably appropriate, but they are also noncontroversial and deal with children in a vacuum.

So, in the spirit of wanting to deploy volunteer energy towards a better life for all young people, I propose the following five additional goals for volunteering. What do you think?

1. Help parents earn a livable wage.

Volunteers already have a track record in helping new business owners. SCORE has provided thousands of hours of volunteer consultation to minority and women business owners. VISTA volunteers showed the women of Appalachia that their folk crafts could earn money. Why shouldn't we allow volunteers to tackle the most pressing problem of our times: how under-educated people can earn a living and afford to be good parents to their children?

Consider that volunteers could use the Junior Achievement model and help teenagers and young adults start legitimate for-profit businesses: small appliance repair, home chore services, safety escorts, etc. Non-profits could move into abandoned factories and warehouses and develop cooperative industries. If the revenue is taxable--so what? The line between nonprofit and for-profit is not based on whether the organization can make money--it has to do with who "owns" the company.

2. Mentor on the job.

Instead of diverting the attention of corporations into philanthropic areas in which they have no expertise, why not encourage businesses to develop a certain number of new jobs aimed at former welfare recipients? Because these new employees will undoubtedly need a lot of training and support, organize employee volunteers to mentor their new colleagues. And, when the first set of trainees has moved on, ask them in turn to mentor the next "class." Mentoring may mean help with coming in on time every day, budgeting or arranging child care. Nonprofit agencies could also recruit volunteers to come into the company to offer additional support (to the new employees, not to the company) such as literacy tutoring.

3. Tackle labor union resistance.

The Summit was silent about the fact that many labor unions actively fight against volunteer involvement. While there are indeed situations in which management inappropriately tries to replace paid workers with volunteers, this has never been the intent of the movement to

renew citizens' commitment to their own communities. We need to engage union members--who are themselves volunteers at the shop steward level--in working toward inclusion and not exclusion of volunteer help.

4. Mentor parents as well as children.

All children deserve to get the attention of caring adults and that's why it is important to encourage everyone to make time for a child. But it doesn't make sense to focus on children without attending to the needs of their families. It is also patronizing to assume that parents who are poor or even drug-dependent do not care about their sons and daughters. Mentors ought to broaden their focus to help mothers and fathers help their own children. Why not, for example, a family-to-family mentoring program? Everyone, of all ages, helping one another, would be the strongest model.

5. Be willing to take risks.

In all spheres of American life, we are becoming almost paranoid about the risk of lawsuits. Perhaps our fears are justified in this litigious society, but when it comes to volunteering, we must draw the line. Change always involves risk. Volunteers, at their best, fight for change.

Despite current moves to limit liability, there will always be risk in volunteering. If we sincerely want to do such things as work one-on-one with a child in need or assure safe playgrounds in drug-dealing territory, it is time to accept risk. Volunteers (and organizations) must commit themselves to doing the work despite possible safety concerns and even if someone decides to sue. This is not to disregard the need to take adequate precautions, use safe tools, or train volunteers appropriately. But someone, somewhere, has to say: "I'm going to do what is sensible and right--even if I end up in court." Then it is up to all of us to raise the money needed to defend the suit if it is brought.

Do you think that Mother Theresa or Albert Schweitzer or Harriet Tubman thought about risk management? Volunteers always have the courage of their convictions. Let's keep that spirit going.

Now it's your turn....

Responses :

This month's Hot Topic on volunteerism is right on target! You have clearly identified key points that need to be addressed. As a volunteer fire fighter for some 45 years, I have been exposed to your third item, Labor Union Resistance, on a regular basis. All your points are valid. But, in today's socialistic society, don't expect them to be addressed. Have I always been pessimistic? Probably not. But for now I see a society dependent upon government and a government which pays lip service to volunteerism while placing numerous obstacles to it. Oh, well! Maybe things will get better some day.

Response from: *John Stankiewicz, volunteer fire fighter, Weirton, WV USA*

Other Hot Topics

- Why is it labor unions vs. volunteers?
- Is the challenge recruiting citizens to volunteer or making sure agencies are ready for volunteers?

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April 1997 Hot Topic



Is the challenge recruiting citizens to volunteer or making sure agencies are ready for volunteers?

By Susan J. Ellis

Right now a lot of national attention is being given to stimulating increased volunteering. The upcoming Presidential Summit for America's Future is focused on this topic, with hundreds of major organizations committing themselves to quantities of community service by the year 2000.

President Clinton has further called for millions of volunteer tutors to assure that no child leaves third grade unable to read. Almost all the publicity about withdrawal of government and other funding for many social service and cultural arts programs concludes with speculation about whether or not citizens will come forward as volunteers to fill the new needs.

Here's the problem as I see it:

No one is talking about the cost and extra resources needed to work with volunteers—or whether agencies even want them.

All the publicity and rhetoric is on recruiting people to become volunteers or do "community service." Precious little is ever said about what it will take to interview, screen, place, train, and work with all these new volunteers. While citizen involvement is a vital and important contribution to our society, the equation is not; volunteers instead of money;--we need money AND volunteers.

In this present climate of under-funding, volunteers are in danger of being resented as a second-best solution to serious social problems. All the mentoring in the world cannot make up for lack of decently-paid jobs, schools with adequate supplies, or available health care. On the other hand, when such resources are accessible, volunteers can make the difference between success and failure on the individual level.

We also need money FOR volunteers. As one example, who is going to cover the cost of thousands of child abuse police checks (something President Clinton never mentions when he calls for adults to work with young children)? Taking on more volunteers also means more staff time and resources--and too many agencies aren't able or willing to give either. Those individual citizens who want to help neighbors in need or students who can't read will also require some method of connecting.

Even in the best of economic times, too many agencies limit volunteers to unchallenging roles. We must educate professionals to welcome and respect the skills volunteers can bring. Perhaps the Presidential Summit will give us the opportunity to do the following:

- Articulate realistic expectations about the interconnected roles of volunteers, employees, government at various levels, businesses, and nonprofit organizations.

Volunteers are an integral part of the community resource mix--but all the components need to expand their reach.

- Do thoughtful planning for volunteer involvement, with a clear vision as to what volunteers can contribute in unique ways--not as unpaid staff assistants, but as providers of service meeting a wide range of client needs.
- Prepare social workers, teachers, medical care givers and others to adapt their job descriptions in these new times. Volunteers should not be expected to fill in the slack while employees continue business as usual. Every profession must re-examine its priorities. This is a particularly difficult question in unionized work settings.
- Engage clients in the process of problem solving. The old paternalistic model of charity is discredited. We must be careful not to rush into such activities as mentoring under the assumption that the needs of children in poverty can be solved simply by an adult friend (as powerful a force as that relationship can be). We must learn to listen to what our neighbors think they need. Volunteers can be most effective as facilitators of self-help and advocates to prod the bureaucracy into doing its job. Not every client may want a mentor; not every citizen is best assigned to that role.

The questions that I want to pose to Web site visitors are:

**Do you agree or disagree with my perspective?
What do you feel is lacking from the national discussion?**

Responses to Susan's Commentary

I agree with Susan. It is too easy to call for "volunteers" without knowing the mechanics involved with developing productive volunteer programs. As one who has spent the last 10 years observing and writing about local non-profit organizations and in particular the volunteers who make them successful, I know all too well the lack of understanding of what makes a productive volunteer. And as a life long volunteer I know the commitment it takes to be a productive volunteer.

Over the past 10 years volunteers in my area, especially those connected with organizations that allow hands-on-work by volunteers (they don't just raise money any more) are taking on more and more skilled responsibilities that require some form of training. I think one of President Clinton's problems in his call for volunteers is his lack of awareness of the quantities of volunteers already in place. He treats his call as though the volunteer pool was grossly under populated. I don't really think it is as small as he might think. Then again this call for volunteers is another way to sidestep other issues that are more politically sensitive, like offering the same services on a reduced budget...where to go -- Volunteers!

Response from: Maggi Stamm, Chronicler of non-profit organizations & volunteers, Southern California, USA

I basically agree with Susan's position. I think that much of the political hoopla over volunteering is just that. Volunteer organizations, of course, benefit by any PR about volunteering, whether politically motivated or not. But volunteers, without financial support to the organizations that need their skills, aren't the answer to solving all of the social & environmental problems facing the world today. Government is promoting volunteerism through PR, while at the same time cutting much needed funding to worthwhile programs. Let's see a balance between providing funds/grants for programs and PR to raise volunteer awareness.

Response from: Bruce Bechtold, Developer of Volunteer Information Mgt.(V.I.M.)

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All-Volunteer group leadership

- Starting Groups (Lay Persons), from the book *The Self-Help SourceBook*
- Leaving Agendas Outside Is Part of the Organizational Structure, from the book *Better Than Money Can Buy*
- Sage Advice for the New Member, from the book *The Group Member's Handbook*
- The Need for Specialized Projects, from the book *When Everyone's A Volunteer*

Employee/Volunteer relations

- Satisfy Staff First, from the book *Building Staff/Volunteer Relations*

Executive and board role

- Advisory Volunteers, from *The NonProfit Times* "On Volunteers" column
- Staffing the Volunteer Program, from the book *From the Top Down*

Faith-Based settings

- What Can We Do about It? The Tools, from the book *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers*
- Keys to Effective Service Celebrations, from the book *The Starter Kit for Mobilizing Volunteer Ministry*

For Individual volunteers

History/Philosophy

- Volunteerism: The Outlook for Tomorrow, from the book *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*

International

- Characteristics of Regions, from the book *A New Civic Europe?*
- VOLUNTEUROPE First European Workshop on Volunteer Action

Policy development

- Benefits of Policies, from the book *By Definition*

Program assessment

- The Process for Completing Audit (and One Sample Section), from the book *Volunteer Management Audit*

Recognition

- The Radio Hour, from *The Volunteer Recognition Skit Kit*

Recordkeeping

- Documenting Volunteer Hours, from the book *Proof Positive*
- Internal Controls, from the book *Self-Help Accounting*
- Meeting the New FASB Standards

Recruitment

- Creative Volunteer Roles, from *The NonProfit Times* "On Volunteers" column
- The Black Church, from the book *Pass It On*
- Finding Daytime Volunteers, from *The NonProfit Times* "On Volunteers" column
- Your "Circle of Resources", from *The Volunteer Recruitment Book*

Research

- Organizational Culture and Volunteer Programs, from the book *At the Heart: The New Volunteer Challenges to Community Agencies*

Risk and liability

- Volunteering is Inherently Risky, from *The NonProfit Times* "On Volunteers" column
- Barriers to Preventing Abuse, from the book *Child Abuse Prevention Primer for Your Organization*
- Step 2: Screening, from the book *No Surprises: Controlling Risks in Volunteer Programs*
- Reference Checks, from the book *Staff Screening Tool Kit*

Role of director of volunteers

- Recognizing Your Role, from *The (Help!) Guide*
- Preparing for the Volunteers First Day, from the *Focus on Volunteering KopyKit* ©

Seniors in service

- Get Your Life Organized! - Skit #2, from the book *The Time of Your Life*

Service-learning

Special settings

- Two Volunteer Program Structures in Museums, from the book *Volunteer Program Administration*

Training tools

- Training Design and Content, from the book *Training Busy Staff to Succeed with Volunteers*

- Signs, from the book *Organizing Special Events and Conferences*

Trends

Volunteer centers

- Planning for a Volunteer Center, from the book *Volunteer Centers*

Volunteer opportunities

Youth in service

- Preparing Your Organization, from the book *Children as Volunteers*
- Points of Entry, from the book *Recruiting College Students*
- The Adolescent as a Whole, from the book *Kidding Around? Be Serious!*

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