

1996 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC ISSUES IN THE UNITED STATES, CANADA, AND BEYOND III.

ABSTRACT

Non-profits are major forces in delivering services in the United States. Volunteers are essential to this service delivery representing 41 percent of the total non-profit work force. Today there is an unprecedented effort on the part of Congress to make sure non-profits are accountable to the public and worthy of their tax-exempt status. At the same time there is minimal understanding of the need to support the contribution of volunteers. This article outlines some of the issues in the news today and suggests ways volunteer administrators can be proactive in demonstrating accountability as well as advocating for their profession, their volunteers, and their communities.

Public Issues Facing Non-Profits and Volunteerism in the United States

Jeanne H. Bradner

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR AND VOLUNTEERISM IN THE UNITED STATES

All over the United States non-profit organizations and volunteers (both direct-service and board members) are working to meet a multitude of needs including health care, social service, education, and culture.

According to the Independent Sector's 1992-1993 *Nonprofit Almanac* there are 1 million non-profit organizations in the United States representing 10.5 percent of total employment (including volunteers) and 6.2 percent of national income (including assigned value of volunteer time which is 41 percent of total employment in non-profits).

The 1996 *Giving & Volunteering in the*

United States (Independent Sector) reported 49 percent of the population volunteers (a three percent increase since 1993). The value of that volunteer time is placed at \$210 billion.

THE ISSUES FACING NON-PROFITS AND VOLUNTEERISM

Non-profits and volunteerism are in the news today. Consider the following headlines found during the fall and winter of 1996 in such leading publications as *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and *The NonProfit Times*.

Property Tax Exemption: Maine Camp's
Tax Abatement Goes to Court
Hartford Imposes Strict Zoning Rules on
Charity Expansion

Jeanne H. Bradner is a nationally known author, speaker, trainer, and consultant in non-profit management, leadership development, and volunteer management. Among her current clients are the Illinois Commission on Community Service and the Metro Chicago Volunteer Coalition. She is the author of *The Board Member's Guide, A Beneficial Bestiary* (Conversation Press, 1995) and *Passionate Volunteerism* (Conversation Press, 1993). She is a contributor to the new John Wiley *Handbook Of Volunteer Management* and the soon to be published *The Nonprofit Handbook*. She has served as Illinois' Director of the Governor's Office of Voluntary Action and as Region V Director of ACTION. She has held various positions within AVA and is the 1996 recipient of its Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Service Award.

U.S. Department of Labor Fines Pennsylvania Nursing Home \$30,000 for Using Teenage Volunteers
 President Signs Measure to Fight Charity Abuses
 New Disclosure Law for Trustees in New Hampshire
 A Holy War in Colorado against Tax Exemptions
 Will Charities Learn from United Way Mess?
 Make Charities Earn Their Tax Exemptions
 Senate Protects Health Volunteers
 Parents Sue over "Forced Volunteerism"
 New Tax Form for Charities Is Useless
 Volunteer Protection Act Still Hanging
 Few Free Lunches: Non-profits Must Contend with Gift Bans
 Putting the Muzzle on Non-profits
 AmeriCorps: But Is It Volunteerism?
 Charities Face New Scrutiny by Congress

These headlines reflect some of the issues facing non-profits and volunteerism in the United States today. They have widespread and complex implications:

- As government at the local, state, and federal levels looks for ways to decrease the tax burden on citizens, it questions the legitimacy of the tax-exempt status of non-profits and the tax deductibility of gifts donors make to 501(c)(3) organizations. Governments are asking the question, "Do these groups truly deserve the special status that is given them?" They are also questioning whether the "one size fits all" approach to non-profits is wise. For example, are there some non-profits that are more deserving of tax benefits than others, for example, poverty groups? In addition, as more hospitals become for-profit, is there a continuing reason for special benefits for those that are non-profit? Non-profits react vehemently to these questions. They are feeling squeezed. While increasingly subjected to scrutiny, they also are required to take more and more responsibility for

providing community services because of the limitations in government program funding that have resulted from congressional budget cuts.

- Some recent abuses by charities and religious groups have cast suspicion on the entire voluntary sector.

- Small business continues to express concern that there is an inequity when non-profits are "making money" through efforts such as gift shops and travel tours while enjoying tax benefits.

- The United States Congress is considering whether it is a conflict of interest for organizations that receive federal money to be permitted to advocate before that body.

- Volunteer liability protection is progressing slowly. While many states have passed versions of an act to limit the liability of volunteers, and some special groups like health care volunteers are covered, the United States Congress has been unwilling to pass a general Volunteer Protection Act—a reflection of the country's unresolved debate over tort reform.

- There is much confusion in the country and in Congress about what is and what isn't volunteerism. For example, many critics of AmeriCorps, the federally funded national service program, say that it undermines "true" volunteerism because its members receive a stipend. A few people have filed suits against required community service in schools and colleges because it is "forced." There also is a continuing lack of understanding about the role of volunteers in amplifying services. For example, one of the issues in the Pennsylvania nursing home case mentioned above is the notion that volunteers should only assist clients, not help the organization itself—a difficult and unrealistic distinction to make.

- Emerging welfare reform is causing concern among volunteer administrators raising questions such as, "Will people who can't find jobs be required to seek volunteer work?" If so, what is the responsibility of organizations in trying to

accommodate these "mandated" volunteers? How can the volunteer administrator ethically balance the needs of those seeking assignments with the needs of the organization, particularly if there are more people required to volunteer than the organization can meaningfully involve?

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT ALL OF THIS?

An article could be devoted to each of these issues, but what follows are some basic steps that volunteer administrators in the United States can take.

Step One

Understand that a tax exempt organization is accountable not just to its donors and customers, but also to the government and to the taxpayers.

Step Two

Find ways to demonstrate to elected representatives and the public that the organization does good work and makes measurable impacts. Make sure the organization honors all legal responsibilities including submitting all required reports and payroll taxes to the appropriate governmental entities, and that it abides by fair employment policies and lobbying restrictions.

Step Three

Advocate for the Volunteer Protection Act. (See AVA's "Portrait of a Profession" for a list of other issues on which AVA encourages advocacy. This publication is available from the AVA office.)

Step Four

Employ good risk management policies in volunteer programs.

Step Five

Collaborate with other organizations, with school community service and service learning programs as well as with the Corporation for National Service Programs (AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps VISTA, and the Senior Service Corps). Collaboration builds synergy, enhances results, and draws expanded attention to the efficacy of service, whether it is called volunteerism, community service, national service, or service learning.

Step Six

Advocate for the profession of volunteer administration. Articulate a vision that extends way beyond the individual program and the people and mission on which it focuses to how important volunteerism is to the community and the nation and how important it is that programs be managed professionally.

Step Seven

Keep informed and get involved with the issues facing non-profits and volunteerism. The issues change almost daily, but the only way to have a voice in their resolution is to be proactive. Suggesting changes within one's own program and organization, writing letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines, and calling or writing Congress members and other state and local government officials are ways to make things happen rather than being in the unfortunate reactive position of wondering "what happened?"