Advocates for Change

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Throughout the past decade, much attention has been paid to the opportunities for and responsibilities of volunteers to increase their level of involvement in meeting the critical needs of today's communities. This call for action, though, generally narrowly defines the role of volunteers as that of service provider or deliverer. I believe if volunteers are to be positioned for effectiveness in their communities that we must broaden the definition of that role. We must see ourselves and be seen by others as advocates as well as service deliverers, largely because I do not believe that service can be divorced from a policy framework. In this context I am talking about advocacy as a force for change; the roots of that change are in our beliefs and values.

I'd like to begin with two quotes:

Our League was organized as a means of expressing the feeling of social responsibility for the conditions which surround us. We have the responsibility to act, and we have the opportunity to conscientiously act to affect our environment. . . .

It seems almost inhuman that we should live so close to suffering and poverty, that we should know of the deplorable conditions and of the relief work that exists within a few blocks of our own homes, and bear no part in this great life. . . .

Those words were spoken in the early 1900's by Mary Harriman who founded the Junior League. Essentially, the Junior League is an organization of women committed to effective community leadership as trained volunteers. We have a rich tradition of providing services in a wide array of areas in 267 communities in the United States, eight in Canada and one each in Great Britain and Mexico.

Like the Junior League, many not-for-profits which were founded in the early part of this century began with very ambitious visions of a changed society. However, the urgency for advocacy to bring about desired changes waned for many of us in the late 1940's and 1950's for reasons which aren't entirely clear. Thus, many of our organizations are now working to redefine their role as advocates. And Junior League members are struggling with the same questions many have about whether or not advocacy is appropriate for volunteer organization; about whether there isn't an inherent conflict between providing services and advocating for systems change.

With the backdrop of the vision of people such as Mary Harriman, who I don't believe saw any inconsistency between service and advocacy, I'd like to look at volunteers as advocates for change from several vantage points:

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First, I want to get clarity on what I believe advocacy is and why I believe the volunteer and voluntary sectors must see advocacy as an essential strategy in the work we do;

Second, I want to examine some of the reasons I believe advocacy is a less-often used strategy for many of us and what "myths" I believe perpetuate our reluctance to eagerly embrace advocacy; and

Third, I want to give you some tips about ways in which you can become effective advocates, regardless of the level at which you focus your efforts, e.g., local/regional/state/national/international.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Let's begin with what advocacy is. As I said at the beginning, advocacy is rooted in our beliefs and values. It is how we express what we believe about the world in which we live. I use the word "belief" not in the religious sense (although, for some, beliefs about society are deeply rooted in religious tradition). Rather, I use the word belief more broadly to mean whatever are the moral/ethical/intellectual/personal bases for how we view the world and how we think that world ought to operate.

To advocate effectively, it is essential to first achieve clarity about the beliefs which underlie the advocacy. In this context, we are talking about our external policies or positions—what most often is termed public policy. To advocate without a clear and thorough understanding of what your policy goals are is to "shoot from the hip." Getting clarity about our beliefs ensures that we have a clear vision of the desired state we are trying to achieve. For example, if your area of expertise is child care, you have a vision of what really good child care is—it's affordable and accessible, it's developmentally appropriate, it's healthy and safe, it supports families—each of these elements could form the basis for your own child care policy and, in turn, the basis for your advocacy on behalf of

improved child care. Without knowing what your desired state for child care is, you are unable to argue effectively for that desired state; you are easily ignored by those who don't share your vision . . . as well as by those who do.

At this point, some of you may be wondering how this relates to your present work as volunteers. Some of you may be child care volunteers—either in a direct service capacity or as board members or trustees of child care centers—and right now your only focus is on making final arrangements for the next field trip you have planned, or on how to keep your budget in balance in the face of rising insurance, food and staff salary costs, or on how creatively you can scramble to come up with enough child care slots for the parents you know need them. In a word, you are busy enough providing services and don't need to be asked to be an advocate . . . or so you think.

There is no question that most of us are on overload as well as overdrive; too often our days are organized more by the crises which crop up than by any carefully or thoughtfully laid out plan. However, I believe many of the most effective advocates are those who are delivering services or are the trustees and board members of those organizations which provide services. (And that statement is not intended to discredit those who engage full time—either as volunteers or employees—in public interest advocacy, for theirs is an important role.) Rather, my point is that we all need to become effective advocates *because* it isn't enough just to deliver the service. Nor is it enough to leave the forming of policies and building of systems—that is the advocacy—just to those who choose to be full-time advocates . . . not to mention to those whom we elect all over this country.

Why not? Bluntly, because there aren't enough volunteers or service hours available if the core problem is a system which is inadequate or, worse, harmful:

There aren't enough volunteers to handle rape crisis calls when the core problem is an environment which fosters violence against women.

There aren't enough volunteers to make a difference in child care when the core problem is an absence of policies which affirm the value of safe, affordable, accessible child care for all parents who want it.

No matter how many museum docent programs we can create, they won't substitute for the absence of a comprehensive system of support for the arts.

To believe our sole role as volunteers is to provide service, edges dangerously close to saying:

We believe in feeding the hungry but not in solving the problems of hunger.

We believe in rescuing children from abuse and neglect but not in advocating for policies which build strong, self-reliant families.

We believe in tutoring children who cannot read but not in advocating for school reform which will be committed to and accountable for preventing illiteracy in the first place.

We believe in volunteering to immunize children from childhood diseases but not in advocating for the funding needed to buy more vaccines.

. . . and the list could go on and on. And it is a grim one which I give you to provide a very sharp focus to what advocacy is all about.

ISSUES IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

But let me shift the focus a bit to underscore what I believe is so essential about advocacy. The voluntary sector—and in fact the very vitality of voluntarism in our society—is also crying for effective advocates. In recent years, a growing number of issues related to the very nature of the voluntary sector have crept onto the public agenda: how the term "charity" is to be defined in state laws; how our tax systems will or will not encourage people to make charitable contributions to not-for-profits; how not-for-profits engage in fundraising; what types of revenue-raising activities outside of charitable donation solicitation will not-

for-profits be allowed to engage in; what type of liability insurance policies will exist which enable volunteers to function while, at the same time, protecting the recipients of our efforts; and, most closely related to my topic today, the degree to which volunteers and voluntary organizations will be permitted to advocate before government.

Every one of these issues explicates an underlying set of policies which support our time-honored system of voluntarism and volunteerism . . . and many of them are the subject of heated debate at all levels of our society. My guess is that your comfort level about advocacy rises considerably when you imagine yourself advocating for the best policies you believe are needed to ensure a vital voluntary sector. I imagine that many of you have been faithfully advocating for better charitable contributions policies and for fairness in the laws which prescribe the kinds of unrelated business income you are allowed to raise.

I hope so because if ours are not among—if not the loudest—voices heard in every public arena as decisions are made concerning the voluntary sector, we will have no one to blame but ourselves for laws and policies which constrict and inhibit our ability to make a difference. Simply extend that premise beyond our own sector's survival and self-interest issues to the issues which are at the core of the work you do as volunteers—in the arts, at homeless shelters, in hospitals, or wherever. We volunteer now to shelter the homeless because their need compels us, not because we believe homelessness is a desired state.

The reason we believe in volunteer service is because we believe voluntarism and volunteerism are essential elements in the kind of society in which we choose to live. We believe that volunteers and voluntary organizations must be part of our social fabric, must be part of our service delivery system. Isn't it just a bit hollow, then, to be willing to advocate for an effective voluntary sector but to withdraw from advocating for the best systems within which our choice for community service can flourish? In fact, the service we give each and every day is really the

first step in being an advocate because our service is assumed to be an expression of our beliefs.

It is assumed that if we volunteer to give children vision and hearing tests that we believe in preventive health care for children.

It is assumed that if we are a CASA or guardian ad litem volunteer in family court advocating for a speedy disposition for a child waiting for a home that we believe all children need a permanent and nurturing home within which to grow and thrive.

It is assumed that if we volunteer to help a senior citizen complete a complex Medicare application that we believe people should have access to the services designed for them.

So let's imagine that in the course of our volunteer work to screen children for vision and hearing problems, we discover that most health insurance policies, including Medicaid, will not reimburse parents for the glasses we tell them their children need when we discover a vision problem. Or, imagine that you discover as you are urging that Family Court judge to help your CASA client find permanence, that the child's family cannot afford the apartment which is the sole barrier to that child returning to her family. Or, what if you learn that the snag in completing eligibility for Medicare which your senior citizen client is facing is an arbitrary administrative bureaucracy designed to make it difficult to qualify because of budget policies which seek to slow the growth of Medicare expenditures.

It's tough, isn't it, when faced with these types of circumstances to say, "my job is to provide the service, not be an advocate."

BARRIERS AND MYTHS

Let's turn now to consider some of the barriers and myths that I have heard which help explain some of the discomfort many volunteers and voluntary organizations have with advocacy.

It's illegal. There is a significant amount of misinformation abounding about whether or not a not-for-profit under the IRS code is allowed to engage in any advocacy activity without threatening its tax-exempt status. While I will not go into great detail about the current laws which address the permissible lobbying/advocacy activities in which a tax-exempt organization is allowed to engage, simply put, there is a great deal of lobbying/advocacy activity which is permissible. What we can't do ever under any circumstances is engage in partisan activities or electioneering.

Over the years, Congress has enacted legislation specifically designed to bring clarity to those lobbying/advocacy activities which are permissible. Many of you may have worked to advocate for these laws. I urge you to learn more about what you can and cannot do. One organization which is an excellent resource for what is permissible is Independent Sector and there may be others in your own communities. Many attorneys and accountants can be helpful, as well.

Remember that advocacy is an inherent citizen right in our society and that right extends, in significant ways, to your work as volunteers within voluntary organizations. In fact, I believe that one of the "jobs" or "roles" of the voluntary sector in our society is to bring forth new ideas and issues, to question policies and systems, to be a free voice of inquiry, to raise the unpopular or the heretofore unimagined.

It's political. Some of our concerns about engaging in political activity relate to what I said above, which is to say, confusion about the difference between lobbying and advocacy as opposed to electioneering and partisan political activity.

But, more often, I hear volunteers say something somewhat deeper about this thing called politics. Politics is simply one word which describes a web of human interaction; a web in which ideas are put forth, debated, and around which we struggle to find sufficiently common ground and the will to act. While few would disagree that our current climate for public debate is significantly flawed; we can find more examples of people who

have spoken out only to be attacked and vilified for their views than we can point to an environment which encourages and values healthy debate. That makes the thought of going forth as an advocate somewhat distasteful to many of us. But to shrink from speaking out only guarantees that the current climate will persist and that the quality of our public debate—and more importantly of the decisions which result in our public policies—will continue to deteriorate.

It takes courage to demand an environment in which all are free to speak and to demand that the "rules of the game" be changed. Just keep in mind that if you believe what you believe strongly enough you can find others who share your commitment to a climate in which communities can reach consensus on what needs to happen.

It will be impossible to find consensus. The problem here is that we labor under a very fuzzy and flawed understanding of what it means to achieve consensus. It does *not* mean that a group will arrive at a unanimous decision, most of the time. The issues are too complex, our rich diversity guarantees multiple viewpoints, the needs are many and competing. But seeking consensus means we are willing to take the time and effort to "stay at the table" until a decision which satisfies most of us—for now—emerges.

Quick fixes, easy answers, single-focus solutions are what we all too often see. Just as there is no free lunch, I believe there are no quick fixes or easy answers to most of the issues we face—because often there is no absolute right or wrong answer or approach. And the decisions that we do make will not satisfy each of us at the same level of intensity or for the same reasons. They can't because we're all different. Our desire for unanimity because it affirms sameness has robbed us of the opportunity to learn how different views and perspectives can and must be fused to create a consensus that will move an entire community forward—not just that segment of the community which has seized the power.

We'll lose members, standing in the community, or money. I want to pause at this one for I think it may be the most trou-
bling for many of you. Many of our organizations have existed for long periods of time, are broadly based in their purposes/memberships/donor bases, are heavily dependent on the good will of the community for financial and other types of support, are multi-issue or multi-purpose. It's easy to look at the organizations which are single issue or whose formation was triggered by a particular event and understand their role as advocates. Their purpose seems more clearly defined as promoting a cause or an issue.

On the other hand, many of us perceive a dilemma in our role as advocates. We see ourselves, potentially, as advocating against those who provide our support. And those of you who are part of membership organizations many find it difficult if not impossible to imagine taking a position that won't alienate a portion of your membership.

Well, you're right—to a degree. From time to time, the things for which you advocate will cost you members and donors and even support from some segments of your communities. The point is not, per se, to alienate people. One of the first places you can begin your advocacy is with your own memberships, constituencies, and donors. You may be assuming, to an alarmingly large degree, that there will be a mass defection; that "they" as a block can't possibly share the beliefs you have and for which you and your organization believes it must advocate.

It has been my experience that if people do not perceive themselves to be heard, to have access to the debate, that they quite logically oppose the outcome by attacking the process. That is, they argue that advocacy is an inappropriate role for your organization. So the challenge is to create an environment in which people feel free to express opinions and a process which is fair and open.

But even after you do this, it would be dishonest of me to paint a picture of perfect peace and tranquillity. There is no question that people will choose to join or remain members of your organization or to give you money according to whether or not they perceive their beliefs to be sufficiently aligned with the organization's

beliefs. This only makes sense. Why would you join or contribute to an organization which espouses beliefs diametrically opposed to those you hold? But imagine for a moment those people in your community who presently choose not to support you with their membership or their dollars *because* they perceive yours to be an organization which lacks the courage to take positions on the issues for which it is organized. A perception that, if you will, you won't put your mouth where your money is.

And, finally, there are those who will block you no matter how open and accessible your process is; how much you work to create understanding. They see their role to be a blocker. They're often noisy and obstructionist about it to boot; seeking to intimidate you and invalidate your process. But remember, if they are allowed to prevail, you, in effect, have made the decision to operate by minority rule; to have the work you do and the beliefs you hold held hostage by a few who aren't even interested in playing a constructive role.

So remember that the critical issue is *not* what position you actually take on a given issue but, rather, the degree to which you believe that it is essential to grapple with tough complex issues; to work together with those who are willing to carve out the stands that will enable you to effectively advocate for the mission, vision and purpose for which your organization was founded.

This isn't an exhaustive list of the barriers and myths we in the voluntary sector often have about advocacy, but it touches on those which I hear most frequently and which I believe are the most confounding for us to confront. No matter what barrier you have which I haven't addressed, though, it helps to keep what you believe foremost in mind. There's a direct relationship between how deeply you believe in something and how many hurdles you are willing to leap to pursue your beliefs.

TACTICS FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

I would like to conclude by touching on some factors which I hope will help you begin to position yourselves as advocates for change. This will not be "Advocacy 101." Frankly, teaching advocacy in a vacuum can be quite boring and tedious. Furthermore, there are many organizations which can and are eager to work with you to teach you the fine points and the tricks of the trade: how to be effective, credible, strategic; what works and doesn't work in which settings. In fact, I encourage you to contact an organization in your community which you perceive to be effective in advocating its positions—and don't look only to those who take positions with which you would agree. The tactics for effective advocacy are largely value free; that is, they work as well for you as for those who will advocate against your positions. And one essential tenet in effective advocacy is to know what your opposition thinks and why.

What I would like to address is the environment in our communities within which we seek to find solutions to the problems and issues we face. That is, how we go about being advocates. No matter how clever and smart we are in the strategies we employ, I believe we cannot be successful in advocating the systems change we seek unless we get much smarter about how we go about building our agendas for change. We must join together in coalitions, collaborations and partnerships. Ho hum, you may say, we do that now—and to an impressive degree many of us do. But the kinds of partnerships and collaborations we need for the future must be radically different from many in which we participate today.

They must be formed and maintained with a goal of true systemic change—a goal which will require a sustained effort over a significant period of time. It's the difference between tinkering or nibbling around the edges of an issue we now know, or shifting the paradigm which presently defines the issues so that we see and experience them in entirely different ways, with dramatically different possibilities. It means being smart, strategic and persistent. It means being cooperative rather than competitive, being inclusive not exclusive. It means we will enfranchise and not continue to disenfranchise many members of our society.

I want to highlight some factors which I believe will make the difference between old patterns of flawed decision-making for change and opportunities for entirely new types of community agendas for change. We need to think about these factors in working collectively in partnership.

The partnerships will require maintaining an important but delicate balance between group identity and individual member identity; the balance between, if you will, "what's in it for me" and the collective good. They require the ability to truly respect and value the differences brought to the table by various players. Sometimes there is a tendency to view a collaboration as that entity which minimizes or blurs differences to create a unitary whole. While it is true that a collaboration must be able to articulate a shared vision or focus, it is terribly important that that shared vision or focus not be formed at the expense or in diminution of the different perspectives, values, capacities, etc. of the individual members of the partnership.

Effective partnerships insist on a process whereby critical decision making is meaningfully shared. Too often we see the example of one organization calling together a group of other organizations to carry out the convening organization's idea, goal or program. To me, this is not the basis for a true partnership but rather that of an endorsement.

Following on the issue of shared or collective decision making, an effective partnership must believe in—and must vigilantly maintain—an equalization of power among the members. Hierarchical behavior and thinking are extremely destructive to a true partnership.

Partnership members must constantly remember that it is only necessary to achieve and maintain a workable consensus on the issues around which the partnership is formed. It not only is possible but very necessary that groups come together with other groups with whom they share some *but not all* viewpoints or stands. I believe we must come to grips with the need to avoid ideologically divisive efforts. We all must commit to raising the level of tolerance in our communities for honestly held differing points of view

and different values. It has become horrifyingly easy to stigmatize and divide sectors of our communities and of our society as a whole on the basis of single issues around which there are varying beliefs. I don't for one moment diminish the importance of individual or organizational values, but I am deeply concerned with the growing failure to couple the right to have values with the equivalent importance of respect and tolerance for those whose values are different from ours.

In joining forces with others in our communities, we must not withdraw at the first sign of conflict or disagreement. Both are not only normal occurrences within partnerships but are necessary to the process of working to consensus as I have described consensus earlier. In the extreme, there appear to be two pitfalls in our general approach to conflict and controversy. On the one hand, we sometimes seek to avoid it by engaging in what I call the "conspiracy of smothering niceness." Actually, experience shows that when controversy is assiduously avoided, it reappears with a vengeance far more intense than when it first was recognized. On the other hand, we sometimes go out to meet controversy and then find we have gotten ourselves stuck in a process that we can't complete until "everybody is happy." I understand and basically agree with the principle of "win-win"; it is important *up to a point* that everyone participating has bought into the final outcome. But there is a significant danger in insisting on "win-win" *in extremis*.

Finally, our partnerships must be measured by the degree to which they move us toward a truly multicultural society. For the past several years, we have been deluged with information about the changing demographics of our society, by which we typically mean the increasing numbers of Latinos, African-Americans, Native Americans and Asians, with the result that increasingly our work force, our schools, our communities—our population as a whole—will be diverse. In fact, in some parts of this country, whites who have been a majority will become a minority. On balance, much of what we read is hopeful that these demographic

changes will move us quantum steps toward a truly multicultural society. I hope this is the case. I am convinced, however, that it will not happen unless and until all of us, regardless of race or ethnicity, seriously commit ourselves to making it happen.

Partnerships are difficult to maintain and multicultural partnerships may be especially so because of the deep tradition of discrimination and disenfranchisement in our society. Many of those demographers I referred to earlier warn of dire consequences if we don't build true multicultural communities. They may be right to "scare" us some. I acknowledge the pragmatic reasons for building a multicultural society; but I truly value that it is the right thing to do.

SERVICE AND ADVOCACY LINKED

Citizen action is so very deeply imbedded in American society, but we have come to view that action too narrowly as serving others. What I hope I have helped you see is the inextricable link between service and advocacy. Service in a system which is flawed is flawed service, at some point. But more importantly, I have tried to point toward a new vision of how you in your communities come together to shape the worlds within which we all live. We must have collective agendas built with all segments of our communities. We must bust the myths which often surround advocacy and systems change.

The stakes are very high right now. Virtually every state, most cities and our nation itself are confronted by deep economic decline. Nobody believes our education system is working; there are growing numbers of children living in poverty; virtually everyone agrees that we need health care reform. But, the opportunities also are very great to help shape the systems and policies which will define our futures. I am convinced that those of us who choose not to participate—who reject persistent and broad-scale advocacy for systems change—are doomed to become irrelevant in our communities. How we serve as volunteers—and even possibly if volunteers will be a vital resource—will be determined by others.

It won't take much to get started and it isn't necessary to become a full-time advocate. Your service role is essential. You lead busy lives with other personal, family and professional commitments. Advocacy for systems change is as much a way of viewing the world as it is actions you take. By that I mean that if you only have time to write some letters or make some phone calls, or go to one or two meetings to learn how others view the issues you care about today, that's fine—begin here.

But no matter how much or how little you are able to do as an advocate today, always think as an advocate:
- Get clarity on what you believe about what you do as a volunteer—what the policies are.
- Always ask yourself how what you do moves you toward that desired state—the systems change.
- Whenever and however you can, advocate for what you believe will close the gap between what is and what could be.

The need to change the systems within which we now live is obvious. Your capacity to be advocates for change is unlimited. You only have to make the decision to act—to be an advocate for change.