

# Points of View

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## Taking Service Seriously

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### The Problem

Sixty years ago, America collapsed into the worst economic depression in its history. The nation responded with the New Deal. Thirty years later, America discovered, amidst growing prosperity, deepening pockets of poverty in its cities and rural areas. The nation responded with the Great Society. Today, once again, America finds itself faced with a social crisis—but a crisis for which our past has not prepared us.

Today's crisis did not happen suddenly or shock us into awareness like the crises of 30 and 60 years ago. It has been with us for some time. We have knowingly watched it grow and worsen. Its manifestations are as familiar as the evening news: inner cities racked by family breakdown, health epidemics, homelessness, crime—schools that no longer educate the young—drug dealing and abuse on an unprecedented scale—older people cast off and forgotten—rural families living in stark desolation.

Today's social ills reflect a crisis of the will and of the spirit, of failed and failing institutions, of a persistently and annoyingly divided nation. A crisis that is quietly, slowly, stealthily ruining lives and shortening futures like a subtle disease rather than a cataclysm, and because it is quiet, slow, and stealthy rather than cataclysmic, seems somehow tolerable. A seemingly enduring crisis that is, nonetheless, jeopardizing America's ability to thrive, economically and politically, now and in the long-run. Unless we turn the corner on the path down which it is sending us, a gradual but unstoppable fall into national

mediocrity may be our inevitable fate.

Fortunately, we have it within our power as a nation to do otherwise. We can—with collaborative effort, good will, and common sense—turn the corner on the present crisis and move with due speed toward a greater destiny of common well-being for all of America.

### The Response

The response to America's social challenge this time around must acknowledge, but then build upon and, in a critical way, depart from the solutions of the past. Simply put, the nation as a whole must be called to respond, not just one or a few parts of it, not just one or the other political party, not just the public or the private sector—but all, together.

Government, of course, must play a crucial role, as it has when America has been confronted by social breakdowns before. It must use its resources intelligently and fairly to fight the systemic causes of social ills and its leadership to spur the creative energies of society. We will not and cannot overcome the present social deficit without our government—at all its levels and all its branches—pointing the way with sound laws, resources, and vision.

However, we must also realize that systemic solutions can have only a limited impact on problems that are often local, particular, and behavioral. Thus, *citizens*—as the workers, club members, faith-observers, and neighbors in their communities—must take responsibility to act, as well. Citizens must act not as a substitute for government but as an essential partner in the effort to restore hope in lives and

communities. Everyone must be asked to pitch in and do his or her part to reverse the forces of social decay. The current crisis will be overcome in no other way.

The mobilization of the American people does not start from scratch. The cherished tradition of voluntarily serving one's community, so important a part of the nation's past, remains a strong current flowing through American society. People selflessly giving their time and talents can be found making a difference every day in communities across the country.

More, much more of this kind of caring and helping is needed to renew this hope for a brighter future. Every individual, every group who reaches out to help, inspires others with their hope. Service, thus, builds on itself, drawing ever more citizens into its conduct—enlarging and deepening its effect on people and neighborhoods. This is what makes the mobilization of the American people an essential ingredient in a national strategy for renewal.

### A Call for Leadership

Numbers alone, of course, are not the answer. Citizens want to know where they are needed and how they can help. They want to be sustained in their service efforts by the organizations to which they belong and by the communities of which they are a part. In short, they want, and they need good leaders.

Citizens will respond to community service leaders:

■ Who are people of hope and vision—who believe that a better America is within our grasp if we but reach out and draw in the hurting, the



angry, the excluded in our midst.

■ Who can motivate others toward that hopeful vision—who believe that each and every person has a gift for helping others.

■ Who can join people in practical, cooperative action—who believe that community service means what it says.

While leaders from all walks of life should be called to this indispensable task, the early initiative must lie with two groups especially well-positioned to influence citizen service: *business leaders and leaders of nonprofit community organizations*. The first heads the most significant untapped source of volunteers (i.e., workers), the second knows the most significant existing source of opportunities for volunteer impact. The successful mobilization of these two groups can set an abiding precedent for all of society.

**Business leaders**, including and especially chief executives, must be challenged to make volunteer service by workers an integral part of what they do as a business, rather than a sideline. They must see that community service by workers is key to addressing the social problems now impairing competitiveness.

**Nonprofit leaders** must be challenged to maximize the willingness and ability of their organizations to tap fully the many talents of community members. They must find ways to blend professional and volunteered resources into greater effectiveness in helping others.

## A Call for National and Local Action

To mobilize business and nonprofit leaders, and other groups of leaders over time—such as senior citizens, disabled Americans, and public employers—attention must be directed to organized forces at both the national and the local levels.

At the *national* level, the *associations* to which leaders belong represent the indispensable channel of access and a meeting ground for stimulating nationwide action. These national entities must be galvanized to make mobilization for community service a high priority in work with their members. National bodies have special strengths in generating credibility and visibility for national causes. These strengths should now

be used in the cause of citizen service directed at building healthy, safe, and just communities.

Ideally, the national level also represents a formal opportunity for business and nonprofit leaders, along with those in government from both political parties, to come together in stimulating citizen initiative aimed at redressing community problems. A coalition or consortium of national leadership from all sectors can galvanize public attention, establish common ends, and marshal the resources for a nationwide undertaking.

While national action is important, the most critical connections must be made *locally*. This is the level at which social problems are not abstractions but concrete realities affecting particular lives. It is also the level at which citizens have the greatest opportunity to shape their society.

## Local diversity is the natural genius of American volunteerism.

Local diversity is the natural genius of American volunteerism. Perhaps in no other country are the people as free or as likely to volunteer for such an endless variety of causes and good deeds. At the same time, however, this treasured variety is a delicate thing. Differences can too easily become reasons for envy and dissension among groups, rather than a source of vitality and flexibility.

The tendency to divisiveness must be overcome by establishing a focal point in every locality for stimulating volunteer service by community members—a neutral meeting ground, sanctioned by leaders (public, as well as private) who represent all parts of the community and supported with the expertise required to be a catalyst for effective citizen service.

The makings of these pivotal institutions already exist in more than 400 cities and towns throughout the nation. They are called *volunteer centers*. While some of these centers have long histories, most have emerged during the past twenty years as communities have increasingly

recognized the need for a formal means of nurturing volunteer involvement. The network of volunteer centers is the foundation on which America can erect the local infrastructure for organizing and supporting social-problem-solving initiative by citizen volunteers. The impetus that centers can provide to “people-raising” will complement the already well-established community systems for “fund-raising” to address serious social needs.

The volunteer centers are also well-positioned to provide a local linkage for national service by young Americans, as this idea is developed and expanded by the new federal Administration and as attention focuses on ways to instill a lifetime commitment to the service ethic. The involvement of young people, as well as all other age groups, in community-building, on both a full-time and part-time basis, must be considered among the highest priorities in the overall effort to mobilize the nation and to create a legacy of service for future generations.

Mobilizing national leaders to action with the nationwide network of volunteer centers brings key elements together in a new strategy for drawing citizens into direct and consequential community service.

## Conclusion

The social deficit now weighing on the nation's conscience did not emerge overnight, and it will not be lifted quickly or easily. The voluntary efforts of community members—when motivated and informed—can have a powerful impact on the amelioration of community problems. In many places, they already do. But turning back the tide of social distress will require, more than anything else, sustained attention. The true test of leadership—at both the national and social levels—is not what it does today. The true test is what it makes possible tomorrow. ■

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*“Taking Service Seriously” is the working title of this article slated for discussion and possible resolution at the 1993 National Community Service Conference. Written by former Foundation Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer David Racine, the article represents the broad philosophical outlook of The Points of Light Foundation's Board of Directors and management.*