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## "A New Era of Responsibility": An Open Letter to President Obama

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

February

2009

Dear President Obama:

I join with millions of Americans in welcoming you to the Presidency and feel the renewed spirit that you are engendering in our country. Because you have made a commitment to all forms of community service, including what is generally called volunteering, I'd like to take this opportunity to connect you with the professional field of "volunteer resource management." We're a field that has often been ignored by past Administrations in favor of establishing brand new campaigns that assume there are no existing resources for best practices in volunteerism.

You have already raised the visibility of volunteering through your speeches, writings, and actions – and you have provided the catch phrase of "a new era of responsibility." Thank you for including citizen participation in your very [first posting to the new White House Blog](#) on your first half-day in office, January 20, 2009. More specifically, thank you for taking the opportunity of the Martin Luther King Jr. "Day On – Not Off" to urge much more than single bursts of energy:

*So today, I am asking you to roll up your sleeves and join in the work of remaking this nation. I pledge to you that government will do its part to open up more opportunities for citizens to participate. And in return, I ask you to play your part – to not just pitch in today, but to make an ongoing commitment that lasts far beyond one day, or even one presidency.*

Of course we have heard such rhetoric before but I genuinely believe that your Administration will be different and add tangible resources to the lip service. Your hallmark is seeking solid information and educated opinions to develop your strategy, so this open letter is intended to give you input on the subject from professionals who work in the field of volunteer engagement and understand its complexities. Here is what we believe your Administration can do to strengthen volunteering in the United States. Below are some of my ideas and then our site visitors (who number in the thousands daily, from around the world) will add their perspectives in the response area.

- The problems confronting our society today need BOTH volunteers *and* money. It's not either/or. Too often, your predecessors have turned to volunteer engagement as a way to *avoid* government responsibility for the common good. The more citizens see our tax dollars going to critical services, the more we will contribute our time and energy towards their success.
- Focus on examples of volunteering that work to *solve the causes* of entrenched problems and go beyond addressing only the symptoms. No U.S. President should ever again extol "working in a soup kitchen" without stressing how citizens can become activists in the fight to *end hunger*. A newly painted wall is certainly valuable to a homeless teen center, but think about the message sent to America if the volunteering modeled was instead mentoring those same teens to stay in school, finding their parents solid jobs, or removing street violence from their lives. Volunteers are already engaged in all those actions, too, even if they provide fewer "photo ops."
- Spend money on national service programs because AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and the like allow thousands of dedicated participants to give a year or two of *full-time* service, which can be transformational to both the giver and the receiver. However, recognize that such expensive programs only deal with a minute percentage of the millions of volunteers out there who give a few hours when they can all year long. Daily volunteering by Americans of all ages is rarely acknowledged, often neglected, and usually underfunded. You will soon be appointing a new Director of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Please select someone who understands the *full spectrum* of citizen participation. Today, CNCS focuses on youth and seniors. What about all the people in-between?
- Seek to share the knowledge and best practices of volunteer management as they have developed here with the rest of the world – but never, never under the assumption that "volunteering is uniquely American." It is not. Volunteering is truly international and we should go abroad to *exchange* methodology, not preach our own. Change the pattern of the U.S. being absent from collaborations and celebrations on the international stage. Most developed countries have a "national center" for volunteerism with the mandate to represent their citizen volunteers to the rest of the world. Unlike your predecessors, you can encourage the CNCS and the new Hands On Network/Points of Light Institute (which receives federal funds) to fulfill this role—which will also help all Americans in this field who work internationally.
- Understand that people are not unwilling to volunteer, but rather, organizations often are unwilling to welcome the skills and the *input* of community members. It's the unhappy dark side

of nonprofits that so few of them want strong volunteers or are able to harness highly-skilled volunteer talents effectively. Just look at how few nonprofits designate funds for volunteer program coordination or other tools that volunteers need to perform effectively. The federal government can assure that all its grant proposal guidelines ask:  
Fund those requests that include community participation in a strategic way and budget for a coordinator of volunteers position.

1. How will community volunteers be involved in this project?
  2. What funds are being requested to support volunteer involvement?
- Lift the ban against volunteers serving *in government*, rather than exhorting nonprofits to be open to community involvement. Right now, the federal government *prohibits* volunteers from working in all its offices except for a few designated programs (National Park Service, Cooperative Extension, veterans hospitals, and so on). CNCS cannot invite citizens to help in the work of the Corporation itself! State, county and municipal governments have long ago overcome this hurdle. It's time for Washington to get on board. [Note that this may force a confrontation with government worker labor unions who will misunderstand and fight this as a "slippery slope" threatening their jobs. As chief executive, you can assure that allowing taxpayers to volunteer in government *expands* the benefit of their tax dollars, in *addition* to the salaries needed to provide basic services.]
  - Applaud that volunteers are active in all areas of society, way beyond human services. Museum docents, bike path advocates, youth soccer coaches, community orchestra members – all contribute to the quality of life as much as volunteers in homeless shelters or AIDS clinics. No one was paid to dump the tea in Boston Harbor, and still today all forms of cause-related activism rely on unpaid workers. Past politicians extolled volunteers as "quiet heroes." Given your community organizing background, you know that more things get done by noisy advocates!

Please read on to see what our colleagues want to say to you, too.

All our thoughts and wishes are concentrated on your success. And we'll roll up our sleeves, too.

Yours in service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan J. Ellis". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Susan J. Ellis

President  
Energize, Inc.

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***Submitted 7 March 2009 by Priscilla Prather, Student at UNT, San Antonio, TX USA***

In response: First, I am thrilled that our new administration seems to hold volunteers and those that manage them in high esteem and deem their jobs and service worthwhile and absolutely necessary within our communities. I personally feel challenged by Obama's charge that we are to be part of "a new era of responsibility." That excites me and makes me want to pull up my boot straps, grab my neighbors and get to work. However, I think we would be remiss to say that no other administration before Obama has even so much as glanced in the direction of community service and or has shown a genuine interest in true community investment. I feel, given some time in office, Mr. Obama will begin to feel the tug and pull of his powerful position and find some of these agenda's placed on a back burner... "just for a while."

From the White House BLOG Mr. Obama encourages us to be strong and stand firm because that's what we do – "it's a great American tradition of giving of ourselves to lift up our community." (1) His words were a shadow of a previous administration (Bush) when he said that, "our problems cannot be solved by government alone – or even mostly by government. It's going to take all of us, putting our shoulder to the wheel, doing our part to remake this nation." (2) In an excerpt taken from a statement before the United States' Senate Committee on Finance President Bush's Proposal to Encourage Charitable Giving By, C. Eugene Steuerle, it says that "The President, along with many other Republicans and Democrats, have put forward a number of suggestions aimed at strengthening the nonprofit sector of the economy. The goodness of a society is defined by the sum total of what all its members do, whether directly as individuals, as contributors of time and money to others, as participant in community activities, or as taxpayers and representatives. The government can't do it all and neither can charities." (*link no longer online, 2014*). Based on this information it is difficult for me to completely dismiss those that have served our country before now.

President Reagan was also a true supporter of the nonprofit sector and he assisted in establishing many organizations that we are familiar with today. With the creation of the Freedom Corps Web site; "Nonprofits Agree: USA Freedom Corps Volunteer Network will make a big difference in the mission to help everyone find a great place to volunteer, and the support for USA Freedom Corps helps make it easier than ever for people to discover the reward and fulfillment that accompany volunteer service" (*link no longer online, 2014*). This was just as important to the Reagan administration as is to the Obama administration. This kind of collaboration between nonprofits like VolunteerMatch, Points of Light, Youth Service America's SERVENet, America's Promise, National Mentoring Partnership and United Way. Federal partner volunteer programs such as, AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Citizen Corps, Peace Corps, and Department of the Interior as well as others; has been needed for some time. I believe that over the years, and through the last three administrations –

these organizations and many like them have held a seat of importance. Keeping it on the front burners will be the key!

It's exciting to me that this new administration is ready to expand corporation for national and community service, engage retiring Americans in service on a large scale, expand the Peace Corps, integrate and expand service learning into our Nation's schools, expand youth Programs, require 100 hours of service in college, promote college serve-study, create a social investment fund network, and social entrepreneurship agency for nonprofits. I was equally impressed with Ms. Ellis's letter that hit upon ever point of volunteering and volunteer management that needs attention for the betterment of each community within our great Nation. I pray that there are ears to listen and hands and feet to carry out the promises made and the mission that needs to be attended to. It is an exciting time for sure.

***Submitted 24 February 2009 by Rhoda White, Visiting Nurse Service of NY, Director Vol. Services (Retired), New York, N.Y USA***

Dear President Obama, After 30 years in the field of Volunteer Administration and now retired I find new hope in your spotlighting once again what citizen involvement can add to this country. My hope is that the professional and trained volunteer administrators will not be left out of the process. All too often the not for profits feel they can do without trained managers in this field and they are the first to be let go. I would hope that there is continued funding for these organization as well as emphasis on the management of this precious resource of volunteers led by volunteer administrators.

***Submitted 24 February 2009 by Lana Mills, International Baccalaureate, Volunteer Coordinator, New York USA***

Dear President Obama, Volunteering is an endeavor that helps others but gives so much back to the giver. Please continue to spotlight the importance of volunteers in America and around the world as has done past administrations.

***Submitted 23 February 2009 by Carole Ferster, Bronx Zoo, Retired Volunteer Coordinator, Bronx, NY USA***

Dear Mr. President, When volunteers flounder without leadership we waste their time and turn them off. With professional leadership guiding these same volunteers, they do useful work and receive tremendous personal satisfaction. Please remember to consider professional volunteer managers as essential to well functioning volunteer programs.

***Submitted 18 February 2009 by Tracie Wheeler, Senior Services, Inc., Director, RSVP - Your Invitation to Volunteer, Kalamazoo, Michigan United States***

Dear President Obama, RSVP has proudly helped people age 55 and better volunteer for 40 years. RSVP began to keep older Americans active and engaged, but has evolved to meet community needs through coordinated efforts to engage people in active service. You and your administration are applauded for acknowledging and valuing the need "to expand and improve programs that connect individuals over the age of 55 to quality volunteer opportunities". Expanding and improving RSVP

financially would allow programs to: better engage people in improving their communities by offering significant benefits/incentives to volunteers giving intense service and/or significant time, adequately provide reimbursement to help people who find it financially difficult to travel to an organization to share their skills, recruit and train volunteers as nonprofit volunteer managers, educate nonprofits on the benefits of effective engagement of volunteers (highly skilled or otherwise), and improve the ability of programs to provide excellent customer service to volunteers and partners. Improving RSVP operationally might include removing barriers to resource development by programs and sponsors, instituting a national marketing plan with a consistent message about RSVP, and rewarding programs that collaborate with other civic engagement organizations, practice effective volunteer management and consistently meet standards set forth by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

***Submitted on 11 February 2009 by Diana Kyrwood, President, Gloria Deucher, Board Chair, New York Association for Volunteer Administration, New York, NY USA***

Dear Mr. President, The members of the New York Association for Volunteer Administration (NYAVA) commend you for raising the visibility of volunteerism by calling for "a new era of responsibility." As you are undoubtedly aware through your work as a community organizer, the challenge in many communities and not-for-profit organizations is the ability to harness the goodwill, expertise and creativity of would-be volunteers and channel it into its most effective uses. A corps of professional volunteer resource managers with a wealth of knowledge and experience currently exists in organizations throughout the country to help bring your vision to fruition.

And yet ironically, what we are seeing too often in this troubled economy is a short sighted budget-cutting approach in which organizations render their volunteer programs ineffective by cutting staffing and resources. We have experienced it among our colleagues in New York City, in large cultural organizations and small social service providers alike. We know from experience when this happens that volunteer resources will be squandered and community needs will go unmet.

As Susan Ellis and others have already done, the members of the NYAVA invite your administration to call on us and challenge us with the resources to get the job done. Programs designed to increase volunteer involvement must include the funding to train and manage volunteers and provide those volunteers with the resources to do their jobs well. When we empower volunteers, much can be accomplished.

***Submitted on 11 February 2009 by Brenda J. Greenberg, Northern Services Group, Director of Volunteer Services, Monsey, NY USA***

Dear President Obama, As the retired Director of the Rockland County New York RSVP, and present Director of Volunteer Services for a group of senior citizen residences, I urge you to maintain and even increase the federal funding for these organizations. Additional funding would enable RSVP to continue transporting volunteers 55 and older to worksites where they accomplish so much. In addition, I would urge you to ask the Corporation for National Service to recognize the fact that humor and laughter are valid impact projects and people who provide such are doing a great service.

***Submitted on 10 February 2009 by Kate M. Burggraff. Minnesota Association of Volunteer Administration. President. Maplewood, MN USA***

Dear President Obama, The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) is the only multi-sector, statewide professional association of volunteer resources leaders in Minnesota. More than 700 members strong, we are advancing our mission "to inspire excellence in the leadership of volunteers".

The dire economic environment has immediate implications for volunteers and volunteer programs, and especially for the people and communities served by volunteers. As you address pressing economic challenges, MAVA urges you to keep in mind the importance of sustaining and investing in a strong volunteerism infrastructure. Loss of funding for existing volunteer programs will result in the loss of volunteers and quality volunteer services on which our communities depend. Investments in volunteer programs will contribute to retention of volunteers and greater implementation of volunteer resources management best practices. The return on volunteer program investment will be many times the original investment.

As emphasis on volunteer and service initiatives is heightened, it is extremely important for volunteer programs to have the internal capacity to effectively incorporate the anticipated growth in the number of volunteers, in order to help assure positive community results. Direct investments in volunteer programs will be essential.

***Submitted on 8 February 2009 by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, NYMH and KJMC, Program/Training Coordinator, Grant Coordinator and Consultant, New York, New York United States***

Dear Mr. President, I didn't know there was a professional career path for volunteer resource managers (or directors of volunteer services, volunteer administrators, etc.) before I volunteered for a LGBT Community Service Center during the early days of HIV/AIDS. That experience led to my intentional career change to volunteer resource management.

Those in the profession were willing mentors with a vast body of knowledge. They had the tools, among them best practices, and were nurturing to a new colleague. I was able to find professional associations - local, statewide, national, and international. Those in this field are often unrecognized as they quietly toil - making a difference on a daily basis. From day to day they focus on identifying the needs of a community, cause, or organization and they recruit, interview, screen, orient, train, monitor, mentor, evaluate, and recognize the volunteers who step forward to serve.

I invite you to engage volunteer resource managers in your journey of citizen engagement. They know how to build the infrastructure that is required to usher in your spirit of service. Look to the professional associations, volunteer centers, and the grass roots ventures. We can create a rich tapestry of united passions, knowledge, and sweat equity/labor. I encourage your administration to empower us to be part of that journey.

***Submitted on 8 February 2009 by Deborah Zink, Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts, Volunteer Coordinator, Baltimore, MD U.S.A.***

As a Volunteer Coordinator of an arts organization that depends on hundreds of volunteers per year, I respectfully urge President Obama and Congress to quickly act to change the standard mileage rate used to calculate the deductible costs of operating an automobile for charitable purposes. Currently, and for far too long, this mileage deduction is fixed at only 14 cents/mile – which is 41 cents lower than the standard deduction for business miles driven. Let's encourage and support volunteerism by enacting a deduction that is and remains comparable to the amount allowed for business purpose travel. Thank you.

***Submitted on 3 February 2009 by Sue Vineyard, Retired Volunteer Management Trainer and Author, Darien, IL United States***

I celebrate the first President to come from the 3rd Sector, which is made up of over 50% of adults and teens as volunteers. Too few people, however, understand that the sector also includes the people who LEAD programs, the professional volunteer program executive, who I believe MUST be part of the shaping of a Presidential Assistant or Cabinet level entity to promote voluntary service. Those "pros" who understand that the volunteer spectrum runs from stipended folks in established groups i.e. AmeriCorps to neighbors who gather like minded folks around the kitchen table to identify, then respond to a need. Your campaign tells us you understand the latter, so I pray that you ensconce experienced, creative & cooperative professionals who have program experience to lead your efforts. Such "pros" understand the breadth & energies of volunteering as no others do. God Bless.

***Submitted on 3 February 2009 by Susan Dixon, Volunteer Center of Gloucester County, Sewell, NJ***

Like politics, volunteering is local. Local people addressing local problems. There is already an infrastructure of volunteer centers that serve the needs of 60% of our population. Underfunding is these Center's most critical problem. They need funds to recruit and manage volunteers and to share information through web sites, blogs, and Directories of Volunteer Opportunities in hardcopy. Volunteer Managers working in local non-profits need training and support. Volunteer Centers need funds to run mentoring programs, youth involvement councils, donation drives, friendly visitor programs.

I believe the best way to fund these centers is through pass through grants to state governments and/or Points of Light Foundation/HandsOn Network. The temptation is to create new programs with your administration's name all over them. Please consider support for already existing volunteer centers to mobilize volunteers in their communities.

***Submitted on 3 February 2009 by Martin J Cowling, People First -Total Solutions, CEO, Melbourne, Victoria AUSTRALIA***

Dear Susan, This was a brilliant letter. I hope you get e response from the President soon. I also hope that the new era of openness and understanding that has been promised will mean that your letter will be acted upon.



***Submitted on 3 February 2009 by Janet Sharma, Volunteer Center of Bergen County, Executive Director, Hackensack, NJ USA***

The Volunteer Center of Bergen County, which is an affiliate of the HandsOn Network, eagerly endorses the concepts articulated in the open letter to President Obama. While traditional volunteers – those who give freely of their time and who comprise the vast majority of those engaged in service activities -- are not paid, volunteering is not free. Volunteers are a vital human resource and, as such, deserve competent management. However, volunteer management professionals have for too long been undervalued and, in many nonprofit organizations, nonexistent. Our wish is that the current administration recognizes this and takes steps to promote the importance of effective volunteer management. The result will be that the resources of time and talent provided by those willing to volunteer can be effectively engaged to address the most pressing issues in our communities.

***Submitted on 2 February 2009 by Dr. Judith A. M. Smith, HandsOn Jacksonville, Inc., President & CEO, Jacksonville, FL USA***

HandsOn Jacksonville, formerly Volunteer Jacksonville, a proud member of the Points of Light Institute's HandsOn Network, applauds President Obama for his strong words of support regarding the power and value of voluntary service in making our communities and our world a better place.

We look forward to being a part of his plan, and we echo the comments of our colleagues in this discussion thread that encourage the administration to strengthen the existing network of volunteer action centers by delivering real resources for those of us whose business is to inspire, equip, and mobilize people to take action that changes our communities and our world.

***Submitted on 2 February 2009 by H. Roberts, PLNJ Inc., - Blankie Depot, President, Keyport/NJ USA***

I wholeheartedly agree that local Volunteer Centers are a vital connection to community opportunities. Sadly, Centers are all too often understaffed and not commonly understood by the general public. In my community, the VC has one manager and is constantly looking for in house volunteer support to man telephones, handle intake forms and work on mailings. How can a VC be in the office guiding the public and in the field supporting area non profits with a lone Manager? With limited financial strength to hire or train?

Many VC websites are lacking updated information or a designated IT person to keep the site efficient. Today's recruitable volunteer is a very busy, tech-savvy individual eager to connect with local and national charities but limited by information that is not easy to access. A VC without a smart communication protocol is underserving the very community it wants to support. Program budgets must cover IT/communication needs.

President Obama, as you call Americans to serve, empower the professionals in volunteerism with state and county funding to expand their office staff, develop training protocols and PR campaigns, hire technology experts and properly prepare volunteers in service.

It would be incredibly refreshing to see a Volunteer Center Manager standing beside you in a national television ad campaign expressing the pride to serve. It would be incredibly forward thinking to place more funding in the hands of those who know how to engage volunteers and support local communities. Strengthen the local Volunteer Center and more people will commit their time and talents through appropriate channels.

***Submitted on 2 February 2009 by Marilee Chinnici-Zuercher, FIRSTLINK, President/CEO, Columbus, Ohio USA***

FIRSTLINK, the Hands on Network Affiliate in Columbus, OH, praises the President for recognizing the role that volunteers play in every community. We would encourage the administration to utilize the existing volunteer 'hubs' in communities. Volunteer Centers/Hands on Network Affiliates, who have the partnerships, infrastructure and services to build the capacity of nonprofits and volunteers to effectively serve their communities.

***Submitted on 1 February 2009 by Julie Thomas, Volunteer Center of North Texas, Chief Executive Officer, Dallas, Texas USA***

The Volunteer Center of North Texas heartily supports the concepts presented to President Obama. We would encourage this administration to promote community engagement to citizens and capacity building for nonprofit organizations through established organizations rather than beginning a new initiative. Volunteer Centers act as the hub of many community's volunteer wheel. Approximately 60% of America is served by a Volunteer Center. I will be happy to discuss an efficient, effective way to mobilize more Americans to volunteer!

***Submitted on 1 February 2009 anonymously***

Thank you for the commitment to and recognition of service which already occurs in our nation . . . and it supported by Volunteer Centers. This is an existing infrastructure in most cities to connect citizens with opportunities to serve. A national effort to support and connect people to these resources which already exist is important. I hope that a new slogan and website are not the answer you have in mind, but instead directing people to service within and for their communities. New websites just confuse volunteers and require nonprofit to go through more work posting opportunities.

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