

# 1983 VAC SURVEY: SUPPORTING THE VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY

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*The following article reports the results of the survey conducted jointly by the Association of Volunteer Bureaus, Inc., and VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement. The survey examines the community of 350 Voluntary Action Centers in North America.*

**V**oluntary Action Centers (VACs) are community-based local organizations that serve as a focal point for volunteer activity. They are known by a variety of names, the most common being Voluntary Action Center, Volunteer Bureau and Volunteer Center. VACs serve a number of functions within the community, including

1. Recruitment and referral of volunteers to agencies;
2. Technical assistance and training of agencies operating volunteer programs;
3. Sponsorship of special projects, such as RSVP, alternative sentencing, etc.;
4. Public awareness programs, such as local volunteer awards; and
5. Work with corporate and union volunteer programs.

Each VAC designs its activities around the needs of its community and its ability to generate funding and support.

As the data below indicates, the VAC community represents great diversity in size, scope and operation. Some VACs are independent nonprofit agencies; some are a part of United Way or another local organization; some are a part of local government. The largest VAC has a budget of almost \$1 million; the smallest, below \$10,000. Staffs range from a

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single, part-time volunteer to over 12 paid professional staff. Despite this diversity, all VACs work toward a common goal: increasing and strengthening volunteering at the community level. Their success at this seems evident—during the period examined in this survey, over 220,000 people were recruited as community volunteers through the VAC network.

## VAC Organizational Structures

VACs operate with a variety of organizational frameworks. Some have their own separate nonprofit status while others exist as a program within another community agency. Table 1 displays the pattern of organizational structures reported in the 1983 survey:

**TABLE 1  
VAC Structures**

TYPE OF STRUCTURE	WITHIN STRUCTURE
Separate Nonprofit Agency	67.0%
Division of United Way	21.0
Division of Another Community Agency	9.0
Unit of Local Government	3.0
Program of Community College	.6

This distributional pattern seems to have remained fairly constant in past years. Most newly formed VACs operate as separate agencies, once they are established. The number of VACs that are a division of United Way appears to have increased in recent years, but the relative percentage of United Way VACs has held steady. The only significant change reflected in the above data is the increase in the number of VACs that are a part of a local government unit—an outgrowth of the increased interest in volunteering among government agencies.

## VAC Budgets

VACs also come in a variety of sizes, reflecting age, size of community, success in funding, etc. This section examines the size and composition of those budgets.

### A. Budget and VAC Structure

Table 2 compares the budget of the VAC with its organizational structure. In analyzing the table, keep in mind that the budgets of those VACs that are a unit of another agency (whether United Way, local government, etc.) may understate the real working budget of the VAC because they may not include in-kind or indirect support services provided to the VAC by the parent organization.

For this reason, it is impossible to compare relative sizes of budgets between the various categories. One may, however, generalize that the VACs with the largest budgets are those that are independent agencies, perhaps because of their greater freedom to initiate special projects that add to the overall VAC budget.

### B. Budget and Population Area

Table 3 compares the size of the VAC budget with the size of the population area served by the VAC.

In general, there is a small, but by no means controlling, relationship between the size of the population area served and the amount of the VAC budget.

**TABLE 2  
VAC Budget Vs. VAC Structure**

Budget	Independent Agency	Unit of United Way	Unit of Local Agency	Unit of Local Govt.	Other
\$0-10,000	7	2	1	1	
\$10-25,000	22	3	5	1	
\$25-50,000	24	11		1	1
\$50-75,000	14	5	3		
\$75-100,000	15	4	2		
\$100-150,000	8	4		1	
\$150-250,000	13	3	1		
\$250-500,000	5		1	1	
\$500,000 +	2				

Key: Numbers represent VACs in each sub-section.

**TABLE 3  
VAC Budget Vs. Population Area**

BUDGET	POPULATION					
	0-25,000	25-100,000	100-250,000	250-500,000	500-1,000,000	1,000,000 +
\$0-10,000	2	5		2		1
\$10-25,000	2	17	10	2		
\$25-50,000		10	9	16	1	1
\$50-75,000		3	8	6	2	2
\$75-100,000		5	4		7	5
\$100-150,000		1	2	3	4	4
\$150-250,000		1	2	4	4	6
\$250-500,000			2		1	4
\$500,000 +				1		1

**C. Sources of VAC Funding**

VACs receive funding from a large variety of sources. Over 25 different *types* of funding sources were reported in the survey. In general, the most common sources of VAC funding are shown in Table 4.

**TABLE 4  
Sources of VAC Funding**

SOURCE	% OF VACS RECEIVING FUNDING FROM SOURCE
United Way	87%
Special Events	37
Local Government	36
Individual Donations	36
Federal Government	28
Training/Consulting Fees	26
Corporate Donations	21
State Government	17
Memberships	15
Agency Fees	11

The order of importance of funding sources varies somewhat when examined in the context of which sources contribute the largest *amounts* to a VAC that receives funding from that source. Viewed in this manner, United Way still heads the list, but is followed closely by grants and contracts from local government. Those VACs that do have funding support from local government tend to receive a large portion of their budget from this source. The next three places in order of relative amount of funding are held by federal government grants and contracts (primarily from the Department of Health and Human Services or ACTION), state government grants and contracts, and foundation grants. Training and consulting fees, which contribute to the budget of 26% of the VACs, only provide a very minor portion of the budget of any of the VACs who receive them.

There is a clear trend toward diversification of VAC funding. The Los Angeles VAC provides one of the best examples of this—it receives funding from 11 different source areas, none of which contributes more than 31% of its overall budget.

Diversification has meant a move away from total reliance on United Way support. Of the VACs who are United Way-supported agencies, only 13% receive 100% of their funding

**TABLE 5**  
**Five-Year Funding Patterns**

PATTERN	Independent Agency	Unit of United Way	Unit of Local Agency	Unit of Local Govt.	Other
Increase	73	21	6	2	1
Decrease	11	1	3	2	
Same	10	11		1	
Up & Down	6	4			

KEY: Figures represent number of VACs.

from United Way. Of the VACs who are divisions of United Way, only 41% receive all of their funding from United Way.

#### D. Trends in Funding

Most VACs reported favorable trends in funding. Table 5 indicates the trend in the size of VAC budgets over the past five years.

Overall, 68% of responding VACs reported an increase in budget over the past five-year period, and only 11% reported a general decrease.

#### Recruitment of Volunteers

Recruitment and referral of volunteers are regarded as their primary task by the majority of VACs. The 155 VACs who provided recruitment totals reported involving over 221,000 volunteers within a 12-month period. VACs generally are quite successful at locating a placement for a volunteer—the average percentage of those referred who were eventually placed with an agency was 73.8%.

Only 40% of VACs require a written contract or agreement with an agency before referring volunteers. Many VACs indicated a desire for a written agreement, but cited agency opposition as an insurmountable barrier. The overwhelming majority of VACs reported a total inability to get agencies to report back total hours of time donated by VAC-referred volunteers.

Table 6 indicates the most popular methods of recruitment utilized by VACs.

**TABLE 6**  
**"Best" Recruitment Method**

METHOD	% OF VACS CITING AS "BEST"
Newspaper Column	78%
Contact with Volunteer Groups	6
TV Ads or PSAs	5
Skillsbank	2
Volunteer Fair	2
Radio Ads or PSAs	2
Word of Mouth	1
Yellow Pages	1
Speakers' Bureau	1
Volunteer Opportunities Book	1

Most VACs utilize a variety of the above techniques.

The majority of the VACs have some restrictions on referral of volunteers to requesting organizations. Slightly over 87%

of those responding had at least one restriction. Of those who did impose restrictions, the type and pattern of the restriction are shown in Table 7.

**TABLE 7**  
**Restrictions on Referrals**

RESTRICTED CATEGORY	% VACS WITH RESTRICTION
For-Profit Organizations	84
Political Groups	66
Fundraising Purposes	46
Religious Organizations	17
Individuals	4
Membership Campaigns	1

Of those VACs who do not refer volunteers to for-profit organizations, most made an exception for hospitals and nursing homes, or where the work to be done involved direct services to clients. Several of those who did not refer fundraising volunteers made an exception if the fundraising was related to the United Way campaign.

Other restrictions cited by respondents included a barrier on referrals in situations involving displacement of paid workers, positions requiring a volunteer to undertake driving, and to agencies that did not have a volunteer coordinator. Although not directly stated, it is likely that most VACs follow the guidelines cited by the Houston VAC only to refer volunteers in instances that are "non-partisan, non-discriminatory, rewarding, meaningful and effectively supervised."

Most VACs reported a favorable trend in the willingness of the population to volunteer: 62% of VACs reported an opinion that the willingness to volunteer was up during the past 12-month period, 8% reported the trend was down, 29% reported the willingness as the same as usual, and 2% saw no pattern.

#### Hours of Operation

It is interesting to note that most VACs reported ease in volunteer recruitment. They seem to be able to recruit adequate numbers of volunteers while violating one of the primary tenets that they preach to agencies: Be easily accessible to volunteers. The overwhelming majority of VACs only are open for operation during weekdays and during regular business hours. Out of 167 VACs who reported their hours of operation, only 7 VACs reported being open at least one night per week, and only 2 reported being open on Saturday. A small number of VACs (14) reported that they were open after regular hours by appointment or in special cases. A

slightly larger number reported the use of answering services. This pattern of operation seems somewhat inconsistent with efforts to involve the "working" volunteer.

### Towards A Common Name?

Over 25 different organizational names were reported by VACs responding to the survey, with Voluntary Action Center, Volunteer Bureau and Volunteer Center the most common. There is some trend toward the adoption of "Volunteer Center" as a title, spurred most by its greatly increased use in California.

VACs were divided sharply over the use of a common name. Of those responding, 62% indicated that a common name was desirable, 36% opposed a common name and 2% had no opinion. Of those who supported a common name, there were differences in what that common name should be, as shown in Table 8.

**TABLE 8  
A Common Name?**

NAME	% VACS SUPPORTING USE
Volunteer Center	38%
Voluntary Action Center	26
Volunteer _____ (city)	12
Volunteer Bureau	9
Seven Other Miscellaneous Choices	13

### Job Satisfaction

The majority of respondents cited general satisfaction with the operation of the VAC. The greatest difficulty of operation was the continuing struggle for survival. Most VAC directors would paraphrase Cecil Rhodes and lament, "So little time; so much to do; and so little to do it with."

Other major difficulties cited include effectively marketing the concept of the VAC, setting program priorities, relations with United Way, agency resistance to standards, difficulties in recruiting minorities and day-time volunteers, and working with the VAC board. Paperwork was cited as the bane of their existence, with surveys running in close competition.

Despite these complaints, most respondents seemed pleased with their situations. The most common job satisfactions were "the ability to work directly with people" and "flexibility in designing their job." This satisfaction is further evidenced by the greater than five-year average tenure of current VAC directors.

### Conclusion

The above data only summarizes the results from the 1983 VAC Survey. Both responses to additional questions asked in the survey, and further refinement to questions outlined above exist. Much of this further information will be used for special studies by VOLUNTEER in the area of corporate involvement, union involvement, and VAC computer use, or in the computerized program bank, and will be made available at a later date.

Those with an interest in other areas should contact VOLUNTEER.

### METHODOLOGY

The survey form was distributed during the spring of 1983. At the time the data was compiled, 169 surveys had been returned. The returned surveys represent a cross-section of the approximately 350 VACs across the country, but there appears to be a lighter response from VACs in very small population areas and from VACs with very small budgets. We still are collecting completed surveys and would appreciate receiving data from any VAC that has not yet provided it. Additional copies of the survey form are available on request from VOLUNTEER.

The results presented in the accompanying article are one of three dissemination products of the survey. Part 2 consists of data concerning the position of VAC executive director (salary, background, attitudes). Due to the confidential nature of this information, it is only being made available to VACs. Part 3 of the survey consists of a computerized data bank of program information, i.e., which VACs operate which programs. This data bank will begin operation in March 1984 and will be accessible by telephone through VOLUNTEER. Use will be restricted to VAC Associates of VOLUNTEER.

For further information about the survey, contact Steve McCurley at VOLUNTEER, (703) 276-0542.

### THE SUGGESTION BOX

The following list is a partial compilation of the "best new ideas" submitted by the VAC survey respondents:

1. VAC branch offices on colleges
2. Area-wide media campaigns for National Volunteer Week publicity
3. Libraries as recruiting sites
4. Charging a fee for court referral services
5. Working with corporations
6. Volunteer pep rally during National Volunteer Week—one balloon released for each donated hour of service in the community
7. Ads on cable TV
8. Short-term projects calendar mailed to regular volunteer pool
9. Skillsbank
10. Advertising on buses
11. Having volunteers operate recruitment and referral operation
12. Cosponsoring training events with other groups
13. Contracting with municipalities
14. Computers
15. PR help donated by local Ad Council
16. Good Egg of the Week Award announced on radio
17. Human Race fundraiser
18. Recruiting unemployed persons as volunteers
19. Forming a singles group to do volunteer projects
20. Recruiting local business school students to do VAC clerical work