



5450 Wissahickon Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19144
(215) 438-8342

January 1993

THOUGHTS ON THE NATIONAL SERVICE PROPOSALS:
A Volunteerism Perspective

Susan J. Ellis
President, ENERGIIZE, Inc.

After so many years of rhetoric about the potential value of national youth service, it is wonderful to sense that the new Clinton Administration plans to introduce a full-scale program--and soon.

Let me start this position paper by saying that I (as are many of my colleagues in the field of volunteer administration) am truly excited about the philosophy and concept of national community service by young adults. All of the positive outcomes that are predicted by proponents of the plan can indeed become reality if the program is well constructed and thoughtfully coordinated.

The reason that I am writing this paper is that almost every word that has been written or spoken about national service up to now focuses on the young participants. It is imperative that attention be paid also to the agencies and organizations that will be expected to channel corps members' efforts to serve their communities.

Here are four concerns that I would like to propose for serious consideration in planning, for funding, and for monitoring.

I. ORGANIZATIONS MUST BE READY, WILLING, AND ABLE TO PUT SERVICE PARTICIPANTS TO PRODUCTIVE WORK.

Some of the projects that will be tackled by national service participants will be self-administered. But the majority of the assignments to be tackled are expected to come through existing community-based organizations--those nonprofit agencies already hard at work trying to solve local problems. It is unrealistic to think that all of these agencies are

eager for the help of largely untrained young adults. Anyone in the volunteer field can tell you how hard it is to get agency workers to accept any type of volunteer. Why should such resistance lessen just because the President decrees a national service plan?

The good news is that agencies can be helped to be receptive to young service providers. Sponsor organizations need guidelines and some training to create meaningful assignments, develop appropriate orientation programs, and provide supportive supervision and evaluation. This will require technical assistance and funding.

II. IT TAKES MORE THAN ENTHUSIASM TO BE OF REAL SERVICE.

For the past twelve years, the human service community has chafed under political speechmaking that justified budget cutting with the implication that serious social problems can be solved simply by more hearts and hands. This is insulting to everyone: it demeans those citizens who need help; it devalues workers with professional training; and it sets youthful community service participants up to fail.

Certainly there are hundreds of important tasks that enthusiastic helpers can accomplish under the right supervision. On the other hand, national service projects should not imply that accomplishments will happen the second day on the job. Part of teaching "citizenship" is to bring young adults to the realization that social problems develop over time and can only be solved with tenacity.

I respect the potential talents and abilities of young national service participants. (After all, as early as 1983 I produced the first book advocating the recruitment of children under the age of fourteen as volunteers--so I certainly believe young adults have much to contribute.) But I also would like the proponents of national service to acknowledge the crisis in education that exists. Even some college graduates are, in fact, under skilled. Literacy and the ability to interact in community networks may be requirements beyond the initial capacity of corps members. Freshness and enthusiasm can be accompanied by inexperience and rawness. This is one of the fears expressed by agencies.

This cluster of concerns can be addressed in several ways, including: careful identification of what problems to address and what roles corps members can play effectively; a system for matching applicants to openings; some initial orientation prior to placement to prepare participants for the experience; and some supportive educational opportunities while in service.

III. IT IS AS IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF CORPS MEMBERS ON CURRENT VOLUNTEERS AS ON UNION MEMBERS.

It is politically correct to engage labor unions in the discussion of the role of national service participants. And it should be so. However, nowhere have I seen any discussion of the impact of national service on current volunteers. In fact, these many millions of Americans have been ignored by national service advocates.

The National Service Corps will follow the model of Peace Corps, VISTA, and other such programs in offering a stipend or some end-of-service monetary reward to participants. I applaud this as a way to insure that any young adult has the option to participate, regardless of his or her financial status. But it would be helpful to have some public discussion of where the line of demarcation falls between volunteer "enabling funds" and actual "pay"--and also between "slave wages" and a legitimate compensation level.

Service participants will often work side by side with "volunteers." As with VISTAs, one explanation for why one group receives money and the other does not is duration or concentration of service. Most volunteers offer a few hours a week while the National Service workers will give full time.

There is a danger that National Service workers will displace other volunteers. It is easier for an agency to coordinate and manage a few full-time people than many part-timers. Such a result would be exactly the opposite of the goals of National Service. We want to add to the pool of citizens working on community needs, not substitute one group for another. Also, it is to be hoped that National Service "graduates" would continue to do part-time volunteer work for the rest of their lives (having learned its value for a year). Where will they be able to do this if agencies stop recruiting non-corps volunteers?

It will be important to watch vocabulary and to acknowledge that national service participants are only one of a variety of community resources that should be mobilized to meet needs. Federal dollars would also be well spent in funding positions of "director of community resources" so that agencies can recruit and support volunteers of every type.

IV. NATIONAL SERVICE PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE WELCOMED INTO
GOVERNMENT AGENCIES...EVEN BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT EXPECTS
THE NONPROFIT COMMUNITY TO OPEN ITS DOORS.

It has been amusing to me for the last twelve years that Washington has preached the gospel of volunteering to the nonprofit world but does not practice it itself. At this very moment the U.S. government has forbidden its own departments and agencies from utilizing volunteers. Volunteer programs such as those in the National Park Service or the Department of Agriculture's Extension Service were permitted by Congress as exceptions to the rule. The height of irony is that ACTION itself cannot place any volunteers in its own offices to help administer its volunteer programs!

National Service should teach support of government as well as of nonprofit agencies. The Congress should permit (dare I say require?) all of its departments and agencies to accept all sorts of volunteers, including National Service participants. If the labor unions shout, let Congress learn first hand what local level agencies must face when they want to recruit volunteers.

If the Federal government leads the way in opening its doors to a variety of citizen volunteers, state and local governments will follow suit.

* * * * *

The field of volunteer administration has many skills to offer a national service program. On the front lines, it will often be directors of volunteers who create the opportunities for young adults to serve their communities. So volunteerism experts and national organizations should be at the table in the planning process.

I would welcome the chance to discuss these and other issues further with anyone interested. 1993 promises to be an exciting year for citizen involvement--in all shapes, sizes, ages, and labels.