

## ABSTRACT

*The Ohio Governor's Community Service Commission began a statewide planning process in late 1997 to develop Ohio's Unified State Plan for Service. A group of volunteer administrators were invited to participate in the planning process, representing the specific interests and perspectives of volunteer administration. There has been a continuing debate in the field of volunteer administration about the distinctions between volunteerism and service. These volunteer administrators expressed considerable concern about the use of "service" as an umbrella for all forms of civic participation. This article is an excerpt from a position paper written by the author as a part of Ohio's planning process.*

# **The Volunteerism Versus Service Perspective: An Excerpt from a Position Paper Submitted for Ohio's Unified State Plan**

Mary V. Merrill

## WHERE WE ARE

Public attention has been focused upon volunteerism in ways that are almost unprecedented in the history of the United States. The 1997 Presidents' Summit for America's Future initiated a follow-up organization, America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth, that aimed to marshal resources to address the needs of 2 million young people by the year 2000. Respected leaders and the media have highlighted the need for American citizens to be actively engaged in their communities. As a result, the private, public, and independent sectors of our society are forming new alliances in a search for ways to improve the quality of life through citizen action.

While recognizing that volunteerism is alive, well and flourishing, as volunteer administrators engaged in developing a state plan for Ohio's citizens, we have identified several current concerns. First, there is increasing confusion around language. Volunteerism, community service, national service, and Learn and Serve are terms used to refer to varying activities

and yet in the public arena there is no clear understanding of what is being discussed.

America has a long history of volunteerism and the word "volunteer" generally is used to refer to persons giving of their time and talents without concern for remuneration. "Service" has been discussed since the early 1900s, sometimes referred to as an army of youth required to perform some form of public service. This concept of service was reflected in the government-sponsored Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s and the Peace Corps and VISTA programs of the 1960s. In recent years there have been many proposals before Congress to promote and expand "national service." The debate over federal funding for service initiatives has done much to confuse the distinctions between volunteerism and service. Add court-mandated community service and school-based service-learning programs and the confusion grows, even among the professionals who work in the field of citizen participation.

To date, very little research and litera-

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ture exist to define these terms and the scope of each form of citizen participation. Volunteerism in the United States has traditionally been associated with the Judeo-Christian ethic of helping one's neighbor. The word itself has been linked to the Latin word *velle* meaning to wish or will and is defined as one who enters into or offers himself/herself of his/her own free will. Today the term "service" is most often linked with government-sponsored initiatives designed to foster an ethic of national civic service among youth.

As professionals in the field of volunteer administration who are helping develop a state plan for Ohio, we see similarities among service, service learning, and volunteerism but do not agree they are synonymous. We believe the continuing efforts to lump all forms of citizen engagement under a single generic term such as "service" confuses the public and the profession. Additionally, the word tends to create factions professionally and leads to a division of energies by not acknowledging the importance of the diverse forms of civic contribution made by citizens. We believe we are involved in an ongoing process of defining how citizens can be and are engaged in their communities and that the terms used to describe their activities should reflect that fact.

While we believe volunteerism is flourishing, the how, who, and when of volunteering must constantly evolve to meet the needs of a changing population. As professional volunteer administrators, we seek new strategies, methodologies, and venues to engage citizens in community action. To this end, we welcome the growth of programs like Learn and Serve and AmeriCorps because they offer new, alternative methods for citizens to become involved in solving social problems and contribute to the overall health of society. We welcome their addition for, indeed, we see these new programs as expanding the traditional form of service known as volunteerism. However, we do not wish to see volunteerism or the ideals

it stands for, incorporated into a newer definition or program in an attempt to simplify, combine, or consolidate. While there are similarities between volunteerism, service-learning, and service, it is important to recognize that each is unique. Efforts to combine or consolidate our understanding of these various types of citizen involvement under one umbrella term would be limiting. However, government support for each should be maintained so that individuals and society may reap the benefits from all of them.

American citizens have a long-standing tradition of civic engagement. Women's suffrage, civil rights, and the anti-Vietnam war movement are examples of the collective actions of citizens who share a commitment to a common cause. While these are dramatic examples of the social impact citizens can have in a free society, all communities have countless stories and examples of the unselfish, heroic, meaningful contributions of individuals and groups who give their time, talents, and energies to making a difference. Each hospice volunteer, reading tutor, Meals on Wheels driver, Foster Grandparent, museum docent, theater usher, food pantry worker, Scout leader, Sunday school teacher, coach, or mentor contributes to the overall fabric of our communities, touching our lives in personal, often unacknowledged ways each day. We recognize and value the role of government in protecting and securing our rights to act individually and collectively as agents of social change.

#### WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

It is our belief that those involved in volunteerism and service need to collaborate. We view collaboration as a process, a formal, sustained commitment to work together with mutual respect to accomplish a common goal. We recognize that collaboration is always political with each of us bringing our own definitions, expectations, roles, and power to the table. To help us focus on a common mission, we suggest the following core values.

We believe that:

- Citizen participation is vital for healthy, caring communities and that the collective actions of those who share a commitment to a common cause are extremely powerful.
- Volunteerism, national and community service, and service-learning experiences are distinct forms of citizen participation by which people in a free society act on their beliefs and initiate/impact social change.
- Volunteerism, service, and service-learning experiences foster individual growth and self-esteem, build relationships, contribute to the quality of life in the community, and strengthen civil society.
- Government can play a role by strengthening and promoting volunteerism and service by encouraging its citizens to become engaged, by reducing obstacles and by creating an environment that enables individuals and groups to become involved.

It has been said by Noyes and Ellis (1990) that:

*Volunteerism is both reactive and proactive. It is a response to current events, social problems, and community needs that volunteers are often the first to identify.... By creating or urging others to create programs, volunteering challenges the status quo. This is the inherent political side of volunteer work. The irony is that pressure in one direction elicits pressure in the other; whenever one group of volunteers works toward change, another group often reacts to preserve tradition or advocate yet another alternative. This is why volunteers will continue to be found on both sides of an issue—and at all points along the political spectrum.*

Because there is an inherent “political” nature to volunteerism, it is important for

government service to be separate from volunteer service. Programs funded and promoted by the government provide wonderful opportunities for community and national service and help to promote a positive attitude toward public service. They address federally-identified issues and are funded through tax dollars and should remain distinct from “volunteer” actions that take shape at the grassroots in response to local events, problems, and issues. While we may view some individuals or groups as radical, negative, even destructive, we are a country founded on the principles of free speech and individualism. We must feel free to be involved on “both sides of an issue—at all points along the political spectrum,” unhindered by funders or political ideology. Government may foster and even create opportunities for service, but its main role should be to create and foster the climate in which individuals may contribute to the quality of life in their own communities through freely given citizen participation.

#### HOW DO WE GET THERE?

As citizens of a free society we welcome support from government. We acknowledge its role in the creation of service opportunities, we support efforts to encourage all citizens to be engaged in the life of the community and we delight in the role it plays in promoting civic engagement through volunteerism. Fostering government and private support of tax incentives for mileage, flextime, corporate incentives, academic credit, liability protection, and strong infrastructures promotes participation from all sectors of society. We must be careful, however, that we do not focus all resources on formalized service opportunities such as AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve grants. These programs, while meaningful and productive, are not fully inclusive. They do not include corporate and/or government employee volunteers, traditional volunteers, or the vast potential reservoir of citizen activists who exist in our communities.

Government at the federal, state, and local levels can do more to strengthen the environment that enables citizens to be engaged. As major employers in this country, federal and state government can review their policies and attitudes toward volunteerism. They can promote, encourage, and perhaps offer incentives that allow employees the freedom to make a meaningful contribution of their time, talents, and energies. Government can serve as a leader in the promotion of "workplace volunteerism" by its employees.

Government—federal and state—can play a role in the dialogue with the business sector to encourage corporations to become civic partners through employee volunteerism. Resources should be devoted to incentives for corporate participation similar to the tax incentives given corporations to build in certain locations.

Government has a role in encouraging academic communities to continue to develop the research and body of knowl-

edge to guide professionalism in volunteer administration and to develop interdisciplinary courses for managing volunteers in various settings, such as corporate, educational, non-profit, and government.

Government should designate financial resources to public relations campaigns to promote all forms of citizen participation such as volunteerism, national service, and service learning opportunities.

Government can provide financial resources and encourage the philanthropic community to support efforts in the non-profit community to build the infrastructure that allows citizen volunteers to contribute in meaningful, significant ways to the quality of life within their communities.

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#### REFERENCES

- Noyes, K. H. & Ellis, S. J. (1990). *By the people: A history of Americans as volunteers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 356-357.