

Investing in Volunteerism: Recommendations Emerging From the Study of the Impact of Volunteers in Texas State Agencies

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteers are indispensable to the functions of Texas State government. Individuals seeking to do good works, to gain professional experience, to repay a debt to society, members of community service organizations and school clubs, participants in national service initiatives and many others regularly give their time, effort and expertise to state agencies. When well-managed, state agencies leverage the work of their volunteers to increase efficiencies and deliver sound government and effective services to the people of Texas, they accomplish things that simply would not happen through tax dollars and state employees alone. Putting the time of volunteers to good use is not only a matter of common sense and common concern, but it is also an issue of good management and adequate fiscal allocations. It does not happen on its own. It does not happen without thoughtful attention. Volunteers may work for no pay, but they are not free!

A modern state requires the skilled orchestration of dozens of institutions and the collective efforts of thousands of permanent employees as well as thousands of volunteers. All too often we lament the inefficiency and lethargy of government agencies. Yet when jobs are done well, when benefits are delivered, when children and seniors are safe and

cared for, when parks are clean and inviting, when services are rendered efficiently and well, and when historic sites are preserved and made available for all to see and appreciate, we rarely acknowledge the efforts behind the countless duties and innumerable tasks that make it so. Likewise, we rarely notice and even less frequently hear about the work of the volunteers who serve state government agencies willingly and effectively every day, 365 days a year.

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BACKGROUND

At the request of the Texas Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas at Austin undertook a qualitative analysis of the work volunteers perform, an

assessment of the management structures governing volunteer involvement, and a review of the data collection practices associated with volunteer programs among state agencies. From the findings—based on responses to a 46-question survey instrument from 20 of the 22 organizations contacted¹—the following “snapshot” of volunteerism in Texas state government emerged:

- More than 200,000 Texans serve the state through structured service opportunities providing contributions in time, in-kind contributions, and donations valued in excess of \$42.5 million.

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- Four organizational models facilitate the delivery of volunteer service—centralized models with dedicated staff at a central office and support at the regional level; decentralized models operating on a project or program specific level; hybrid models representing a combination of these two systems; and institution-specific programs focused on a single service-delivery site. The investigation points to a strong relationship between the centralized organization model with dedicated community resource staff and the more frequent employment of effective management practices. The eight state agencies with the most well-developed volunteer management systems engage 81% of the volunteers identified in this study and account for 97% of the cash contributions raised by volunteers.
- More than 100 different service opportunities and 9 distinct “adopt-a” programs were described. People of all ages volunteer, although seniors are often more engaged in service. RSVP was the most frequently utilized national service program. Less than half of the programs were prepared to engage youth of high school age or younger in service endeavors. Volunteer positions ranged from avocational archeologists and GPS Mapping volunteers to tutors, fund raisers and web developers.
- Placement, not recruitment, is the volunteer managers’ greatest challenge. Other key challenges to greater volunteer involvement include staff availability to supervise and support volunteers and staff understanding of the roles and functions volunteers can perform.
- Texas does not provide a uniform work environment for its volunteers. Fewer than half of the state agencies queried covered their volunteers with liability insurance. Similar inconsistencies were reported on criminal background checks.

A standardization of these data collection processes across state agencies would be extremely beneficial in order to better understand the scope of volunteer involvement.

SUMMARY COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this paper is to present to the reader a summary of the study’s key findings which appear below. Persons interested in the full report can access the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service web site for a PDF version of the study at http://rgkcenter.utexas.edu/research_investing.html.

Although volunteers are clearly indispensable to the delivery of government services, the study does identify numerous opportunities to refine current practices and to enhance program management.

1. Standardize Data Collection Practices

Volunteers make an incredible contribution to the work of state agencies by delivering needed services, protecting our environment and preserving our cultural heritage. Their contributions represent serious commitments and clearly extend the reach of government and enhance service delivery. Documenting and reporting this contribution is, however, an arduous and challenging task. Recordkeeping systems are idiosyncratic at best. In some cases, volunteer contributions of time are carefully monitored and assignments tracked. In other situations, hours are collected and outcomes enumerated, but the number of persons providing the service are not counted. The variations are as diversified as the programs studied.

A standardization of these data collection processes across state agencies would be extremely beneficial in order to better understand the scope of volunteer involvement. Serious consideration should be given to adopting a uniform system of valuation thereby eliminating the existing confusion. A uniform system would help to clarify the statewide picture of volunteerism and facilitate its promotion as well as its evaluation.

2. Provide Liability Coverage for Volunteers

Volunteers provide an alternative delivery system for important state services. The study documented more than 100 distinct jobs volunteers perform within state agencies. It also documents that when liability coverage is available it is provided on an agency-by-agency basis. *Investing in Volunteerism* recommends that the state of Texas provide a blanket policy offering uniform coverage to all residents engaged in formal, organized volunteer service within Texas state government entities. The state should also consider allowing volunteers to drive vehicles in select situations, and provide those volunteers with the same automobile insurance that it provides to salaried state workers. While volunteers may be willing to contribute their expertise to the state, this service should not expose citizens to additional personal risk or expense.

3. Expand Volunteer Recognition Programs and Events

Hundreds of thousands of people volunteer to serve state government agencies. Recognizing the contributions of volunteers is critical to volunteer retention. The Texas Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service is charged with orchestrating the annual Governor's Volunteer Leadership Awards. Although this ceremony is meaningful to the persons who receive this commendation, attention should be given to finding additional ways to recognize volunteers. Recognition events should be staged regionally, and designed to recognize far more individuals, as well as groups of people dedicated to causes or representing service organizations.

4. Hire Competent

Qualified Volunteer Managers

Volunteers should be treated well and managed competently. Research demonstrates that volunteers leave positions where their time and expertise is poorly utilized. The data collected in this investigation point clearly to the advantages of centralized systems of volunteer management supported by qualified staff on both a state and regional basis. Model programs should be highlighted, and the experience of those currently managing these centralized programs should be broadly shared with other state agencies and commissions serious about expanding their systems of volunteer involvement and community engagement. Additional research should be undertaken to develop accurate cost-benefit analyses, and to address issues of position classifications and the necessary qualifications of competent volunteer management personnel.

This study does *not* support the development of a media campaign to encourage more people to volunteer, rather it strongly recommends the attention to infrastructure development to utilize those resources fully and effectively.

5. Support Adequate Infrastructure and Fund Program Development Activities

Adequate infrastructure is critical to the development of any volunteer initiative. When asked about significant challenges facing volunteer managers, funding and staff development were key.

Insufficient funding for support personnel prevents agencies from engaging all the volunteers willing to serve, though it could also be the case that agencies under-allocate their funds to this end. Experienced volunteer managers suggested that more volunteers were generally available to serve than could be assimilated into available openings. Although the sample was limited, this finding is of critical importance. This study does *not* support the development of a media campaign to encourage more people to volunteer, rather it strongly recommends the attention to infrastructure development to utilize those resources fully

and effectively. Similarly, the lack of certainty among middle managers regarding appropriate roles for volunteers thwarts a number of available opportunities. The Commission is encouraged to engage the state agency volunteer managers, along with policy advisors, to design strategies to gain additional support for volunteer program development and staff training opportunities.

6. Study and Replicate Best Practices From Nonprofit Organizations

An analysis of volunteer management practices suggests that programs administered through centralized organizational structures are more effectively managed than those administered through hybrid or decentralized structures, or programs that are institution-specific. Surpassing even the centralized programs in management acuity, however, is Texas CASA, the one community-based agency included in this report. While it would be premature to assume this behavior from all community-based management systems (because only one such agency was analyzed), the finding does merit attention and call for additional research. Does the volunteer management system in place at CASA reflect the organization's years of operation? Do these good management practices translate into high levels of volunteer retention? Are they worthy of careful investigation so that the findings should be shared? What are the ingredients of successful "adoption"? What is the optimal level of staffing support? What publicity is most effective? These programs appear to address current trends in volunteer participation by providing short-term, episodic options for service as well as activities in which groups of people can participate together. Other adoption programs appear to encourage a sense of ownership between the volunteer group and the targeted problem or issue, providing participants with a clear picture of the value and consequences of services rendered. Understanding these and other successful service experiences will facilitate appropriate replication.

7. Share Best Practices From State Agency Volunteer Programs with USA Freedom-Corps Initiatives

Expanded knowledge about all forms of public sector service is particularly significant given the country's current attention to the roles volunteers can perform in response to disaster. A great deal can be gleaned from current practices and existing challenges. These findings can be applied to homeland security and citizen mobilization concerns, and shared with nonprofits to encourage more effective volunteer involvement.

8. Encourage State Agencies to Engage More National Services Programs in Volunteer and Community Engagement Initiatives

The contribution of volunteers can be augmented by participants in national service programs. Although many state agencies commented on the expertise and commitment of volunteers registered with the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, the other Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) programs were not as well represented. One agency commented that AmeriCorps had been tried unsuccessfully. To facilitate greater integration of national service members with community volunteers, the Commission might consider seminars targeted specifically to state agency personnel to explain all of the CNCS programs as well as the methods to access these services. Special attention could be given to streamlining the AmeriCorps grants process to facilitate applicants from within state government. Additionally, state agencies could be encouraged to join together to submit joint applications designed to meet collective needs.

9. Encourage and Facilitate a Formal Network of State Level Volunteer Resource Personnel

An experienced group of state level volunteer managers currently meets in Austin on a regular basis to share experiences and learn from each other. A larger and more

formalized version of this group exists in Arkansas. Calling themselves "The Council for Promoting Volunteerism in State Government," these managers of volunteer initiatives meet to "(1) promote volunteerism in State Agencies by acting as a clearinghouse, (2) for sharing information, solving problems, and (3) identifying information, trends and issues."²

The Commission should consider serving as focal point for such a group in Texas. In addition, such an organization could be organized to address the unique needs of state agency managers based on their level of experience and the organizational structure of their programs. Such a partnership could leverage the educational opportunities available through the Governor's Volunteer Leadership Conference with a track of programs and workshops designed to meet the specialized needs of this audience.

Likewise, the Commission website could be expanded to provide the information and data needs of volunteer programs in state government. Respondents shared several excellent policy and procedure manuals. With permission from the developers, posting documents such as these would assist other agencies with the creation of comparable documents. In addition, some of the state agencies have prepared materials to facilitate community volunteer involvement. Prepared in both English and Spanish, these documents are a valuable public service. The Commission should explore partnering with these groups and disseminating proven resources more broadly.

CONCLUSION

In its inception, this report and the aforementioned recommendations ostensibly aim to create awareness and dialogue concerning

the utilization of volunteers by Texas state agencies, and the role of the Texas Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service in sustaining and strengthening public sector volunteerism. But the report has broader applicability by contributing knowledge and research to an area where an exploration of the literature confirms there is much to be done. The data collected from this survey suggest that Texas is home to many innovative state agency volunteer initiatives. In this respect, the report serves as a case study to practitioners and volunteer program personnel in state governments around the

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United States not only by observing the extent to which volunteers can be deployed in state-run initiatives but perhaps more importantly, by identifying common challenges and model solutions.

Yes, we are a "nation of joiners" and Texas is clearly "a state of joiners." We are a people who want to make a difference, a people who care deeply about the problems and the challenges facing Texas. Yet, in today's complex and bureaucratic environment, joining requires an open door and frequently a guiding light so that people can focus their time, their efforts, their skills and their talents in the places where those gifts can make a difference. While tight budgets may propel the discussion of volunteer engagement, citizen involvement is far more than the response to fiscal or other crises. A democracy is predicated on the active and informed involvement of citizens in the affairs of governance. Knowledgeable voters need to know far more than the names and political slogans of candidates seeking office. It is imperative that they understand the consequences of their political actions and the ramifications of policy decisions. Active citizen service in the day to day affairs of government encourages thoughtful analysis and supports informed participation. Volunteerism as a mechanism to support citizen involvement is, in its most basic analysis, simply good government.

ENDNOTES

¹There are 136 state agencies in Texas. The authors distributed the survey instrument only to those agencies believed to engage volunteers. Of the twenty agencies responding eighteen reported engaging volunteers in more than 30 different programmatic thrusts. One of the agencies surveyed, Texas CASA, is technically a 501 c (3) organization. It was included in this study because it serves the state court system and receives a significant legislative appropriation. The state agencies participating in this study were:

Texas State Government Agencies Participating in this Study.

Texas Department on Aging

Texas Commission on the Arts

Office of the Attorney General

Texas Commission for the Blind

Texas Department of Criminal Justice

Texas Commission on Environmental
Quality

General Land Office

Texas Department of Health

Texas Historical Commission

Texas Department of Human Services

Texas State Library & Archives Commission

Texas Department of Mental Health and
Mental Retardation

Parks and Wildlife Department

State Preservation Board

Department of Protective and Regulatory
Services

Texas School for the Blind & Visually
Impaired

Texas Youth Commission

Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates

²*Spirit of 110 Council's By-laws*, March 24, 2000, p. 1.