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## What's Ahead for 2009?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January  
2009

New Year's Eve inevitably causes reflection on the year coming to a close and hopes, wishes, and resolutions for the year about to start. Since you can read my thoughts on the key issues of 2008 in [past Hot Topics](#), let's focus on what might be ahead. [/hot-topics-and-news](#)

### The Obama Effect

The United States is about to inaugurate a new president who represents the hopes of many for a brighter future. Barack Obama won the election in large part because of his unprecedented ability to mobilize volunteers at the local level – many of whom had never gotten engaged in political action before. He had special appeal to young voters, with whom his campaign connected mainly by Internet technology.

Here are several ways that the Obama Administration may impact volunteering in the United States, along with some of my own editorial comments.

- Obama campaign leaders are working hard to maintain the momentum and engagement of their election volunteers in ways that 1) truly give people a way to serve their communities, and 2) are not cynically seen as a ruse to keep the corps intact for the 2012 campaign. They are making a very interesting start with their "Change is Coming" house meetings, in which volunteers are being asked to suggest priorities for the new Administration and develop ideas for grassroots action on real needs.

Already there have been e-mails from both Barack and Michelle Obama urging volunteer action of various sorts. Michelle's holiday message on December 23rd started with:

*This holiday season, the grassroots movement you helped build can make a big difference for those in need. I hope you will join me in supporting your favorite charity or contributing to causes that are especially meaningful to me and my family.*

She specifically recommended donating to a local food bank or giving to Operation USO Care, and provided links directly to such sites. Perhaps in the future this Administration will talk about *ending* hunger and war rather than palliating the effects, but it's a nice start.

- Candidate Obama made campaign promises about enlarging stipended service programs such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. Many also believe that he will favor the proposed U.S. Public Service Academy. So we may see legislation and appropriations that fund these efforts.
- President Obama will be appointing the next director of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which will set the tone for that agency's work in the coming years. From the volunteer management perspective, we'll be watching whether the new person understands that stipended service is only a small part of "service" and will seek ways to strengthen volunteering infrastructure. Still on the table is the idea of training AmeriCorps members to be volunteer coordinators at the local level (something successfully done by VISTAs in the 1980s) – will this happen and how?

There is also the question of whether someone new will break down the silos that have encased AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn & Serve projects. It's time that the Corporation presses all these "streams of service" to find their commonalities on the ground.

## Our Profession

Volunteer management continues to percolate professionally, although the outcomes are rarely clear. Some developments on the horizon are:

- This may be the year that the U.S. finally develops a viable professional association. The \$100,000 grant to ALIVE ([Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement](#)) may be just the push needed to help this fledgling effort live up to its name. And, maybe there will be progress in uniting with the struggling AVRMA (Association for Volunteer Resources Management) so that we can stop fighting each other and tackle the real issues we fully share.
- Keep an eye on the professional associations, trainers, and authors outside of the USA, particularly in the UK and Australia. They are growing in strength and will lead the way in redefining our work, how we learn best practices, and how we exchange ideas.
- Despite the counter-intuitive reasoning, it's already starting to happen that volunteer program managers are being laid off in the face of tightening budgets – just as the demand for more volunteers is growing. As a profession, we must respond when executives make short-sighted decisions. DOVIAs and state associations ought to develop "position papers" on the importance and value-added of the volunteer management role and use them on behalf of their members, whether directly with each offending agency, with funders, or even with the press. *[Some associations have already done this and I hope, if you're a member of one of these, you'll reply to this Hot Topic with a link to the statement you've developed.]*

- Everyone is rethinking conferences, which are expensive to produce and attend. A few long-standing events are testing an every-other-year schedule and some organizations are moving to regional-level gatherings instead. This will drive more groups to consider online training options, although, with a growing number of exceptions, we're still a field that dislikes online interaction, electronic documents, and the feel of cyberspace. Also, it's much harder to create quality online learning than to put on a real-world workshop. Energize has been working hard for 5+ years to understand this medium in creating *Everyone Ready*®.

On the other hand, it is increasingly simple and inexpensive to add technology to group events, such as setting up an Internet connection and Web cam and "inviting" a guest speaker from anywhere on the globe. Maybe in 2009 we'll do more experimenting with this sort of idea.

## And now it's *your* turn...

**What do you predict (or hope) will develop for volunteering in 2009?**

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***Submitted on 25 February 2009 by Christine Adeeb, UNT /COMs 4100, Fort Worth, TX USA***

I think that with the Obama Administration we are going to see a lot more change in volunteering. I think that with Obama's way of reaching out to the people of the younger generation by use of internet technology more and more people are going to be able to see his call for action with volunteering. With the economic downturn, many people are going to be turning to organizations for relief and help as the job losses continue to increase. In addition, more people are going to be volunteering and helping out the organizations they believe in and feel will make a difference in their community. With the increase in volunteers I feel that there will be a greater need in volunteer managers to make sure the volunteers are being able to be as beneficial to the organization as possible, and to have continued success in each organization.

***Submitted on 24 February 2009 by Priscilla Prather, UNT, Student, San Antonio TX USA***

The Obama effect has already had an interesting grasp on our culture, even prior to his election. I have to ask, what exactly is this change that is coming? How will President Obama and his family actually show us how to be agents of change in our own communities? How will this differ from past presidents who have also seen HOPE at the end of the tunnel and had a desire to see change in our country? The hope that we seek in Obama's director-elect for the Corporation of National and Community Service would inevitably lay new ground work for volunteer managers in the future. I can't say for sure, but I'm almost positive that the past few men that have held the office of President have also had an interest in the volunteers of the communities we live in. Why is now so different?

ALIVE's new grant will continue to validate the work that has already been set in motion as stated on their website. The greatest amount of work achieved was in 2007 during a retreat when they identified their overall purpose as an organization. I am ever so appreciative of the interest our congress and President has with this program, but I cannot dismiss those that have gone before Mr.

Obama and laid the foundations that are already in place. It is an exciting time for ALIVE as they seek to “enhance and sustain the spirit of volunteerism” in our country. I give credit to those that have served this organization, such as Professor McCleskey and have done the research and back breaking work to place this organization on the forefront of the politicians minds as a viable contributor to our society. On the flip side, it good to see the steady growth and recognition of the AVR. As our country slips quietly into a recession we might find ourselves in need of help or assistance, it is good to know that there is a small sector of society that still sees the profession of volunteering and those that manage the volunteers, as useful.

It's a shame that people may see the volunteer manager as dispensable rather than indispensable. Understanding that times are tough and recession has hit – the trend to unload this position on one or a few- that do not understand fully the responsibilities involved; will be a story that will be told and outcomes unveiled over time. The US may, in fact, take a few lessons from the growth of volunteerism an ocean away. One trend that makes sense to me is cutting back in the mega conferences. Utilizing technology is a smart, as well as, time and cost effective. There is more than one way to skin a cat and hosting satellite regional conferences will prove to be more effective over time.

***Submitted on 31 January 2009 anonymously from Florida***

I am a paid employee at a hospital doing quite well despite the downturn in the economy. My employer is a for-profit with a vibrant healthcare volunteer program because the area demographics lean more toward well income retirees. There have been substantial cutbacks of paid positions since the current for-profit took the hospital over from non-profit. Of course, as a paid employee, I am angry seeing some of these paid positions slowly taken over by, I suppose, well meaning volunteers. The reason I write "I suppose" above can best be illustrated by a conversation I recently had with a volunteer which prompted me to research and write about this topic. The Volunteer asked me if what I do is a paid position (I am a patient transporter for a very busy Hospital). I answered that my position is indeed paid. The volunteer then told me that the hospital he had volunteered at, prior to this one, had him do my job and he was not paid. When I asked him whether that hospital was a non-profit he just went on about how volunteers should be doing my job. I suppose what made me angry about all this was that this gentleman was retired and did not need the income because he was employed during better times when jobs were more plentiful. Now, however, unemployment is high and if I lost my job now I would not be able to support my family. Is this what he wants? I thought he volunteered to help people. How does putting more people out of work - which no doubt will cause more suffering- help. Just something to think about; thanks.

***Submitted on 27 January 2009 by Sheryl Luebke, JFS, Coordinator of Volunteer Resources, Richmond/VA USA***

The economic downturn seems to be leading people to find new ways to express their concern for others in need. Lately I've experienced and heard about birthday parties where invitations are requesting attendees not bring gifts but food items for the local food bank, contributions for a social action project that the birthday celebrant wants to fund, and checks/credit cards to buy jewelry at the party from a vendor who contributes a percentage to a designated charity/effort, to name a few

examples. Encouraging people to direct endowments has been a big push in many agencies locally, but I wonder how much social action birthday parties could reap if they were played up as well?

***Submitted on 7 January 2009 by Barbara Ellen Reynolds, Volunteer Maryland, Director, Baltimore/MD USA***

I'm happy to report that many AmeriCorps programs are providing volunteer coordinators to communities as well as volunteer management training to their members each year. In fact, my program, Volunteer Maryland, is a full-time corps of trained volunteer managers who serve at nonprofit agencies across Maryland. Our program is the perfect example of Susan's reflection on the contribution of AmeriCorps to the much larger (and older) world of professional volunteer management. Through the work of our 32 AmeriCorps members each year, we have the privilege of working with 4,000 community volunteers in every region of our state. I think our program is a perfect hybrid of the best of both worlds--stipended service and traditional volunteerism.

***Submitted on 5 January 2009 by Sarah Jane Rehnberg, RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, Univ. of Texas, Assoc. Director & Lecturer, Austin, TX USA***

### **The Myth of the Retiring Boomer**

Although great efforts have been focused on engaging the retiring boomer in service, I find myself questioning the projections associated with this "trend." Yes, in spite of the economic down-turn, there will be boomers retiring eager to find a niche through service, but I would suggest that this trend may be greatly over-rated. First, research fairly conclusively suggests that older volunteers are volunteers who age -- ergo, we should be quietly suspect of those who suggest that all retirees will turn to volunteerism to continue to find meaning in their lives, especially if they have no prior history of volunteering.

Second, the downturn is significant -- many will be postponing retirement -- others will work part time (a condition that does support volunteer involvement) while others may use their free time to assist extended families with child care as more and more couples find that two incomes are essential and the price of child care prohibitive. Please don't confuse this with the need for skilled volunteer positions however. We need volunteer opportunities that require professionally honed skills -- but these opportunities are as important for existing volunteers as they are for those eager to keep their hand in after retirement. And finally, please remember that those who are able to volunteer in their retirement may want to finally serve in ways that involve nurturing and other rolls not necessitating high end professional skills.

***Submitted on 5 January 2009 by Gail Barrera, Disabled Resource Services, SYEP Coordinator, Fort Collins, CO USA***

I'm encouraged by the Obama's approach to seek systemic change and fix the problems. I've been in social work and acted as a volunteer coordinator and past president of DOVIA in my area, and have now moved my efforts toward working with initiatives and groups that are trying to end homelessness rather than put a band-aid on it by providing basic needs for a period of time. I'm currently involved in a plan approved by the mayor in my local area to end homelessness by providing

housing in a "housing first" initiative. The success rate of these programs nationwide is staggering, as people are more apt to move to a functional life when the stress of street living is not an issue. I would really like to see more of this type of volunteer work applied to other important issues, ie: hunger, health care, and other problems that plague our country.

***Submitted on 5 January 2009 by DJ Cronin, Board Member AAVA, Brisbane, Australia***

Thanks Susan. I particularly like your suggestion of associations developing a position paper on the importance of volunteer management. I will be taking this suggestion with me to the planning meeting for the Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators (AAVA) at the end of this month.

And so to some of my own wishes for 09.

I am delighted to see that ALIVE got this grant and I too hope ALIVE and AVRMA can work closer together for the benefit of the volunteer management profession in the US. Our association here in OZ must look deeper into ways in which we too can gain funding in order for us to provide a more comprehensive and stronger service to the sector here.

I too despair at the fact that we do very little online interaction. While there appears to be intermittent activity at times there is still a resistance to this type of communication. I guess we simply must work harder in demonstrating its numerous benefits.

Globally, it would be good to see us interact more. We have some wonderful professional associations dotted around the globe but very little idea or note comparing goes on. I am confident we can learn a lot from each other.

Another of my wishes for 09 though is to see individual volunteer managers grow. For the penny to drop that they provide a remarkable and valuable service. For individuals to be confident and to find the voice that expresses their multiple skills and talents. For the voices that are quiet up to now to emerge and share their insights and perspectives.

Recently I have been amazed to see others in the sector and Government propose and come up with initiatives to do with volunteering without any consultation whatsoever with those in the volunteer management sector. Initially my reaction was to whinge and moan about the absurdity of this behaviour. But on reflection I realised that we very much had ourselves to blame.

My hope then for 2009 is that we present a united and strong front. That we articulate clearly on what our needs are and on what we can bring to the discussion table. We are after all at the coal face. We do after all see the emerging trends before other "experts" even realise there is an emerging trend! We can put ourselves in a position where others approach us for our wisdom, solutions and expertise!

Can we do it? Yes we can!

**Submitted on 3 January 2009 by H. Roberts, Project Linus NJ Inc., d/b/a/ Blankie Depot President, Keyport/NJ USA**

As a member of the Media Group for the US Public Service Academy, I remain dedicated to the vision and urgency for a national college of this caliber and civic focus. If we wish to engage young people, our future leaders, in civic responsibility we should not fall short in the area of greatest opportunity: education. USPSA offers a return to civic education and the national importance of such fostering should not be underestimated.

I believe that a return to establishing a national DOVIA home office is long overdue. Hundreds of individual chapters exist around the country but with the closing of AVA and the development of two unique VRM associations, DOVIA's do not have a national home base. A national office or affiliation under an appropriate national entity focused on VRM continuing education and best practices would elevate the benefits of DOVIA membership and strengthen ties and encourage shared knowledge between DOVIA chapters.

I believe that 100% volunteer non profits (of which I am one leader) should be eager to adopt traditional and innovative best practices and not settle for a "vigilante volunteer" title. If we wish to be taken seriously (and not accept a do-gooders pat on the head) we must step out of our kitchen tables and common rooms and contribute to the national discussion as VRM's. Equally, I would like to see a more welcoming approach by professional associations, conference planners and non profit resource groups to acknowledge that 100% volunteer non profits have unique but insightful experiences to offer which may require some tweaking from the more traditional non profit sector in order to join the collaborative dialogue. This highly motivated group of time givers are not vigilante in methods, they are vigilant in mission.

I would like to see a nationally broadcast Charity cable channel on television. Given all that has been tried (v-logs, blogs, websites, online seminars, newsletters, chat rooms, virtual conferences and so on) virtually, I truly believe that television is the only form of media far reaching enough to offer a full spectrum non profit education to the general public and larger giving community. There is no question that valuable and inspiring content will never be in short supply...what remains to be seen is who in television broadcasting has the drive and determination to take volunteerism and the profession it represents beyond the "reality tv" or "10 min make a difference closing moment." Ted Turner are you listening?

I would like the International Volunteer Manager's Day committee to organize an online global conference where VRM's from across the globe can brainstorm, share experiences and challenges and bring breath and depth to the Day.

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