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Enough

## Days, Hours and Minutes of Service - Enough Is Enough

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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For over a decade it's been a clear, universal trend that new volunteers are seeking short-term assignments with a visible beginning, middle and end. There are many reasons that this has now become the norm, but two are paramount. First, everyone these days, all over the world, feels time deprived. We are simply living at a faster pace, cramming more and more things into our schedules with less time for pursuing much beyond job and family. Second, volunteering has a self-inflicted reputation as a bottomless pit: initial service leads to ever-increasing expectations of more service. And if you think you have no time at all...

Now combine the hope that people will be more attracted to serving in bite-sized chunks of time with certain holidays and commemorative dates that lend themselves to expressions of community involvement, and – voila! – we created what we commonly call a “day of service.”

Conceptually, the idea of carrying out single days of volunteering is fine. But it has proliferated to the point of absurdity and someone has to cry “enough!”

### Formal Days in the "Seasons of Service"

Energize maintains a [list of special days and weeks](#) dedicated to volunteer work in North America and around the world. Several years ago, Points of Light grouped such events under the heading “Seasons of Service,” recognizing that almost every month of the year offered another national or international service opportunity. This is the list for the USA right now:

January:	Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
February:	Random Acts of Kindness Week
March:	Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning

April:	Global Youth Service Day
May:	Join Hands Day
July:	Mandela Day
September:	My Good Deed – One Day's Pay (formerly United Day of Service)
October:	Be the Change Day (formerly "National Gandhi Day of Service") <i>and</i> Make A Difference Day
November:	National Family Volunteer Day

Add to this things like local United Ways' "Days of Caring" and literally countless similar days sponsored haphazardly by single corporations (Accenture and KPMG are just two examples), individual schools and civic groups. Also, the original HandsOn Network model was built on the concept of a month's calendar of projects from which a young professional could select a few hours of service when convenient.

In the end, we've simply created a new "bottomless pit" of unending service, one day at a time.

## How about 67 Minutes?

For me, the situation came to a head two weeks ago when I learned from a *New York Times* reporter about the brand new [Mandela Day](#) set to launch globally on July 18 this year. It is intended to honor Nelson Mandela, which is surely a fine idea. But somehow the desire to give tribute to this man's 67 years of human rights struggle morphed into a plan to ask people to do volunteer work for – wait for it! – 67 minutes.

The Web site proclaims a lofty ambition: *Mandela Day celebrates the idea that each individual has the ability to make an imprint, the power to transform the world.* In 67 minutes??!! Worse, although the first day is in less than two months, the site still has no concrete options for *what* someone can do, other than links to such sites as VolunteerMatch.

I call this the "dumbing down of volunteering." It is based on the unchallenged belief that only by making it easier and easier, and less burdensome, with less commitment, would anyone today be moved to serve. This is playing out as well in some of the initiatives under the Serve America Act, which keep adding more and more cash incentives, end-of-service pay-outs and other pot sweeteners, again because lawmakers can't envision anyone "just volunteering" any more (except for their re-election campaigns!).

In 67 minutes, isolated from any long-term commitment, someone cannot “make an imprint” on the world. Please understand that I am not condemning service projects per se. But anyone reading this Hot Topic knows that the types of volunteer activities someone can do in a single day – let alone seven minutes more than an hour – are of necessity going to be simple, largely unskilled, based on physical labor, etc. Yes it is vital to get a group together to build a playground on a Saturday. But to eradicate poverty, cure disease, end war, raise literacy rates, and other social priorities, we need *staying power*. We need people who commit to being trained and to work hard towards a goal.

Please, no more unconnected, ill-planned days or moments of service that create huge work for recipient agencies/communities, make the participants feel great, but have little intrinsic meaning!

Nelson Mandela and the world would be better served if this effort challenged people to volunteer 67 days on a focused task, even over several years.

## Now How about "Micro-Volunteering"?

Just to illuminate how this trend is taking on a life of its own, have you heard of The Extraordinaries? It is trying to organize “on-demand volunteerism by mobile phone.” Its tag line is: “Got a few minutes free? Be Extraordinary.” Not quite operational yet and awaiting an iPhone app, the site tells us that: *The Extraordinaries delivers micro-volunteer opportunities to mobile phones that can be done on-demand and on-the-spot.*

In fairness, these people are trying to create a totally different model. They say: “Our dream is to answer this: ‘What social problems can we solve with a million people working on them in brief moments of spare time?’” And they have some interesting ideas for possible projects, including helping the Library of Congress index a backlog of thousands of historical photos.

*We expect an explosion of new volunteers, as people are now able to actually fit micro tasks into their hectic lives. We provide a more efficient link between people’s brief spare time and social projects, and as new people get hooked on doing social good, we believe this will lead them to an increased engagement in their communities. Essentially, The Extraordinaries is the “gateway drug” to traditional volunteering.*

We’ll see.

## Some Middle Ground Suggestions

All of these service days need frontline managers of volunteer resources to create projects for the volunteers they want to send. I propose that this gives us some collective influence. Here are a few of my ideas and I hope you’ll all share yours.

- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Day has recently made a commitment to “[semesters of service](#)” and other longer efforts with more continuity. Bravo to them! We should contact the organizers of our local MLK Day events and praise this effort, asking how we can offer new volunteers

attractive, longer-term projects through them. Then we should encourage other day of service organizers to consider following suit.

- When contacted to create a day of service project, try to offer some alternatives to the volunteers themselves:
  - Ask if people might commit to monthly or quarterly days of service, making the effort you and they put into getting them up to speed for Day 1 pay off with some repetition.
  - Train a group of volunteers on Day 1 and then ask them to “adopt” the project and rotate among themselves who will return over the course of the year to continue working on it.
  - Explain how much more interesting their volunteer work could be if they gave it enough time to become expert at it.
- In the past, Points of Light simply enabled the formation of new Days of Service. The new HandsOn Network/Points of Light Institute should consider exercising some leadership in:
  - Recommending that groups wishing to start their own day of service select an existing day and become committed to visibly supporting that. They can still get attention for their projects, but in support of the greater effort.
  - Talk to national day of service leaders about selecting a theme or type of volunteer work for everyone to do that year, creating an economy of scale with potential for real impact. Right now, too many of these events say “go volunteer” for *anything*, dissipating the net effect.

One more time: All of these one-time efforts are worthwhile in some ways, but we cannot allow them to sidetrack our energies. We must keep our sights focused on making a genuine difference to the community served. And we must truly believe that people are still willing to volunteer (or exercise civic engagement – pick your vocabulary!) with all the devotion needed.

- *Do you agree that days, hours and minutes of service are getting out of hand? How do we buck the tide?*
- *How do you respond when someone contacts you for mini, if not micro, volunteering?*

Related Topics: [Micro-volunteering](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

***Submitted on 30 Nov 2009, Anonymously***

As a VC, I find this very interesting. When I criticize the one-time events, people often reply that it's a good way to get people into service. But it's hard for those of us who only see them at one stage on this continuum.

It's also hard when corporations call to ask if we can "accommodate" a group of 30+ for a couple hours - not what we need or what we want - but if we can accommodate them! That is the word they used!

We want to take every opportunity to introduce new potential donors and supporters to our wonderful causes and organizations, but one-time events don't have the as great of an impact that ongoing committed volunteers do.

I want to remain anonymous because we appreciate the financial support of the corporations that call asking for one-time events - ahem, Target!!

***Submitted on 12 July 2009 by Cathy Moyer, Volunteers for Outdoor California, Redwood City, CA USA***

Until a volunteer develops a real commitment to the organization -- not just to the general cause - it will be difficult for her/him to make a long-term or recurring commitment. Days of service or even micro-volunteering are opportunities to introduce and engage those who can become recurring volunteers. It then is up to the organization to provide an experience that brings the volunteer back for more. We train and engage recurring volunteers to train and supervise new volunteers, and keep a list of tasks with varying commitments so we can put any volunteer to work quickly and give them a task with identified meaning and value to the organization.

Our primary activities are big (100+ volunteers) weekend-long projects and we invite and encourage volunteers to participate for the entire event, including camping out with us. We also make it possible for smaller commitments inside of the weekend commitment, i.e., 1 day, morning registration, evening cooking or cleanup, etc. New volunteers tend to come for a day or partial day, see how much fun the folks are having for the whole event and overwhelmingly come back for a longer stint at the next opportunity. This approach has enabled us to build a base of over 2000 active volunteers in just 3 years.

***Submitted on 26 June 2009 by Reed Dewey, Director, Montgomery County Volunteer Center, Rockville, MD USA***

Thanks Susan for your push back to "volunteering made easy." We need to keep reminding the public that the majority of making a difference is not through a few days, or minutes. We all know the studies that show when people invest more time in volunteering, they get more out of it. In a culture that increasingly is about not committing to things, I think we have a responsibility to remind people that they can enrich their lives and make a difference by investing MORE time in a cause they are passionate about. And, while perhaps not as exciting as being a "tweeting volunteer", direct service as mentors, big brothers or tutors probably will make more of a difference in the long run than volunteering at the edges. How about a bumper sticker that says, "Invest Yourself in Service."

***Submitted on 26 June 2009 by Susan Lebovitz, Volunteer Manager, Overland Park, KS USA***

Episodic volunteering helps our agency so very much...on a number of different levels. However, I require a minimum of two hours. No community service group, school, or corporation ever voices a

problem with this. Short term volunteering introduces people to our agency, mission, services, and needs that we have. It's not unusual to receive a monetary donation after a group volunteers..an added benefit!

Volunteer Managers also have the choice of turning down a group if scheduling is too challenging. I think that's something all VM's have to remember: it's our choice if a group volunteers. We are not obligated to facilitate every volunteer request. It took me a long time to learn to "say no!" It has to fit in with the needs of the staff as well as the desires of the volunteer group.

***Submitted on 23 June 2009 by Marcia Hale, Boise, ID USA***

I am not surprised that this "done in a day" volunteer issue is still being discussed. I found in my 12 plus years as a VPM that organizing these things were often more trouble than they were worth. I too, rarely if ever, saw these one day volunteers show up again. In my case most were from corporate groups and some showed up with a huge attitude that they had been "forced" to be there by their supervisor. Some would show up, sign in, and then disappear (a day off for them). I think for some organizations a day of service just doesn't work, in other organizations it's great. But all in all, I truly believe that it degrades the concept of volunteering. It makes it sort of disposable.

The root of the problem from my perspective has always been that these "feel good/photo op projects" are not organized with a volunteer program administrator within earshot. More often than not, the day is a coordinated effort between development and marketing from both the organization and the corporate side. At least that was my experience. My input was never asked, I was just handed this "wonderful opportunity to have 100 people from xyz to do something really great (and please make sure we'll get some good photos)." Some things never change.

***Submitted on 22 June 2009 by Glenice Jones, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Blaine, MN USA***

Most of our volunteer positions are long-term (98%), so I have felt unable to participate in the one-day of service opportunities, until last January. On the Tuesday after MLK day, I offered two opportunities to come and learn about what a typical "day" of volunteering is like in an Adult Basic Education setting. This response was good and we were able to recruit about half of those attending. I felt the effort was worthwhile and would certainly do it again, plus it made our organization a part of the "day of service" event.

***Submitted on 16 June 2009 by June Bass, Portland, OR USA***

I think another thing to consider about "done in day service" is the impact and impression it leaves on paid staff. I agree that finding these opportunities are important to a certain degree and fit some tasks well. But if staff are mainly working to develop these low skilled opportunities their impression of volunteers is that they only can do low skilled things. As a Volunteer Manager I battle this issue almost on a daily basis. These one day of service events perpetuate this idea. Finding challenging opportunities for high skilled volunteers and having paid staff work effectively with them is difficult.

Also someone commented on the marketing messages that help promote volunteerism through these service events. We have found these national campaigns to sometimes be a negative for our organization. Our office has fielded a number of inquiries about the various service days and we simply can not host events for all of them. We have disappointed people and sometimes angry people because their impression is that we are not providing opportunities for the community to engage in service. When the opposite is true. We have a very large on-going volunteer program and some people only interested in "67" minutes of service get the impression that we do not offer ways for volunteers to engage no matter how we explain our regular on-going volunteer programs.

***Submitted on 12 June 2009 by Lori Tsuruda, People Making a Difference (PMD) and Directors of Volunteer Administration (DOVA), Boston, MA USA***

Although many of my colleagues, AmeriCorps alumni, and friends are lobbying for full funding of AmeriCorps in MA due to the federal match and their livelihoods, I find myself unsure when direct needs like food and housing subsidies, education, day programs for the needy, counseling, and substance abuse treatment are being cut in the state budget process.

I've been unconvinced that subsidizing below-minimum-wage positions is the best way to maximize volunteer engagement since AmeriCorps began, and now I question whether saving the quasi-state agency that disperses these funds should be a priority given the direct needs of the least able among us and the core educational needs of the next generation.

Direct philanthropic investment in experienced volunteer recruiters and volunteer managers paid to serve on charity staffs may be a better route to increase volunteer engagement, vs. "hiring" inexperienced people with limited training and resources for short stints without long-term vision and commitment to volunteerism from charity leaders. (And if these AmeriCorps volunteers are so important, how can we be equal opportunity if we expect them to live on less than minimum wage or limited health coverage?)

There are certainly more active volunteers who are NOT in AmeriCorps than those who are in AmeriCorps, so I contend that broader, more long-term growth will occur if charitable donations are invested directly into community charities. More charity boards of directors, executive directors, CEOs, and other leaders should encourage, support, and reward excellent volunteer programs that engage and retain volunteers, and respect, assign, and use volunteers' time and talents effectively for ongoing and project-based commitments.

***Submitted on 10 June 2009 by H Roberts, PLNJ Inc. - Blankie Depot, Keyport, NJ USA***

The idea that a VRM should "do away with" generic tag lines designed to engage new volunteer is too extreme. Collective wisdom teaches each of us that our positions, agencies, missions, clients and volunteers are unique to our own day to day operation. We don't work in a one size suits all industry. We should cultivate our own best practices and applaud sister charities that keep current, re-visioning and professional engaged. If Day of Service doesn't work for your agency, pursue a program

that does. But, to look over the shoulder at fellow organizations, newbies to service learning or newly formed community efforts with anything less than pride hurts the larger message and our profession.

Sometimes a VRM neglects to recruit his/her own helping hands first in order to stay fresh and motivated by new ideas and new partnering opportunities!

Volunteer programs, national events and the industrial publicity that comes when large entities fund the message that individuals, groups and youth can approach volunteerism from a personal and educated place promotes opportunity and encourages participation. The agency I support could never afford such marketing/PR on its own steam. I say, bring on the public service announcements, daily!

So, if the message to volunteer appears to be heading in a direction you can't relate to or is too generic, find a solution for your own programs BUT be thankful that the MESSAGE on how and where to volunteer is getting out there. It has taken years and several administrations for VRM's to have a voice and to achieve a level of credential that warrants attention. The public needs to know that volunteering is a real commitment -- even if that means in "baby" steps. Let's encourage a voice of volunteerism that reflects our pride and purpose and the general public will become better equipped to make a difference at your door.

***Submitted on 9 June 2009 by Trudy Hamilton, Lewiston, ME USA***

I'd also like to chime in, especially when a Day of Service is combined with higher ed's "Service Learning" or k-12's Community Service.

Both of those terms need definition, and I believe the definition should include a bit more service than a day. Using a Day of Service to meet a Service Learning requirement is like looking at a snapshot instead of watching the movie. While some may experience a profound moment, is it really going to change their paradigm about volunteering and service?

I believe a much better model would be to have students adopt a year long project that they truly can learn from, serve their community, and become truly engaged with.

***Submitted on 6 June 2009 by Ashley, Volunteer Manager, Kansas City USA***

I have to agree with this post. Days of service are getting way out of hand. Most volunteer managers I know are keeping 5 or more plates spinning at any given time. It seems like every time I turn around a day of service pops up or someone has created their own for their specific group. While these enable large, low-skill projects to be completed, (projects which are not part of normal operations), they tend to take more time in planning and prep than the project. When projects go through national clearing houses (Points of Light, United Way etc.) the red tape can be a deal breaker. These are a great way to engage a community (religious, corporate or other) in your cause but the rewards may be nominal in terms of work done. Micro-service is another point of contention. These "down-and-dirty one-shot-wannabe's" are hard to justify given liability and training for normal volunteers.



Typically you have to babysit, or have someone in your agency babysit out of liability concerns (dealing with valuable objects, handling animals, working with clients) and creating or lining up a job is simply not worth it. I am Gen Y and an AmeriCorps Alum who went into the field. I get the concept of instant gratification, but it doesn't work to solve the long-term problems that draw volunteers to agencies. These feel-good moments are nice, but the long-term impact of a wall not being painted every year in my facility are nonexistent. Yet every year the wall gets painted because someone higher than me (us) wants the exposure.

***Submitted on 4 June 2009 Carol-Ann Rolls, Cowichan Community Policing Society, Manager, Duncan BC Canada***

In our program, we have one paid "Manager of Volunteer Programs and Services" and a current active roster of 75 volunteers. Given that I am only one person and have upwards of 20 "programs or projects" to manage we have implemented a minimum expectation of hours of service by the volunteer. If they sign on for a regular position, then they must make a commitment for either 2 or 4 hrs/week for one year minimum. Most of those volunteers have been involved for three years or more. \*(We're now in 6th year) Volunteers also are encouraged to sign up for those special projects like Mall promotions, parades, etc and I get great response.

I recruit twice/year in Fall and Spring and have about 10 - 15 new volunteers each session that help sustain and renew the base of support. I direct those volunteers that can't make the obligation to other agencies or to our Board. Sure I may lose a few good volunteers but when I put the call out for the volunteers, it is only a few phone calls and I have who I need.

Our agency is looked upon as a agency of choice to volunteer with. We try to provide recognition, training and fun coupled with lots of feedback. Careful matching of volunteer to program is required to get that commitment from both the agency and the volunteer. Have also found that when I refer volunteers to other agencies, they sometimes come back to ours when they have more time, or want a different experience. Most of our volunteers are truly committed to our cause and appreciate the individual attention and friendships that develop in the programs. I use the "senior" volunteers to provide the practical training of the new ones and they feel empowered to be asked.

This works for us and the Manager is not stretched too thin with a large unmanageable contingent of volunteers.

***Submitted 3 June 2009 by Irene Dailey, Director, Volunteer & Community Svcs., Pittsburgh, PA USA***

As a Director in health care, I agree that one day projects are extremely rare these days. Let's look at the broadest view of volunteering. To me, it means making a difference in some way for some cause or person. I know in my hospital environment, I can't really use the one day contributors due to the regulations the volunteers are under. However, just take a look at one's own street. Do you have a neighbor who is elderly or like me, many neighbors? If you take 67 minutes and do their weeding, cut their lawn, trim their bushes, take items to the recycle center, take flowers to plant at a cemetery for that person or drive the person to the cemetery so they can visit their loved ones, or in the winter

shovel snow, take their garbage to the curb on the bad day so they don't fall, provide a dinner - just because - for the single mom and so forth...what a difference and help that would be. So many times, we think in terms of a "formal" setting but yet day after day, so many needs - yes, in our own backyards go unattended to. I'm not a fan of the single days of volunteering, but I am an advocate of helping someone that impacts without taking a lot of one's time. This is volunteering! Think about it. Isn't there something that can be done that is not necessarily in a formal setting? I think we would see there is an overwhelming need to volunteer; to do good if one is willing to think out of the box and away from the limitation of a 'formal' program to help and make a difference. If enough take this route what wonderful - ongoing changes could occur.

***Submitted 3 June 2009 Katy Watkins, Volunteer & Mentoring Programs Coordinator, Columbia, SC USA***

Ditto! I wish people would go back to supporting the cause/s they believe in and incorporate it into their lives as it suits them!

***Submitted 3 June 2009 Anonymously***

Another problem people have today in America is cynicism. I think it is very cynical to discount service projects, episodic volunteering, and days of service. Done right, these opportunities could really make a difference, but you have to be open-minded and think outside the box. For healthcare, a drop-in activity I have heard about is the decorating of boxes and/or cards for families whose children are dying or who have died. These families then receive these boxes after a couple months have passed and get the cards at the 6-month and 1-year anniversary. Though this may seem morbid, I know for one hospital it has been a very well-received opportunity that the parents appreciate and cherish. I am sure, without a doubt, that there are many, many more such opportunities. We can't forget that these episodic or project based opportunities are meant to get people more involved and committed to service, even if they only do once a year, what they have done makes a difference for nonprofits and their community.

***Submitted 3 June 2009 Anonymously***

There are good one-day volunteer opportunities that make a difference: reading to a child, serving food to the homeless, visiting the elderly. People who have multiple interests can decide which they want to do and how often, maybe rotating service areas each month. Plus, this one-day commitment attracts people who may only have one day a month to serve. Busy professionals need this option; it is a great way to get them hooked and provides your organization with some fantastic community support. Discounting these one-day service opportunities is like shutting your door on these amazing resources.

We should definitely focus our national days of service on one area; that would definitely make more of an impact. Maybe there are too many days, but at least this gives the plethora of agencies out there a list to choose from. Could it be possible that Random Act of Kindness Week and Join Hands Day are just too generic for organizations like Save Africa or Bridges to Sudan and that maybe they would be looking for a Mandela Day that connects with their organization's mission? 67 minutes could be an

amazingly rewarding idea for organizations who might offer an entire day of 67 minute projects focused in one area. Volunteers could just pop-in and help out when they were able and at the end of the day they could say, "I helped them accomplish that goal!"

***Submitted 3 June 2009 by Diana Kyrwood, New York, NY USA***

I see an interesting contradiction in "external pushes." It appears to me that volunteer managers are currently stuck between trying to find ways to utilize the new pool of highly skilled available volunteers and also produce single days of service that perhaps require minimal skill or training. Both efforts require significant time and resources on the part of managers and organizations. And both are quite challenging to execute so that there is a benefit to both the volunteer and the agency.

Although we want people to have meaningful and enjoyable volunteer experiences, managers should remember that their primary loyalty is to their agencies and clients. In some of my past work experiences, and I think this is generally a good approach, there were guidelines that no volunteer project was undertaken unless there was a benefit to both the agency/clients and the volunteers. At one agency we would typically not engage in group days of service unless there was a clear defined benefit to the organization. Often these benefits came in the form of monetary donations from corporations in exchange for the "benefit" of offering well run volunteer opportunities to their staff.

We must always consider the costs and benefits of any service project. If these one day/one hour/one minute service projects actually benefit the organizations, then why not adopt them and give individuals one more option. I think there will always be those individuals who are motivated by meaningful in-depth involvement and close connection to a cause. It's our challenge to find them and embrace them.

***Submitted on 2 June 2009 by Elizabeth Savich, Director, City of Bloomington Volunteer Network, Indiana USA***

I am in complete agreement with you, Susan. Days of Service are a fine idea, but they're completely overdone. Just like fundraising runs and walks, golf scrambles. We need some new ideas!

I would like to react to the VISTA Volunteers comment about needing enough to live on. I have serious problems with the VISTA model, because so many volunteers cannot subsist on the stipend. Theoretically, it's so they can experience poverty first hand, but everyone I know who has been there and done that went out and found a second job. The 24 hour a day, 7 day a week VISTA model is not working. It needs to be changed.

***Submitted on 2 June 2009 by Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director, Appleton, WI USA***

I have learned to like Days of Service. I see the Days as avenues to attract new volunteers and start new programs.

This past MLK Jr Day coupled with the Inauguration brought more people to our Volunteer Center. I went out to the sites and offered information about others ways they could serve.

It is difficult for agencies to always be able to come up with these projects or any opportunity that can be done in a few hours but the results can be very positive. The agencies have an opportunity to share their mission with someone new. I tell the agencies if you meet a volunteer that will fit into your program, say to them "I really like what you have done today. May I call you in the future?" "Do what you can to make them your agency volunteer."

We incorporated a downtown clean-up project with National TV Turn-Off week. It was great way for families to serve together. It takes planning but next year we have the format to do it again or make it even better.

Days of Service will become more prevalent and more organized with this Administration. Soon we will hear from the President a call for a Summer of Service. We expect to again find new opportunities, improve existing projects and hopefully meet new volunteers.

***From Susan, 2 June 2009***

The New York Times reporter to whom I refer in the Hot Topic is Douglas Quenqua and the article he was writing when he called me has just been published. It's titled "[How to Stand Out on One More Day Aimed at Volunteers](#)" and you can read it online. Mandela Day is launching a media campaign worth \$5,000,000 to urge their vision of volunteering for 67 minutes.

***Submitted 2 June 2009 by Nicolette Winner, Director, HandsOn West Central Ohio, Piqua, OH USA***

As a HandsOn Action Center, I DO believe in the importance of offering days of service. We should offer a calendar of opportunities that appeal to busy volunteers with a wide variety of interests. The intent of these days, as I address in all of my trainings, is to give our volunteers an awesome experience (defined by being meaningful, not one filled with meaningless perks) and really stress how they can incorporate service into their everyday lives. We direct these one-time volunteers to our Web site, to on-going opportunities, etc. Many do return, if only once a year!

That said, there are TOO MANY new days being started. Let's pick a handful and encourage participation in those, with an emphasis being placed on the "what do we do from here". We will not offer every single day of service sponsored nationally, but instead will focus on ones that best fit our service area: Make a Difference Day, Global Youth Service Day, My Good Deed and likely MLK Day. That's about one opportunity per quarter for our communities and it feels just right.

***Submitted 2 June 2009 Anonymously***

Ah - so much to ponder! As for the proliferation of projects, I too wonder about most of their actual effect. A non-profit can feel the obligation to provide 'service' to major corporate funders that they end up with 20 coats of paint on their buildings.

There's only so many places you can paint, weed, pick up trash or other unskilled labor at in one community. Only so many organizations can handle big projects, limiting the opportunity even more.

Projects = useful, but should not be the national model.

***Submitted 2 June 2009 by Casey Wylie, Volunteer Coordinator, Hot Springs, AR USA***

As a volunteer coordinator for a science museum, I just do not have many "micro" volunteering opportunities. Our positions require at least some training and commitment. I have tried to design a few "community service" volunteering opportunities for people wanting to serve less than 25 hours and I have had mixed results. These projects only work in groups and finding work for a 1 day individual is extremely difficult.

When I am approached by those who want to do want to help the museum on such a small scale, I ask them to be advocates. They tell friends, family random people they meet about the museum and encourage new people to visit. In a resort town crowded with fun activities, it is a huge help to have scores of "mini marketing departments" running around with a word of mouth campaign! As a thank you, these people are some of the first to learn about upcoming events and are usually invited to sneak-preview parties for new exhibits.

***Submitted on 2 June 2009 by Sue Dixon, Volunteer Center of Gloucester County, NJ USA***

I absolutely agree that these short term opportunities are out of hand. Volunteer Centers and the non-profit agencies they serve have had significant budget cutbacks and must carefully consider where to focus their time and energy. Most are deciding to focus on those with a sustained commitment who can make a real difference or those who can respond to one day projects the agency is planning to meet its needs, on its schedule.

Anyone inquiring about 67 minutes of volunteering, will receive our short-term ops list and they can make the effort to find an attractive opportunity themselves.

***Submitted on 1 June 2009 by Gayle Rose, Volunteer Director, Salina, KS USA***

Hospital volunteers--and many others--need to be selected, oriented, and trained to perform with confidence and compassion. That's why we require new volunteers to commit a minimum of six months' time and pay half the cost of their shirts/jackets. We invest time in our volunteers, and they invest up front in volunteering. It's a mutual commitment to a common goal. The six-month requirement deters those who request a day of service. A day or week can work for community projects that have a finish line, but hospital volunteering is not that kind of project.

I like your topic and I totally agree with your conclusions. Much volunteering needs more than hands and hearts. Volunteers need a sense of ownership and loyalty.

***Submitted on 1 June 2009 by Nora Simmons Daly, Volunteer Resources Manager, Denver, Colorado USA***

I agree! The "Days of Service" model is getting out of hand. I recently received an email from President Obama asking people to rally around his healthcare reform ideas by organizing local

Healthcare Reform Kickoff meetings on June 6th. The meeting agenda includes organizing meeting attendees to participate in a National Healthcare Day of Service on June 27th, 3 weeks later.

Event organizers even provide a handy guide for those who wish to host a Kickoff meeting, but have put little consideration into what volunteering at a healthcare organization entails. Event organizers assume that people can just show up at their local hospital, hospice, or community clinic and “help out” for a day (OR LESS...).

What kind of 1-day volunteer experience can I organize for volunteers have not gone through any screening or training that will impact the healthcare system in America?

How do we, volunteer management professionals, convince "day of service" organizers, that there is much more to serving the community than showing up for one-time projects? By continuing to follow this model we perpetuate the notion that volunteering requires “little or no skill” because we are developing “little or no skill” projects to fit a broad spectrum of people who “show up”.

I have found over the years, the people who come for “mulch-and-run” volunteer projects, rarely get involved beyond their one day. And while short-term volunteer projects are fine for weeding playgrounds and painting classrooms, real change comes from the volunteer who are committed over the long haul (not just 67 minutes!)

***Submitted on 1 June 2009 by Amber, Raleigh, NC USA***

Ah, thank you. I'm glad somebody said it. While offering short terms of service is useful to try to encourage participation by the busy 9-to-5er population, I've wondered if we are also running the risk of sending the message that our expectations of people are too low. Once short-term/day projects become what people expect of volunteering, how will we build the volunteer loyalty, dedication, and commitment that is required to solve the bigger problems? One day service projects are good for painting buildings or building wheelchair ramps. But nonprofits so frequently need regular administrative and background help, and advocacy work that can change system and policy certainly can't happen in a few hours one day. It's time we help the public understand the balance and the need; volunteering - to make a real difference - HAS to be more than just about hands-on "feel good" projects. We have to help volunteers to have the maturity and "big picture" vision that shows them that investing in a cause for the long-term can be just as valuable if not more so to real impact than 'burst' projects.

***Submitted on 1 June 2009 by Emily Schnipper, Goodwill Industries of San Francisco, San Mateo and Marin Counties, CA USA***

I think one problem with these isolated days of service is that the whole point is obscured, that is -- getting people's feet wet in volunteering so that they see that it's enjoyable and they want to do it in the long term. If people aren't getting the message that a day of service can kick off a longer commitment, then I really don't think the service days have much of a point.

As a member of a national service program though (VISTA), I do say "bring on the incentives"! though. Volunteering is our full-time job, and we're not allowed to have outside employment, so I think it's only fair that volunteers like us receive enough to live on.

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