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Volunteering We See but Don't Recognize

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)September
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We have spent a lot of time and words debating whether or not something called “volunteer” has earned that label. We question if someone in VISTA or AmeriCorps is a “volunteer” despite receiving a living allowance or an after-service educational grant. We chafe when offenders are sentenced to volunteering as a punishment and feel more comfortable calling it “community service” instead.

But what about the situations where the word volunteer is almost *never* applied, yet the activity truly is unpaid service – especially in situations in which it actually costs people money to participate. Let me give a few examples.

Not Owning a Car

One case in point is the rapidly-spreading car-share programs in urban areas. Here, it's PhillyCarShare (www.phillycarshare.org), with its stated vision as: *A Philadelphia region in which nonprofit car sharing exceeds the convenience, affordability, and flexibility of car ownership.* Further, their mission is: *To maximize the economic, environmental, and social benefits of reduced automobile dependence in the Philadelphia region through community-based car sharing.* Note the words “community-based.”

At 20,000 members and growing, PhillyCarShare is a real success story, especially considering that it's only five years old. They describe their beginnings as: “In the fall of 2002, five Philadelphians, all volunteers, set out to reduce automobile dependence citywide.” Did you catch the word “volunteer”? It appears only one other time on the Web site, in describing the efforts of one of the founding board members: “...Tanya organized volunteers and board members to wash PhillyCarShare's cars, perform outreach, and manage finances, while donating months of her own time to launch the organization.”

OK. There's nothing extraordinary about an innovative idea being pioneered by volunteers. But here's the part of the story that also deserves recognition: that the arrangement only works through the voluntary cooperation and honor system of the members. For example, drivers sign up for the use of a specific car for a specific time period, and the next driver is dependent on the first to bring

the car back on time and in good condition. Drivers are asked to return the car with a clean, uncluttered interior. There's a credit card that travels with the car so that drivers can purchase gas at no personal cost, so they're asked to do this if the tank gets below the one-quarter mark.

In other words, no matter how well organized and managed the service is, it still depends on its members to make it work. And remember that many of these people are making a political statement about the environment, energy consumption, and lifestyle choices.*

Taking Care of Other People's Children

Another example, far older and mostly taken for granted, is our system of foster care for children. Foster families go through a rather extensive screening and selection process that includes giving up the privacy of their home for assessment. Then they wait for a placement, which can come at any time of the day or night, without warning. Once a child or children are in residence, some money is paid by the government to cover the basic expenses of food, clothing, and essentials – at amounts determined by bureaucrats in a cost-saving frame of mind.

But what about the services of the foster parents themselves? There is no payment for their time, effort, and caring. I always refer to foster parents – and also the birth children in the house who share in giving fostering attention – as *volunteers*. Unfairly, one of the nasty stereotypes many hold is that some foster families take children in “for the money.” I defy anyone to find the fat in the expense budget allotted. In fact, most foster parents I know spend their own money to make up the difference between what their foster children need and what is provided for them at public expense.

You might want to consider adoptive parents volunteers, too, but I draw the distinction that adoption creates a permanent family arrangement in which outsiders are no longer involved. In foster parenting, to the contrary, social workers have the final say on most things and the children can be removed at any time, emotional ties notwithstanding. Fostering is probably one of the most intensive forms of volunteering – it's full-time, long-term, and demands sacrifice.

I Love a Parade

The final example I'll give of the invisibility of volunteers is almost every holiday, festival, or celebration parade. Millions of television viewers may see huge balloon figures floating down Fifth Avenue, but I see the volunteers from Macy's holding the tethers. Or I think about the hundreds of volunteers who painstakingly spent New Year's Eve affixing flowers to the floats for the Pasadena Tournament of Roses parade the next day. In both those and the other big holiday events, the high school and college bands that intersperse the floats have all worked hard to raise money to pay their own way to the parade city for the prize of marching in it.

But let's not just focus on major, televised events. In fact, the smaller the community, the more obvious it is that a parade is a neighborly occasion. This past May 5th, while visiting Ivan Scheier in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, we attended the town's Cinco de Mayo parade (see photo of

the peace float to the right). With a population of 8,000, a resident not in the parade most definitely knew at least a hefty percent of the marchers.

Why Does this Matter?

All three of these situations and many, many others demonstrate how deeply volunteering is woven into our communal lives. It's a way of collaborating that we often think of only as historical tradition, such as barn raisings or quilting bees. These modern equivalents are what the concept of "civil society" is all about. It's the things that people do collectively in their spare time to achieve a goal through group effort, sometimes for fun and sometimes to share in the end result benefit. Here are a few more:

- *Food co-ops* – where members must give hours of service as well as pay a membership fee.
- *Community gardens* – in which urban folks grow vegetables and fruit on common property to feed themselves and neighbors, and to give to programs serving the hungry.
- *County fairs* with all their booths and competitions, with entrants working all year to win the top ribbon and judges giving their time (sometimes making enemies of the neighbor whose pie or pig didn't win).
- *Beautification programs* – run by people who simply can't bear to see a traffic circle without welcoming flowers.
- *Church choirs* – just think of the enormous number of hours it takes to rehearse and the devotion of sticking to a weekly concert schedule.

Those of us who spend our time in formal, agency-based volunteer efforts need to look around and see the relationship of these much less formal, yet sometimes more productive volunteer projects and ask ourselves:

- What is the appeal of these activities that keep them staffed with volunteers?
- What can those of us in more formal "volunteer programs" learn from the leaders of these activities?
- What might the leaders of these activities learn from us?
- When do we ever get together to exchange ideas and techniques?

How would you answer these questions? How can we make sure we really see the wide complexity of the volunteer world?

* In the interest of full disclosure, after reviewing the draft of this essay, our Webmaster Kristin Floyd – a member of PhillyCarShare – sent me the following update:

As PhillyCarShare is growing, it is feeling less and less like a group of committed volunteers. For example, if someone goes below the one-quarter tank mark and someone else reports it, the first driver is fined \$25. Also, you can wash a PhillyCarShare car and get a \$25 credit. More and more there is a monetary

consequence to most actions you take. Furthermore, someone complained in my recent car's log, "This car is filthy." I didn't think it was filthy but clearly this person had the expectation of a rental car clean versus a slightly less perfect, PhillyCarShare clean.

In the same vein, I suspect that these days high fees are paid to the designers of the Tournament of Roses Parade floats, even if volunteers do the physical labor. So perhaps another question to ask ourselves is how the sense of community changes over time as the "community" grows and a service gets larger and larger. Quite clearly, at some point the line is crossed between "we do this for each other" and "we expect to exchange money for this." Now if we could only predict that tipping point!

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Posted on 24 February 2008 by Ned, a 26-year volunteer fire fighter with an Australian Volunteer Fire Brigade, Australia

There is another area of volunteering which often goes unrecognised due to the fact that it is highly conspicuous, that is, of course, the emergency service volunteer. More often than not, these people are dressed the same and perform the same as their paid counterparts. They are always there putting their lives at risk, not for pay or recognition, but for the sense of community. These are often uniformed volunteers in a system which has limited access to National Honours and awards, but due to the stringent rules governing such awards, only the very best of the best get awarded such honours. It is these volunteers who would certainly benefit from an award of the calibre of the IYV Medal, designed by the UN for member organisations to award for volunteer service in 2001, (International Year of the Volunteer). Such an award was instituted by the New Zealand Government as a national award and all volunteer fire fighters in NZ during 2001 received them. This was a brilliant morale boost and would be a wonderful thing to continue on the 10 year anniversary of IYV, (IYV+10).

I would like to lobby the UN to make this an official UN award, like the awards for peace keepers, which is awarded to volunteer EMS workers across the world. The reason for this is that many governments, state and federal, tend to place such an initiative in the too hard basket and more often than not, nothing actually gets done until the last minute, so it's a case of "let's run off a few thousand pretty bits of paper and have a barbecue to make it look like we care."

Posted on 3 October by Roger Carr, Owner, Everyday Giving, Fredricksburg VA USA

Volunteers give their time to make a difference. They want to use their knowledge, skills and experiences to respond to a cause they are passionate about. They want to feel appreciated and respected. They want to see the impact of their efforts.

Many of the less formal volunteer projects provide these experiences to their volunteers. They are fueled more by passion than business. They typically provide more active and influential roles for volunteers. If a more formal volunteer project doesn't view and use their volunteer force as an extension of the staff, they are going to continue to have more difficulty over time. Gone are the days when volunteers are only used for stuffing envelopes or knocking on doors asking for donations.

Posted on 7 September 2007 by Karen Kogler, The Equipper Church, Volunteerism Resources, Palatine, Illinois USA

The struggle with terminology in the volunteer management field reflect the larger issue you bring up here, Susan, of just what volunteerism encompasses. I like your definition of "the things that people do collectively in their spare time to achieve a goal through group effort." I work in church volunteer management where we too struggle with terminology and definitions. Increasing the ways we can work and learn together benefit all of us.

Posted on 4 September 2007 by Hillary Roberts, PLNJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

A topic close to my volunteering heart, Susan! At the core of every non profit organization was (and if they are true to mission still exists) that initial group of trail blazers who stood tall as visionaries and laid the blueprint for what is now a well-established national non profit. We can look to most large npo's and find the "volunteer start up story."

What saddens me is when a grassroots, or all volunteer organization, is disrespected. Pushed aside as "some other form" of charity. Some charitable missions do not require a paid staff, a commercial space or a transportation fleet. Some very valuable community outreach is accomplished through the support of quality citizens, TIME givers and compassionate spirits. We need to not only admit but relish that leadership comes in all shapes and sizes. That kind of generosity should not be taken for granted.

How do we change perception? One thought, volunteers, not paid staffers, should conduct workshops on this topic. Volunteer leaders should be included at conferences; invited to speak about their tools and techniques as front line advocates and insiders. I'd like to see a national/international, all-volunteer Leadership Speaker's Bureau.

Instead of attending a workshop on HOW to recruit, retain and recognize volunteers offer a workshop that outlines HOW volunteers think, lead and provide some of the best field resources an agency can hope for!

In other words, we all need to welcome and recognize the value of people placed in active volunteer positions to better understand the gaps bridged through the commitment of all volunteer groups and more non profits need to remember their grass-roots.

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