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Volunteerism and the Budget Cuts

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The volunteer community is in something of a quandry. Never has the concept of volunteerism received such national attention. It seems that the president and every other governmental leader is trumpeting volunteerism as the force to bolster services threatened by dramatic budget reductions.

While pleased with these enthusiastic endorsements, many volunteer leaders find this new prosperity of support to be a mixed blessing. Some are alarmed by what they view to be an unrealistic expectation, that volunteers cannot possibly be mobilized to maintain all the threatened services. They fear that volunteerism is being set up for failure. Others are uneasy with the notion of volunteers being asked to replace paid staff, a prospect which violates the old saw "Volunteers supplement, not supplant, staff." This has long been a sore point between paid professionals and volunteers. Still other volunteer leaders are reluctant to collude with what they view as an abandonment of human services, recreation programs, the cultural arts, and other services targeted for funding cuts.

Let me be clear from the start--I intend to offer no definitive answer (if for no other reason than no one has asked the definitive question). What I can offer are six observations which may inform the discussion.

1. Volunteers led the fight for budget reductions! Many volunteer leaders, struggling for an appropriate response to the budget cuts, have overlooked the fact that volunteers led the way in electing the new administration in Washington. Political campaigns are overwhelmingly made up of volunteer workers. The whole taxpayers' revolt, itself, is a volunteer movement. Volunteers bemoaning budget cuts in the offering for their favorite causes or programs must simply admit that another volunteer group won the day this time. The tax-cutters were better organized; they worked longer and harder.

2. Some services will inevitably fall by the wayside. In recent years, government has clearly usurped private initiative in this country. Many services, traditionally performed voluntarily, have been supplanted by broader and more comprehensive governmental services. Many of these governmental services would never exist if they had to compete for private resources. That is, in a laissez-faire market, most taxpayers would not choose to support them. In a sense, they have been artificially sustained. We must expect that without the infusion of tax dollars, these programs will at best survive only on a reduced scale and in a very different form, if at all. That is a hard reality of the budget cuts.

3. Charitable giving cannot possibly increase to meet the shortfall. Let us be clear, too, on the potential for an increase in charitable giving. It has been suggested that charitable giving will increase with a lightening of the tax burden. In

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particular, corporate giving is cited as a potential source of revenue that can make up the difference. Let's not delude ourselves. It is estimated that budget cuts will result in a \$27 billion dollar loss to social service programs alone in the next three years, while all corporate giving in the United States last year amounted to only \$2.7 billion dollars. Simple arithmetic suggests that corporate giving would have to increase threefold to meet the deficit, a rather unlikely prospect.

4. A new approach to grant making must be forthcoming from the philanthropic community. Most foundations have operated for years on a philosophy of giving "seed money." The notion is that they will invest start-up funds in new initiatives which will be assumed by local funding sources if they demonstrate their viability. It is time to reconsider this philosophy. Foundations must shift their emphasis to providing sustaining funds. If not, they will be abandoning many of the programs in which they have already invested and will be investing in programs which have no hope for continuation.

5. The issue of volunteers replacing paid staff is a false dichotomy. Whenever it is suggested that budget reductions can be offset by renewed emphasis on volunteerism, the question is always posed, "Should volunteers replace paid staff?" Volunteer leaders are well practiced in skirting this issue. The question is really a naive one because volunteers seldom replace staff directly. People familiar with motivational research into volunteering understand that people volunteer for those activities which they can identify as helping someone else, or contributing to a cause they hold dear. The most sophisticated recruitment program in the world will not generate volunteers to build highways or to volunteer at the Tax Commission. It just isn't going to happen. Steve McCurley, in an article in the Spring edition of *Voluntary Action Leadership*, reverses the issue to pose an equally instructive question--"Should paid staff replace volunteers?" History shows that many professions ranging from fire fighters to probation officers have evolved from what once were exclusively volunteer services. It really is not an issue of volunteer versus professional. McCurley adroitly observes that the real question is one of "putting the right people in the right place at the right time."

6. Budget reductions and the renewed emphasis on volunteerism are not synonymous. The strong mood to cut governmental spending and the tax burden at the national level, in our state capitol, and at the local level is readily apparent. Many of the advocates for budget cuts are in the same breath calling for a new spirit of self-help, individual responsibility, and neighborly helping to take up the slack for reduced services. As a result, volunteerism and the budget reductions have become a popular theme, mentioned together frequently enough that they have become inexorably linked in the minds of many citizens. Let us be clear--they are not synonymous.

The impetus of the budget cuts is a growing tax burden, a sluggish economy, and a shift in the world's economic balance. Consequently, governmental leaders, backed by a majority of the voters and taxpayers, have said that government can no longer afford to be all things to all people. The resulting budget cuts are real. A resurgence of volunteerism is another issue altogether. One can be enacted by a majority of duly elected representatives. The other is the hope of progressive legislators, but it is a spirit...it is a societal framework...a free will response. It will not happen by pronouncement. No citizen had to guarantee when he backed a candidate proposing budget reductions or voted down a bond levy, that he would at the same time volunteer 25 extra hours a week to his community or increase his charitable giving. This can never be legislated.

So, if volunteer time and dollars are not forthcoming to save every library, museum, or social service, let us not apologize for a failure of the volunteer spirit. It is unfair to expect volunteers to be the safety net for every service that government drops. We can only trust that volunteers, as they have historically done in this country, will again rise to the need as they perceive it. This edition of *Volunteer Virginia* contains vivid examples of volunteer responses, but the public needs to be mindful that volunteerism and reduced government, although they may be complementary, certainly are not one and the same.

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