

## ABSTRACT

*The National Association of Counties' (NACo) Volunteerism Project promotes volunteerism in local government and assists counties that want to establish and maintain effective volunteer programs. In February 1996 the Volunteerism Project, in conjunction with NACo's Research Division, conducted a survey of volunteerism in county governments to document the extent of volunteer service and the level of volunteer management practices. This article provides an overview of the results and an analysis of the major findings.*

# An Overview of Volunteerism in County Government

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 1991 the National Association of Counties' (NACo) Volunteerism Project has promoted volunteerism to county government officials and provided assistance to counties that want to establish and maintain effective volunteer programs. Volunteers in county government presently work in a wide range of areas and provide vital services during an era of shrinking budgets.

One goal of the Volunteerism Project is to educate county elected and appointed officials about the important role volunteerism plays in county government and the need for sound volunteer management practices. Through workshops, articles, and other resource materials, the project emphasizes the following benefits (from *The Volunteer Toolbox*, NACo, 1990):

- Volunteer programs are a cost-effective strategy to fill gaps in service or initiate new projects;

- Volunteers promote a positive image and learn about county government operations;
- Volunteers often become acquainted with their public officials and the goals and purposes of county programs;
- Volunteers bring a variety of skills and experiences to county government;
- Volunteers become advocates for programs and help seek donations of time, money, and materials from other members of the community; and
- Volunteer programs encourage civic participation.

As part of its activities, NACo's Volunteerism Project sent a questionnaire in February 1996 to the chief elected official in every U.S. county (3,042) and to individuals the project had previously identified as serving some type of volunteer coordinating role for their county (750). The questionnaire asked respondents to identify areas in which volunteers work, how

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the programs are structured, management practices employed, numbers of volunteers involved, and the dollar value of their contributions. In this article, the authors discuss the results of this survey and the implications for volunteer programs in county government.

## BACKGROUND

There is relatively little research or written material on volunteer programs in local government. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) conducted research on volunteer involvement in city and county governments during the 1980s (Valente and Manchester, 1984, and Morley, 1989). It reported an increase in the number of volunteer programs during that decade, particularly in social and human services.

Although references were few, a literature review revealed the benefits of establishing a volunteer program in county government as well as practical advice on creating one. Joan Brown in her 1983 article, "Government Volunteers: Why and How?" (*The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, Fall 1983) clearly articulates the rationale for establishing a volunteer program in county government and offers practical advice on how to go about it based on her experience in Marin County, California. In *Fostering Volunteer Programs in the Public Sector* (1990), Jeffrey L. Brudney offers a comprehensive overview and guide to establishing volunteer programs at all levels of government. Nancy J. McLeod and Tony Marks outline the process used by the city of Phoenix, Arizona, to establish a volunteer program. Their guide, *Getting a Volunteer Program Started* (1995), is helpful for those working in large, metropolitan areas. In 1995 the Pinellas County, Florida, volunteer program was highlighted in a segment of a 25-minute video on nontraditional volunteers produced by the Government Services Television Network. Apart from these resources, few materials exist that specifically address volunteer management issues within a local government structure.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) Volunteerism Project was initiated in 1990 when the president of NACo launched a year-long initiative focusing on the role of volunteers in local government. Volunteer programs in Salt Lake County, Utah, Arlington County, Virginia, Multnomah County, Oregon, and San Diego County, California, served as the basis for NACo's efforts at the outset of the Volunteerism Project (see *The Volunteer Toolbox*, NACo, 1990).

A task force comprised of elected and appointed officials met throughout the year. Task force goals were to promote the development and management of volunteer programs in county government and to study resources and methods through which county governments could facilitate and assist volunteerism. The task force discovered that volunteers were involved in nearly all areas of county government operations somewhere in the United States.

By 1991, the NACo Volunteerism Task Force had conducted a preliminary survey of volunteer programs in county government, completed a guide on how to establish a volunteer program in county government, and secured funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to support the goals of the project. With that financial support, NACo's Volunteerism Project has conducted workshops for elected and appointed officials, publicized model programs, developed resource materials, and established a clearinghouse of information at NACo's Washington, DC office.

Although volunteer involvement in county government is widespread, it has often been done in an informal and unstructured manner. Volunteer programs that are more organized and expand the role of volunteers into less traditional service areas are now being considered more seriously by elected officials. Faced with budget shortfalls and an often apathetic citizenry, they are looking for creative solutions to the challenges many county governments face. In an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article written in 1993, Liane

Levetan, Chief Executive Officer, DeKalb County, Georgia, offered this perspective:

*The fundamental question facing the head of any government today, whether at local, state, or national level, is how to do more with less.*

*Citizens repeatedly tell their elected representatives that government costs too much and that they are tired of paying more taxes. But, in the same breath, they emphasize that they will not accept any decline in the number or quality of services.*

*That means governments have to downsize without affecting the product they offer—services. We are going to have to work harder, and more efficiently.*

*It occurred to me when I took office last fall that we were neglecting a vital resource—our county's people. . . . So I initiated a program to encourage volunteers to offer their services to the county.*

Ms. Levetan goes on to note that volunteerism in public service is not a new idea. Citizens are an invaluable resource and many are looking for ways to make a difference. The challenge, she says, is not to find people who want to make a contribution, but to make opportunities available to all who want to help.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE SURVEY

NACo's Volunteerism Project, in conjunction with NACo's research division, sent the volunteerism survey to 3,042 chief elected officials and 750 volunteer coordinators previously identified by project staff. Of the 3,792 surveys sent, 842 were returned (a 22.2% response rate). These responses represent 47 states and 754 of the 3,043 (24.8%) county governments in the United States.<sup>1</sup> More than one response was received from some counties because the chief elected official and one or more volunteer coordinators received a survey.

Large counties (population over 50,000) responded in slightly greater numbers than small counties (population under 50,000) based on the total number of counties in each population range. It is unclear whether a greater proportion of

small counties did not respond because they don't involve volunteers, or because volunteer activity occurs very informally and officials didn't have adequate information. The survey results represent counties with 37.2% of the total population of the United States.

Of the responding counties, 98% indicated that they involve volunteers in some capacity, including non-paid board members and service providers. Since 1991, almost one-fifth of the responding counties have either established a volunteer program or a central coordinating office.

Table I shows different service areas and the percentage of counties that indicated volunteers provide service in that area.

**TABLE I**

**Service Areas and Percentage of Counties that Provide Volunteer Service**

Service Area	% of Counties
Firefighters/ Emergency Medical Services	72.7
Aging Services	63.7
Libraries	50.2
Parks & Recreation	49.0
Youth Services	48.0
Social Services	42.5
Education	42.4
Environment/Recycling	40.9
Sheriff/Corrections	40.0
Community & Economic Development	37.3
Public Safety	34.7
Public Health	33.1
Transportation	25.9
Housing	19.5
Judicial/Legal	19.0
Finance	6.3
Public Utilities	3.2
Other	10.6

The number of citizens volunteering for their county government varies greatly and is often related to population size. Excluding counties that reported they did not know the number of volunteers contributing services, approximately 20% of responding counties involve more than 500 volunteers per year in government operations. The survey also found that the dollar value of services contributed by volunteers to county government is significant, rang-

ing from \$25,000 or more in 33% of small counties (less than 50,000 population), \$100,000 or more in 34.2% of mid-size counties (up to 250,000 population), and \$1 million or more in 21.3% of large counties (more than 250,000 population). Eleven counties reported receiving services valued at over \$5 million.

An overwhelming percentage of county governments (80%) coordinate their volunteers on a department or program basis. Approximately 6% of responding counties reported having some type of central coordinating office. Some county governments fund a volunteer center or work closely with other groups such as the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) or a local non-profit agency. In 32.8% of the responding counties, there is at least one full-time or part-time paid volunteer coordinator. In 9.6% of counties, there is at least one volunteer who serves as a volunteer coordinator. Of the counties with central coordination of volunteers, half have a population of 50,000 to 250,000. Counties that have established a central office, regardless of population, received a greater dollar value of volunteer service than counties that did not.

To assess volunteer management practices in county government, the survey asked respondents to identify the administrative tools that any of their volunteer programs use. Table II shows the percentage of counties that identified each type of volunteer management practice:

**TABLE II**

**Volunteer Management Practice**

Volunteer Management Practice	% of Counties
Formal Recognition	61.5
Training	57.2
Policies and Procedures	39.9
Insurance	38.4
Program Plan	36.9
Benefits	35.6
Budget	33.8
Annual Report	30.5
Job Descriptions	30.0
Program Evaluation by Volunteers	18.3
Volunteer Evaluation	16.7

All eleven management practices listed on the survey are employed by 7.4% of the responding counties. In addition, another 2.3% employ all but one of them. The components that volunteer programs most often do not use are program evaluation and volunteer evaluation.

**NOTABLE FINDINGS**

- *Although there are many successful and well-established department or project-based volunteer programs in county government, survey results indicate that counties with some form of a central coordinating office receive nearly three times the dollar value of service from volunteers than counties that do not.*

This may be due to two factors: 1) a central office has a greater presence in the county government structure, and may be better able to work with individual departments to develop volunteer jobs and to more readily advocate for volunteer activities, and 2) a central office may be better able to record county-wide volunteer hours and calculate the dollar value of volunteer service.

- *Volunteerism in county government is on the rise.*

In comparison to ICMA's survey result from the 1980s, NACo's survey indicates at least a 20% increase in volunteer programs in several service areas including services to the aging, children/youth services, parks and recreation, and crime/corrections. In addition, NACo's survey indicates that nearly 20% of responding counties have established a central office or volunteer program since 1991. Because most counties face severe fiscal constraints, it is likely that many of them will continue to involve volunteers in meeting rising service demands. Volunteer programs can no longer be considered a luxury.

On the other hand, paid volunteer coordinator positions and volunteer programs are often the "first to go" if they are viewed as non-essential or not filling a critical service need. Although many people working with volunteer programs can attest to the fact that volunteer contributions to county government go far beyond

a simple dollar value, volunteer program coordinators will need to address the issue of accountability and ensure that the county leadership is aware of the benefits of volunteer service.

- *While the dollar value of volunteer efforts is substantial, particularly in an era when officials must scrutinize the "bottom-line" of every county program, it is important to note that 24% of the responding counties either did not know the dollar value of volunteer service to their counties, or did not respond to the question.*

Without this information, volunteer programs may not be able to effectively advocate for their role within the county government structure or be accountable to elected officials and county managers who may want to conduct a cost/benefit analysis.

- *While many counties have made significant strides in strengthening the management practices of their volunteer programs, there is an ongoing need to educate county officials and paid staff who are responsible for volunteer programs about the importance of many of these basic components of a successful program.*

Creating an environment that is supportive of volunteers—and of paid staff who work directly with volunteers—requires the support of elected officials, department heads, and administrators. This means support for such things as staff training, volunteer training, screening, insurance, and benefits. In addition, many volunteer coordinators in local government would benefit by having greater contact with local and national resources and networking groups. These groups, in turn, would also benefit by increased membership and the perspective brought by local government volunteer coordinators.

## CONCLUSION

As devolution takes place, and more responsibilities are shifted to local governments from the state and federal level, counties will seek innovative ways to provide services. As the survey demonstrates, volunteer programs are already playing an increasingly important role in county government. This trend toward hands-on par-

ticipation is one way counties will meet the demands of future service delivery without great expense to taxpayers as well as promote an informed and active citizenry.

The challenge for many counties, however, will be to create a new culture of volunteerism. Doing so will mean shedding the outdated notion that volunteer programs can provide services without the need to provide a supportive, safe, and inclusive work environment. For successful volunteer programs, county officials must provide volunteers with the support and tools (for example, training, staff support, and equipment) necessary for their jobs. Volunteer coordinators must regularly assess and publicize the benefits of their volunteer programs to all segments of the community. They will have to work closely with county paid staff to promote the development of meaningful jobs and ways in which citizens can be a part of the county team.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Please note: Forty-eight of the 50 states have some form of county government structure though their role varies greatly from state to state. Connecticut and Rhode Island are divided into geographic regions called counties, but they do not have county governments. Vermont is the only state with functioning county governments from which no survey was received.

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