

## ABSTRACT

*This article shares the results of the Illinois Commission on Community Service's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of volunteerism in the state of Illinois and discusses the significance of Illinois' findings to those who lead volunteer programs. The findings are based on six public hearings held throughout Illinois and the results of a statewide survey.*

# Strengths and Weaknesses of Volunteerism in Illinois and What That Means to Those Who Lead Volunteers

Jeanne H. Bradner

## BACKGROUND

In 1997 the Illinois Commission on Community Service embarked on a year-long effort to develop a strategic plan for volunteerism in the state. The members were assisted most ably and *pro bono* by the planning staff of the Mid-America Chapter of the American Red Cross (Melanie Furlan, Caroline Dillon, and Cynthia Testa).

The plan was to focus on strengthening the infrastructure of volunteerism in the state, supporting the work of the Presidents' Summit for America's Future (America's Promise), and strengthening collaboration and cooperation among the Illinois Commission on Community Service, the Illinois Office of the Corporation for National Service, and the Illinois State Board of Education.

The federal Corporation for National Service, which funds AmeriCorps, Retired and Senior Volunteers, Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, VISTA, and Learn and Serve, requires each state receiving funding to prepare a plan. At first the main objectives of the Corporation were to encourage collaboration among their programs in each state and improve the state's infrastructure for volunteerism. However, when it became a co-sponsor of the April 1997 Presidents' Sum-

mit for America's Future, the Corporation asked states to include plans to help implement the Summit goal to bring more resources to children and youth. The Illinois Commission on Community Service felt strongly that the most important focus for Illinois was strengthening the infrastructure of volunteerism. Strengthening volunteer involvement and management would provide the means through which the initiatives of America's Promise (the national organization created as a result of the Philadelphia Summit) and the Corporation for National Service could flourish.

To give stakeholders an opportunity to contribute to the plan, the Illinois Commission on Community Service co-sponsored an Illinois summit in June 1997 with Governor and Mrs. Jim Edgar, held six public hearings throughout the state in August, and distributed a comprehensive survey on volunteerism to over 5,000 non-profits, corporations, and local governments in October. This was followed by a retreat that included representatives from the delegations that attended the Presidents' Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia. By the time the strategic plan was drafted, 1,200 citizens of Illinois had participated. They represented a diverse cross-section from rural, suburban, and urban areas.

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## INFORMATION GATHERING

The Illinois summit meeting focused on the resource areas of the Philadelphia summit: to provide youth with ongoing relationships with caring adults, safe places and structured activities, marketable skills through effective education, a healthy start for a healthy future, and opportunities to serve. In general, attendees addressed how to get to know programs in one's community and how to measure the number of youth served and/or serving, as well as how to create new programs or expand or form collaborations with existing ones.

The feedback from the six public hearings held throughout Illinois was significant because people responded spontaneously when asked: "What is good about Illinois volunteerism? What is not so good?" There was extraordinary congruity in the responses to these questions throughout the state.

The survey was mailed to 5,040 organizations with volunteer programs and generated a 20% response rate. Some organizations served more than one community type (i.e., urban and suburban). Of those responding, 58% represented urban areas, 49.7% the suburbs, 50.9% small towns/villages, and 41.9% rural/farmland areas. The state's low-income population was served by 71.5% of the responding organizations. Of the total organizations responding, 44.5% had a full-time paid volunteer coordinator. (Agency demographics of those returning the survey can be found in the Appendix.) The information collected from the survey was useful not only because of the response rate, but because the questions were carefully written to elicit needed information.

Two major issues that emerged from the Illinois summit, public hearings, and the survey were the requirement for criminal background checks for volunteers working with vulnerable populations and issues of liability.

### *Criminal Background Checks*

This issue was raised so often that one

discussion leader at the Illinois summit said she had trouble getting people to talk about anything else. People were concerned not with the need for checking volunteers who would work closely with vulnerable populations, but with the cost and the time involved in getting the results. They spoke of the additional expense and confusion when checking crosses state lines. They lamented the fact that they lose interested volunteers who are diverted to other volunteer work during the long wait for a criminal background check.

What clearly is needed is a national system for checking volunteers who work with vulnerable populations. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is working on an Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS) which is supposed to be in place by July 1999 for states that have the appropriate technology. Summit delegates, volunteer administrators, and volunteers can advocate with their Congressional representatives for implementation of this legislation at a reasonable cost. It holds promise for national fingerprint checks to be completed within 24 hours.

### *Liability Issues*

People were anxious about volunteer liability stating that "people don't want to volunteer because of a fear of being sued." These comments appeared to demonstrate ignorance of the liability situation in their own states on the part of many, including competent volunteer administrators. As in many states, Illinois has legislation that limits the liability of volunteers in 501(c)(3) organizations (organizations that are classified by the U. S. Internal Revenue Service as eligible to permit their donors to take an income tax credit for contributions) to acts that are willful and wanton (i.e., with a deliberate intention to cause harm). In addition, federal legislation was recently passed to limit volunteer liability. The language is complicated, but it limits liability if the volunteer was acting within the

scope of his/her responsibility; was, where appropriate, properly licensed, certified and authorized; the harm was not caused by willful or criminal misconduct, gross negligence, or flagrant indifference; was not a hate crime or sexual offense or a violation of the civil rights law; the volunteer was not under the influence of alcohol or drugs; and the harm was not caused by the volunteer operating a vehicle for which he or she is required to have a license or maintain insurance.

The Association for Volunteer Administration and individual volunteer administrators need to disseminate information about volunteer liability protection. In addition, we need to impress upon our peers that good volunteer management (job descriptions, training, evaluation, supervision) is good risk management. I was concerned that so many apparently feel powerless in the face of liability issues and don't realize that risk management is a component integral to their job descriptions. Good risk management deals with planned, concrete risk management policies and procedures and is supported and extended by good volunteer program management.

Another issue that came up frequently at the public hearings was the need for stronger volunteer centers. There was no question on this subject in the survey. Public hearing attendees advocated for more funding and support of volunteer centers.

## SURVEY RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

What follows are major findings from the statewide survey, some of which were validated at the public hearings.

*Fewer than half (46%) of the respondents reported that board members showed "a lot of support" for the volunteer program.* The gap between policy making and service volunteers is a reality that can be dealt with through improved board training. However, it is only by advocating for the volunteer program with their boards and executive directors that leaders of volun-

teers will gain support. Ask to report to the board about the volunteer program and bring a couple of eloquent volunteers with you. Submit a quarterly report to the board listing the number of hours given by the volunteers along with an estimate of the value of the in-kind contribution. Ask a board member to chair the volunteer advisory committee. Ask to be part of the organization's strategic planning process. And, most importantly, present the measurable outcomes of the volunteer program to the board regularly.

*Fewer than one-third (28%) of all respondents measure the impact of volunteer efforts on the community they serve.* Volunteer administrators need to design programs they believe in passionately, set measurable goals and objectives, and make sure the board, volunteers, staff, and funders are aware of the results. Increasingly funders are demanding proof of outcomes from programs. How about a focus group of clients and another of volunteers to assess "customer satisfaction?" How about pre- and post-tests to determine if students really are improving their reading levels? How about student, teacher, or parent surveys to see if young people have changed their attitudes about conflict, drugs, or teenage pregnancy?

Today's volunteers want to carry out meaningful assignments. Measurements are a way to let them know what they have achieved. Measurements also help us decide what needs to be improved in a program rather than getting stuck in the "that's the way we always did it" trap.

*Almost four out of five organizations do not use the Internet.* While I would be the first to admit that there is a lot of useless "stuff" on the Internet, there is some wonderful material that the volunteer administrator on the cutting-edge shouldn't miss. Try the Support Center site at [www.supportcenter.org/sf](http://www.supportcenter.org/sf) for information on non-profit management. Tap into Independent Sector at [www.indepsec.org](http://www.indepsec.org) for the latest statistics on volunteerism or the Nonprofit Risk Management Center at [www.nonprofitrisk.org](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org) for new informa-

tion on risk management. Volunteer management information is available through Susan Ellis at [www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com), Nancy MacDuff at [www.bmi.net/mba](http://www.bmi.net/mba), and the Metro Chicago Volunteer Coalition at [www.mcvc.org](http://www.mcvc.org). Information on outcome-based evaluation can be found through the United Way at [www.united-way.org/outcomes](http://www.united-way.org/outcomes). These are only a few of the many agencies, whose numbers are increasing all the time, giving away good, free information.

At our public hearings I was struck by the number of people who didn't know what training was available for volunteer administrators. A few hours on the Internet would bring them some excellent resources. For more information on the Internet, see "The History and Development of Internet Resources for Volunteer Programs" by Nan Hawthorne in *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* (Fall 1997).

*Of respondents 65% do not collaborate with any corporations or businesses, a major focus of the Philadelphia summit.* This high percentage can be interpreted as a lack of interest from businesses stemming from a lack of commitment from top corporate executives to make resources and staff time available for this purpose and/or a lack of persistence on the part of non-profit volunteer administrators to forge relationships with corporations and businesses. At the public hearings we heard testimony from only a few groups that have positive relationships with businesses. Now is the time to piggyback on America's Promise by generating local business involvement and partnerships wherever possible.

*Of respondents 85% currently have programs in at least one of the five resource areas of the Philadelphia summit.* This suggests that the job of America's Promise is more to coordinate and collaborate than a need to develop new programs.

*Of respondents 38% do not have any volunteers under the age of 18.* One of the five goals of the Philadelphia summit is to involve more youth in service. At our

public hearings, the school- and community-based service-learning programs were lauded by teachers and voluntary organizations alike. Service-learning is an opportunity for volunteer administrators to work with schools and colleges and encourage youth volunteerism. The greatest predictor of volunteering when one is older is having volunteered when one was young. However, as our Illinois summit pointed out, we must listen to the "youth voice" and encourage them to be involved in helping decide their roles.

*Of respondents 73% feel their community is only somewhat aware of its volunteer needs and opportunities.* A truism of the public relations field is, "I know half of my public relations efforts are wasted, but I'm not sure which half." As well as continuing to publicize needs and opportunities, however, we need to publicize outcomes. This can improve visibility and validate programs.

*Only 16% of respondents find volunteer fairs to be helpful.* We need to find some way to make fairs more engaging for those who walk by, frequently with eyes averted, or give volunteer fairs a low ranking on our list of priorities. We need to find other methods to recruit collectively, not just fairs.

*Of respondents 44% say they are poor to fair when it comes to recognizing their volunteers.* Is this because too many organizations think volunteer recognition is an expensive event at the end of the year instead of the way we treat and recognize our volunteers from the moment they first join us? Surely volunteer recognition is a daily part of volunteer management, not a once-a-year event. This response may also indicate that volunteer administrators are overworked and feel they can't spend adequate time relating to the individual volunteers.

*Of respondents 70% rank themselves as poor or fair when it comes to evaluating volunteer performance.* Evaluation of volunteer performance is one of those "I know I should do it, but I don't have time" activities. Those who responded may expect

too much of themselves and need to find simpler ways to give volunteers feedback such as sharing outcome results, giving brief on-the-spot but sincere compliments, or asking, "how's it going?" Negative reactions to the last question can be followed up.

*Budget constraints are a problem.* This is another area where volunteer administrators need to advocate for their programs. Of those surveyed, 65% said that only 0-10% of the organization's budget (excluding salary) goes to the volunteer program. A startling 12% said they don't know what percentage of the organization's budget goes to the volunteer program.

*Frequency of staff communication with volunteers was ranked the most important characteristic when it comes to a program's success, yet only 60% of organizations give themselves a good performance rating here.* Again, this speaks to recognition, evaluation, and feedback about the impact of the volunteer program. I recently interviewed a volunteer who had given up his volunteer job writing resumes for job seekers because no one ever bothered to tell him if anyone had found a job as a result of his efforts.

*Of respondents 44% rank themselves as poor to fair in supervising volunteers.* This may be another time availability issue, but sometimes volunteer administrators are reluctant to delegate supervision to others (even to capable volunteers) and try to do it all themselves, leading to frustrating results.

Administrators of volunteers are aware of some problem areas in their programs as is shown above. The fact that they are aware of them is a first step toward improvement.

Some positive survey findings include:

- Of respondents 90% believe volunteers make a meaningful contribution to the organization.
- Of respondents 89% who collaborate with schools find it effective.
- The 30% of respondents who use refer-

rals and links to other community groups as a way to raise community awareness find this method to be "very successful."

## CONCLUSION

The members of the Illinois Commission on Community Service and the Mid-America Chapter of the American Red Cross planning staff feel that the meetings and survey referred to in this article merit a high level of confidence.

While I don't think I heard anything I didn't already suspect, I was surprised by some of the percentages: Only 46% of the respondents believe their boards are supportive, meaning, unfortunately, that apparently 54% don't believe their boards care about volunteers. Only 28% of respondents do outcome evaluation and have data on the results of their programs to share with the board, funders, volunteers, and the public. And 65% of respondents don't have relationships with businesses or corporations. Clearly there is work to be done in these areas as leaders of volunteers become stronger advocates for the efficacy and importance of volunteers.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In addition to the Internet sources included in this article, the following are of interest.

### **Board Support for Volunteer Programs**

Ellis, S. J. (1995). *The board's role in effective volunteer involvement*. Washington, DC: National Center for Nonprofit Boards.

Ellis, S. J. (1996). *From the top down: The executive role in volunteer program success*. Philadelphia: Energize, Inc.

### **Risk Management**

Graff, L. L. (1997). *By definition: Policies for volunteer programs*. Dundas, Ontario: Graff and Associates.

Tremper, C. & Kostin, G. (1993). *No surprises. Controlling risks in volunteer programs*. Washington, DC: Nonprofit Risk Management Center.

### **Outcome-based Evaluation**

*Measuring the difference volunteers make* (1997). St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Human Services.

### **Collaboration and Youth Involvement**

*The community collaboration manual* (1991). Washington, DC: The National Assembly on National Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations. (Includes a chapter on involving youth.)

### **Internet Information**

*Grapevine*. A newsletter published by the California Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, Sacramento, California, that provides regular information on Websites of interest to volunteer administrators.

## APPENDIX

### UNIFIED STATE PLAN MAIL SURVEY — AGENCY DEMOGRAPHICS (n=1,200)

This Appendix lists the questions from the first section of the survey and the percent of respondents who marked each answer. Some of the columns may not add to 100% due to rounding or because respondents were allowed to make multiple responses. The survey was prepared by the Mid-America chapter of the American Red Cross for the Illinois Commission on Community Service.

#### SURVEY QUESTIONS (The first three questions asked for name, address and title)

4. Please mark the size of your organization in terms of paid staff:

Response:	Percent responding:
0-20	49.2%
21-50	13.5%
51-100	9.2%
101-300	13.9%
301-1,000	9.5%
1,000+	4.7%

5. Please mark the number of volunteers in your organization:

Response:	Percent responding:
0-20	24.9%
21-50	14.6%
51-100	12.6%
101-300	21.6%
301-1,000	17.3%
1,000+	9.0%

6. Approximately what percent of your organization's volunteers are:

A. Under the age of 18?		B. Between the ages of 18 and 35?		C. Over the age of 65?	
Response:	Percent responding:	Response:	Percent responding:	Response:	Percent responding:
0%	37.8%	0%	8.2%	0%	14.6%
1%-25%	47.7%	1%-25%	40.7%	1%-25%	45.6%
26%-50%	4.7%	26%-50%	22.3%	26%-50%	13.5%
51%-75%	0.8%	51%-75%	12.3%	51%-75%	8.7%
76%-99%	2.8%	76%-99%	6.7%	76%-99%	7.6%
100%	1.6%	100%	1.4%	100%	0.9%
Don't Know	4.7%	Don't Know	8.3%	Don't Know	9.1%

7. How many people does your organization provide services to annually?

Response:	Percent responding:
1-100	7.1%
101-500	16.4%
501-1,000	13.1%
1,001-10,000	34.5%
10,001-100,000	20.2%
100,000+	8.8%

8. What type(s) of communities does your organization serve? Mark all that apply.

Response:	Percent responding:
Urban	57.6%
Suburban	49.7%
Small town/village	50.9%
Rural/farmland	41.9%

9. Are you familiar with any of the following programs? Mark all that apply.

Response:	Percent responding:
AmeriCorps VISTA	53.7%
AmeriCorps	60.2%
Learn and Serve America	20.6%
Foster Grandparents	46.7%
Senior Companions	21.4%
Retired and Senior Volunteers	56.2%
None of the above	13.7%

10. Does your organization have any of the following programs? Mark all that apply.

Response:	Percent responding:
AmeriCorps VISTA	4.8%
AmeriCorps	8.3%
Learn and Serve America	6.7%
Foster Grandparents	5.0%
Senior Companions	3.3%
Retired and Senior Volunteers	22.5%
None of the above	56.9%



11. What kinds of populations does your organization serve? Mark all that apply.

Response:	Percent responding:	Response:	Percent responding:
Seniors	63.7%	Low income	71.5%
Children	74.3%	Disabled	53.3%
Youth	76.8%	Unemployed/ underemployed	43.4%
Families	71.6%	Ex-offenders	19.3%
Women	60.9%	Single parents	54.3%
Homeless	35.1%	Illiterate	34.1%
Juvenile offenders	26.8%	Other	15.4%

12. For what community needs does your organization provide services?  
Mark all that apply.

Response:	Percent responding:	Response:	Percent responding:
Health	37.7%	Mental health	26.3%
Education/ tutoring	59.3%	Institutional/ residential care	16.4%
Environmental	17.8%	Legal services/ advocacy	15.4%
Research	10.8%	Housing	22.1%
Feeding the hungry	21.0%	Cultural/ arts /recreation	28.1%
Mentoring	34.1%	Job training/ income security	23.3%
Senior services	33.2%	Public safety	14.8%
Youth services	44.1%	Other	17.0%

13. Who is responsible for your organization's volunteer program administration?

Response:	Percent responding:
A full time paid staff member	44.5%
A part time paid staff member	11.0%
A volunteer	9.6%
Each department is responsible for administering its own volunteer programs	18.2%
Paid and volunteer staff share responsibility	10.3%
Other	6.3%

14. What percentage of your services is delivered by volunteers?

Response:	Percent responding:
0%-10%	39.1%
11%-25%	13.3%
26%-50%	7.8%
51%-75%	7.6%
76%-99%	13.5%
100%	13.2%
Don't Know	5.4%

15. What percentage of your organization's expense budget (excluding salary) is allocated to your volunteer program?

Response:	Percent responding:
0%-10%	64.6%
11%-25%	7.5%
26%-50%	2.9%
51%-75%	2.5%
76%-99%	4.0%
100%	6.1%
Don't Know	12.4%

Note: All responses were calculated based on the number responding to that particular question. Less than 4% of total respondents skipped any particular question except for question #13 where 7.8% of the respondents skipped the question.