

# Vision to Reality: A New Future for Volunteer Administration in Minnesota

Judie Russell and Carol Thompson

In 2001, voluntary service in the United States reached an estimated \$239 billion, according to the Independent Sector. Without this vital asset, services offered by non-profits, government and educational institutions would be profoundly diminished. Yet those who mobilize this tremendous resource often lack credibility. Simply put, volunteer administration is not seen as a real profession.

Professional associations have long been recognized as strategic to professionalism. In Minnesota, until recently some 40 networks connected those who managed voluntary effort. This led to fragmentation, duplication of effort, competition for leadership, and most importantly, no common voice. Something needed to change.

In 1997, a small group of dedicated leaders drafted a vision called "*Volunteer Leadership 2000*." The goal was to take the profession to a higher level of development, visibility and credibility by creating one statewide professional association to speak with a powerful voice for and about volunteerism in the state of Minnesota.

## FROM VISION TO REALITY

What does it take to unite geographically and philosophically diverse networks? Fascinating and frustrating, the process used in Minnesota was a gradual distilling of ideas and a grand exercise in soul searching. *What were volunteer administrators both willing to give and to give up?* We have summarized here the steps taken and lessons learned, so that others may learn from our struggles and successes.

**Bring all the players to the table.** We launched the process by bringing together representatives of over 30 networks and affiliated organizations, including the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services (MOCVS) and the Upper Midwest Volunteer Action Centers. Our goals were to identify barriers, build consensus, and identify leadership.

The process of getting agreement from disparate and often unempowered groups across a large geographic area is difficult and complex. We looked for ways to move members of all networks toward consensus. An early key step was seeking written commitment. Sixteen networks pledged to work together by signing a "Letter of Intent."

**Build committed and sustained leadership.** It took three years from the beginning of the planning process until the new association was launched. It is difficult to sustain enthusiasm and intense engagement for such an extended period of time. Aim for two years maximum.

The enormity and complexity of this project called for a high level of commitment and a firm pledge to see it through. A core group of planners emerged to form the Executive Planning Team of Volunteer Leadership 2000. Many people worked long and hard over the years, but two key leaders emerged and committed to stay the course. Turnover on the planning team proved disruptive and difficult to manage, so this consistency was critical to the ultimate success of the project.

---

*Judie Russell*, Director of Volunteer Services for Children's Home Society of Minnesota, is a Licensed Social Worker and has over 30 years of professional experience in Human Services. Russell has served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Volunteer Center in St. Paul, as co-chair of the Advisory Council for the United Way of Minneapolis Volunteer Center, as a consultant and trainer in Volunteer Administration, and as past president of the Minnesota Association of Volunteer Directors. She is a frequent presenter at state and national conferences and facilitated the Volunteer Leadership 2000 process.

*Carol Thompson* has worked in leadership roles in volunteer management for more than 20 years. She directed the volunteer program at Planned Parenthood of MN/SD when it received the Planned Parenthood Federation of America 1998 Affiliate Excellence Award. She was a charter member of the Planned Parenthood Network of Volunteer Advocates Steering Committee and recently chaired a sector-specific network within MAVA known as Administrators of Healthcare Volunteers (AHV). Thompson served in a leadership capacity with the Volunteer Leadership 2000 process for over three years.

**Articulate the vision.** Early in the process the team developed the essential building blocks for the new association: mission, vision, values and guiding principles. Agreement around these vital elements built consensus and excitement. In naming the association, planners sought to avoid duplication and to be inclusive. The name, Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA), emerged and provided a link to international identity through AVA.

**Design it.** Planners struggled with two critical challenges:

- Accommodating the interests of sector-specific and geographically-based networks.
- Achieving the necessary mass to become one large, strong statewide association.

MAVA emerged as an umbrella organization to bring together smaller networks. It has one governing body. Individual members join MAVA and may opt to join affiliated networks of their choice. Since all central functions are handled by MAVA, the structure of the networks has been greatly simplified, virtually eliminating competition for leadership.

MAVA sought ways to enhance networking opportunities while offering the benefits of a larger and stronger association. MAVA holds quarterly meetings with top-notch educational presentations, networking, and a business meeting and the networks within MAVA may, if they wish, hold additional events.

**Articulate the member benefits.** Defining member benefits proved to be a classic “chicken and egg” dilemma. Potential member networks asked, “What will we get for our money?” while the planning team asked “What benefits do you want and need?” While MAVA would offer typical member benefits of any professional association, the planning team continued to stress the overarching benefits:

- One strong statewide association to speak with a common voice
- More effective use of human and financial resources

- Enhanced professional development, and visibility and credibility for the profession.

Another important and new benefit was a part-time executive director, a bold new step in Minnesota for an association representing volunteer administrators.

**Communicate, communicate, communicate.** The planning team developed consistent messages, clear and powerful, to help others understand the vision. For example:

- A series of short progress reports distributed statewide
- An information packet to answer questions, explain why the new association was needed, how it would be structured and how to join
- A PowerPoint presentation delivered around the state.

We cannot emphasize enough the need for good, clear communication to create buy-in. Address skepticism and build trust with face to face communication whenever possible. Be prepared to answer tough questions. How will you finance this venture? Won't my network lose its identity? How many sets of mailing labels will we get? All questions, big and small, were welcomed.

**Get down to brass tacks.** Operational planning was a multifaceted task. Decisions were numerous and complex.

- *What would it take to change many networks and associations into one alliance?*
- *Would any of the networks dissolve?*
- *Would any retain an identity?*
- *What legal steps would it take to construct this new alliance?*

While busy trying to sell the concept, the planning team also orchestrated the necessary operational planning:

- Developing by-laws
- Facilitating discussion with legal counsel
- Securing start-up funding
- Guiding networks with resolutions to join
- Hiring an executive director
- Recruiting the first board of directors
- Planning a kick-off event

**Transition to the new association.** Moving from the old to the new was complex and required legal counsel. To save time and money, a plan emerged to use the existing 501(c)(3) IRS designation of the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Directors (MAVD), one of the older statewide associations, as the legal foundation. MAVD changed its name to the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, accepted the resignation of its board of directors, and voted in a new board representative of the new member groups.

Simultaneously, individual networks needed to make a decision: *Continue as a small network with little impact, or join the new alliance and contribute to a strong professional association.* At last, four of the largest and strongest associations voted to form the new alliance. These included:

- Minnesota Association for Volunteer Directors
  - Corporate Volunteer Council
  - Minnesota Council of Directors of Health Care Volunteers
  - Directors of Church Volunteer Ministries
- Three additional geographically based networks also joined.

**Keep the faith.** Various obstacles surfaced periodically. There was concern about loss of identity and reluctance to commit too quickly to a new idea. Many adopted a “wait and see” approach, a direct threat to the success of the new association since a minimum critical membership mass was needed for the association to survive financially. Many objected to the \$50 annual membership dues, a clear indication that they saw their daily occupation as a job, not as a profession.

Participants in the process changed as individual lives and jobs changed. For others, multiple demands interfered with sustained effort. To the planning team, it often seemed like taking two steps forward, then one back. Re-education around the vision was continuous. Affirmation of leadership was critical. A fervent belief in the value of creating one strong statewide association sustained the planning team and moved it to success.

**Celebrate and launch.** Three years of activity culminated in a kick-off event in November 2001. Susan Ellis, president of Energize, Inc., joined the celebration as keynote speaker. Our dream was realized as over 400 professionals across the state became members of the new alliance!

By the end of 2001 the vision of Volunteer Leadership 2000 was achieved. Minnesota had developed a new model for a new century.

## EVALUATING THE FIRST YEAR OF OPERATION

Since the launch of MAVA, events occurred in Minnesota that showed us how timely the vision was. Six weeks after the launch, the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services was cut from the governor's budget. Volunteer directors lost an important resource and the new association, housed in the MOCVS office, even lost its office space.

Resources to volunteer centers have eroded, services are diminished, and some have closed. More recently, nonprofits face major cuts in government funding and reduced revenues from many other sources. Jobs are disappearing, and those who stay are asked to do more with less. More than ever, it is a time when professionals in this field need representation. A strong statewide association has never been more important.

It is timely to reflect not only on how the association was formed, but also on what lies ahead. *What does the future look like?*

**Funding:** A planning grant and subsequent implementation grant provided an initial financial base, but funding remains a concern and a critical issue. Income from membership at or near its current level will not be sufficient to support the work of the association. Funding partners have emerged in our state's Learn and Serve, for joint statewide workshops, and the Bremer Foundation, to connect and build capacity in greater Minnesota.

**Membership:** Building MAVA membership to twice or three times its current level must take priority. We need to learn what

various constituencies want and need, and find ways to meet those needs. All must be part of this alliance. As other networks face the dilemma of continually shrinking resources, joining MAVA will become a more attractive option.

**Professional education:** Professional education is a key benefit. Our first year was very successful with over 200 in attendance at each of four educational sessions, but members in remote parts of Minnesota cannot always attend. Technology will help. Our Web site ([www.mavanetwork.org](http://www.mavanetwork.org)) is up and running, with biweekly updates. A "Traveling Trainer" model is being explored, with members as presenters.

**Advocacy:** Creating a common voice was a critical goal of the new alliance. Finding a way to carry that out is more difficult. The alliance has created key messages, defined an advocacy plan, and has partnered with the Minnesota Council of Non-Profits and others. Initiatives include training members to speak out internally and externally. An active committee is poised to respond when opportunity arises.

**Governance:** The initial board was charged with building a foundation for the new association and implementing start-up activities. Focusing on the big picture during the first year was a challenge. Building working relationships at the board level and learning to work with an executive director were also challenges. An active Nominations Committee to develop future leaders is critical.

**Strategic Planning:** One would think that, given the newness of this association, strategic planning might be less critical. Nothing could be farther from our actual experience. Since the kick-off, changes in the climate in which we work have been profound. We must continue to focus on how we fit and identify opportunities that will benefit us. We have used every opportunity to seek input from members, including conducting a facilitated strategic planning session with board members, past and present, and

community partners. Focus groups are being planned to collect critical information about needs and resources in greater Minnesota.

## 2003 AND BEYOND

MAVA has created a sense of cohesiveness, of shared leadership and of hope for impacting concerns, but there is still much to be done. While pooling leadership and resources seems to be an ideal direction in these difficult times, participation must be statewide and all must benefit. Our hope is that with continued hard work, the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration will grow in size and strength. We have a strong vision and passion for the future. We intend to be an effective voice for the critical role volunteer administration plays in successful citizen participation in the state of Minnesota.