

Volunteering: The Policy-Maker's Role

By C. William Verity, Jr. and Frank Pace, Jr.

The next five pages contain useful resources, which may be reproduced for use in promoting volunteering among citizens and decision-makers in your community. They are excerpted from the Marshalling Human Resources Committee's booklet, "Volunteers: A Valuable Resource," available from the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives, Washington, DC 20006.

VOLUNTEERING IN THE United States is alive, healthy, and growing. Like the democracy it helped to give us, though, volunteering must be actively preserved and protected. It doesn't just happen.

Volunteering grows out of the leadership of creative, committed people who believe that it is possible to solve problems in ways that help people in need become independent and self-sufficient.

Much of this leadership comes from individual volunteer leaders and from those organizations at the local, state, and national levels that seek to promote more effective volunteer involvement.

But there is also an important role to be played by elected officials and those in key decision-making and resource-allocation roles in both the private and the public sectors.

Elected officials can help increase public awareness of the impor-

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tance of volunteering.

- President Ronald Reagan has chosen to do so through sponsorship of The President's Volunteer Action Awards Program.

- Governor James Hunt of North Carolina spends an hour a week tutoring at a Raleigh high school.

- In 12 states, governors give awards to outstanding volunteers, as do innumerable mayors.

- Many members of Congress help call attention to volunteers through their newsletters, speeches, and insertions in the Congressional Record.

Most importantly, public officials can help give legitimacy to the idea that it is the right and responsibility of citizens to participate fully in the lives of their communities.

Public officials can recognize that volunteering is a legitimate area of public policy discussion.

- Government can both remove impediments and create incentives for people to get involved.

- Congress is currently considering legislation to increase the tax deduction for mileage expenses incurred by volunteers to a level equal to that given paid workers.

- Bills have been introduced to remove the blanket restriction on volunteer involvement in federal agencies.

- Issues for further consideration include state regulations that restrict the volunteer involvement of those drawing unemployment benefits, and the need to alleviate possible liability problems for volunteers.

Public officials can understand the role government has played in

supporting volunteering and the structures through which people volunteer.

- The allocation of public resources in support of programs that maximize volunteer involvement—for example, hospices or neighborhood associations—can stimulate people to volunteer.

- Government has funded demonstration and pilot programs, assisted in the replication of successful programs, and supported technical assistance and training programs.

- Government has also been a heavy user of volunteers—through the stipended full-time and part-time programs at ACTION and the Peace Corps, in the National Park Service, in veterans' programs, in counseling small businesses, and in the Department of Agriculture.

- Many states, counties, and cities have established publicly supported offices of volunteer services.

Public officials can accept responsibility for helping to maintain and protect the independence of voluntary organizations.

- Through legislation and regulation, public officials set the pattern for the behavior of government agencies.

- Volunteering could not survive in a hostile public environment in which the desire for dominance by government overwhelmed the urges of people to help themselves and others in the ways they choose.

- If the involvement of Americans as volunteers insures the survival of our democratic institutions, then those institutions must act to preserve the opportunity and ability of citizens to volunteer.

The World of Volunteering: Questions & Answers

Why are volunteers important in the life of a community?

- Volunteers are a cost-effective supplement to paid helpers, enabling both public and private sector agencies and organizations to reach more people with better services at less cost and allowing more paid helpers to better focus their professional skills and energies.
- Although not "free," in that they require appropriate management and support structures, volunteer programs provide services valued at many times the dollars invested.
- Volunteers are an important way of humanizing services, reducing bureaucratic obstacles between consumers and the help they need.
- Through their volunteer involvement, citizens learn more about community needs and resources, and serve as communications links to the entire community.
- Volunteering enables citizens to meet their own needs and to create those self-help and mutual aid efforts that are most appropriate and useful.
- The sheer number of volunteers is staggering. According to the most recent Gallup study, over 80 million Americans volunteered between March 1980 and March 1981.

How has volunteering changed in recent years?

- More Americans than ever before are volunteering in self-help and mutual assistance efforts.
- Volunteering increasingly is an activity involving those at either end of the age spectrum.
- Volunteering is being seen as an integral part of a person's life-long work experience, integrating unpaid work with paid work.
- Volunteerism is increasingly being used as a vehicle for mainstreaming into society those individuals who had formerly been

perceived as recipients of service.

- There has grown up around volunteering a whole army of organizations, scholars, trainers, consultants, and individual leaders. Volunteer service administration is now recognized as a true profession with ethics and standards.

What is volunteering?

Volunteering is the voluntary giving of time and talents to deliver services or perform tasks with no direct financial compensation expected. Volunteering includes the participation of citizens in the direct delivery of service to others; citizen action groups; advocacy for causes, groups, or individuals; participation in the governance of both private and public agencies; self-help and mutual aid endeavors; and a broad range of informal helping activities.

Are voluntarism and volunteerism the same thing?

Not exactly. When people talk about voluntarism, they may or may not be talking about volunteers, because not all voluntary organizations work with volunteers. However, the word "volunteerism," now found in dictionaries, refers solely to volunteering.

Why do people volunteer?

- People volunteer out of a wide range of complex motives. They feel a need to give as well as to receive. And it is the balance between selflessness and selfishness that is essential to sustain the interest of volunteers.
- People volunteer because they see a need and try to fill it—a need for schools, for libraries, for food and clothing, for health and medical services, for beauty and culture.
- People volunteer to satisfy a universal human need for companionship. The satisfaction of work-

ing with others on a common goal, and the sense of belonging that such involvement brings, are central to the volunteer experience.

- People volunteer because they want to help make a change in some aspect of life—a political change, a personal change, a social change, an environmental change, or, people volunteer because they want to preserve what already exists, and to maintain control over their own environments.
- People volunteer because volunteering provides an educational experience available nowhere else.

What does the volunteer get from the experience?

Besides companionship, volunteers frequently report that they acquire information and skills, a break from the routines of paid work, and a sense of responsibility, of being a contributing member of a community.

Who is a volunteer?

Almost everyone is a volunteer at some time in his or her life. Volunteers come from every segment of society, and may include:

- The retired newspaper editor who teaches swimming to the handicapped.
- The business executive who serves on the board of directors of a local nonprofit.
- The family who participates in their neighborhood crime watch.
- The housewife who works at her polling place on election day.
- The citizen who circulates a petition aimed at getting the city to put "no parking" signs on residential streets.
- The usher at church or synagogue.
- The teenager who runs in a marathon to benefit medical research.

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Do older Americans volunteer?

Yes, they do. A 1981 survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons showed that 30 percent of Americans over 55 were serving as volunteers. Of those not volunteering, 20 percent said they were interested in doing so. In broad terms, there are nearly 25 million potential older volunteers, but at present older Americans volunteer in numbers far less than those of other age groups.

Do young people volunteer?

Yes. The 1981 Gallup survey indicates that last year 7.7 million young people aged 14-17, or 53 percent, volunteered.

What kinds of volunteer jobs do young people do well?

When they are treated seriously as responsible people, and are given appropriate training and supervision, young people can do many of the volunteer jobs that adults can do.

Why is it important to challenge young people to volunteer?

Volunteering gives young people meaningful work experience and smoothes the transition from youth to adulthood. Volunteering provides:

- The opportunity to explore career options.
- The opportunity to reinforce and apply the basic skills acquired in academic work, and to gain an understanding of effective work habits.
- The opportunity to make decisions.
- The opportunity to interact with adults.
- The opportunity to serve the community and thereby contribute to the welfare of others.
- The opportunity to test values.

Volunteering provides a means through which young people can explore, question, and decide what it is they wish to be. As a training experience in citizenship, youth volunteering becomes a vital investment in our nation's future.

How do neighborhood groups fit into volunteering?

The biggest growth in recent years

within the volunteer community has been in the area of neighborhood organizations. Such efforts include local crime prevention, clean-up campaigns, child-care services, and housing and street repair. Neighborhood-based volunteering by its nature can be flexible and quickly responsive to needs that arise. Ad hoc groups can form to deal with a specific problem and disperse when that project is completed. Self-help and advocacy groups frequently operate on the neighborhood level, as do community partnerships, which combine private and public resources.

Do people who have paid jobs volunteer?

Yes. A 1981 Gallup survey shows that in fact 55 percent of full-time employed people, both *men* and *women*, are volunteers.

But isn't it true that because more women are working at paid jobs, they are no longer volunteering?

Apparently not. All evidence suggests that working women continue to volunteer. As the role of women has changed, however, so have their requirements for their volunteer work. More flexibility in scheduling, assignments closer to home, and volunteer activities that mothers can share with their children are among the options that allow volunteering to continue to be attractive to women.

Is it true that individuals can receive credit on resumes for volunteer work?

Yes, increasingly employers recognize the valuable experience that volunteer work represents. Largely through the work of a single volunteer, Ruth March of Los Angeles, a growing list of employers in both the private and public sector recognize such experience when considering job applicants. Using and extending the concept and basic I CAN materials developed by the Council of National Organizations for Adult Education (CNO), a coalition of national voluntary organizations, working under the leadership of the American Red Cross, has created a special training program to help

volunteers identify the skills they have gained. Some colleges are giving academic credit for documented learning from volunteer experience as well.

Clearly, volunteers have a role in both the private and public sectors. How, then, are they actually integrated into formal work settings?

● In many formal settings, volunteer staffs are headed by a volunteer coordinator, a director of volunteers, or a volunteer administrator. This position may be full-time or part-time, paid or unpaid, but in most cases will include recruiting, placing, training, supervising, and evaluating volunteers, and planning volunteer activity, for any organizations in which volunteers participate.

● In volunteer organizations, "professional" usually refers to paid staff. The distinction is made on the basis of remuneration, not of skill or competence. Misuse of the term adds strain to the relationship between paid staff and volunteers, because many volunteers are, both by occupation and by the kinds of volunteer work they do, professional in both their skills and their commitment. An attempt to substitute the term "paid staff" for "professional" would represent a step toward easing what is often an ambiguous relationship.

Is volunteering free?

Not completely. Except in the most informal ad hoc situations, the volunteering requires some financial backing ranging from small out-of-pocket expenses to formal management and support structures. Nevertheless, the dollars spent to support volunteering are returned many times over—volunteers contribute over \$64 billion in service to our economy a year!

Are volunteers the answer to all of America's social problems?

No. While it's important to recognize the role volunteers *can* play in problem solving—a role which has often been underestimated—it is also necessary to avoid unrealistic expectations.

SAMPLE SPEECH

The following remarks are sample speeches written by the staff of the Committee on Marshalling Human Resources. They never have been delivered.

MOST OF US TAKE VOLUNTEERS for granted. We know, of course, that the teenager wheeling flowers down the hospital corridor is a volunteer, as is the neighbor who rings the doorbell asking for a donation for birth defects. We may even have done some volunteering of our own at one time or another. But mostly we give little thought to volunteers, or to volunteering; we just accept them as a natural part of American life.

Just for a moment, imagine what would happen if, *tomorrow*, all volunteers in America went on strike. Of course this is an unlikely prospect, given the commitment and conscientiousness of most American volunteers. But just for a minute imagine what a walk-out by all volunteers would do to a typical day in a typical American community.

Let's begin close to home, at your community hospital. In the lobby, the gift shop, run by volunteers, is closed. At the desk, there is no one to greet and direct visitors. On the upper floors, things are worse. Not only are the candy-strippers gone, but those patients in need of blood transfusions are out of luck—without volunteer blood donors, the shortage would be felt at once.

Down the street, at the home for the elderly, it's even quieter. No one there to read to the blind, talk with the lonely, or wheel the chairs out into the sun.

Church is quiet, too—no choir. No flowers on the altar, no one to pass the collection plate. At the synagogue, much of the warmth and closeness is gone. Many museums



are closed—without volunteer tour guides, there is no one to run the programs.

At the end of the day, after school or after work, there's very little to do. No community soccer games—how could there be, without volunteer parents to coach, and organize, and drive? No scout meetings—who would lead the troops? The alcoholic facing temptation has no AA meeting to turn to; there are no Parents Without Partners meetings for the newly divorced or widowed. Not even the usual choice of television programs is available—without volunteers, the public stations would be off the air.

The point is clear. American civilization as we know it is based, absolutely, on the efforts of volun-

teers. Trying to imagine doing without those efforts is truly a nightmare.

And that's the way it should be!

The tradition of people helping people is as old as our nation itself—in fact, we would not exist today were it not for the volunteers who won our freedom from England in the Revolutionary War. The spirit of volunteerism flows like a deep river through the history of our nation. It's what the American dream is all about.

All of us together can keep that dream from turning into the kind of nightmare just described. If you are not already a volunteer—and more than half of all Americans are—ask your neighbor how you can help. Think back on the institutions that have made up your personal universe, and ask them how you can best serve: the hospital where your children were born; the library where those children enjoyed Saturday story hours, or where you borrow books; the church or synagogue where you were married.

Contact volunteer organizations in your community and ask how you can become part of an established volunteer program. Call your local voluntary action center and ask for people like you. Everyone has a skill to share, a gift of time he or she can give to the community.

Ask your neighbor to volunteer, too. Get the people in your neighborhood together to stage a community spring cleanup of that vacant lot, trashed park or creek that's been an eyesore in your town. That's the American way—people helping each other to solve the problems close to home.

Don't take volunteers for granted. Imagine what life in America would be like without them. Don't let that nightmare come true—VOLUNTEER!



SAMPLE SPEECH

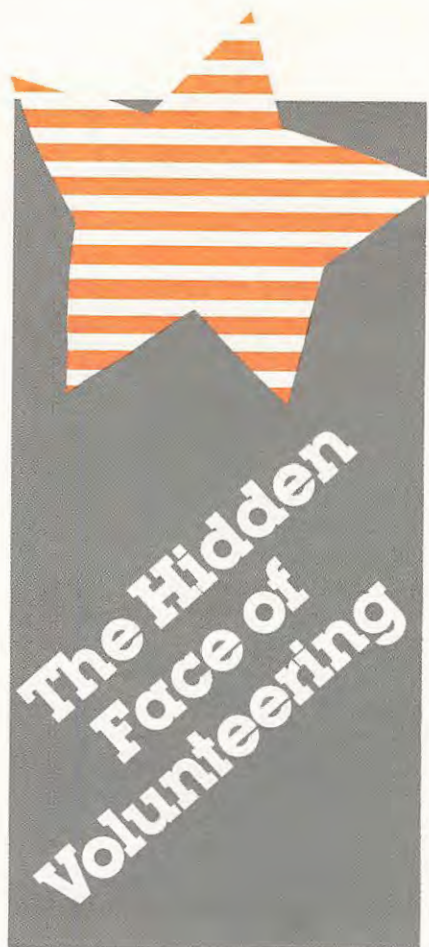
ALL OF US WOULD AGREE that volunteering is a good thing to do. If someone asked us why, we'd probably answer "because it's a way to help other people," or "because it's a way to solve problems." Both these statements are true. Volunteering is a way to help other people, to feel useful, and to help solve many kinds of individual, community, and national problems. But there's another side of volunteering, a hidden side that no one talks about. In fact, it's a very well-kept secret. Everyone who volunteers knows about it, even if no one will say so.

The secret is this: volunteering is good for the volunteer.

Volunteering is good for the volunteer because of the contact it provides with other people—the companionship, the friendship, the fellowship of working with others on a common goal. No one knows this better than the young mother at home with small children, or the newly retired worker who no longer goes out to an office every day. Both share a sense of isolation from the world outside. And both are among the most likely segments of our society to volunteer—for reasons that may be as simple as that need for companionship that we all share.

Volunteering also offers a way to exercise skills, talents, and experience not used in regular paid jobs or in other areas of life. Many of us who have found that paid work doesn't meet all our needs, do find that volunteering offers an opportunity to pursue personal goals and delve into areas of personal interest. The computer programmer who spends her days working with machines may welcome the change of pace that coaching a girls' soccer team provides. The accountant who juggles numbers may find an outlet for his love of art by serving as a tour guide at the local museum on Saturdays.

Volunteering offers a chance to learn new skills as well. Many a woman can attest that the skills she acquired through years of volunteering when her children were young—skills in organizing, managing and fundraising, for example—were exactly the skills that got her hired for a paid position once those children



were grown and she was ready to resume an interrupted career or to begin a new one.

Someone said recently that volunteering is a form of continuing education. That certainly can be true for the volunteer who consciously chooses to volunteer in ways that provide opportunities for learning throughout a lifetime. Most of us discover that learning doesn't stop when our formal schooling comes to an end. Indeed, the healthiest, most active adults continue to learn until they die. One of the best ways to insure this is to volunteer intelligently—that is, to choose the areas we want more knowledge about, and then to immerse ourselves in volunteer work relating to that subject.

The possibilities are endless—volunteering on a rescue squad teaches us emergency medical techniques, working for our political party at the polls expands our understanding of how the political process works, the training given those who staff emergency "hot lines" provides a wealth of information about counseling and human relations.

We live in a mobile society. Americans move more than anybody—it's in our blood, starting with our immigrant and pioneer ancestors. Moving can be tough—even within the same country. In many ways it means starting all over again. Volunteering can ease that transition. What better way to get to know new people and a new community than by making a phone call, offering your services, and getting involved in a volunteer project?

The last way that volunteering is good for the volunteer is perhaps the hardest way to describe. It is that when you volunteer, you begin to claim power over your life. That is, through thoughtful, serious volunteering, people gain the information, the skills, and the relationships needed to understand how the world works, and to participate in making decisions. Particularly when people volunteer to work on issues of deep concern to them, on problems that touch their own lives, volunteering is an empowering experience.

No one is trying to suggest that the only reason to volunteer is because of what it can do for you. We've just said goodbye to a period in our history some called the "me decade." No one wants to go back to that, nor to recommending narcissism as an approach to or a rationalization for volunteering. But when it is perfectly clear that volunteering is good for the volunteer, and when some people don't know that, or are embarrassed to admit it, it's important to point it out.

Nor should it really come as a great surprise. After all, it is an age-old truth of most of the world's religions that in giving we receive and in healing we are healed. But somehow, volunteering has been surrounded with such a halo, such an aura of do-goodism, that we tend to forget that it's not a one-sided experience.

It's time to show the other side, to share this secret. It's time to let people know that volunteer work is and can be a significant part of their life experience which deserves to be taken seriously, to be protected and strengthened. Volunteering is not just a means of getting things done—it is itself a valuable, enriching experience.