

# Count Us In:

## Public Broadcasting's Volunteer Amendment

By Phyllis S. Dennergy

In November 1978, President Carter signed the landmark Public Telecommunications Financing Act. Passed in the waning hours of the 95th Congress, the Act signifies the greatest-ever federal commitment to the support of American public broadcasting. Over a three-year period (fiscal 1981-83), the Act authorizes a total appropriation of \$600 million to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the nonprofit body which helps fund this country's 285 public television stations and more than 200 full-scale public radio facilities.

As is the case with every law making its way through the legislative process, the Telecommunications Act was the product of countless hours of deliberation, involving hundreds of players and a typical smattering of behind-the-scenes drama.

I was one of those players. In the 18 months which preceded Mr. Carter's approval of the Telecommunications Act, Capitol Hill was my surrogate place of residence. Legislative aides and lobbyists became surrogate

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neighbors. My vocal chords became my most precious resource. My feet became the objects of constant abuse. My rewards came in new-found knowledge and a sense of achievement, not at all in terms of material gain.

I am a public broadcasting volunteer. In the 21 years I have worked on behalf of public TV and radio, I have never collected a paycheck. Nor have any of the tens of thousands of Americans who each year give their time in helping non-commercial broadcasting stay alive.

Through the efforts of volunteers, public stations across the country have been able to stretch meager budgets further than imaginable. Public broadcasting volunteers are involved in virtually every aspect of station operations — from the mundane but necessary stamp-licking and phone-answering, to the ringing of doorbells, to running cameras and occasionally performing on air. The benefits to the stations are obvious; for every post filled by a volunteer worker a professional is freed to work on the most pressing priorities.

With the passage of the Telecommunications Act, stations

will accrue a new, and equally significant, benefit from volunteerism - a benefit which, according to current estimates, will be worth no less than \$20 million annually to the system.

That is the legacy of my 18 months on Capitol Hill: an amendment to the Telecommunications Act which will allow stations to count the time dedicated by volunteer workers as "gifts in kind" in order to generate additional federal funding.

An explanation is in order. The \$600 million for CPB authorized by the Telecommunications Act is by no means automatic. Recognizing that public broadcasting, in order to be free of any specter of government interference in its day-to-day affairs, must itself account for the lion's share of its own revenues, Congress placed a major condition on the availability of federal funds to CPB. The Act stipulates that for each federal dollar appropriated, public broadcasting must come up with \$2 from other sources.

Thus, to free up the \$180 million authorized by the Act for FY 1981, public broadcasting will have to earn \$360 million on its own. In the second year, when the federal authorization rises to \$200 million, public broadcasting's matching share will be \$400 million. An in FY 1983, with the authorization increasing to \$220 million, public broadcasting's share would be a whopping \$440 million. That's nearly as much as public broadcasting gathered in total last year, from the federal government and all other sources.

Clearly, public broadcasting has its work cut out for it. And when you examine the current state of affairs, it is evident that the medium is going to need all the help it can get in raising enough nonfederal revenue to generate all the available federal dollars.

Presently, public broadcasting's nonfederal income is a mixed bag, with money coming from many diverse sources. Most of these sources are necessarily limited. Foundation grants, for instance, are drying up in our inflation-ridden economy. Corporate underwriting, while on the increase, can never be allowed to predominate. State and local tax support is problematical. Colleges and universities have yet to commit their fair share. The biggest potential growth area is the contributions of individual viewers. And public broadcasting is already under attack for the frequency of its on-air fund raising appeals.

Volunteer energy is one commodity that is not in short supply, nor is there a limit on its potential volume. The new volunteer amendment, therefore, takes on added significance.

Essentially, it will work like this: CPB will set up a procedure by which each station can keep an accurate track on the amount of time contributed by each volunteer worker. Each volunteer activity will be assigned a uniform per-hour monetary value. (A system for determining this value is currently being prepared.) On a periodic basis, the stations will forward their records of volunteer time commitments to CPB, which will compute a national dollar total. As authorized by the amendment, public broadcasting will be able to attribute up to 5% of its non-federal revenues to volunteer services in seeking the full 2:1 federal match.

How did all this come about? At the risk of sounding gratuitous, my personal role in the scenario was not insignificant. To my consternation, the volunteer provision of the Telecommunications Act is now popularly known as the "Dennery Amendment." That's like calling the Declaration of Independence the "Jefferson Paper." Many, both in and outside of public

broadcasting, played a part in enacting the amendment and all deserve a share of the credit.

The initiative, however, was a product of my household if not of my own creativity. The real author of the concept is my husband, Moise W. Dennerly, a New Orleans attorney. For more than two decades, Moise has kept the home fires burning while I scurried about the country in pursuit of one public broadcasting cause or another. One morning in June 1977, Moise elected to express his sentiments about same at the breakfast table.

"You spend more time working for public broadcasting each week than I spend in my practice," he observed. "Why can't public broadcasting get some credit for all that time?" In other institutions, Moise noted, volunteer services are routinely counted as "gifts in kind" with a fixed dollar value for accounting purposes. Here, we had literally tens of thousands of public broadcasting volunteers working in an industry that is perpetually underfunded. And while public broadcasting was getting the benefits of their labor, the customary financial bonus was conspicuously absent.

That got me to wondering why. As it turned out, the then-current public broadcasting act, in which federal funds were dispensed under a 2.5:1 match, did not ignore volunteer credits; it specifically disallowed them.

This struck me as peculiar, given the fact that public broadcasting, by its very nature, is geared toward the individual. volunteerism in public broadcasting is more than a daytime diversion for homemakers with time on their hands. It's a way in which thousands of Americans — many of whom cannot personally afford a substantial contribution to their stations — can show their support.

My initial reaction to this concept was buttressed by some new revelations, courtesy of the staff of my friend and congresswoman, Lindy Boggs (D-La.). They learned that the prohibition against volunteer credits in public broadcasting was not only unusual, it was an exception to a clearly-defined precedent.

Title 45 of the Public Welfare Act states: "Volunteered service may be counted as matching or cost sharing if it is an integral and necessary part of the approved program." There was no doubt in my mind that public broadcasting volunteer services are "integral and necessary." Without them, many stations would have to cut back services dramatically. A few might not even exist.

Congresswoman Boggs' office reported that such federally-funded programs as Operation Head Start, the Community Services Administration and the United Planning Organization had been counting their volunteer services as "gifts in kind" for years. Indeed, back in 1975, there had even been a uniform dollar value of \$4.75 per hour for these services.

What remained, then, was to rewrite the law.

As a trained volunteer, accustomed to working at the Board level, and with paid staff, I knew that the obstacles to achieving such a formidable objective were numerous. I knew the support I could count on would be more rhetorical than material. I knew I would have to do a lot of homework. I knew that the right people talking with the right people was of primary importance. I knew that I had to have my judgment checked regularly. But of the greatest significance, I knew that I would have to have two very strong legs to walk the halls of Congress.

One of the first steps resulted from a call from the office of Representative Albert Gore, Jr. (D-Tenn.), a member of the House Communications Subcommittee. Congressman Gore was interested. Indeed, he expressed a willingness to introduce a volunteer amendment to the Telecommunications Act then under construction. But having language on the Record carries no great meaning absent substantial political support.

Filling that void was largely my responsibility. In the next several months, my expeditions to Washington took me to almost every member of the Communications Subcommittees in both the House and Senate. A substantial aspect of the mobilizing effort involved eliciting support from the public station managers in each of the states and districts where Committee members resided. Politically, it was imperative to keep every manager informed whenever I was planning a visit to his representative. And having their endorsement in my pocket during that visit gave me instant credibility. Public broadcasting is highly regarded by most Committee members. The principal task centered not so much on selling the medium as in educating people on the Hill on how heavily public broadcasting does depend on volunteer services.

But at the same time, these representatives were dealing with a parent bill - the Public Telecommunications Act - which was growing more complex as the days wore on. Public broadcasting was the object of considerable scrutiny, as vested interests lined up to inject a particular concern into the legislative process. There were the EEO advocates; those who felt that public radio wasn't getting a fair shake; independent producers who wanted greater access to the national schedule; labor unions who expressed concern over the quantity of British productions on PBS. And then there were the

public broadcasters themselves, whose principal battle was to seek adequate funding for a service that has been on a starvation diet since its inception. It was enough to confuse the most thorough thinkers, and I had to wait my turn in line.

But by January 1978, I had planted enough seeds in the proper places so that the volunteer issue was, if nothing else, a topic for discussion. In that month, it became something more, as the PBS Board of Directors, meeting in New Orleans, passed a resolution urging that "the reasonable value" of volunteer support be included against the federal match.

The following month, I journeyed to San Francisco where congressman Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Cal.), Chairman of the House Communications Subcommittee, was scheduled to address the annual meeting of National Public Radio. Catching Van Deerlin at his hotel prior to his scheduled remarks, I had my first real opportunity to seek his direct support face-to-face. Van Deerlin included the concept in his speech later that day.

By the spring, we had reached the stage where drafting formal language to an amendment was a priority. Representative Gore invited me to come to Washington to work with his staff in the drafting process. In the ensuing days, I again made the rounds to Committee members. While no amendment had been formally introduced by the time the Van Deerlin Subcommittee held its hearings on the Telecommunications Act, we had gained sufficient support in the Subcommittee to give us reason for optimism.

The Van Deerlin Subcommittee had scheduled its mark-up of the Telecommunications Act for May 15. Congressman Gore planned to introduce the amendment at that time. But 48 hours before the Subcommittee was

scheduled to meet, the bottom dropped out.

A communications breakdown had resulted in a letter from a prominent public broadcaster to each member of the House Subcommittee in opposition to the amendment. In the course of two days my support in the Subcommittee, which had numbered at least two-thirds of the membership, had almost completely eroded.

It was the worst day of my life. By failing to keep certain influential people in the industry apprised of my progress, I had come to the brink of destroying months of labor. But what was worse, I had to face up to the possibility that thousands of volunteers would be deprived of the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts on public broadcasting's behalf would have no long-term consequences. It was this greater deprivation that troubled me most deeply.

Returning to my hotel, I called my husband, urgently in need of counsel, if not sympathy. Moise listened carefully. And then he said the only thing that would have made sense at that time.

"What you're going to do, Phyllis, is start all over again."

So I made the rounds again, contacting every Subcommittee member, making myself visible to every staff assistant. After two scores of phone calls and miles of trudging down congressional corridors, I had convinced the majority of the Subcommittee of the importance of volunteer support.

Congressman Gore's proposed amendment passed the Subcommittee on May 15 - unanimously. The Telecommunications Act, with the "Dennery Amendment" intact, passed the full House in July.

The going was a bit tougher in the Senate. While I had contacted all the appropriate Committee members there, my emphasis was in the House. Consequently, the Senate version of the Telecommunications Act, which was passed in September 1978, contained no volunteer amendment.

When the Telecommunications Act went to the Senate floor, Senator J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.) proposed that a volunteer amendment be included. But Senator Ernest Hollings, Chairman of the Senate Communications Subcommittee, required more information.

Hollings, however, maintained an open mind on the question. He agreed that if we could come up with sufficient documentation he would support a volunteer amendment when House and Senate conferees met the following month to resolve conflicts in their respective versions of the parent Act.

CPB went to work in putting together a document that made a rational case for the volunteer amendment. Apparently, it was effective enough to satisfy Senator Hollings.

When the conferees met in October, Hollings put his support in the form of a question: "Ladies and gentlemen, don't you think we should go ahead and adopt a volunteer amendment so that that nice lady from New Orleans does not have to move to Washington to continue knocking on our doors?"

That was that. The conference report, with the "Dennery Amendment" intact, was adopted by the conferees and passed both houses within a few days.

And for the first time in more than a year, I was able to fully relax.

Nearly two years have elapsed since I made the commitment to

tell the story of public broadcasting volunteerism in Washington. There had been time to reflect, and time to re-evaluate my actions. I know I have grown. I know, ultimately, that good will result from the work. It was exciting to realize that a citizen with an idea can succeed in having that idea made law if the idea is just. But, truthfully, I have experienced feelings of selfishness as well.

Where, I have asked myself, are the personal rewards? Where is the emotional slap on the back, the feeling of pride that comes from knowing that personal sacrifice is recognized and applauded? In my months of amateur lobbying, there were too many other concerns to contemplate such comparatively trivial matters. But now that it was over, I was conscious that volunteers like myself need recognition - just like anyone else.

Then in April 1979, the National Center for voluntary Action notified me that it had selected me as one of the recipients of its Activist Award for "unique contributions...to

improving the quality of life in the community." And it was...nice.

Nice, but not euphoric. Welcome, but not all-encompassing. It was, I recognized, anticlimactic.

For 21 years, I had made public broadcasting a non-official career. I had never sought recognition. Formally, I had rarely received any. Now I had, and I suddenly understood that personal acclaim is not the glory that I - or the thousands of volunteers like me - take away from the experience. It is, instead, the inner satisfaction that comes from knowing that what you do with your life is going to benefit others, and benefit society.

That feeling, I have learned, is its own reward.