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Tackling Causes Not Symptoms: New/Old Roles for Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November
2001

In August, a colleague shared the following provocative snippets. In light of the present world political stage, I thought her thoughts and a discussion about political activism and the role of volunteers would be a great November topic:

- David Wagner in his book *What's Love Got to Do with It? A Critical Look at American Charity* (New York Press, 2000) explores whether charity exists as a substitute for social justice and posits that charity signifies inequality and is more symbolism than accomplishment. In a review of the book in the e-zine, Salon, the reviewer starts out:
Just as I was finishing David Wagner's tightly argued essay on the history of American charity, out came a poll that seemed to confirm everything the sociologist was saying: Religion and its do-gooder stepchild, volunteerism, have all but smothered real political engagement in America.
- From the "365-Days-a-Year Dilbert" calendar comes a cartoon of temporary CEO Dogbert cutting employee health-care benefits while simultaneously joining the board of the local free clinic. In the last frame he receives an award for having increased the clinic's number of clients during his tenure on the board!
- A veteran activist observes that what started as a one-page resource sheet for homeless services has evolved in 25 years into a multi-page, glossy publication featuring innumerable such agencies. He ponders that the one-page resource sheet was part of an effort to end homelessness, not to develop services to "help" homeless people.
- The 1998 Virginia Volunteering survey asked volunteers in what types of work they were involved (as opposed to the need or cause addressed). Advocacy had the smallest percentage as indicated below:
direct service 47%
resource development 32%

leadership roles 30%

clerical work 22%

advocacy 14%

To my friend, all of these items raise an important question for the volunteer field:

Are we engaging enough volunteers, enough of the time, in advocacy and activism along with direct services?

As in the parable about the drowning babies floating down the river (*if you are not familiar with this parable, you can read it in our Reflections area: [Parables](#)*), are we simply pulling more and more good swimmers into the water or are we also sending adequate numbers of volunteers upstream to stop whoever is throwing the babies into the river in the first place? Have we in "volunteer management" spent so much time focusing on support roles and helpfulness that we no longer foster activism?

Now more than ever, we as a people and as worldwide citizens need to focus on root causes and prevention of new problems. Advocacy is part and parcel of influencing policies and decisions that will address the complicated issues facing us. Certainly the needs addressed by direct services are impossible to ignore and the services important to continue. But what questions, principles, challenges and resolve do we as a profession need to deal with as we also engage volunteer resources to go up the river...?

There are a number of issues to consider:

1. Most social agencies and institutions were originally started by pioneering volunteers who focused on a problem and invented creative ways to address it. Many of these same agencies have now become so vested in maintaining themselves that they have lost sight of solving the problem they were created to address. They need to bring back those pioneering volunteers! The power of volunteer involvement is proven by the history of most of our organizations. This potential for what is now called "civic engagement" is always present; September 11th only made it more visible.
2. Most established organizations want help, not input, from volunteers. But this is an enormous missed opportunity. We need to harness the diversity of perspectives volunteers offer. They are *not* just like the paid staff - and that's exactly the point! Along with hands and hearts, advocacy involves volunteers using their ideas and voices as well. Are we designing specific advocacy roles for volunteers? When we train volunteers, do we include such skills as how to speak their minds in constructive and persuasive ways?
3. Volunteer administrators face some ethical issues in mobilizing volunteers as advocates. It is a tenet of a free and pluralistic society that volunteers/citizens may stand on either side of any issue. So, how do we encourage volunteers to be advocates without exercising undue influence on their position or appearing to be motivated by their own or their organization's self-

interest? On the other hand, how do we educate volunteers to choose positions that strengthen the ultimate mission of our organizations?

4. Engaging volunteers in advocacy provides a legitimate "career path" for volunteers. Michael McCabe, in an excellent article in a recent issue of [e-Volunteerism](#), speaks about a "continuum" of service in which volunteers begin by hands-on involvement in direct-service positions and ultimately advance to an intelligent understanding of the *causes* of a problem and work actively to effect real social change. Advocacy offers seasoned volunteers leadership and teaching roles, with responsibilities that tap and recognize their advanced abilities.

Here's the challenge: As everyone else is paid to conduct business as usual, how do we provide the environment in which volunteers can step out of the forest, see the trees, and prevent fires? How do we enable volunteers to:

- re-examine fundamental assumptions about why and how we give service?
- re-determine priorities in a changing world?
- analyze what is working and why, and what is not working and why not?
- be political - not in a partisan sense, but in influencing legislative votes on the issues that affect long-term solutions?

The word "war" is again in use. Terrorism, racial bigotry, and fears of many kinds are worldwide concerns. I believe that volunteers can be peacemakers and coalition builders. In fact, only private citizens can do this quickly and locally. We may have to "free" volunteers from some of the direct-service roles they may love to do so that they can advocate for social justice. We cannot limit ourselves to being concerned with "volunteer management." This is a time for volunteerism as a philosophy of community life - the engagement of citizens above and beyond the ordinary.

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Posted 12Dec01

Submitted by Denise M. Laugtug, Director, Ambassadors Circle, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Baltimore, MD, USA

This article is especially poignant as we struggle with the aftermath of September 11. As an agency dedicated to serving the most vulnerable of immigrants and refugees, we at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service find much of our time spent in advocacy. We advocate with Congress and with the administrative arm of government. Yet the volunteer change-agents of the LIRS Ambassadors Circle bring a special voice to their communities and to their legislators. Many of them are former refugees or immigrants or have welcomed someone to his or her community. Their voices remind all of us of why we share what is truly important in being American: family, freedom, and a fruitful life. These "volunteers" want to maintain peace and respect for everyone in a community and are willing to work to see that happen. It never ceases to amaze me.

Posted 21Nov01

Submitted by Mark Steven, Information Officer, Edinburgh Volunteer Exchange, Scotland

Read our recent article on this topic (no longer available).

Posted 20Nov01

Submitted by Gary Turner, Deputy Director, CityCares/Hands on Atlanta, Atlanta/Georgia USA

As I read articles like this one and other materials on citizen non-action I become more and more disturbed. What amazes me is how we don't READ and dissect the classics, independent of the community from which they rise. Generations are missing out on the importance of the works of those who have already passed into the world of the living. The old adage "those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it" continuously rings in my ear. We have got to get the young to understand that action and advocacy are twin forces and not distant acquaintances. Fear is a constant paralyzer. It arises most of the time from the unknown. Therefore, we must struggle to expand what is known and from that broader base of knowledge the fear(s) is removed because the unknown no longer exist.

Posted 20Nov01

Submitted by Lisa Flick, Program Director, CityCares, Atlanta/Georgia USA

I am reading a book right now called *The Children*, which is about the student-led civil rights movement in Nashville. Additionally, I was watching an HBO movie last night that I have seen a few times now about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. As I watch and read this history, I ask myself why my generation is not rising up and speaking out - not just on issues associated with the war on terrorism, but against the atrocities that happen every day in our own backyards. I agree whole heartedly that action and advocacy are completely linked, but somewhere in the past the two became separated, and action became fun and easy and something you do when you have the time, not something that is an integral part of your attitude and approach to the world around you. As a member of a national network, CityCares, I have been part of powerful approach to increase the connection to action and advocacy through a program called Citizen Academy. This program blends education, action, advocacy to move volunteers to deeper understanding on critical issues, increase their leadership capacity for change, and encourages them to merge the paths of education, action and advocacy. I would be happy to share this new approach with anyone that is interested (lflick@citycares.org).

Posted 20Nov01

Submitted by John Magisano, Technical Assistance Specialist, NY AIDS Coalition, New York, USA

This is a great topic, but perhaps too narrowly phrased. I think we need to stop thinking of volunteers as a "resource" to be used and start thinking of them as stakeholders in our missions. We are hopefully trying to develop the next generation of leaders in organizations through this integration of stakeholders and constituents. I feel that we, as paid staff are usually too afraid of empowering people enough so that they will perhaps have opinions about the way we do things, and will begin to question our procedures and want input into the decision-making. Heaven forbid our "volunteers" feel strongly enough about our missions to question our effectiveness!

Posted 19Nov01

Submitted by Shana Baker, unaffiliated, Maine, USA

This really hits home. Now that I am semi-retired and delighted with the time that I can now call my own, I have a big desire to do 'service.' Teaching at-risk teens to read and working with new refugees from Bosnia in America (ESL) feels meaningful to me. But these kids might not be at-risk if their parents had more than minimum wage jobs and didn't have the kinds of economic pressures that implode family life. Summer of 2000 I worked at an Aids orphanage in S. Africa. The babies just kept coming. How I think of it: there is great need. I am only one person.

Posted 19Nov01

Submitted by Mark Carr, Assistant Director, Bridging The Gap, Kansas City, Missouri

Being fortunate enough to work for a social change organization, I think that painting this as an issue of how we use volunteers is limiting. If the organization doesn't have a social change goal in mind, then it will be very difficult to get volunteers to take on the task. It is far too easy for organizations to focus only on the narrow problem, and forget about root causes. Not using volunteers for advocacy and education is a symptom of that narrow focus. An organization that uses volunteers as an extension of staff can effectively use them for advocacy only if social change is part of the group's overall goals.

Posted 19Nov01

Submitted by Marsha Riddle, Director of Volunteer Services, N.C.

As Volunteer Managers we really do need to educate and give greater opportunity for the volunteer to improve the quality of life for all society. It means for each of us taking a risk. What happens when education meets opportunity...Change! Are we all willing to allow volunteers to "rock the boat" and support change?

Volunteerism is always changing to meet needs. Have the secure systems of Volunteer Management prevented us from arming the volunteers with the knowledge needed to change the political and government systems which are not working for the people? Or do we not want to risk the security of a well trained group of volunteers whose actions may be stymied by being puppets of the organization? Volunteer advocates can be the cutting edge. They do and can raise their voices on our behalf if they are educated and armed to mount a battle for the cause we might represent.

Some non-profits should strive to reach their ultimate goal. Some have done this and have moved on to fight other related battles. The March of Dimes is a perfect example of an organization that help to conquer a disease and move on to another mission and cause. Missions can be changed if staff are not stuck in their roles and jobs and work as a team with volunteers to improve the quality of life for all citizens of our country.

Posted 13Nov01

Submitted by Sheri Comfort, Volunteer Manager, Housing Hope, Wasington state, USA

I am very pleased to see this as a hot topic. We work with homeless families, and as social/political

issues worsen, the case load gets heavier. I would love to see volunteers tackling root causes. However, I have no idea as to how to help them do this, as my own political background is limited. This would be a great topic for training. What books would you recommend?

Posted 09Nov01

Submitted by Heather Blakeley, National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease, Hertfordshire, England

An interesting topic. We have just had a Forum for our volunteers and to help them through a period of change we asked them to think through the reasons why they are volunteers and what they want to achieve. They agreed that one of the ways they wanted to help was by instigating change through lobbying and by being activists as well as carrying out fundraising and support activities. So give the volunteer the opportunity and they will get involved!

Posted 09Nov01

Submitted by Manuel Acevedo, e-Volunteering unit coordinator, UN Volunteers, Bonn, Germany

I think that your thoughtful essay helps one to pause on the "what's" and "how's" of volunteering. Drawing a parallel to civil society organizations at large, some specialize in direct action (e.g., access to nursery care for poor working mothers), while others focus more on changing existing policies (e.g., passing legislation on services for those mothers). Some manage to do both, with varying relative weights. Action on both fronts is clearly necessary. Volunteering can have a wonderfully "subversive" character, i.e., taking power away from traditional power centers which inevitably is put to use at some point. I believe that in Europe, where the general population looks more to Governments as providers than in the US, this is making many people support volunteerism where they once thought it a disguised excuse for Governments to do less. At any rate, one of the ingredients for responsible and productive activism is good knowledge of a particular subject matter. "Direct action" volunteering is a practical way to accrue such knowledge. I would thus venture to say that volunteers who have gotten involved in some avenue of direct service provision will make for good, informed and productive activists. Among change agents, volunteers are hard to beat.

Posted 09Nov01

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, United Nations Volunteers, Germany

I think there are two reasons volunteer hosting organizations (in the U.S., at least) are reluctant to engage their volunteers in advocacy: one, the organizations have been told at some point that nonprofits are forbidden from engaging in any lobby efforts whatsoever (which isn't true, though the Ishtook Amendments in Congress would, indeed, make this so) and, two, because nonprofits seem to be terrified these days to make any statements that could be deemed in any way political, for fear of losing funding from some big corporate donor. Which is interesting since, as a donor, I am most attracted to those organizations that engage in advocacy and aren't afraid to make statements that might be seen by others as political. As always, excellent topic on Energize!

Posted 05Nov01

Submitted by Manon Ellis Williams, Volunteering Development Officer, Wales Council for Voluntary

Action, Wales, UK

Interesting piece. Reminded me of a meeting a few years back where someone said "Why are we sitting here discussing how to manage poverty? Shouldn't we be out there getting rid of it?" My colleague's comments on the piece were "but all of the social activists have gone away, or grown older or died! Where are their descendants?" Maybe they are out there, but don't know that they can volunteer to lobby and protest?

Posted 05Nov01

Submitted by Jeanne Bradner, President, Jeanne H. Bradner & Associates, Winnetka, Illinois, USA

Good topic, Susan. Interestingly on Saturday I was teaching a course on outcome evaluation at Harper College. In that I stress the notion of volunteers and directors of volunteers thinking through the question "what do you want to change"? It's always a hard concept for students to grasp because what they think they want to change, for example, often is to have more volunteers or a more diverse volunteer corps. Those are good thoughts, but they are not what the program exists for. When students do come to grips with the idea, it's like a light going on as they says things like "I want to change the way our society deals with people with disabilities" etc. It's another instance where "managers" can get caught up in means rather than ends. Leaders focus on ends and then develop the means to achieve them.

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