

The New Pragmatism

This year promises a wide range of new developments for volunteerism. The theme of the recent Presidential election was "change," and the Clinton administration will take the lead in refocusing many related efforts. Before looking ahead, it is worthwhile to consider the issues that concerned volunteers and volunteering during the past year.

As always, volunteers were on the cutting edge of social issues, responding to the most current of community needs. Among the causes receiving volunteer attention this year were AIDS, homelessness, long-term housing needs, and unemployment due to plant closings. It is not coincidental that such causes blur the lines between traditional social welfare and the need for political activism.

The most visible volunteering (in terms of the media) occurs as instant reaction, reaching out to those in the midst of the crisis, collecting emergency goods, and helping with the clean-up. But "hard core" volunteering remains on the scene long after national attention fades. Volunteers are deeply involved in rebuilding—physical and emotionally—the communities ravaged by natural and social storms.

Momentum increased

The movement to encourage community service by students increased in 1992. Across the country, public schools have begun to mandate a certain number of hours of volunteer work in the community as a requirement for graduation. Though not without controversy, this is having the effect of introducing large numbers of teenagers to local issues and agencies. The agencies, in turn, must adapt adult volunteer programs to create openings for these young volunteers—a challenge that has great potential to add spark and creativity into all volunteer efforts.

The First European Conference on Volunteer Action was held this September in Doorn, Netherlands, bringing together representatives of 20 European countries to discuss mutual interests. Sponsored by Volonteurope, an organization that is an official part of European Commission, the conference planners expect the event to expand in subsequent years.

There is no question that our European colleagues are hungry to share strategies for rebuilding local and national political and service structures, and that they recognize volunteers as an integral part of these efforts. The recent Association for Volunteer Administration's International Conference on Volunteer Administration attracted 1,200 participants to Minneapolis, including representatives from 14 countries outside North America.

1992 may well enter the history books for its renewed involvement of the electorate. Ross Perot almost redefined the word "volunteer" as he urged individuals to take part in the political process. Such initiatives as term limits and environmental reforms recruited supporters and opponents.

The two major candidates were quite different in their approach to volunteer issues. Conspicuous by its absence from any speech made by President Bush was the phrase "thousand points of light." Because his insistence on volunteer action was criticized as a smokescreen to hide social budget cutting, Bush dropped his advocacy for community service as a strategy to win re-election. On the other hand, President-elect Clinton promised to propose a new National Service plan, encouraging graduates to "work off" student loans through community service. When he speaks of "responsibilities" and "working together", Clinton is offering a new vision of community involvement.

Predictions for the future

It will take some time to see what the effect of "change" in Washington will mean to the rest of the country. Here are some predictions for what volunteers and volunteer administration are likely to focus on in 1993:

Rebuilding the inner cities. Volunteers are hoping for renewed attention and funding for urban problems and are prepared to add their efforts to the mix. Probable types of projects: increased crime watches, low-income housing, support to pre-teens, alternatives to gangs, racial-diversity and human-relations training.

Retraining the unemployed. For a long time, leaders in volunteer programs have claimed that "volunteering is good for your resume." But too often, volunteer opportunities were unrelated to the marketplace. As more and more communities face plant closings and wide-scale unemployment, volunteers will begin to tackle refitting military installations and old factories for peacetime industries; retraining the technologically unemployed, especially in computer literacy; developing cooperative day-care programs to enable single parents to get ahead; and rebuilding the infrastructure.

Examining the national debt. Bake sales won't do it, but I predict that we will see citizen groups forming to study the national debt and propose ways for individuals to work on this major challenge.

Refocusing the "Points of Light" Foundation. For the past two years, this organization has denied the interrelationship of its name and mission to the leadership of President Bush. Most Americans are completely unaware that there is any difference between the daily "Point of Light" award made by the White House and the services and programs of the Foundation. (Which raises the interesting question of what is going to happen to those 1,000 award recipients who were promised an invitation to Bush's second inaugural?) Indications are that the Points of Light Foundation has sufficient funding and clout to remain viable for at least one or two more years. How soon will they change their name? Will they be able to latch onto the winds of change that the Clinton election implies? Regardless of

the ultimate outcome, volunteerism *deserves* a truly nonpartisan national organization.

Volunteers never exist in a vacuum. They respond to and are affected by the social conditions of the moment. It promises to be an exciting year ahead for the nonprofit sector, government, and volunteers. The work will be hard, but people seem ready to rise to the occasion—if the

leadership is there to channel their efforts.

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