

VOLUNTEERISM AND THE GOVERNMENT SECTOR

By Susan J. Ellis

President Abraham Lincoln's immortal phrase that the United States government is "of the people, by the people, for the people" is proven every day by volunteers. The fact is that despite what some may think, not every government worker is on the payroll.

A common misconception is that volunteering involves activities solely for nonprofit organizations. Because of the term "voluntary sector," the general presumption is that volunteer work and private voluntary agencies go hand in hand. This is too narrow a view. In fact, a very large percentage of American volunteers assist government units at the local, county, state and national levels.

Consider the following places where volunteers can routinely be found:

- Public schools and public libraries.
- Local parks and recreation programs.
- Community and U.S. military and veterans hospitals.
- Centers for services to the aging.
- Facilities housing family and child counseling and protection services.
- Courts, jails and prisons, probation and parole departments.
- Homeless shelters.

In these settings, citizens work as volunteers alongside employees as a team. They perform assignments identified by the staff as appropriate and important.

An examination of the interrelationship of government and volunteering in the United States must take into account four distinct categories:

- Volunteering done on behalf of government by citizen volunteers, by choice and without remuneration.
- Volunteering done by government officials and employees as an extension of their commitment to the community, but without additional compensation.
- Citizen activities seeking to affect political or social life through lobbying, protesting, advocating or advising on a wide range of issues.
- Government programs that bring about community service by special categories of citizens. This includes voluntary but stipended service and "mandated" service, particularly within school districts, the criminal justice system and the new welfare reform system. This category can be controversial.

Volunteering by Citizens

U.S. citizens are accustomed to a high standard of police, fire and emergency services. In rural areas, these would be nonexistent if it were not for the involvement of community members as volunteers. Even in the nation's largest cities, volunteers are a critical element in ensuring public safety. Indeed, volunteers account for an astonishing 80 percent of the national firefighting force. Depending on the size of the community, there may be a paid fire chief, quasi-governmental authority and some flow of tax dollars. Still, most of those who are involved in all aspects of firefighting, running the companies, and fundraising to purchase equipment are volunteers. Suburban communities may supplement a weekday paid force with evening and weekend volunteers, when commuting homeowners are back in their houses, close enough to respond to an alarm.

Similarly, other emergency services rely on volunteer effort. Citizen first-aid specialists serve industry and the community. They staff volunteer ambulance corps and paramedical groups, and provide first response to rescue

people who are trapped or immobilized in some way. This even extends to the National Ski Patrol that offers aid on wintry mountain slopes.

Volunteers are the silver lining in the cloud of disaster. They mobilize to assist officials in time of flood, fire, earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes; build barricades and dikes; provide emergency shelter and care; clear debris; and then help to rebuild afterward.

Crime prevention is another focal point of volunteer activity. Citizens police their own communities in "neighborhood watches" for mutual protection, and provide safe houses for children along school routes. Volunteers directly support police departments by handling non-emergency police functions such as supporting juvenile diversion activities, assisting at parades and public ceremonies, and traffic control. They staff police reserve units and auxiliaries; gather and analyze statistics. "Crimesolvers" projects encourage witnesses to provide clues that can lead to the apprehension of criminals. Volunteers also help in searches for missing persons. Finally, civilian review boards monitor police department practices to ensure compliance with legal standards and human rights protections.

In cases where crime could not be prevented, volunteers are also on hand to help the courts and the correctional system. They handle a variety of assignments -- serving as court watchers, probation and parole mentors, temporary foster parents, counselors and recreation aides. Teen juries of youthful volunteers help in reaching dispositions for juvenile offenders, while adult volunteers staff arbitration boards. Volunteers assist victims of crime as they go through the legal process and give similar aid to crime witnesses who agree to testify. Finally, the various bar associations -- national, state and local -- consider it a professional obligation to coordinate *pro bono* legal services to indigent clients.

In prisons and correctional institutions, community volunteers visit inmates and act as activity leaders, instructors, lay ministers and counselors. As inmates leave prison, volunteers assist with a variety of re-entry services for ex-offenders, ranging from locating housing and jobs to supportive counseling.

The very word "community" implies mutual aid and cooperative action. Many of the volunteer roles mentioned above contribute substantially to the quality of life in a community. Certainly at the neighborhood level, the integration of local government and its citizens can be quite personal. Government coordination and volunteer action combine to increase public safety, public health and the quality of public education. This even extends to neighborhood clean-up campaigns, anti-litter and "adopt a highway" programs and community gardens. Civic events such as parades, holiday festivities or community concerts may be coordinated by a government employee, but the helping hands (and feet!) of many volunteers are vital.

Some cities and counties have an Office of Volunteers that places interested citizens into assignments, including helping with the daily work of government offices. Registrants at professional volunteer management conferences reflect the wide variety of government staffers who are responsible for recruiting and working with volunteers. In addition to employees connected to the types of volunteer programs already described, paid coordinators of volunteers function at the Internal Revenue Service (its VITA program helps thousands of older and poor citizens to file their tax returns), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (engaging scientists and interested citizens in support of space exploration), and the National Park Service (fielding volunteers at every national park site). Volunteers turn up in many other unexpected places -- such as Virginia Beach, Virginia, where the local streets department recruits neighborhood volunteers to communicate information on street repairs and construction projects. In a time of searching for values, we can look to volunteers as one source of inspiration. Similarly, volunteering in a government program activates citizenship.

There are many reasons for welcoming citizen participation. One is purely economic: Volunteer services stretch available tax dollars to cover even more than would have been possible otherwise. This is a way to keep taxes manageable and still provide seriously needed programs. But the value of volunteering is far greater than financial. When residents participate in providing government services, they develop a sense of ownership, a commitment to community improvement that is both the right and privilege of a taxpayer.

The Military

Americans speak of the U.S. military as a "volunteer army." What we mean, of course, is that it is an army made up of people who chose to enlist (U.S. citizens no longer have a mandatory military service requirement).

Military service for some is a job and for others a career. Its members are salaried, and are offered lifelong financial benefits. But there are unpaid supporters -- volunteers -- on hand as well.

Throughout U.S. history, volunteers have been on the front lines and on the home front in support of war efforts -- and, occasionally, to protest the use of military force. In addition, there is an expansive system of military reserve units, National Guard companies and civil defense programs in place. In times of war, volunteers have provided a wide range of support services to those at the front. The United Service Organization has had an impressive history of arranging tours by leading entertainers and other personalities to troops on the battlefronts, and also continues to provide facilities for rest and recuperation to military personnel on leave.

Voluntary support involves other projects as well -- for instance, keeping lines of communication open to fighting men and women through correspondence and holiday gift-giving, programs that normally mobilize thousands, often including elementary schoolchildren and civic groups. This support extends to families awaiting the return of loved ones in the military. Think, for a moment, about the volunteers who coordinated the yellow ribbon distributions and placements across the United States during Operation Desert Storm. Other citizens spend leisure time working in veterans hospitals. Furthermore, citizen efforts rally all Americans to commemorate fallen personnel on specific holidays, and to raise funds for statues and monuments in their memory.

Each branch of the armed services maintains a social service delivery system that involves volunteers in counseling service people and their families, particularly for marital problems and spouse employment (examples are the Army Community Service and the National Guard Family Support Program). When the military and the nation are faced with concerns about personnel missing in action, or captured as prisoners of war, or held hostage, affected families and other volunteers work to obtain information about, and speed the return of, these Americans in peril.

Often, military campaigns have elicited strong responses from groups of citizens. Whether the scale of activity is modest -- such as writing individual letters to legislators -- or more ambitious -- such as participating in a protest rally in Washington -- it is volunteer-driven. It is a sign of a healthy democracy that debate about military engagement can occur publicly. And both sides use the same tactics: petitions, marches, rallies and the efforts of as many volunteers as possible.

Volunteering by Government Officials

Although the general impression is that government workers are paid, the fact is that in smaller and rural communities, many local government services are only needed on a part-time basis. It is possible to extend resources, therefore, by having a community's citizenry volunteering for a host of responsibilities. In tiny communities, town officials often serve without pay or with only a modest stipend for expenses. Similarly, all levels of government create "commissions," advisory councils and task forces to oversee or advise on a wide array of public activities. Members of these groups are usually drawn from the private sector, and therefore receive little or no remuneration. School board members, though typically elected, also serve without a salary.

It is interesting to note that every candidate for political office is a "volunteer." None receives a government paycheck until (and unless) elected. The U.S. political process requires the involvement of thousands of volunteers for election campaigns and political party activities -- ranging from distributing leaflets to monitoring the polls on Election Day.

Workplace volunteering is of keen interest these days. A growing number of businesses are encouraging their employees to volunteer on their own time -- and even on company time.

Government, as a major employer, also sponsors this type of community building. Police officers, for example, organize volunteer opportunities, often aimed at young people. Local chapters of the Police Athletic League and DARE (a drug awareness program in primary and secondary schools across the United States) exist only because of volunteers. Throughout the country, government agencies at every level participate in locally sponsored days of service, encouraging teams of employees, for instance, to clean up parks. On an individual basis, elected officials often continue personal volunteer work they began before running for office, or accept new volunteer work as role models for others. A number of governors and mayors tutor young people, coach youth sports, or deliver meals to the homebound.

Citizen Advocacy

From the early colonial days, town meetings were vital for fostering participatory democracy. In colonial times, the town meeting represented local government in its totality, a tradition upheld today in only a few New England towns. But even as the 20th century comes to a close, town meetings and public hearings bring out vocal and active citizens seeking input on the policies that affect their lives. Every time an American writes to his or her Congressional representative, it is volunteerism in action. So, too, are all other advocacies for a cause on all levels of government -- to change laws and procedures, to educate the public or to enhance a community -- through marches and other forms of demonstration. The causes can be as modest as the placement of traffic signals and speed bumps in a local neighborhood.

Government-Created Community Service

One final example of volunteerism within government is the community service that has arisen as a result of government legislation. It has given rise to a burning question that preoccupies many in the volunteer sectors -- namely, can those who are paid for work or compelled to do it be identified as volunteers?

On a national level, this issue first arose when President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps in 1961. The U.S. Government offered funds for lodging, food and incidentals to anyone making an intensive two-year commitment to represent the United States in service abroad. As Peace Corps members would not be allowed to hold an outside paying job during their tenure, this modest monthly sum was designed to ensure that any qualified American -- on any economic level -- could join the Peace Corps. Members who have served, and still serve, do so voluntarily. As a result, notwithstanding the subsidy for expenses, Peace Corps members, as well as participants in VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), are regarded as volunteers. (The latest example of stipended service, AmeriCorps, promulgated under President Clinton, provides an end-of-term education benefit to the living allowance sum.)

To coordinate these programs, known collectively as "national service," President Nixon created a U.S. Government agency called ACTION. President Clinton replaced it with a broader-based body, the Corporation for National and Community Service. It includes AmeriCorps, the Senior Corps (for citizens 55 and above), Learn & Serve America (fostering school-based service) and AmericaReads (a literacy program). Funded by federal tax dollars matched by state and local money, the Corporation fans its participants out into nonprofit agencies, schools or local government projects involving children with special educational, physical or psychological needs.

But despite the enthusiastic participation by tens of thousands of citizens, is this volunteerism? When does a living allowance become a stipend, and when is that considered simply a low-income wage? The debate continues, but as it does, a corps of willing and energetic men and women of all ages provide services they would be unlikely or unable to offer without the modest expense sums.

Another unusual example of government-created community service is the battery of programs established to enable people to "work off" taxes or fines. Seniors on fixed incomes or low-income wage-earners are afforded the chance to contribute a certain number of hours of community service annually so as to reduce or eliminate any cash payment obligations they may have to their jurisdiction. These programs are locally based; there is no comparable national scheme. And it is the citizen's choice whether or not to participate. Generally, though, the risks are few and opportunities great.

This issue of community service comes up in other spheres as well. Public schools set requirements for students to complete a fixed number of hours of service in their locale as a prerequisite for graduation. Courts offer adults and juveniles the choice of a prescribed number of hours of service in lieu of fine or incarceration (this is often called "alternative sentencing"), or ordering the offender to provide such service in addition to probation or parole. And welfare reform efforts add the option of service to that of payroll employment or education as a way to maintain public assistance benefits.

Because of the conflict over terms and definitions that can arise, these types of programs are generally referred to as "community service" rather than "volunteering." In practice, though, an organization's volunteer office accepts, trains and manages these special categories of workers. Furthermore, statistics show that in many instances, if these workers are treated well and enjoy their assignments, a percentage of them will continue their tasks beyond

the minimum number of hours specified. In the last analysis, then, mandated or directed service can lead, eventually, to true volunteerism.

As we have seen, there are many dimensions to government-related volunteering. In the United States, government at all levels depends upon citizen involvement in a wide variety of ways part of the nature of civil society and civic engagement. When one considers the services performed by government employees, and by citizens deployed through specific government volunteer programs, the importance of this facet of the volunteer world becomes mightily clear.

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