

# IS VOLUNTEERISM IN TROUBLE?

## NCVA's Response to the *Psychology Today* Article

There's an interesting article in the March 1978 issue of *Psychology Today*. It's called "The Day the Volunteers Didn't" by Benjamin DeMott, who asserts that voluntarism in America is on the wane. He attributes this decline in our "unique aptitude for spontaneous cooperative endeavor" to the women's movement, the growing political militancy of minorities, and "a new so-called enlightened selfishness, or self-absorption."

NCVA disagrees. Here's what Kenn Allen, our executive director, and Arlene Schindler, director of education and training, have to say about DeMott's thesis:

**Kenn Allen:** Benjamin DeMott begins with a basic misunderstanding of the nature of volunteering today by constructing an analysis that does a disservice to the millions of Americans who daily engage in helping activities. His article further muddles the public image of volunteering by dredging up pieces of every negative argument presented by critics in the past five years.

He begins by inappropriately mixing voluntarism and volunteering. While at first glance this may seem a problem of minor semantics, it is in fact one of the critical elements of his thesis. *Voluntarism* most often is used to describe the institution of nongovernment, nonprofit activity, the "third sector" of American society. *Volunteering* (or, as some prefer, *volunteerism*) describes the acts of one or more people, not monetarily compensated, usually toward what they believe is solution of a pressing human, social or environmental problem or toward the general improvement of community life.

That voluntarism, appropriately defined, faces problems is not an issue.

Increased reliance on government involvement in problem-solving has inexorably worn into the role of the voluntary sector. This has been exacerbated by government officials who prefer the creation of new programs and new structures to the utilization of the existing resources and capabilities of voluntary organizations. Similarly, virtually every nonprofit organization faces difficulties with funding, confronted with increasing costs and greater competition for the charitable dollar. Again, government's heavy hand threatens—in the form of increased postal rates, greater Social Security costs, and the proposed "simplification" of tax returns which would remove the charitable deduction.

But these threats have precious little to do with the health of *volunteering* in this nation. DeMott ignores, or is unaware of, the heavy volunteer involvement of citizens in neighborhood associations and other local initiatives to solve local problems. He conveniently turns his back on volunteers who work in self-help organizations, in advocacy settings, in "cause" groups. He accepts the lament of established organizations that volunteers are increasingly difficult to recruit without acknowledging the new volunteer energies that are flowing into such problem areas as child abuse treatment and prevention, family violence and battered spouses, sexual abuse, care for the dying and bereaved.

In short, DeMott adopts the negativist's narrow view that all volunteers are "do-gooders" in the "establishment" without recognizing that the leadership for all the major social movements of the twentieth century—civil rights, women's rights, anti-war, anti-poverty and human suffering—has come from volunteers!

What's worse is that DeMott supports

his contentions with vague references to largely unidentified sources. He quotes "many authorities," tells us things are "widely believed," relies on "the most thoughtful leaders"—all without a description of his research methodology or the clear attribution of observations. Thus he is prone to such errors as identifying possible changes in the Internal Revenue Code as having "substantial support in volunteer circles," when in fact it is the lack of agreement on this idea that has hindered its progress in Congress. Similarly, he inaccurately describes the accomplishments of ACTION's National Student Volunteer Program, which actually is a technical assistance effort, recruits no volunteers, and was predated by the major college volunteer programs by several years.

But these errors are minor, compared to his damaging portrayal of who volunteers and why they do it. He relies heavily on the ACTION/Census Bureau report of 1974, a study that was soundly criticized even before the report was published. The study did indicate that people who volunteer are *more likely* to be white, female, married, college educated, earning more money. But, unquoted by DeMott was the other side of the story:

- The rate of increase for men was slightly higher than for women between 1965 and 1974.
- In two areas, religion and civic/community action, the involvement rate was higher for nonwhites than for whites.
- Employed people volunteered more frequently than the unemployed or those considered "not in the labor force."

More important, there has been a major effort in the past few years in the volunteer community to broaden the scope of our definitions to recognize that involvement in structured agency

settings is only *one* form of volunteering. The result has been a greater understanding of volunteering in the informal helping networks important to rural, low-income and minority communities. In-



deed, by recognizing that the essence of volunteering is a positive attitude toward helping, one sees that everyone is, at one time or another, a volunteer.

DeMott's final contention that "the relation between voluntarism (sic) and personal growth remains obscure" is not borne out by what is happening in the volunteer community today. Increasing attention is being given to the translation of volunteer experience into defined, certifiable areas of skill development. Efforts by the Council of National Organizations, the National Council of Jewish Women and the Association of Junior Leagues have resulted in several programs that directly tie volunteering to personal growth. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has given leadership to programs in which volunteering is an important "second career" for the retired. Demonstration programs by the National Information Center on Volunteerism and the National Center for Voluntary Action have helped make volunteering an integral part of life for high school students and employees of corporations. The "What's in it for me?" of volunteering is, for many, the opportunity to develop and test skills, to learn about themselves and about others, to contribute to the improvement of their community and thus of their own lives.

No benediction need be given over America's volunteers. Rather, the self-proclaimed foretellers of doom need to step back and recognize that their view of volunteering as "marginal, elitist and

incommensurate with the enormous social problems" is out-dated, fit only for their own analysis. It is precisely because volunteering has changed to meet new needs and new constituencies that they see it "on the decline." That it no longer fits their preconceived view is no cause for alarm. Rather, it is a sign of the vitality and strength of America's oldest social movement.

**Arlene Schindler:** One of the interesting things about Benjamin DeMott's article is that many of his observations are correct. His conclusions are wrong. Instead of seeing volunteerism today as the mature institution it has become, he sees it as an American tradition in trouble.

It is true, as DeMott reports, that recruitment is a problem—but only for those organizations which persist in treating individuals as free laborers and rewarding them with humdrum, albeit at times, necessary work. Programs involving volunteers are competing for the time of aware people who, because of the tremendous variety of volunteer activities available, can choose from a thousand causes, a smorgasbord of projects filled with excitement, challenge, and reward for participation beyond the annual recognition banquet or the gold lapel pin.

And to acknowledge that people volunteer "with a motive" or an eye to "what's in it for me," is simply to recognize a fact that has always been a part of volunteerism. Motives haven't changed; our willingness to admit that they exist and that they are factors in retention and recruitment has. Socializing, learning new skills, absolving guilt, seeking power, collecting stars for one's heavenly crown, recognizing that improving "your half" of society also improves mine—whatever the motive—none of them are new. Today's volunteer, however, has the opportunity to select consciously and openly those activities which satisfy *both* the desires to be involved in worthwhile, important activities and to fulfill personal aspirations for growth, happiness and all the rest.

In addition, the observation that the most typical volunteer is a married, college-educated, upper-middle class woman under 45 is to confuse *typical* with *visible*. The most typical volunteer isn't visible at all. Typical volunteers include men, young people, minority group members, retirees, handicapped,

business persons, urbanites, suburbanites and rural folk, too. That middle-aged white woman gets counted in the tallies because when she is asked the question, "Do you volunteer?" she says, "Yes." A large majority of truly typical volunteers are engaged in activities so important to the individual's life that they aren't even identified by the individual as a *volunteer* activity. Such activities are those associated with the church, with many youth athletic programs, and countless numbers of small community activities.

A real danger to volunteerism is for us to equate it with institutionalized, formal volunteer programs and to fail to see the masses of people involved in every institution, in every community, in ways identified by themselves as being concerns of the first priority.

If volunteerism has a problem today it is that we neglect to recognize the maturity of the institution and subsequently are not able to see that it is more a part of the fabric of our society than ever before. And that's the key. Today's society is a different society, and so is the volunteer. Volunteers in 1978 respond to 1978 recruitment techniques; they demand placement in positions worthy of their much sought after time, their improved skills, their broader experiences. They work superbly with 1978 staff which is neither threatened by their presence or suspicious of individuals who choose to do something for rewards other than the dollar.



There is nothing wrong with volunteerism today. It's alive, vigorous, visible, articulate, informed, influential, probing, and touching the quality of life in every aspect of American society.