

[News and Hot Topics](#) » [The Presidents' Summit One Year Later](#)

## The Presidents' Summit One Year Later

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Before anything else, I want to acknowledge those of you who took up my challenge from last month and posted replies to my "Hot Topic." Thank you! I hope it felt good to share your thoughts--the synergy of everyone's responses was great. (Don't forget that it's never too late to add your thoughts to any of the hot topics, even those already in the archive.)

OK. It's April and that marks a year since the Presidents' Summit on (take your pick) "America's Future" or "Volunteerism." I applaud the many local efforts that are underway to translate the rhetoric into real action. And, indeed, one can find examples of great state or local summits, and organizations and corporations taking their "commitments" seriously. But, all in all, what looked last year as the most politically popular bandwagon of mobilization to help youth has not covered much distance--not to mention the little red wagon that pops up occasionally, empty and still.

You'll probably be reading a lot of mainstream media "look back" articles this month. But in this "hot topic" essay, I want to focus specifically on the volunteerism perspective of the Summit's aftermath. I want to emphasize that, despite the real problems I had with the Summit itself (documented in various print columns and articles), I take no pleasure in remaining negative. I would rather be cheering for successes.

Here are some of my thoughts. Do you agree? Has your local situation been different (please DO share positives!)?

- The lines are completely blurred as to whether the issue is anything and everything that helps children (within the 5 goals) or whether the issue is how American citizens, as volunteers, can help children.
- Above and beyond everything else, recognition of the existence, let alone the importance, of volunteer administration remains almost completely absent. Listen to the few media stories that trickle out and try to find any discussion of the vital element of effective volunteer

coordination. It's all "if only people would help," never "if only organizations knew how to involve people effectively."

- The supposed "resource materials" produced by America's Promise focus on about how to run a summit and the rules of how to use the red wagon logo. It's as though local summits are ends unto themselves. Nowhere is even the *topic* of "volunteer management" mentioned as one on which people might want to become better informed.
- Has anyone seen any indication at all that America's Promise has led to:
  - More funding for organizations to hire volunteer coordinators to help all the new volunteers accomplish something?
  - More funding for Volunteer Centers to be clearinghouses for the process?
  - Any training (or any increased respect) of affected professional paid staff in valuing volunteer contributions? After all, the new volunteers must work with teachers, social workers, and other youth workers. Do these folks really want the volunteer help?
  - Any further examination of the issue of screening requirements, particularly the cost, time, and limitations of the current police check system?
- From the beginning, the "commitments" so loudly touted have been flawed, and they have not been improved. Here are a few concerns:
  - No mechanism for assessing whether a commitment is needed by anyone, or how it might mesh with other relevant commitments and/or activities already underway in a community. The operative philosophy seems to be "the giver knows best"--even if the corporation or organization has no record whatsoever in working with youth or volunteer issues.
  - Emphasis on quantity, not quality or impact. One large nonprofit organization made a numerical commitment to recruit 100,000 more volunteers by the year 2000. While this sounds wonderful on a superficial level, I find myself wondering: to do what? It's ironic that right now we are seeing a buzz about the concept of "outcomes evaluation" (see *Measuring the Difference*, by Melissa Eystad, et. al.), in which managers are urged to stop confusing activities (e.g., the number of volunteers, the number of summits) with accomplishments (e.g., ten per cent increase in GED test takers since volunteers assigned, cutting truancy by 25%).
- Points of Light is conspicuous by its absence from the work of America's Promise. In fact, the only mention of POLF I could find on the AP Web site was buried in a list of organizational resources. Many of you know that I have criticized POLF for various things, but to me there is no question that POLF was the logical (and rightful) home of the Summit's follow through. Because of political in-fighting, we now have millions of dollars funneled into two national organizations, neither of which is doing the job of making the public and agencies aware of the complexities of volunteer involvement (while also being cheerleaders and advocates).

- There has been no sustained visibility for the work being done. In fact, the re-initiation of the daily Points of Light awards (which I applaud), has more long-term impact than anything America's Promise has produced. Given the amazing media blitz preceding the Summit, and the beyond-belief coverage of the actual event, the almost total silence since then has to be chalked up to ignorance of the need to sustain enthusiasm or gross incompetence. (Not that I have an opinion!)

All this may be fiddling while Rome burns. If we succeed in recruiting and training a million tutors, but we decimate our school systems by underfunding, union resistance, and schemes like private tuition vouchers, what are we really doing? Or, given last week's horrifying killing spree in Arkansas, how can we give kids a "safe place" if we refuse to deal with gun control or look at the failure of the war on drugs? Volunteers may indeed be a large part (not the whole) of the solution for such bigger problems. It may be marginalizing the true potential of volunteers to relegate them to handling the symptoms of children at risk rather than the causes. How can leaders of volunteers act, not react, to these challenges?

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***Submitted by Irene, Director of Volunteer Services, Georgia***

I think Colin Powell should stick to running the kind of war he knows how to handle. He has been very ineffective in keeping up the momentum to accomplish anything of lasting importance. I think he underestimated ( or didn't do his homework) just how much work it takes to manage volunteer groups.

Too bad....maybe the concept was just too broad in the beginning. I think that all of us involved in the profession of Volunteer Management know that it takes time to implement change, and that you just have to stick with it to accomplish your goals. I just think if they would define one or two goals and work on those exclusively, the effects would be much more effective.

***Submitted by Rhoda White, Director of Volunteers, Visiting Nurse Service of NYC***

After all was said and done, the little red wagon turned out as a reminder to me of a gift I needed to send to a new baby. The gift was much appreciated,

However I have not experienced any more people signing up for our mentoring program in the Bronx.

***Submitted by Carol Friedland, CVA, Deputy Director - Mayor's Voluntary Action Center, New York, NY***

In NYC there has been some meetings, a lot of talk but it seems nothing of substance has really emerged. A follow-up to the Summit, spearheaded by the Chase Manhattan Foundation, the New York Community Trust and the United Way of New York has now published what they call a strategic plan titled *The Caring Adults & Safe Places for New York City's Youth* filled with platitudes about helping

children, training mentors, involving the community and the corporate world. This 27 page report never mentions the volunteer manager. This is indicative of the lack of understanding that keeps our profession underpaid and underutilized.

***Submitted by Jackie Sinykin, Executive Director, The Volunteer Center, St. Paul, MN***

In Minnesota, 5 "Regional Summits" were held in a 2 month period. The goal was to mobilize people to work together to achieve the 5 goals. A state Summit will take place in late May. Corporate and Nonprofit commitments are being requested at local and state levels, measurement outcomes will be difficult to track.

I remain skeptical about what we will gain, except for one bonus which gives me great hope. The person who has assumed the role of director of Minnesota's Alliance with Youth is a big picture thinker. The picture she envisions is one in which communities all over the state will become more involved in caring about, in nurturing, in providing for our youth -- in whatever way best suits that particular community and its resources. Her role is to serve as a resource, a connector when necessary, a motivator and a storyteller for the successes that may emerge.

We are not, however, talking about the coordination of volunteer efforts or the lack of dollars for volunteerism or that many of those who must work with the new wave of volunteers do not have a clue as to what that means or how to go about establishing a working relationship. It seems as if much of the professional volunteer community still feels somewhat alienated from the wagon.

***Submitted by Michael, Director of Volunteers, Pennsylvania***

The impotence of the Summit should come as no surprise. From the start it was a well-intentioned idea infested with personal agendas. Is it any surprise the lack of coordination between America's Promise and Points of Light?

Even a year later, local efforts related to the summit are still about agendas. Why push for increased standing and training for volunteer administrators...no good photo op or press release in that issue. If that sounds totally cynical, it's the result of seeing my organization and my volunteers (and me!) burned a little too often over the past 8-9 years. Once again, effective use of volunteers will more likely result from local initiatives rather than anything that comes out of state capitals or Washington.

***Submitted by Sherry Cushman, Volunteer Coordinator for a School District***

I agree with the points made in Susan's essay. The most unsettling of which was the thought that we (volunteer coordinators/directors) may be "enabling" a continuation of the current inequitable distribution of resources by using the good will of volunteers to deal only with the symptoms. The cause of the symptoms of "at risk" youth being the appalling and absolutely unacceptable number of children living below the federal government's poverty line -- and this number is growing! If this is

what America's future looks like during times of a "strong economy" -- I shudder to think about any recessions we may face in the future. *I've enjoyed everyone's responses as well.*

***Submitted by Judy Rust, Director of Volunteers - Minnetrista Cultural Center/Oakhurst Gardens, Muncie, Indiana***

I feel that it is up to us as volunteer managers to keep the momentum going. I am the president of a young organization of volunteer managers in my community. During the month of April we are taking the opportunity to let our community know we exist. POLF for a nominal fee gave us lots of tools to work with, statistics, art work, proclamations, PSA's etc. We are using these to promote volunteerism in the community.

We have the support of the newspaper and radio stations and local businesses will be honoring national volunteer week on their marquees. We are inviting the mayor to our monthly meeting for the reading of the proclamation. At our meeting we are also inviting the people that attended the Governor's Roundtable to tell us what they learned. If we do not let people know we are proud of what we do, how will they ever know what we do? In putting this together in the community I have opened more doors for furthering volunteerism. You can do it too. The profession should not be silent any longer.

***Submitted by Tom Rinkoski, Volunteer Services Coordinator/ Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA***

We in Wisconsin have held a State Summit. And we in Green Bay have held a City Summit. I am currently participating in our City/County's Wisconsin's Promise Volunteer Board. The aspect of the meetings I enjoy the most is the commitment of the youth who have agreed to be on this committee. Their insights are wonderful! However, I find the work of this committee to be weakened not by its dreams and hopes, but by not having any budget or resources. In addition, I find the lack of definition of terms ( Just how do you define mentoring or measure its effectiveness?) allows considerable license in determining the numbers of "youth helped," "programs developed," and "volunteers recruited." I worry that this committee has become a convenient place for politicians to point to, without taking any specific action, budgeting any dollars, or investing critical time.

***Submitted by C.S. Andrews, Director, SCP, Florida***

I didn't attend the meeting, "The Summit", in Philly last year, but followed it with interest and kept waiting for the other shoe to drop around the country. Little did I hear or see! How disappointing!! And, little did I hear or see other than the literacy initiatives. What about volunteerism other than new initiatives? What about our seniors? scouting? community efforts? they are all essential. My community has just now started to talk about the summit openly, in the media and among collaboratives... I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop!!

**Submitted by Mary V. Merrill, President, Merrill Associates, Ohio**

I strongly agree that there is a persistent lack of recognition of Volunteer Administration. However, I believe that we, in the field, share the blame in this area. Rarely do I see DOVIAs or professional groups out there advocating in the public arena. If we cannot get the word out, how can we expect others to know about us? We continue to be a "silent profession". I believe the Summit offered us an opportunity to showcase things that were happening. It created an atmosphere of interest. I am not sure we caught that brass ring! It is one thing to say a year later "What has come of all the hype?" It is another thing to ask "What did I (we) do to capitalize on all that hype?"

I believe the Summit gave volunteerism more coverage than ever. Perhaps it was at least partly up to us to make something happen beyond those days in Philadelphia. When I returned from Philadelphia I went to our DOVIA and encouraged them to take a position, chart a plan, do anything! They chose non-action. I went to the corporate council and encouraged them to make a plan, be a voice, do something! They too chose non-action. For me one of the saddest things is the creation of "new programs" to carry out the Summit in the local area. In my city a coordinator has just been hired to "further the goals of the Summit." Of course it was NOT a volunteer administrator that was hired! I left the Summit believing this was not an attempt to create new programs, but rather an effort to draw attention to and strengthen existing program. I wonder how many delegations returned home and used the Summit as a way to get funding for "a new initiative"? I agree that there are still many "professionals" that do not want volunteers. I agree that there is a lack of follow-up from the "organizers." I too would like to hear from other communities to know what has happened.

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