Volunteering In America 1980-1981 A Status Report

By Kerry Kenn Allen

PERHAPS THE MOST OFTEN QUOTED OBSERVER of American society is a Frenchman who died some 100 years ago—Alexis de Tocqueville, who spent nine months in 1831-32 touring the new United States. His survey of our emerging nation, *Democracy in America,* has become one of the classic benchmarks in our attempt to define American life. Of particular pride to us have been his descriptions of the American disposition to "constantly form associations," to seek solutions to community problems through the actions of private citizens.

But in recent years, we've heard less of Tocqueville and more of the "malaise" that supposedly grips us, less of voluntary associations and more of government, less of working together and more of the "Me Decade." Now, as we enter the 1980's, we are confronted with new realities: increasingly complex problems that seemingly no amount of money can solve, demands to reduce public expenditures and to roll back the oppressive influence of a bureaucracy run amok, growing distrust of large institutions and of people who are paid to make decisions or to help others.

We are also confronted with new political leadership and a new rhetoric, one that calls up the heritage that Tocqueville described. If we are to solve our problems, we are told, we must return to the habit of helping one another, of assuming greater responsibility for ourselves, of turning not to government but to our families, churches, voluntary associations and to each other.

Are we prepared for the changes in the approach to problem-solving that is implied? Are individual citizens willing and able to get more heavily involved in their communities? Are we prepared to turn power to the people?

The answer, perhaps surprisingly, may be a resounding "yes!" The winds of change are once again blowing in the United States. That literally millions of Americans are finding new, creative ways to attack problems and to regain control over their own lives is a good indicator of the current status of our national heritage of volunteering:

- A new era of citizen involvement and activism is dawning—much of it outside the realm of the large, well-established service organizations that are the most visible part of the voluntary sector.
- The ability and willingness of individual citizens to volunteer is changing, as their lifestyles change along with their expectations of reward, personal growth and responsibility.
- The long, often uncertain, relationship between government and the voluntary sector is reaching a major turning point, when serious attention can result in building a creative collaboration between them.

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A New Activism

The "Me Decade" has come to an end, not with an orgy of self-awareness but with the simple act of people caring about each other and their communities. For example:

- The "Straphangers' Revolt" in New York City is mobilizing citizens to lobby for improvements in the subway system.
- Adrian Miranda in Los Angeles has created the Community of Togetherness for teenage Chicanos by opening his garage as a temporary community center and offering his friendship.
- The keeper of a general store in eastern Kentucky is leading the local fight against strip mining.
- More than 84,000 people volunteer for fire and emergency squads in New Jersey; in Philadelphia, 150,000 citizens participate in police-sponsored neighborhood patrols.
- The membership of the increasingly activist Audubon Society has quadrupled since 1968 to the current level of 415,000.

"What has made the historic preservation movement strong enough to change the face of our cities, is precisely that it is a movement, a mighty popular movement. It has become the most enthusiastic and intelligent citizen effort in the history of this democracy."

—Wolf Von Eckardt
Washington Post

At the core of this new spirit of activism is a growing belief that if problems are going to be solved, it will be because people, not institutions, are attacking them. Rudolph Wagner, a 78-year-old North Dakota farmer, one of a dozen to volunteer to assist young farmers, captured the essence of this mood: "If people want to keep [problems] inside instead of making an issue of it, they're going in the wrong direction."

The movement to become involved is massive: tenant associations buying their buildings and developing co-ops in Washington, D.C.; 4,000 ADDition volunteers in Orlando, Florida, schools; more than 300 corporations nationwide encouraging their employees to volunteer; a growing membership of 26,000 low- and moderate-income people in ACORN (Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now) in 19 states; the anti-nuclear movement serving as the focal point for new activism on campuses.

Why? What has happened to rekindle this spirit? Was the "Me Decade" real or only the figment of the media's imagination? There are several answers, none completely satisfactory:

"Something special is happening that makes our country's economic picture a good deal brighter. There is a new movement—an exciting cooperative spirit—making itself felt everywhere from rural towns to big city neighborhoods. The movement has no single leader nor does it have a national platform. Rather, consumers are taking concrete steps to beat inflation on the local level. They are forming partnerships with businesses, governments, unions, private foundations and, most importantly, with each other."

—Esther Peterson
Director, U.S. Office of
Consumer Affairs

First, there is a growing desire for the empowerment of citizens as citizens—that is, as active participants in decision-making. This is a natural outgrowth of three dissimilar movements of the past 20 years: the battle for social justice, the search for self-awareness and the growing involvement of volunteers in the delivery of human services. People have realized that they *do* make a difference. But they also have realized that service and advocacy are not enough. They want to be empowered as full participants in the planning, policy-making and resource allocation processes, the forces that shape their lives and their communities.

Second, there is the growing belief that big institutions, including both government and business, have failed to solve problems or to provide the positive leadership that people are seeking. This belief is evident everywhere.

Ronald Reagan has been elected with the expectation that he will "get government off the backs of people." There is skepticism about the role professionals play, about the skill and sincerity of paid helpers, about the promise of a "technological fix" to solve our problems. Even the Three Mile Island accident underlined the anti-nuclear sentiment that is as much rooted in a concern about poor management as it is in the technology itself.

Third, there is a desire to recreate a sense of community. At least partially akin to the "small is beautiful" notion, this desire is rooted in the realization that there are not economies of scale when it comes to helping people help themselves. Self-help, for example, has grown into a new form of community, with some 500,000 such groups, involving 15 million Americans. So has telephone counseling. There are now so many "hotlines" in New York City that the telephone company is starting a special information number for them. Rev. Gary Rowe, director of the Yule Connection in Chicago that helps people who are depressed during holidays, says, "The telephone is the modern backyard fence in the city. Strangers can become neighbors over that wire and help each other simply by communicating."

"No government can guarantee a perfect life for anyone. No government can substitute for our families, our churches, our synagogues, our neighborhoods, our volunteers. But a progressive government must do two things. It must create the conditions to help all people build better lives for themselves. And it must do so efficiently and honestly and fairly."

—Walter Mondale

Consider PROP (People Reaching Out to Other People) in Eden Prairie, a suburb of Minneapolis. PROP is a 100 percent volunteer effort to coordinate services for people who can't wait for agencies to respond or who "fall through the cracks." Gerry Beckmann, a PROP leader, captured the new desire for community when she told the Minneapolis *Tribune*, "I grew up in a small town in Nebraska. People did things like [helping others] as a matter of course. They saw each other every day and knew when help was needed. People here want to do the same things but they don't know how. When they have the opportunity, they always respond. You might say PROP gives Eden Prairie a chance to be a small town."

Finally, the "Me Decade" may never have happened, at least not in the way and to the extent media pundits and merchandisers would have us believe. In 1974, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that over 37 million adult Americans regularly volunteered in some way. Less than five years later the Gallup Poll surveyed residents of urban areas and discovered that over 80 percent indicated a willingness to get involved in their communities, if asked. Americans never have stopped caring, never have stopped helping one another. Instead of saying, "Isn't it too bad no one volunteers anymore?", we should be seeking to understand the very positive ways in which volunteering has changed to meet new needs in the community and new expectations in the lives of individual citizens.

"The American ethic of neighbor helping neighbor has been an essential factor in the building of our nation .... Government must never elbow aside private institutions—schools, churches, volunteer groups, labor and professional associations—in meeting the social needs in our neighborhoods and communities."

—1980 Republican Party Platform

IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT MOST OF THIS NEW ACTIvism has grown up outside the realm of the large, well-established service organizations that are the most visible part of the voluntary sector. It has happened in neighborhoods, in organizations of the low-income, minorities, handicapped and elders. It has found its roots in people's anger, in their desire for change and justice. It is the work of individuals working outside the system and of enlightened corporate leaders who see that the primary social responsibility of business is much more than maximizing profit.

There is little coincidence in the fact that the new activism is accompanied by the decline in the number of people willing to volunteer in well-established, "traditional" and institution-based human services. People no longer want to "do good" in the traditional sense. They want to become involved in activities that touch their lives directly, that they feel strongly about, that empower them. Many voluntary

agencies have been unable to change with the times, unable to capture the imagination and the energy of the citizens they have relied on for so long.

There is a new volunteer community emerging, one that harkens back to the true tradition of America: citizens banding together around a common cause that is in the public interest. A host of new technical assistance, information-sharing and advocacy organizations are growing up around this new community of volunteers.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, for example, helps increase the funds available for social change and emerging, consumer-based service organizations. Its advocacy has brought changes in the Combined Federal Campaign, growing sensitivity among foundations to the demand for public accountability and greater public awareness that federated fundraising campaigns, like United Way, while important, are insufficient to meet the needs of the entire community.

"At this moment, in scores of neighborhoods across the country, in big cities and small towns, along dirt roads, behind mountain 'hollers,' there are people speaking out. They are turning toward *one another, asserting themselves as they have never done before .... a long-buried American tradition may be springing back to life."*

—Studs Terkel

The New Volunteers

The ability and willingness of people to get involved is not unique to the United States. But it is around that energy that our unique institutions—voluntary associations and organizations—have been built. Now volunteering is changing, partially in response to changes in society as a whole, but mostly because people are changing their lifestyles and expectations.

At the heart of this change is what has been called "enlightened self-interest," a supposed moving away from helping others to helping ourselves. It is a common complaint of large voluntary organizations: people only want to volunteer for things that help themselves, such as an opportunity to resolve personal problems, to obtain marketable skills, to achieve a certain status. For many, neighborhood associations and self-help groups have lost the "purity" of volunteering because the participants themselves benefit.

"The swift growth of the self-help movement is the second Copernican revolution. It shatters the myth of the professional as the center around which human services function. There are groups that meet just about every human need, and the groups work because their members focus on their own resources and experience."

—Dr. Leonard Borman
Center for Urban Affairs
Northwestern University

But this is a dreadfully narrow view of the meaning of altruism. Is it selfish to fight for creation of a neighborhood clinic rather than to volunteer in a hospital across town? Is it wrong to demand involvement in decision-making rather than to accept a passive role as supplement to paid staff? Is one's work any less pure because one hopes to move into paid employment? The outcry about these changes has come to a great extent from those who have been able to afford the luxury of volunteering for its own sake, rather than for its primary purpose of problem-solving.

And if altruism is dead, how do we account for the hundreds of examples we find every day of people sacrificing to help others? How do we fit in football player Harold McClinton, killed in an auto accident outside Washington, D.C., as he was returning from a visit with inmates at Lorton prison? Or Cynthia Motyka, a 27-year-old Chicagoan, who adopted a blind, retarded infant she met on her first day as a hospital volunteer who, through her efforts, has "become a little boy?" Or the 600 volunteers of Friends Outside of San Jose, California, who help inmates and their families?

Altruism is not dead. It simply reflects more accurately now the wonderful truth of volunteering: that people can help themselves while helping others help themselves.

"I get very discouraged. There never seems to be enough time. I never feel fully prepared. I can't find the answer for every child's problem. There's always something I didn't do or could have done better. I need a volunteer—someone who has the time to listen and talk to them, to help them learn and grow. They need another adult friend who will share their dreams and thoughts, just as I do."

—A teacher, quoted by Whitty Cuninggim, *Teaching Exceptional Children,* spring 1980

Two new expectations are shaping the nature of citizen involvement. One is the expectation of greater responsibility. People are seeking ways to have direct, significant involvement with another person. Hotlines and crisis centers, for example, rarely have trouble recruiting volunteers. People are seeking participation in decision-making—often through neighborhood organizations. The best are considered to be those that are multi-issue, multi-racial, decentralized and democratic. People no longer want to be viewed as "just a volunteer," as evidenced by the increasing use of volunteers that clarifies expectations and establishes a sense of increased professionalism.

The second expectation is for work that offers the opportunity for personal growth and fulfillment. This is not unique to volunteering. Indeed, many corporate leaders encourage employees to volunteer to relieve the boredom and routine of their paid jobs. For volunteers, this means seeking jobs that extend their skills, that offer training and feedback on performance, that provide certification of work completed or skills gained. This expectation has grown as more and more

people, primarily women, choose to enter the paid workforce.

It is possible to make the transition from a volunteer to a paid job. Indeed, largely through the efforts of a single volunteer—Ruth March of Los Angeles—many corporations, state and local governments, and the federal government, now provide a space for volunteer experience on job application forms. The American Red Cross has led a collaborative effort of a dozen national voluntary organizations to help volunteers gauge the skills they've gained through the "I Can" project.

These expectations are a natural and positive outreach of the self-awareness movement. People believe that they are important, that they can make a difference. They are demanding the opportunity to prove it through involvements that are responsible, rewarding and effective. And they are demonstrating their willingness, if need be, to create their own organizations and mechanisms to gain that opportunity.

Working with Government

Paralleling the emergence of the new activism has been a growing concern with the impact of government on the health of the voluntary sector. Clearly, the relative size, role and resources of the three sectors—government, corporate and voluntary—have shifted dramatically in the last half century. With the rapid growth of federal involvement in human services since 1960 and the increasingly arbitrary development of complex regulations, government threatens to overwhelm those voluntary associations that Tocqueville found so unique. Despite the determined efforts of voluntary organizations to fight back—most notably through advocacy for the Charitable Contributions legislation—government steadily is eroding the viability and strength of the voluntary sector.

To a great extent, this is because public policy decisions that will affect voluntary organizations or volunteers are made in a vacuum, without benefit of an overriding philosophy or policy framework. The implications of this situation are clear.

First, there is very little appreciation within the federal government for the value, role and capabilities of voluntary organizations and volunteers. There is very little understanding of the way in which nonprofit organizations function, their particular maintenance needs or their mode of decision-making and operation.

Second, virtually no public funds, or technical assistance are available to enhance the operation of these organizations or to stimulate greater citizen involvement and volunteering either within them or in the government itself.

Third, the utilization of voluntary organizations and citizen groups in the delivery of human and social services takes an extremely low priority, far below that accorded to the growth of the federal bureaucracy and the utilization of state and local government agencies in these roles.

"It seemed to me that every industrial country in the world treated its senior citizens more humanely than our country. And I came back with the kind of anger that made me want to pitch in and do battle to help seniors sustain their own validity and to change whatever situations or attitudes were diminishing them as people."

—Lou Cottin, activist for elders

"The challenge is double-edged. It is not only for volunteers to be appreciated and respected by others, if indeed there are any 'others,' any individuals who do not at least in some small, unorganized manner give voluntary service to their fellow man. The challenge is also to the volunteers to respect the tasks they have undertaken and not shortchange them because "I'm just a volunteer.' "

—Editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor*, April 25, 1980

"Citizen participation in [neighborhood] groups often belies the image of a disillusioned, cynical public and suggests instead that people are eager to participate in political processes when they feel they can make a difference."

—Harry C. Boyte, author of *The Backyard Revolution*, in the *New York Times*, October 10, 1980

"There is a spirit here that needs to be rediscovered, cleansed from over-regulation, and reinvigorated in modern America. This spirit is the antithesis of the attitude: 'Let government do it.' This spirit transcends the meddling of excessive and irrational federal regulations and nitpicking bureaucrats who pile up mountains of meaningless reports. This spirit surmounts the self single-issues zealots, unmindful of the common good of the nation and the world. This spirit springs from free citizens who prize and use their freedom to touch humanity in its basic needs and anguishes, by dedicated service, freely given. Voluntarism, in its variegated manifestations, is America uniquely at its best."

—Theodore M. Hesburgh, upon accepting the 1980 Alexis de Tocqueville Award from United Way of America

"Moreover, it is evident that "collectivist" movements—like the human-potential, civil rights, antiwar, women's, ecology and 'gay' movements—have done more to raise the issues, confront the inertia of the status quo and actually alter prevailing policy than the election of one candidate over the other.... The way we live day to day in our communities will do far more to change the faltering political machinery than our campaign canvassing and yearly fling at the polls."

—Ed Gondolf of Principia College in the April 29, 1980, *Christian Science Monitor*

"Something is missing in my life... I guess I know what the answer is. Maybe it's just that every day, everywhere I look, I am constantly reminded of the enormity of human and social needs, and I find it hard to turn my back."

—Rhoda M. Gilinsky of White Plains, N.Y., writing in the December 30, 1979, *New York Times* on why she is giving up her resolve to quit volunteering

"No matter where we find our volunteers, we have to understand that they will demand challenging roles, short-term projects, evening hours and flexible plans of commitment. We'll also have to meet their needs for exploring career options through our organizations. Many will want to gain skills and experiences that will help them find paid employment."

—Fay Wattleton
President, Planned Parenthood
Federation of America

Fourth, the impact of government tax policies and regulations on voluntary organizations and volunteers is rarely understood. When it is understood, it is largely ignored.

Fifth, to the extent that government does seek to utilize voluntary organizations, it tends to rely on those that are large, well-established and highly professionalized, providing relatively little funding for the development of new, alternative, consumer- or volunteer-based, neighborhood organizations.

Sixth, virtually no support is available to develop and maintain the knowledge base or services that are constantly demanded by both public and private agencies that seek to involve citizens effectively.

Finally, it is rare for voluntary organizations and citizens to be seen as legitimate partners in the identification of needs and the development of programs to meet those needs.

As a result, voluntary organizations are forced to adopt an adversarial, rather than collaborative, posture. Public policy displaces, rather than enhances, those structures through which citizens traditionally have attempted to solve problems. Government loses a valuable partner for service delivery. Citizens redefine "helping each other" as serving as advocates, working against a bureaucracy that is impersonal, unresponsive and illogical.

Ronald Reagan comes to the presidency with a pledge to change all that, to reduce government spending and to return responsibility for problem-solving to the state and local community levels. But accomplishing that means more than slashing budgets or repealing social legislation. An alternative must be found, developed and supported. To some extent, that alternative may be in the voluntary sector.

"Frankly, I'm optimistic about our future. I look on the '80s as an opportunity to give more freedom of choice to individuals, to private institutions and to volunteerism. I see the 1980s as a chance to explore and implement alternatives, rather than falling back on the old answer of more government. I'm convinced that once we define the roles of doer and decider, our country can be more productive, we can achieve more goals, we can accomplish more good than we ever thought possible."

—Sen. David Durenberger
Minnesota

But taking such a transition, even in a limited way, will be neither easy nor inexpensive.

Positive leadership is needed at the very top of government to demonstrate the importance of citizen involvement. The President and his staff must be sensitive to the unique role voluntary organizations and individual citizens can play. They must understand that the voluntary sector is not rich, that if it is to assume greater responsibilities, it must receive funding support that enhances its capabilities without engendering inappropriate dependence on the government.

Neighborhood organizations can play a more vital role in local planning and resource allocation. The corporate community can be an important source of highly skilled volunteers and of greater financial support for nonprofits. Existing voluntary agencies can offer alternative systems for service delivery. Citizen involvement within federal agencies can be expanded and made more effective. But none of this will happen on the scale that is necessary unless there are clear signals from the new Administration that it supports such efforts.

"We have an increasing demand for volunteers to run things and at the same time we are looking at a new generation of women. Since in today's world a person's worth is unfortunately measured by a paycheck, organizations depending on volunteers will have to find a substitute for dollars earned. Compensation can be in money, goods, services, ego satisfaction or recognition .... If you don't face up to the social requirements of today's society, you will find volunteerism will shrink if it doesn't disappear entirely."

—Mitchell Fromstein
President, Manpower, Inc.

There must be a clear focal point within the Administration for this leadership. ACTION, now designated as the "federal volunteer agency," is a logical spot for this to happen. As an institution, it has the demonstrated sensitivity to the issues of most critical importance to the poor and the powerless to enable it to act effectively in mobilizng resources on their behalf. It is the obvious agency around which to build supportive services for the voluntary sector as a whole. It can become the model to demonstrate the effectiveness of citizen involvement in assessing community needs, advising on the appropriate allocation of resources and monitoring the effectiveness of federal programs.

Beyond ACTION, there are any number of possible mechanisms to build government support for the voluntary sector: a special presidential advisor, a high-level citizens' advisory committee, directives to cabinet departments, designation of specific responsibilities in Congressional committees.

But the key to providing the needed leadership may rest in the realization that it is not an "either-or" proposition. Just as government should not dominate, neither should voluntary organizations seek to replace public programs. There is a growing tendency in our country to seek simple solutions

to what are and will remain extremely complex problems. It is easiest for us to focus our anger on the government. But in so doing, we run the risk of shutting off, rather than enhancing, the very real work of collaboration that is needed.

Government is not all bad. To believe so is to deny the very real accomplishments of government in meeting the needs of millions of people for food, clothing, shelter and the opportunity to build decent lives. It is to deny that through government, millions of citizens finally have achieved a modicum of civil rights and justice. It is to deny that through government, the worst abuses of our economic system have been addressed.

But neither is government all good. There is not a person who cannot recite a litany of the weaknesses of the decision-making process, the irrationality of the bureaucracy or the blatant politicization of issues that far transcend partisanship. But in our haste to solve those problems, in our zeal to root out the worst aspects of the government, we potentially will be sacrificing those programs and protections that many of our citizens have fought so hard to win. As Senator David Durenberger recently noted, "Reform of government too often is being equated with elimination of government."

On the opposite side of the ledger, not everything about the private sector, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, is exemplary. It is not government that causes the pollution it is asked to regulate. It is not government that urges mass consumption of energy and of the often unneeded products of our modern industrial complex. It is not government that manufactures pills, pornography and poisons. Those who are quickest in demanding the cutback of government are often the ones who are slowest in asking why that government was there in the first place. They exercise selective memories, forgetting that it is often because of the work and advocacy of citizens and their voluntary organization that most of our human and social government programs were developed. But the luxury of that selectivity is rapidly diminishing.

The answers to our problems in the 1980s will not be easy to find. It will take the best of our country, the best of our institutions and of our people to solve the very real problems we have. No single segment of society can bear the entire burden, carry the entire responsibility. We have learned painfully in the past fifty years that neither the voluntary sector nor the government, no matter how well-intentioned, can do it all.

A new spirit of collaboration is needed. It must have as its goal the building of a truly just society for all Americans. It must be based on the belief that individual citizens can make a difference, that they can and should have the opportunity to exert control over those forces that shape their lives and the lives of their families, neighbors and communities. It must be built around national leadership that recognizes the very real, appropriate role institutions can play to encourage and facilitate, rather than hinder, the mobilization of that citizen energy.

The breadth and variety of the volunteer community never ceases to amaze. Here are some of the more interesting, unique new programs we ran across in our research for this special report:

Long Island's Northshore University Hospital is one of six Human Milk Banks operating around the country. More than 500 women have registered to be volunteer donors of milk for newborn infants that require human milk but whose mothers are unable to provide it.

Earthwatch, based in Belmont, Massachusetts, matches volunteers with scientific expeditions around the world. This year, some 1,300 volunteers will be involved in 65 expeditions to every continent except Antarctica. Volunteers pay up to $800 plus plane for the privilege of spending two to three weeks living in tents and helping with such projects as archaeological expeditions and bird-banding.

In Columbus, Ohio, over a score of nursing mothers offered to provide live demonstrations to teach female gorillas at the Columbus Zoo how to breastfeed their infants. The zoo practice of separating mother and baby gorilla may have contributed to spread of an intestinal disease among infants that may be prevented by nursing.

AirLifeLine is an organization of pilots who fly for a hobby and provide free airfield-to-airfield transportation service in medical emergencies. Chapters are being developed in 18 states.

In Chicago, volunteers annually staff the Yule Connection, a telephone hotline service for those who suffer special problems during the holiday season. Last year, more than 2,000 volunteers handled calls from those who were alone, felt isolated or had special needs for food and shelter.

The St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, Deputy Corps includes 120 citizens who volunteer to assist the sheriff's office for duties ranging from front-line patrols who answer calls to controlling crowds at parades and high school sports events.

In Los Angeles, a shortage of paid clerks was endangering the police department's ability to maintain current, useful information. Retired police officers, including an ex-deputy chief, volunteered with civilians to serve as file clerks.

Also in Los Angeles, organizers of the 1984 Summer Olympics are planning to involve as many as 10,000 volunteers in all phases of the games, both as a means of holding down costs and to help build community spirit. Volunteers will make up almost 80 percent of the total Olympics staff.

But not all volunteering may qualify as "work worth doing." Our award for poor taste goes to Illinois Corrections Director Gayle Franzen, who told the *Chicago Sun-Times* in March that he might seek volunteer executioners if Illinois carries out the death sentences imposed on 23 inmates now on death rows. "I'm totally against having a warden do it," he said, "and I doubt seriously that I would go with a department employee." Presumably, he is equally anxious to have citizens volunteer for other aspects of the criminal justice process.

—Ken Allen