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Volunteering Is Bigger than the Nonprofit Sector

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April

2008

At the moment volunteering is a discussion topic in the American presidential primary campaign. It revolves around Democratic candidate Barack Obama's proposal to provide an annual \$4,000 tax credit for any college student who "gives back" by doing 100 hours of "public service" each year. In several published speeches and position papers, Obama does not clearly define what such service may include, but definitely considers a wide range of options. Yet, the *Boston Globe* wrote an [editorial](#) about the plan on March 28th, ending with:

Nonprofits would have to grow to scale to train and position students where they can do the most good. There will be growing pains, but the challenge for nonprofits isn't a lack of needs; it's figuring out how to expand to address all the problems crying out for help. By putting college students to work as mentors, tutors, and volunteers, that challenge can be met.

You may expect me to jump on the dozen different questions and red flags that this issue raises for those of us in the volunteer management profession, from questioning why anyone thinks college students are the answer to all social needs to the amount of time, money, and expertise involved in incorporating a huge number of new volunteers into agency work. (If the proposal ever moves from speechifying to legislative action, I suspect we'll be voicing those issues.)

At the moment, however, I am more concerned with a fundamental misconception and its consequences: the assumption that "volunteering" occurs mainly in the "nonprofit sector." Too many politicians, commentators, academics, and the general public are unable to recognize that a giant part of the volunteer world is unpaid service on behalf of *government*, especially at the state and local level. Four years ago, I wrote a Hot Topic essay on "[Does It Matter If Volunteers Work in a Nonprofit or a Government Setting?](#)" I encourage you to read it again because I took pains to outline some of the basic similarities and differences between volunteer management in both the nonprofit and government arenas.

Help Them, Not Us

Whenever politicians urge citizens to volunteer, they mean “go help nonprofit agencies” (clearly this is what the *Boston Globe* sees as the “ObamaCorps” ideal). Politicians rarely issue a call to “help government meet the needs of its citizenry.” In fact, a cynic might interpret the support of volunteering as: “go help nonprofit agencies who are dealing with problems the government caused/won’t help/plans to cut from funding.”

There is a big divide between Federal government policies and what happens at the state and local level. The smaller the community, the more evident the conscious involvement of citizens in activities for the public good: firefighting and emergency rescue, schools, libraries, recreation programs, and much more. It may surprise some to learn that almost no Federal department is permitted by law to involve volunteers! It requires Congressional exemption to do so, which is why the Department of Agriculture can run Extension programs with volunteers, the Department of the Interior can have a thriving national parks volunteer service, or veterans hospitals can place volunteers. Even the Corporation for National and Community Service, which funds an entire infrastructure to send volunteers into nonprofit agencies, is not allowed to assign someone from AmeriCorps or RSVP to work *in* a Corporation office!

The one contribution that the USA Freedom Corps made when it was started was to create a Web site where all the volunteer efforts coordinated by the Federal government were listed *together* for the first time. Unfortunately, that has disappeared from the current site, which increasingly focuses only on national and stipended service or linking people to nonprofit agencies. I just tried three searches on the Freedom Corps site (“national parks,” “soil conservation,” and “4-H”) and turned up nothing. How sad!

Consider, too, that the mandates of all the state commissions and/or offices on volunteering and service focus entirely on mobilizing citizens to help community causes through nonprofit agency sponsors only. Here the commissions are, sitting in state capitals, with no formal responsibility to improve the engagement of volunteers in all those government departments that often badly need connection and exchange on the subject. How many such commissions, for example, have ever convened a “summit” of heads of departments in which volunteers are active to advocate for designating a department-wide volunteer involvement strategy?

To give credit where credit is due, CaliforniaVolunteers, the subject of last month’s Hot Topic because its director was elevated to a cabinet-level position in California’s state government, does ask “Are you a nonprofit organization or public agency looking for volunteers?” – but under a section of their Web site headed solely, “Non-profit Resources.”

Years ago, I fought with the Points of Light Foundation to change what they were calling a “Nonprofit Member” to include vocabulary that included government. They were highly resistant. I’m sorry to report that early materials from the Hands On Network/Points of Light merger perpetuate this problem, continuously referring to volunteering as synonymous with the nonprofit sector. I’ve protested and we’ll see what happens.

I also might mention that the *only* book ever written about government-related volunteering was *Fostering Volunteer Programs in the Public Sector* by Jeffrey L. Brudney, published in 1990 by Jossey-Bass and long out-of-print. Academic programs on public administration ignore the subject of volunteers as effectively as those programs on nonprofit management or philanthropy.

So government officials, those supposedly representing the interests of the volunteerism field at the national level, and universities all perpetuate the stereotypes and miss opportunities to convene and support those public programs that are fully engaged with volunteers.

Why Does It Matter?

Why do I feel this lack of acknowledgement of government-related volunteering is important? Because it is at the heart of our political, social and economic future. (While this essay concerns the United States, may I suggest that the issues are equally applicable around the world?)

Let me raise some questions for us to discuss together:

- If we say that volunteering helps a nonprofit agency to stretch its budget and do more than the available funds would otherwise allow, why is it not as legitimate to speak of citizens serving in government agencies as a way to stretch the impact of tax dollars?
 - Why can't we "fundraise" to pay down the national debt, for example?
- Is the fact that government is highly unionized a key reason why politicians try to avoid rocking the boat in calling for citizens to volunteer in public agencies? If so, who decided that government employee salaries are sacrosanct, even if those providing the public funds – taxpayers – are willing to contribute their services as well as their dollars?
- What would be the political fallout if a candidate issued a challenge for all citizens to give 100 hours a year to some *government* service? More important, what would be the social impact of such collective action for the common good?
 - Would this increase government funding for people to lead volunteer programs? To train employees to work effectively with volunteers?
 - Might this force government volunteer programs to communicate with each other?
 - Might this re-commit citizens to the value of government (since volunteers most often become advocates for more money for the causes they support)?
- How can we, as colleagues in volunteerism, assure that public agency volunteering is elevated to its rightful position as equal to nonprofit volunteering, and recognized as both the same and sometimes different?
- Is there any way that we in the United States can use the current presidential campaign to bring this issue to light?

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Posted on 8 April 2008 Mark Lyons, University of Technology, Sydney, Professor, NSW Australia

In its 2006 Voluntary Work survey the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that 35% of the adult population volunteered at least once during the previous year. It also identified whether the organisations that they volunteered for were nonprofit, government or for-profit. 14.4% were government and another 1% were for-profit.

The survey also identified whether the organisations people volunteered for depended entirely on volunteers for their existence (the great majority of nonprofit organisations, often overlooked in discussion of volunteer recruitment and management) or were organisations that employed staff to do much of their work. Government organisations comprised 27% of this latter group. They included government schools, hospitals, museums, environment agencies, emergency services and so on. Very important indeed!

Posted on 3 April 2008 by Billie Ann Myers, AARP-Arkansas, State President, Little Rock, AR USA

Susan, You know that I agree whole heartedly!!!! The Division of Volunteerism has tracked state and local government volunteer involvement since 1983 and the value of the service is in millions, maybe billions of dollars.

The Arkansas Legislature authorized state and local government volunteer programs with benefits and procedures in Act 42 of 1981. For more information contact Sherry Anderson at:

Posted on 2 April 2008 by Marti Sowka, Portage County RSVP, RSVP Director, Stevens Point WI USA

Amen indeed! I've fought this fight for a long time as an RSVP project sponsored by a unit of county government – and it is pervasive. I can't tell you how many times I've added the words "and public agencies" to local documents being developed and edited by groups I work with. I've countered this to some degree by building strong relationships with county and community public sector programs. For example, a local RSVP site is the state Division of Motor Vehicles where RSVP volunteers take photos for driver licenses/id cards. This allows staff more time to tackle complicated legal issues. The staff are union members who totally support the volunteers because it strengthens delivery of services to customers.

And take a look at many volunteer award nomination forms - often the single eligibility standard listed will be "must be non-profit organization." The Purpose Prize nomination form provides a template for the best wording I've seen, stating under eligibility: Be currently working in a leadership capacity in an organization or institution (public, private, nonprofit, or for-profit) to address a major social problem in the United States or abroad.

Posted on 1 April 2008 by Chris Myers Asch, U.S. Public Service Academy, Executive Director, Washington, DC USA

Amen! Volunteering -- and salaried service, for that matter -- absolutely must include the public sector. Too many of our politicians (and too many Americans), on both the left and the right, have imbibed the reflexive anti-government antagonism that assumes that public sector work is somehow less important, less effective, or less noble than work in the private and non-profit sectors. The non-profit world depends on effective public institutions, and we need good people to work and volunteer in them!

One way to get this topic into the presidential campaign is by urging the candidates to support the U.S. Public Service Academy, which would be the civilian counterpart to the military academies.

Posted on 1 April 2008 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

While we are discussing this months hot topic, I encourage you to visit and read through the U.S. Public Service Academy website to learn more about the national proposal, developing Board and planned youth conference as it relates to public service and higher education.

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