

As I See It

Can Self-interest Volunteering Also Serve the Most Needy?

By Patrick Saccomandi

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Demographics are changing the face of volunteering . . . again. The "boomers" have entered the prime family-raising years.

Popular analysis of the past three decades has made us all too familiar with the "passages" made by this generation. From an early activism that was unable to fulfill inflated expectations to a period of retrenchment where growth was focused on the individual to the current family centeredness, the baby-boomers follow their own star. This is a generation that does what it wants when it is ready to do it. And so now it (we/me) is doing families.

Is this good news for volunteering? It certainly could be, as study after study shows that people with families have the highest levels of volunteer and community involvement. But, there is a real concern about the direction of this increased level of volunteering. Will the community as a whole benefit? Or, will we only see a re-circulation of time and talent among the already fortunate, while the poor and others fall even further out of sight?

Will the demands of family life result in self-interest volunteering to the detriment of the less fortunate and isolated?

Looking closer at the issues here, it is quickly understandable why people with families become more active in the community. They need the supportive ties of church, school, neighborhood groups and government organizations. Raising children is a tremendous challenge, and a quality education, safe and attractive neighborhoods, good moral training and everything else that gives kids a happy, secure and enriching environment will be hard fought for by caring parents. Volunteering to help the school and church is one very effective way for a mom or dad to make a difference.

Now, step back for a second and get a look at the bigger picture. Less than one in six American families still fits the

traditional model of a working father and a mother who stays at home with the kids. Where there are two parents, both typically work. Where there is only one parent, that person almost always has to work, or receive some form of public assistance.

The resulting time pressures on parents are immense. When a working couple or single parent comes home at the end of the day, there are only a few precious hours to be a "family" . . . cooking a meal, having some relaxed time together, doing household chores and having some individual private time. Church and school are going to get big chunks of any remaining moments, with Little League, ballet classes, and assorted child-centered activities usually next in line. And, if the neighborhood has problems with drugs, zoning fights, gypsy moths or other maladies, there go a few more evenings.

How does the average family turn its attention from volunteering for its own self-interests to attending to the needs of the homeless, poor kids needing tutoring, and all the other community needs that are not part of immediate family concerns? Are not the poor and the needy with few family connections of their own likely to get very short shrift, if any volunteer help at all?

I believe a pathway of involvement leads from the concerns of the family to those of the community at-large, including the most needy. Part of the issue is seeing the "enlightened self-interest" of helping others so that one's own family is more secure and happy. Another factor is the practical requirements for creating and managing useful community projects and activities that can involve very busy people. And a third element is identifying leadership among volunteers and volunteer administrators that will put all the pieces together and keep them running.

But before I talk of things that need to be done, let's look at some good fortune that gives encouragement for success.

■ **Community institutions.** At least those in the relatively affluent areas are now stronger than ever, in large part because of the increased involvement brought on by the needs of the families that participate in them. These are potentially wonderful vehicles for translating individual action into larger-scale and more sophisticated projects that benefit the whole community.

■ **Human resources.** People in their 30s, 40s and 50s are at the peak of their skills and energy. For the next couple of decades, the bulk of the boomers will be passing through these years, which means in pure terms of available numbers, these will be the richest of times.

■ **Experience.** As a country, we have learned much from the social service efforts of the past 50 years. Unlike the hurried experimentation of the 1930s or the inflated expectations of the 1960s, these are times where the tone is more one of measured effort for realizable goals. Witness, for example, the voter's preferences for candidates of a more practical and workman-like mind.

Now, what might be done to activate our good fortune to assure that volunteering means more people helping others who are more needy than themselves?

Starting with the issue of increasing the awareness of "enlightened self-interest," almost everyone will say that helping the poor has the potential of raising their own quality of life. People generally accept the fact that crime, urban blight and a

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great many other societal ills that affect us all are connected to poverty, racism and the like. So, the enlightened self-interest of helping others as a way of improving our own community is at least a dim candle burning in the back of our brains. Now, how does the flame grow?

I look foremost to our community institutions, where I see a pivotal point for directing self-interest volunteering to include the community at-large. These institutions can offer the time-oppressed parent (and children) an opportunity to do something for themselves and, at the same time, channel a significant amount of resources to others in need.

Churches and synagogues offer a clear example. They usually have the view that religious worship and the support of fellow members are advanced by helping the poor and others in need. There are many obvious examples, such as special collections for the poor, missions, giving shelter to the homeless, and even sponsoring low-income housing projects. Religious bodies set a supportive atmosphere for helping others—making it a shared value of the fellowship of the church—through the following approaches:

1. Build upon the community involvements already underway by individual church members. It is certain that many church members, as individuals and as members of civic or other organizations, are already working on behalf of the homeless and others in need. Churches enlist broader support from among fellow church members in these projects by:—Using church bulletins and other publications to regularly highlight these activities and to identify how to come to the aid of these projects.

—“Skills banking” church members who have an interest in community work. In this way, members who are already active can quickly identify which other members might be interested in working along side them on a project. Skills banking, of course, also serves to identify resources for the needs of the church members and the church proper.

—Establishing a special donation fund to which applications can be made by church members on behalf of their community projects; and, creating a procedure for recommending projects that merit contributions directly by other church members.

—Encouraging the use of church facilities for members' community projects

2. Develop new, church-sponsored projects that are a step above what the church members are doing individually. There is a sparkling record of churches that have created and operated low-income housing projects, job training programs and even community investment funds for minority businesses. These are projects that deal with the structural causes of poverty. By participating in community forums and other fact-finding efforts, church leaders are able to seize upon the issues and projects that they can handle. Knowing the capabilities and interests of the church members through skills banks and other means, of course, means that the church can be even more effective in marshalling the manpower for these larger-scale projects.

3. Focus on the children. Over 70% of the poor are children, so if an impact is to be made on poverty, this is the place

to start. The kinds of assistance needed by the young are also often of the person-to-person type that is most suited to voluntary action, such as tutoring, big brother and sister companionship, recreation and sports activities, and the many forms of counseling. Church programs that have their own youth reaching out to more needy children are an especially effective means of instilling moral values and involving the whole family in the concerns of the poor.

But even a for-profit corporation has great capabilities and the incentives for encouraging its workers to help those in need. The Workplace in the Community project of VOLUNTEER—The National Center has collected stacks of examples of employees and union members doing community service. This is because corporations and unions increasingly understand that the community's well-being directly affects the job satisfaction and productivity of workers.

The techniques for organizing and managing these activities are very similar to those listed above for religious organizations:

- Highlight the involvements that are occurring through newsletter stories, recognition events and the like.

- Organize individuals' skills into a skillsbank so that they can be matched to appropriate requests and ad hoc teams requiring multi-disciplinary talents can be assembled.

- Back-up employee efforts with financial donations, use of company facilities, endorsements, etc.

- Participate on community boards and task forces so that projects are developed as part of area-wide efforts and the more structural causes of poverty are identified and made priorities.

Local schools, civic associations, day care cooperatives, recreation clubs and other support groups for the family all offer their own opportunities for catalyzing volunteer service beyond the immediate needs of their own constituencies. The approaches cited for churches and corporations work in these additional settings as well.

We cannot use as a barometer of the success of volunteering the gross number of hours or percentage of the population engaged in volunteer work. We need to be certain that an equitable share of the tremendous human resources released through volunteer effort goes to those in greatest need. Too many societal forces in education, jobs, housing and all the rest are already widening the gap between the haves and the have nots. Self-interest volunteering contributes greatly to that problem by seizing the great bulk of available time and talent for the institutions and programs of the more affluent at the expense of the poor.

Leadership among volunteer administrators and volunteers can make a difference. This requires not a changing of the tides, as the increased activity of families in community affairs is a very good force. The key is channeling this energy by highlighting, wherever possible, the benefits to be gained by including the needs of the poor. We must be ever assertive in our advocacy of the special needs of the poor in whatever volunteer programs we administer or participate.

Note: References have been made here on how churches and corporations have provided an atmosphere conducive to this broad-based volunteering. I ask that you send your own examples on how self-interest volunteering can be directed to the needs of the poor. I will collect these and arrange to distribute them widely. Send them to me at VOLUNTEER.—Pat Saccomandi