

Commentary Susan J. Ellis

Fleeting Opportunity

Volunteerism year is in danger

The United Nations declared 2001 The International Year of Volunteers (IYV) more than three years ago. Understandably, this news was greeted with excitement by the volunteer community. No one was exactly sure what IYV might mean, but it definitely had potential.

It is now the end of the year 2000, and volunteer leadership in the United States is on the verge of throw-

ing away a golden opportunity.

The United Nations apparently does not fund its "Year of ___" events - it just designates them. It also appoints some unit of the UN to be the contact point for the "Year" in question. For IYV, it assigned what seemed a logical choice: the United Nations Volunteers (UNV). UNV is a Peace Corps-type program headquartered in Bonn, Germany, that places volunteers

from all over the world into countries for economic development assistance. In fact, the Peace Corps is the U.S. affiliate of UNV.

Because UNV deals only with full-time, stipended volunteer effort, the UNV staff knows very little about the wide scope of the volunteer community. UNV staffers initially saw IYV2001 as a labor-intensive diversion from their primary work. Then they began to view it as a chance to position UNV more visibly within the United Nations itself.

So, there has been a good amount of internal United Nations politicking

going on. For example, for more than two years UNV told the world that the "kickoff" for IYV would be Dec. 5, 2000 - International Volunteer Day. In August, the kickoff in New York City was changed to Nov. 28 to accommodate the schedule of United Nations officials who otherwise would have missed the ceremonies. This disregards those countries planning what they expected to be simultaneous launches for Dec. 5.

UNV started off admirably with a wonderfully worded mission statement and various documents that are on target in terms of cutting-edge volunteer issues. It articulated goals for IYV that go beyond "feel-good" celebrations, focusing attention on the support volunteers need, the importance of funding volunteer efforts appropriately and respect for the skills of volunteer leadership.

Go to the official Web site at www.iyv2001.org to find these and other reference materials. UNV recognized that the word "volunteer" engenders all sorts of stereotypes (even in other languages) and has tried hard to be as broad in scope and inclusive as possible in what the concept of "volunteering" might cover in many cultures.

UNV deserves praise for its vision, but it made an unfortunate strategic decision. From the beginning, it refused to create any unifying project for IYV, justifiably believing that an international conference (such as the one in Beijing during International Women's Year) was not very effective in terms of its ultimate usefulness.

But apart from creating a central Web site to share information, UNV insisted that each country should develop its own, independent way of celebrating IYV2001 - without any single project or goal to connect these national celebrations together. This creates a "Multi-National Year of Volunteers," but it does nothing to stimulate an "International" one. More importantly, it places IYV2001 squarely in the middle of the internal politics of every nation in the world.

Without an external, "let's put aside our differences so we can link with our global colleagues" reason to get together, the status quo reigns in every country. And, so does the politics: Who should convene a steering group? Where is a neutral central communication site? Who will get credit? Who will fundraise and who pays for the fundraising? etc., etc.

National Steering Committees have indeed been formed in a number of countries and activities planned almost always with government leadership and funding. In fact, some countries are using IYV to convene government meetings to consider legislation to foster citizen participation. Others are planning their first-ever volunteerism conference, identifying and gathering together leaders of volunteer efforts already active in their

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Bowdoin College ~ MacCormac College ~ MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) ~ National Public Radio ~ Boston Ballet ~ Airline Pilots Association ~ Greenpeace ~ Franklin Pierce College ~ National Forest Foundation ~ University of Dallas ~ Trinity Lutheran College ~ Camp Fire Boys and Girls National Headquarters ~ Massachusetts Association for the Blind ~ Parkinson's Institute ~ Goodwill Industries Easter Seals of Kansas ~ DeMolay International ~ National Kidney Foundation ~ Gaudenzia, Inc. ~ American Electronics Association ~ Macalester College ~ Video Software Dealers Association ~ Information Systems Audit and Control Association ~ American Society of Industrial Motor Car Dealers Association of Combined Jewish Greater Boston University ~ Automobile Dealers Gordon College ~ Goods Association ~ American Hotel and Motel Association ~ Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ~ National Society of Professional Engineers ~ Lowell College ~ Printing Industries of America ~ Thomas More College ~ Episcopal Divinity School ~ National Insurance Crime Bureau ~ Cambridge College ~ Northwestern Human Services ~ Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities ~ Elderhostel ~ Hellenic College ~ Archdiocese of San Francisco ~ American Red Cross of Massachusetts Bay ~ Cancer Research Foundation ~ Chemical Manufacturers Association ~ National Association of Television Program Executives ~ Specialty Equipment Market Association ~ LeTourneau University ~ America's Promise ~ Ripon College ~ Alabama State University ~ National Association of Social Workers

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country.

The most organized national Steering Committees have their own Web sites, which are linked from the www.iyv2001.org site.

Into the vacuum of international collaboration for IYV steps IAVE: the International Association for Volunteer Effort. IAVE has a track record for running biennial World Volunteer Conferences, attracting thousands of people from more than 90 countries.

Recognizing itself as a natural fit to IYV2001, IAVE changed its traditional

conference time of late summer to January. And so, on Jan. 14-18, 2001, IAVE's World Volunteer Conference in Amsterdam becomes the first (and only) global event for IYV2001

See www.iave.org for details. It promises to be exciting. Good for them for planning ahead, and praises to the Dutch government for contributing some major resources as host country.

The American scene

So what's happening in the United States? Almost nothing.

UNV tried behind the scenes for

more than a year to interest someone in convening an American IYV Steering Committee. Two places seemed the logical starting point: The Corporation For National Service and the Points of Light Foundation (POL).

Both stonewalled UNV for months, promising to take some action but never coming through. One would assume that IYV would be seen as an unparalleled opportunity by Points of Light, but it is not taking leadership in any way. In fact, IYV was not even mentioned by POL as a matter of information sharing until a little over a year ago.

Here's the interesting thing: Kenn Allen, the chief operating officer of POL, also happens to be the World President of IAVE. The IAVE Secretariat is housed in the POL offices in Washington, DC. Given IAVE's aggressive and proactive positioning of its conference as the "kickoff" of IYV, how can POL explain the seeming disinterest in celebrating the year here in the U.S.?

Earlier this year, UNV approached the Association of Junior Leagues International and finally succeeded in co-convening a U.S. Steering Committee with POL. The committee is one of those cast-of-thousand groups with lots of diversity and no accountability. None of the usual channels of communication has shared any news about what the committee is planning and no attempt has been made to elicit input from the field.

At the National Community Service Conference held in Orlando this past June, Sharon Cappelling-Alijka, the director of UNV, gave a keynote speech about international volunteerism but did not discuss American plans for IYV. However, at that same plenary session, conferees were told that by submitting a form pledging to do some IYV activity (anything at all), they could become official "partners" with the U.S. Committee. As of this writing, there has been no snail mail, email or other communication to anyone who completed the partner pledge in Orlando.

The United States Committee unveiled a Web site in late August at www.iyv2001us.org that lists the people and organizations that submitted pledge forms. But, there is no information about what they are going to be doing, nor any contact information for them, nor any link to their Web sites.

As of this writing, there is very little on the Web site to elicit response or action, and the few suggestions offered are all individual activities, with no way to connect to anything larger or global. The main message seems to be "do your own thing and tell us about it." But, the POL logo is prominent, and it takes credit for maintaining the site.

POL is not the only organization silent on IYV. It seems as if the Corporation For National Service has no plans to lead a federal commemoration of the year. The Association for Volunteer Administration, the field's only professional association for leaders of volunteer programs, has informed members about the year but announced no project plans.

Neither the 1999 nor 2000 International Conference on Volunteer Administration (ICVA) provided an opportunity for conferees to make collaborative plans. Even more disappointing, the advance announcement of the 2001 ICVA does not even mention IYV, although it will take place while everyone ought to be en-

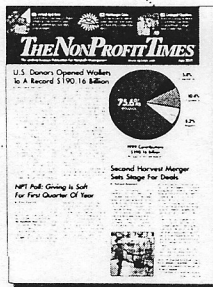
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- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| A. Religion | E. Culture | I. Association |
| B. Education | F. Social/Welfare | J. Other purpose |
| C. Health | G. Government | K. Consultant/Supplier |
| D. Civic | H. Foundation | |

- 3 Your executive responsibilities fall mainly within which area: (Circle one)
- | | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| A. Administration | B. Development |
|-------------------|----------------|

- 2 Estimated annual revenue/budget of your organization: (Circle one)
- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| A. \$500,000 - \$999,999 | D. \$50,000,000 plus |
| B. \$1,000,000 - \$9,999,999 | E. Less than \$500,000 |
| C. \$10,000,000 - \$49,999,999 | |

- 4 Your organization raises funds by: (Circle ALL that apply)
- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| A. Direct Mail | E. Person to Person |
| B. Telephone | F. Special Events |
| C. Planned Gifts | G. Grants |
| D. TV/Radio | |

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gaged in celebrating the Year. To date, none of the specialized volunteerism associations (representing such settings as health care, hospice, justice, schools) have proclaimed IYV2001 in any way either.

What is it about American leaders of volunteers that evokes such a lack of motivation to grab this major opportunity? The Year 2001 could be the chance everyone has been waiting for to focus attention on the value of volunteers and program managers. It could be the excuse to foster long-sought collaboration among national associations mired in historical antagonisms. It could help agency-based volunteering and all-volunteer associations find common ground. And, it could allow American programs to reach out internationally in ways not dreamed of before.

IYV2001 deserves the involvement of every volunteer center, governor's office, state association, Directors of Volunteers in Agencies (DOVIA), specialized professional association and national organization with affiliates in every state. It is not too late, but it-

soon will be.

IYV projects should generate excitement and result in meaningful activity. The ideal project must be simple and low cost, have a tangible product, be doable by small and large organizations, have community-wide possibilities, educate others about the value and contributions of volunteers, involve volunteers themselves in the activity and be relevant in any country and in any language.

Recognizing this, Energize, Inc. announced the "IYV Look Back to Look Ahead" Project. In its simplest terms, a way to celebrate IYV is to research and then present the history of your organization - which will invariably mean uncovering the role volunteers played as founders, fundraisers, and service providers. Once you've acknowledged the past impact of volunteers, take the time to envision the future of volunteering in your setting.

Involve the widest range of people to find and share old records, items from their attics, and memories: volunteers in all roles, paid staff, clients/consumers, legislators, funders, vendors, people in the neighbor-

hood. Sleuth the library, town hall records and the newspaper morgue.

The more people and sources you can contact will yield the most interesting discoveries and generate "buzz" about your organization.

Aim to produce something tangible - a monograph, a photo album, new pages on your Web site, a video - that will be seen and valued. Launch this product with pizzazz, then keep it updated from now on.

Don't stop at your organization's door. Find ways to merge your research with the historical picture of other organizations in your town or wider afield. Collaborate on library displays, town hall exhibits, special newspaper sections. National organizations with state and local affiliates ought to be able to find even more ways to highlight their volunteer tradition.

The second part of the project is to "Look Ahead." Convene an agency think tank to envision the future of volunteer involvement and break the mold of tradition. If nothing else, IYV can be a great motivator (or excuse) to engage everyone in strategic plan-

ning about volunteers.

A detailed explanation of the "Look Back to Look Ahead Project" can be found on the Energize Web site, www.energizeinc.com/backahead.html, along with suggestions and places to share information, free and with no strings attached. Find as many variations as you can and make it work for you.

The year 2001 is fast approaching, but it doesn't have to be too late. Seize the opportunity of IYV and do something, no matter what, to stimulate greater respect for volunteers and for what it takes to support volunteer efforts. Perhaps projects such as "Look Back to Look Ahead" will generate data and then publicity for the invaluable impact volunteering has had on our world. Now that would leave a legacy from IYV2001.

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com