

# Lessons From Minnesota

## Role of gov't in supporting volunteers

After 27 years of nationally acknowledged leadership in the volunteer field, the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services has been summarily closed by Gov. Jesse Ventura in his goal to cut 10 percent of his budget. Its last day was January 31.

Executive Director Bonnie Esposito said she was blind-sided by the news and had only four weeks to close the office. The only reason for the termination given, she said, apart from the need to save money, was that Ventura felt "it was not the role of government to deal with volunteering."

### Mixed messages

We are living in a climate of mixed messages from government. On one hand, government officials extol the virtues of volunteering and express their wish to encourage active community engagement.

On the other hand, all too often this is political lip service hiding the actual desire to divest government of service functions.

Regardless, if the public sector wants the private sector to carry more responsibility for community building, it needs to be done in partnership, not through government abdication of any role in the process.

The new Office of Homeland Security is openly discussing ways that citizens can get involved, after praising the outpouring of help after September 11. President Bush exhorted Americans to volunteer in his first State of the Union Address and still speaks of mobilizing "armies of compassion" from the faith community. Congress has increased the budget of the Corporation for National Service and Community Service.

So why does one governor think it's wrong to have a state office of volunteer services?

### The government's role

Government has a role – perhaps even an obligation – in several specific areas affecting volunteer involvement. The July, 2001 issue of *e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community* ([www.e-volunteerism.com](http://www.e-volunteerism.com)) contained several articles about the work being done by national governments in other countries, stimulated by last year's International Year of Volunteer.

In that same issue, co-editor Steve McCurley and I proposed some universal functions of government relative to volunteerism. Given the events since September 11 and the new action in Minnesota, it seems relevant to reconfirm our major points.

### Government ought to:

#### 1. Understand what volunteering is all about and legislate accordingly.

Like motherhood and apple pie, volunteering is a subject on which legislators and government officials almost universally express support. Unfortunately, this support is based on a great deal of misinformation about what volunteering is all about, how it happens, and what is necessary to make it work successfully.

The consequence of not understanding volunteering is the adoption of legislation which, while well-intentioned, may do more harm than good. A prominent example of this was the much-praised Volunteer Protection Act, enacted by both the federal government and 48 states to provide liability protection for volunteers. Some versions of this law have severe shortcomings, excluding many organizations from coverage, because the drafters failed to appreciate the wide range of agencies that involve volunteers.

More often legislation simply acts as though volunteers don't exist. For example, much of the equal employment legislation of the past decades uses the term "employee" without defining whether that applies to both paid and unpaid workers. As a result, it remains unclear whether significant legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act protects volunteers.

Recent legislation requiring criminal record checks for volunteers are another example of the problems caused by not understanding how volunteer organizations actually manage volunteers logistically. The require-

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ments are almost impossible for some types of volunteer settings to fulfill.

### **2. Sensibly enforce regulations.**

Under the previous administration, the U.S. Department of Labor took some very strange actions harmful to volunteering. Perhaps the most famous of these was telling a nursing home in Pennsylvania that it was unlawful to have a 14-year-old volunteer deliver water pitchers to residents because this was an employee "job."

It ought to be possible for the government to delineate the difference between unfair labor practices and legitimate service by volunteers. Organizations should not have to fear enforcement of rules that stifle both genuine community involvement and what is best for recipients of service.

It is also possible to support both labor unions and volunteers, without elevating one over the other. The Office of Personnel Management has for decades convened task forces to study "barriers to volunteering," but none of these has resulted in any action whatsoever to rationalize government regulations affecting volunteers.

### **3. Conduct research.**

The very first national study of the extent of volunteering in the United States was conducted by the Census Bureau in conjunction with the cen-

sus of 1970. But this pioneering effort turned out to be a dead end. Since that time, all studies in this country have been privately funded. One way to demonstrate that volunteering is valued is to learn about it accurately.

Not only is this something that ought to be funded by the government, but it ought to be included as an element in normal reporting to the government on nonprofit tax reports, as part of the documentation showing how federal grants were used, as part of program evaluations of all sorts. One would assume that such information would be valuable to collect on a state level, too.

### **4. Develop an overall policy on volunteer involvement.**

Both Canada and the United Kingdom are leading the way trying to develop a written statement of the relationship between government and voluntary programs, working through the difficult task of determining how the two sectors should interact in providing social services. In both countries, the role of volunteers is being addressed, and ways in which the government can be supportive of volunteering are being considered. Nothing like this is planned in the United States.

One of the most significant ironies of the subject of government backing

for volunteering is that the federal government specifically prohibits volunteers from working in its own government offices. This prohibition was originally established during the 1800s as a safeguard against political patronage workers sneaking their way into government jobs. The prohibition remains on the books and is interpreted to prevent the general acceptance of volunteer workers by federal agencies and programs.

Fortunately, state and local governments have not followed this model and volunteers can be found in sites as diverse and important as schools, libraries, courts, prisons, parks, and emergency services.

Government at every level can welcome citizen participation – way beyond the window dressing of various unpaid advisory councils and commissions. Government can, and should, work collaboratively with voluntary organizations to develop protocols outlining how they will work together to foster citizen involvement and build social capital.

### **5. Provide concrete support for volunteers and volunteer program managers.**

As pointed out above, the federal government fails to model the utilization of volunteers within its own programs and the general prohibition

should be repealed. It would also be a great step forward if the position of volunteer program manager were legitimized and funded.

Currently, most government employees who coordinate volunteers are not credited as filling management positions. These staff who oversee hundreds of volunteers aren't considered supervisors, receive no recognition or compensation for their work in managing others, and can't even qualify for supervisory training let alone salaries, because of the Catch-22 argument that they do not supervise paid workers.

There are many ways government can acknowledge volunteers by validating their work: granting snow emergency passes to volunteers delivering meals or driving dialysis patients; facilitating both the speed and cost of required screening checks; allowing tax deductions for true out-of-pocket costs incurred through volunteering – at a level commensurate with the deductions permitted to businesspeople. These are just a few examples.

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