

Volunteer Youth Service Legislation: An Opportunity for Social Change?

Marie Saunders

A volunteer, according to *Webster's Dictionary* is "one who enters into or offers himself for any service of his own free will". In their book, *By the People*, Susan Ellis and Katherine Noyes define the verb volunteer in this way: "to volunteer is to choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond what is necessary to one's physical well-being."

Both of these definitions involve free will or choice, a key concept in America. The Ellis/Noyes definition includes social responsibility which can refer to specific and immediate needs or to actions relating to society at large. The definition also uses the phrase "going beyond" which implies that something extra beyond the bare minimum is required. It is interesting to note that the definitions of volunteer used here do not include the words "community service," a phrase one is beginning to see and hear when the concept of volunteering is being discussed.

We as Americans have a tradition of exercising social responsibility beyond the minimum. The Independent Sector recently published a study on just how far we do go. The study showed that for all adults 18 years or older, including nonvolunteering households, an average of 2.1 hours per week was volunteered. Of those who volunteered, their weekly average was 4.7 hours. In 1985 this average was 3.5 hours per week. In addition there are financial contributions with an average contribution

from all households of \$562 or 1.5% of their income.

The Independent Sector drew a number of other general conclusions about the public's attitudes towards volunteers. These included the following:

- Most Americans believe they should volunteer and give to help others.
- People who volunteer are more apt to also contribute dollars. Those who exercised their personal commitment to charitable giving and to participating in public affairs gave more generously.
- 87% believe that charities play a significant role in society and express confidence that they are better able to provide social services than are big business or Congress.
- Americans believe that the government has a responsibility to help people who cannot help themselves. However, there was not much agreement on what form this help should take.

The purpose of this brief review of the volunteer concept is to set the stage for a discussion of some legislation currently before the 101st Congress to establish a national volunteer service program. There are now some 14 different bills before Congress for its consideration. Many of these bills have been consolidated into S1430, a bill to enhance national and community service.

In addition, President George Bush has announced YES in America (Youth

Marie Saunders currently serves as Director of Volunteer Services at Hunt Hospital in Danvers, MA. She has been a consultant in community organization for a national health organization and an executive director of a community services organization. She has implemented an array of programs including a day care, an after school care, and a disadvantaged youth tutoring program. Ms. Saunders has her MBA from Suffolk University in Boston.

Engaged in Service in America), a program dubbed "a thousand points of light" during the recent Presidential campaign and expected to cost \$100 million over the next four years.

The focus of this article is to raise some ethical questions and provide some information to assist in their consideration. This will be accomplished through a brief review of the most significant legislation being considered along with some of the commentary found in the press. It will then take a look at volunteerism in our past which addresses the question of change as well as political expediency. It will conclude with some observations which support, in part, the question of an ethical dilemma.

Some Questions

So what's the fuss? Americans are happily volunteering of their own free will and Congress and/or the President is going to help them.

But there needs to be a fuss about the establishment of a national volunteer service corps. Do we want to legislate into place something that is already being done without legislation? Do we want to create and fund an organization that mandates caring through government requirements? Will such a governmental organization be as responsive to changing social needs over time as a charitable organization dependent on the community for its financial well being? If not, does it matter?

Does the national service corps concept take a uniquely American value and legislate it into being a program that is politically expedient? Is the government saying that it can not solve the social problems so it will take a positive political value and push the solutions on to the nonprofit sector? And what will happen to voluntary volunteering?

In the process of designing incentives to volunteer is too little attention being paid to the costs and problems of supervising volunteers? Will incentives and/or coercion really create a sense of caring and a national sense of community? Are the professionals in volunteer administration addressing these questions in anticipation of the future or is the future simply evolving and our role will be to react when it arrives?

Some Proposed Laws

There is an assortment of legislation pending before Congress that give rise to the questions that have been raised. The proposed laws being reviewed here have been selected because they have been the most visible and have been incorporated, at least in part, into S1430 which will also be briefly reviewed. They also show the range of incentives being proposed and populations being targeted in an attempt to develop a political coalition enabling enactment.

The main focus of all of the bills is on youth with an emphasis on education. They all have considerable sums of Federal money attached. While there is a sense of the national costs, there is little information on the state or local costs for actually running the programs. There is no sense at all of the costs to the agencies in establishing effective programs that meet agency, student, and Federal objectives.

Senator Sam Nunn (D,GA) and Congressman Dave McCurdy (D,OK) introduced the first of the national service bills. S3/H660 allows civilian service volunteers to receive subsistence wages and a \$10,000 voucher for education, job training, or down payment on a home. The \$10,000 voucher would phase out the education loan program. Active military volunteers would receive a \$24,000 voucher at the end of two years of military duty. Senior volunteers over age 65 would receive a stipend for either part-time or full-time volunteering in this program.

A nonprofit Corporation for National Service would be established to manage the program. Its Board would make grants to the states which in turn would develop a service plan and designate local projects. The states would pay 25% of the costs out of non-Federal funds. The nonprofits in which the volunteers are placed would pay up to \$1,000 a year to the state for each volunteer.

S408 sponsored by Senator Barbara Mikulski (D,MD) establishes a similar program with a \$3,000 yearly voucher and a three-year commitment. Management would again be through a national corporation with the states providing local administration and administration costs.

This bill does not phase out the Federal education loan program.

The focus of H717/S322, introduced by Congressman Leon Panetta (D,CA) and Senator Christopher Dodd (D,CT) is on a Conservation Corps targeting 16 to 25 year olds. Matching grants from the Secretary of the Interior would set up local and state conservation corps working on public lands. Participants would be paid stipends equal to minimum wages.

S650, introduced by Senator Edward Kennedy (D, MA), focuses on the concept that community service should be a part of the learning process for all students. Serve America provides start-up grants to existing institutions to expand service opportunities with matching funds to be found locally. No stipends will be paid to students from Federal monies. In addition the bill establishes a youth job-training partnership for summers. Students are defined as kindergarten through college. The bill also mandates existing Federal agencies to offer greatly expanded volunteer service opportunities throughout the system. This mandate is not restricted to youth opportunities.

S1430 incorporates many features of each of the just described bills. It starts with a number of findings that help give credence to questions raised in this article. These include the concept that service to the community and the country is a responsibility of all citizens regardless of age or economic status, that service helps build self esteem and teaches teamwork, and involvement at a young age teaches citizenship responsibilities. The bill also asserts that the high costs of education and housing deter youth from volunteering, that older Americans already give considerable energies to solving community problems and this needs to be recognized, and that everyone should have an opportunity to participate in community service.

To accomplish its objectives, S1430 establishes a school-based community service program, a youth service corps, a national demonstration program, and an expansion of both Volunteers in Service to America and the National Older American Volunteer programs. All of these would be managed by a nonprofit Corporation for National Service.

The school-based community service program (Serve America) would be under the direction of the Secretary of Education with state education departments submitting program proposals. This puts the education system rather than the nonprofit sector in control of determining community needs while enabling educators to address the issue of teaching community service as a value. Funding support would be provided for curriculum development as well as program support. Participants may receive academic credit in the elementary and secondary grades. In the higher education programs, students may exchange participation for financial assistance that reduces educational debt.

Title II of S1430 establishes an American Conservation and Youth Service Corps that offers full-time productive work with visible community benefits in a natural resource or human service setting and gives a mix of work experience, life skills, education, and support services. School credit may be awarded for participation. Participants receive a minimum living allowance and health insurance.

The third major part of this bill establishes demonstration programs in public or private nonprofit organizations engaged in human services, education, environmental, or public safety needs. This program gives grants to states to run full-time or part-time programs, starting with five states in 1991 and reaching no more than 35 states by fiscal years 1994 and 1995. The demonstrations need to show ways to reach economically and educationally disadvantaged youth and may include seniors over the age of 60. Part-time youth participants are eligible for vouchers up to \$3,000 per year, and full-time up to \$8,500 per year. The vouchers may be used for student loan payments, tuitions, or down payment on a home. Seniors are not eligible for vouchers. Full-time participants will receive a living allowance and health insurance. Introductory training will include a component on citizenship and community service.

All of these programs will be administered by a nonprofit Corporation for National Service with a Board of Directors and a paid staff. Each state that applies to participate in the various programs encompassed in S1430 will form a state advi-

sory board for national and community service.

When reviewing the summary of the bills, it becomes clear that the main focus is on youth with an emphasis on education. They are incentive driven rather than enabling the exercise of free will or choice.

In a June 1989 *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed there were a number of reasons put forth for opposing any sort of national service. The author, George Poche, said "at a minimum, the concept of national service defies the forces of the market. It assumes government can accurately assess the needs and desires of the public for social services and plan appropriately to meet them."¹ In the same article he challenges the entitlement mentality of this country, he questions the budgetary and political implications, and he suspects the program would create a self-perpetuating constituency in the same manner as health care, welfare, Social Security, and other government subsidy programs.

Brian O'Connell, president of Independent Sector, criticizes the proposed laws from the nonprofit sector point of view. "The nonprofit sector is about 10% the size of the government and it was never in the cards that much of that 10% could be switched around to match the areas of government reductions. If a large part of the nonprofits' 10% is diverted to cover what the government can not provide, then these organizations lose their capacity to be different from the government."²

Carol Steinback concurred with O'Connell indicating that "while activism has been rising, federal financing of nonprofit groups during the Reagan years has fallen by more than 22%."³ She goes on to say that in 1981 President Reagan created a White House task force on private-sector initiatives to promote voluntarism. Critics charged that this was only a smoke screen to soften the blow of the Administration's cuts in federal social programs. Other critics have indicated that the independent sector has not been viewed as a co-equal in addressing major social problems, but as an afterthought in policy making.

The support for the proposed laws seems to come from the education community. For example, Susan Schwartz of the Education Commission of the States

writes "many education leaders believe that public and community service can do more than any classroom learning to make social responsibility an integral part of a student's life."⁴

The proponents of national service call upon our sense of values to promote their cause. President Bush said "from now on in America any definition of a successful life must include serving others."⁵ According to Sam Nunn, "there is a pressing need to awaken a new spirit of civic obligation and participation in America . . . Those who take from the common good should give something back."⁶ And Senator Kennedy announced that "the Me Decade is over. The 1990's can be the decade when we rediscover the importance of giving something back to our country in return for all it has given us."⁷

This writer suggests that if one reviews this article's opening statistics on volunteerism and reviews the history of volunteerism, it will be seen that the growth and activism is already there. It is possible that political expediency is playing a role in the rhetoric expressed by some of the proponents of the various proposals.

A Quick History Lesson

America's commitment to voluntary cooperation to achieve mutual goals can be traced back to the Social Compact of 1620. In this document the pilgrims affirmed the necessity for a government based on the consent of the governed. They further joined in a covenant which "bound 'them strictly tied to all care of each others' good and of the whole by everyone and so mutually."⁸ Their strict moral code implied an active concern for the behavior and welfare of the members of their community.

In the 1600s and 1700s the community service issues were survival related. Families helped relatives. Neighbor helped neighbor. Social welfare was provided by "taking in" the destitute. Schools and libraries were frequently started through donations. Lotteries financed the building of public works. The military was voluntary.

In the 1800s the questions of survival were still critical as the country moved west, but we began to see more organized structures. There were volunteer fire

departments. Justice with juries was a community affair. Labor organizations and agricultural societies formed and provided leadership for changes. Departments of Public Health were established for the promotion of individual and community health. The church continued to be a central factor in American lives.

With the Civil War came another kind of volunteer—those who aided the Underground Railroad. They were activists for a cause in which they strongly believed.

As we grew through the 1900s many community service functions were provided by the government. But volunteers pioneered in developing solutions to social problems. They provided the leadership and frequently started something that then became institutionalized within our society. Many of these institutions, such as the American Red Cross or the YMCA or YWCA, are familiar to us today. And many of these institutions have changed their focus and mission to address social needs far different from those for which they were originally begun.

Observations

At the start of this article, the definition of volunteer included "own free will." Several of the proposals for national service include "requirements." The emphasis on "require" appears to be coming from the educators.

John Battaglia of the Fort Lee (NJ) High School says "by national youth service I mean a program in which all young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 would be required by law to volunteer a prescribed number of hours within a legitimate, recognizable, and certified human service agency."⁹ In fact approximately 50% of all private schools in this country require some sort of volunteer, community service for graduation.

Educators' arguments appear to be based on the need to teach the value of caring. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett describes many US public schools as "languishing for lack of moral nutrition."¹⁰ He goes on to say that as the home is seen as a less stable and more selfish place, many people have begun to blame the schools for not taking over the traditional family task of inculcating val-

ues.

There is a belief stated by John Gunther in *Inside USA* that "ours is the only country deliberately founded on a good idea. That good idea combines a commitment to a man's inalienable rights with the Calvinist belief in an ultimate moral right and sinful man's obligation to do good. These articles of faith, embodied in the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution, govern our lives today."

While the educators are promoting support for this belief through various forms of national service, those in the nonprofit sector are promoting the free will concept.

Bill Aramony, president of the United Way of America, talks about "collaboratives of the public and private sectors for the common good."¹¹ He argues that "it is often the citizen volunteers who see the problem in their own neighborhoods or experience [the problem] in their family who must raise the cry in the community. When they do so they turn to the voluntary agencies as the best advocates for solutions and for involving the support of our government." The history of volunteerism in this country documents this concept.

Volunteer leaders such as Charlotte Lunsford of the American Red Cross speak about the value of volunteerism with the emphasis still on free will or choice. She said "volunteerism combines the best and the most powerful values in our society—pride in the dignity of work, the opportunity to get involved in things that affect us, the freedom of choice and expression, the chance to put into practice an ethic of caring, and the realization that one person can make a difference."¹²

There are arguments to support the concept of volunteering from all sectors. What has been interesting to this writer in reviewing the literature for this article is the dearth of material to be found. Most of the discussion is in the popular press and it specifically relates to the proposed laws.

What was found in journals tended to be written by educators rather than volunteer administrators. This included the majority of articles that appeared in an issue of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* with a focus on student volunteering. This may be in part attributable to the propensity of

educators to write and volunteer administrators to do. As noted earlier, it may also be related to the educators' frustrations in teaching values and their consequent looking to the government for assistance.

The successful examples of youth service programs cited in articles by educators or volunteer administrators had a common thread. Success came with partnerships between voluntary agencies and the government, and those partnerships were equal. The control of the programs was at the local level, and the models evolved to meet local needs. Those programs that are federal, such as the Peace Corps and Young Volunteers in Action, appear to wax and wane over relatively short periods of time.

If we are going to legislate a national youth service corps, we need to build in "free will" and collaboration. We need to answer the philosophical questions raised earlier in this article and know why we are developing the legislation. We need to know that we are providing learning opportunities that teach the value of caring.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Stop the National Service Before It Starts," *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 1989, p. A32.
2. "Bush's Thousand Points of Light," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 14, 1989, p. A16.
3. Carol Steinbach, "Those Points of Light," p. 3192.
4. Susan Schwartz, "Encouraging Youth Community Service," p. 289.
5. "Uncle Sam Wants You," *Boston Globe*, March 21, 1989, p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Susan Ellis, *By The People*, p. 15.
9. John Battaglia, "National Service: A Prospectus for Student Service," p. 18.
10. "Looking to Its Roots," *Time*, May 25, 1987, p. 27.
11. William Aramony, "Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Public Policy," p. 315.
12. Charlotte Lunsford, "The Answer Is in Your Hands," p. 730.

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