

[News and Hot Topics](#) » California Governor "Pumps Up" Volunteering

## California Governor "Pumps Up" Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I had to switch mid-stream in writing this month's Hot Topic when *The New York Times* ran an article [no longer available, 2014] on February 26th that simply beat what I was originally working on to qualify as "hot"! The headline: "California Creates Cabinet Post to Manage Volunteers."

Referring to negative experiences during the major oil spill in 2007 (see [my Hot Topic on that subject](#)), Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said recent disasters had demonstrated that volunteers were "many times unable to do the kind of work they want to for the state because we are not as organized as we can be."

*To that end, Mr. Schwarzenegger is creating a cabinet-level office for volunteer management, which his administration says is the first such state cabinet position in the country.... Under the change, the governor's commission for volunteerism, California Volunteers, will maintain its staffing and budget. But its executive director will gain expanded duties as a cabinet secretary, playing a role in disaster-related planning and response efforts and coordinating volunteers at disaster sites.*

*The office will also manage donations that flow into the state for disaster relief, a responsibility now held by the state's Office of Emergency Response. It is the first time a governor's commission overseeing federal money to manage volunteers – panels required by law since 1993 – has been elevated to a cabinet role.* After getting the first e-mail about this, I began to get a torrent of various notices. For example, the TIME/CNN Web site ran the story with the headline: "Schwarzenegger's Radical Volunteers" [no longer available, 2014]. Then the official story was posted to the California Government Web site, along with a live webcast of the press conference – complete with hoopla – making the announcement (recorded and still available online for viewing) and the full text of the [Executive Order](#). Here's one quote from the official verbiage:

*California's volunteers have a positive multi-billion dollar impact on the state's economy every year. In 2006, volunteers contributed approximately 858 million hours of service to the California economy-a value of more than \$17.4 billion. A one percent increase in the number of Californians who volunteer would equal*

*approximately 365,000 new volunteers contributing 48 million hours-equal to nearly \$1 billion in service to the state.*

*The Governor's action gives volunteerism a stronger voice and greater visibility and will encourage millions of Californians to make their valuable skills available.*

It was also announced that all three current presidential contenders sent congratulations to the governor for this action.

It is far too early to comment on what this development will mean for California, its volunteer community, and other states. Obviously we'll await the details of the position to see what the vision and the reality will be. The *Times* article already quoted one government spokesperson as referring to a "role for citizen engagement during tough budget times."

But the potential here is enormous. A few things spring to mind:

- This is vital recognition of the sheer number and value of volunteers. It shines a light on the work so many Californians already do as volunteers and gives an extra push to ongoing efforts to encourage even more service. After all, *paid* labor has long been a cabinet-level concern – it's about time unpaid labor gets equal time.
- This acknowledges that volunteering is intimately involved with government and not just with the nonprofit or voluntary sector. Consider the many public settings in which volunteers work: schools, libraries, parks and forests, firefighting and emergency response, courts and corrections, state and veterans hospitals, and many more – even the Internal Revenue Service with its tax aide volunteers. Minnesota's ex-Governor Jesse Ventura (often mentioned alongside Schwarzenegger as an unlikely politician) eliminated his outstanding Governor's Office of Volunteer Service in 2002 by stating "government has no role in volunteering." How absurd! California rights this wrong by placing the subject of volunteer management at the highest decision-making level. Now let's hope that the Cabinet Secretary is allowed to set high standards for all levels of California government agencies in working with volunteers, not just expected to preach to nonprofits about what *their* jobs should be.
- The state commissions created by the Corporation for National and Community Service have for too long been dominated by AmeriCorps funding, almost always at the cost of ignoring the volunteering of citizens totally apart from stipended programs. California can now transform this narrow focus into an umbrella for all types of volunteer service in the state. Doing the bidding of the Corporation will still be important, but finally it will be seen in the larger context of civic engagement. This is especially important in an election year that may soon change the direction of the Corporation nationally.
- Be still my heart...the Governor has named the position the "Secretary of Service and Volunteering." Wow! No euphemisms such as the Secretary of "Social Entrepreneurship." Here's a great opportunity to educate lots of people that there really is something out there called "volunteer management" – and people with professional skills who know how to do it.

The stakes are high. And obviously California is a bellwether state on other things, so if this action works there, we might see other states following suit. And what about a Cabinet post at the Federal level? And similar positions in other countries? Just imagine...

This is particularly amazing in light of the sad state of volunteering infrastructure in the US right now. We still do not have a viable professional association for those who lead volunteer programs. The results of the merger of Points of Light and Hands On Network remain largely unknown, though the decision to make Atlanta home base, the demise of things like the magazine, *Volunteer Leadership*, and rumors of the shallow content of the National Conference in June (an event as yet unpublicized), do not promise much national advocacy for volunteer management.

So, in the midst of frustration with the national level, thank you to California for a new burst of hope! Bravo to Gov. Schwarzenegger and especially to his wife, Maria Shriver! She pushed for this decision – having been committed to volunteerism early in life since her father was the first head of the Peace Corps – and serves actively as chair of the board of CaliforniaVolunteers. Every good wish to Karen Baker, the head of CaliforniaVolunteers, who will become the new Cabinet Secretary of Service and Volunteering. Do us proud!

*What do you think of this news story?*

*What is your opinion of the potential of a State Cabinet on volunteer issues?*

*What are some cautions or concerns you may have?*

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***Posted on 5 March 2008 by Andy Fryar, OzVPM, Director & Founder, Adelaide South Australia***

While I agree that this is a great opportunity which should be embraced by the entire volunteerism community I wanted to add a few words of caution (sorry to be a wet blanket!)

Here in South Australia, our state government created a Ministerial post for volunteering and a government office for volunteers nearly a decade ago. For a long time, this post was actually even held by the Premier of our state.

In looking back, I have to say that there have been some good developments for volunteering in this part of the world as a result of this initiative.

However there were and still are (I believe) two key issues that I think need to be mentioned in the hope you can learn from our experiences.

The first was the result of boundary ownership - and what we saw was the government office taking ownership over areas of volunteering traditionally 'operated' by volunteer centres. This redefined our volunteer landscape and has taken many years to settle.

The other ongoing deficit I see is the ongoing lack of understanding about the importance of supporting volunteer management as a conduit to creating better volunteering opportunities. That's not to say good things have not happened - but more could have been done.

I do hope that the Californian model can learn from what has happened elsewhere and be a shining model for the rest of the world.

Finally, it seems ironic that a wrestler destroys a state volunteering office and now the terminator creates another ...am I allowed to say 'only in America!' :O)

***Posted on 5 March 2007 by H Roberts, PLNJ Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA***

The [June 2004 Hot Topic](#) raised a number of questions regarding the ongoing collaboration amongst ngo's, volunteers and nonprofit professionals. Perhaps more community-based Volunteer Centers will see this state level achievement in CA as a positive sign in keeping their own doors open.

I agree that this news can spotlight volunteerism beautifully (and I'm quite fond of the do-gooder visual) but it is my hope the "sunlight" stretches across the country and not solely for the efforts both organized and organic in the state of CA. On the heels of tremendous enthusiasm should be an emphasis on state to state collaboration and why our profession benefits when we unite the power of volunteer leadership and support everyone working in it.

***Posted on 4 March 2007 by Gilda Kaplan, Vail Police Department, Volunteer Coordinator, Vail, Colorado USA***

This action is the greatest thing that could happen to volunteerism and volunteers. Rather than look at us as "do-gooders", we will be seen in a different and more professional light. Because we are unpaid does not mean we're unqualified. I'm passing this "hot topic" on to our County Agency for Volunteer Services and will press them to get it to the state level. It's time the word "volunteer" takes on a new meaning!

***Posted on 4 March 2007 by Ann Stretch, Travelers Aid, Program Manager at Reagan Washington National Airport, Arlington VA/Washington DC USA***

What a wonderful boost to forwarding our profession of volunteer administration. Makes me wonder what could happen in my state of Virginia!

***Posted on 4 March 2007 by Deirdre Araujo, Exploratorium, Manager Volunteer Services, San Francisco, CA USA***

I flew down for the day to show support for this event. I was surrounded (rightly so) by Emergency Response volunteer teams in uniform, but was equally delighted to find myself seated next to the volunteer manager from Santa Ana's Discovery Science Center. I spoke with one of the students on camera about the value of service - no matter the area you choose - and will keep my fingers crossed that this momentum will further conversations about effective volunteer engagement/management in all sectors!

***Posted on 4 March 2007 by Gypsy Petz, CASA of the Northern Hills, Executive Director, Spearfish, SD USA***

This is empowering. Volunteering is so important in this day and age. I am glad we have a serious "Voice." I am excited to see what the future holds!

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