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Does It Matter if Volunteers Work in a Nonprofit or a Government Setting?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Back in 2000, I wrote “[Volunteering in For-Profit Settings: Exploitation or Value Added?](#)” I suspect that most readers understood why this was a “Hot Topic,” since involving volunteers in a for-profit business seems somewhat controversial. A topic that rarely even comes up on the radar screen, however, is that an enormous number of volunteers are not active in nonprofit agencies but rather in programs that are part of government at local, state, or national levels. Is this an issue worth examining? Are there real differences and implications to identify?

It is common, even standard, to think of volunteering as synonymous with the nonprofit sector of society. In fact, this was one of the criticisms I listed in my reaction to the recent *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations* (<https://energizeinc.com/hot-topics/2004/march>) report: the complete absence of any recognition that we need to assess the capacity of government agencies to work effectively with volunteers, too. And this seems to be an international myopia.

For the record, here are just a few government settings and programs (and the list can be longer in more socialist-democratic countries) that we take for granted will recruit volunteers:

- Public schools
- Courts and prisons
- Public libraries
- Parks and recreation programs
- Homeland security projects
- Community policing/police auxiliaries
- Veterans hospitals
- State departments such as elder care, services to children and families, public health
- Fire departments and emergency response teams

- Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service)
- Cooperative Extension Service (including 4-H)

It quickly becomes obvious that the list is long and critical to both community quality of life and to the core of volunteerism. In fact, numerically, a huge percentage of volunteers are supporting government programs. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I started my volunteer management career at the Philadelphia Family Court, so I have always been attuned to this strange invisibility of the government volunteer world.) The only problem is the unexamined assumption that not much is different between volunteer management in the public sphere and in the voluntary sector.

At the Points of Light 2004 National Conference for Community Volunteering and National Service this month I'll be facilitating an all-day pre-conference session for volunteer program managers in government – a seminar that has been run for several years, specifically in response to the feeling of these colleagues that they needed something with a slant towards their non-nonprofit needs. In preparation, I created the following as a handout.

A few important differences between

Nonprofit Organizations... and Government Agencies...

Are governed by a volunteer board of directors with legal authority to make decisions and amend bylaws.

Operate under authority of legislation, whether Federal, state, county, or municipal law.

Executives have the power to request governance changes and can influence board response to such requests.

Executives cannot change the law and rarely even have contact with the government representatives who vote on legislation.

Control the transition of leadership, board terms of office, etc.

Have no control over elections and have to cope with changing rules and degree of support with each new Administration.

Determine for themselves which clientele they want to serve.	Are mandated to serve all citizens meeting qualifications set by the law.
Are responsible for finding their own sources of funds and revenue, and can accept whatever donations they wish.	Must budget according to tax revenue allocated to them.
Can budget and fundraise for any need they identify.	Expend funds that may be narrowly authorized and cannot always accept donations of funds, goods, or services.
Can collaborate with whomever they wish and involve whatever type of community resource they wish.	Are limited to designated jurisdictions and may be restricted from certain types of collaborations or volunteer involvement.
Often involve higher numbers of volunteers than paid staff, and employees are rarely unionized	Generally involve fewer volunteers than paid staff, and employees are usually unionized.

It must be acknowledged that all the “human relations” elements of good volunteer management apply whenever volunteers interact with employees, regardless of setting. So a great many of what we consider best practices in our field don’t need any adaptation to a government setting. But the differences above are more than window-dressing. They speak to real issues of authority, funding, and even public perception.

On a day-to-day basis, here are some of the ways the differences matter:

- Volunteer program managers (VPMs) in a nonprofit can attempt to change policies or budgeting in their agencies by educating up, using persuasive data, and other reasonable

strategies. In a government setting, certain rules and regulations – and available revenue – simply cannot be changed by the VPMs' bosses – it's out of their hands, too, until the legislators want to change things.

- Volunteers need to understand that they are limited in creating systemic change when they work *inside* a government agency – but they can be encouraged to act *outside* of the agency as private citizens, voters, and taxpayers. Looking at the biggest picture, individual volunteers who care about the services they support as volunteers can have a huge impact when they choose to become activist volunteers in political (not necessarily partisan) ways.
- This ability of government volunteers to exercise their power as voters is truly scary to many public servants, so tension is inherent in staff/volunteer relationships. This manifests itself in limiting the roles volunteers can perform or, if a volunteer role is itself mandated by law (serving on a commission or being an ombudsman), the paid staff may try to marginalize the unpaid efforts in various ways.

There are also some key philosophical questions to consider. We say in the US that we have a government “of, by, and for the people” – so should we think of citizens as having *a right*, or even *a responsibility*, to give their time and talent as well as their taxes to provide services?

In a nonprofit agency, volunteers (even members of the board) are third or even fourth parties, alongside recipients of service, paid employees, and funding sources and donors. But this identity is blurred in a government context. Here, a volunteer is also a taxpayer, with legitimate vested interest in the way money is spent. Given the universality of government worker labor unions, who has the greater stake in keeping costs down and tapping all the willing resources available among the citizenry? In the broadest sense, perhaps it is acceptable for government to “save money” (or spend less) through volunteer services, since the money “saved” is *their* (the volunteer/taxpayer's) tax dollars.

Clearly, at least once in a while, we ought to recognize and discuss the practical and philosophical questions that differentiate volunteering in a nonprofit agency from a government program.

What do you think? If you are in a government setting, what other issues do you feel are of special concern to you? As a citizen, what is your position on volunteers, taxes, and services?

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Submitted on 2 September 2004 by Lucas Meijs, Professor of Volunteering, Civil Society and Businesses at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

I think that looking at the difference between volunteers in governmental or non-profit organizations is an interesting question. From my point of view, the major difference is not on legal status as such but being allowed to volunteer based upon a private (your own) set of norms and values. In the Netherlands, most volunteers are connected with non-profit organizations, which (as stated by Susan

Ellis in the introduction) is a bit different in the United States of America where volunteers are also involved in government.

Sector, whether business, government or non-profit, is relevant to volunteering if the volunteers have a strong personal motivation, rooted in for example religion. In a government agency, there is little or no room for the transfer of one's own standards and values; this is one of the most important points about volunteer management in the government sector according to Jeff Brudney. On the other hand, a non-profit organization can be entirely based on its own standards and values; the volunteers might share an interest in, say, old sailing boats, table tennis or butterflies but also of course religious norms and values.

But also in organizations that are legally seen as nonprofit organizations, personal norms and values are in many cases not supposed to be used. Maybe we should make a difference between public-non-profit and private-non-profit organizations. Just an illustration to show the issue:

The importance of personal standards and values in volunteering

When it comes to running summer camps, there are successful and less successful organizations. Traditionally, the programs of such camps set out to combine the provision of leisure opportunities, the teaching of skills and the passing on of standards and values. The camp volunteers find that their motivation is based on the same kind of combination: their involvement affords them pleasure and allows them to pass on to the children skills and values that they believe will benefit them. As already stated, non-profit organizations can be firmly based on a set of distinctive standards and values – as in the case of evangelical summer camps. On the other hand, it is possible for a non-profit organization to be a public body (because they are 100% funded by government and maybe used to be real government) and be regarded as part of the government, which is essentially 'neutral'; by contrast, such an organization does not, and cannot, have its own set of standards and values. Volunteers are not allowed to pray etc.

Many of the summer camps are offered by semi-governmental organizations such as community centers and umbrella welfare bodies. As a result, the camps fail to profit from a very important set of motivations, especially among those who work with children, and suffer from a lack of volunteers even if they are managed brilliantly. Many other summer camp programs have a strong missionary element, which community centers and umbrella welfare bodies cannot satisfactorily include. These in many cases attract a very committed and easily to retain group of volunteers, even if they are lousy managed....

Submitted on 11 August 2004 by Rory Daly, The University of Salford, Greater Manchester, England

As someone who manages student placements in the voluntary and public sector I can appreciate both sides of this argument but perhaps this conversation needs to be separated out.

Our students pick up valuable skills and workplace knowledge through their activities in these sectors while our partner organisations welcome the input of our students who often change the demographic make up of the organisations' volunteer team. On one hand, having our volunteers work in hospitals and schools, under the auspices of local government, in our local area is of immense benefit to all parties and something I am proud to be involved with. The other side of the coin (and I speak here, due to lack of knowledge of North America, of the UK) is the increasing involvement of the private sector in providing "public" services. The prevalence of Private Finance Initiatives, etc. means the private sector make lots of easy money providing a lesser level of service than the public sector they have replaced. This is especially true in areas where we would expect volunteers to operate in large numbers--hospitals and schools.

My problem then is whether I as a volunteer coordinator should encourage students to volunteer to help private companies make more money, while they provide a worse service to the local community and, without doubt, replace paid workers. While the decision must ultimately be the volunteers', would I not be remiss in at least seeking to promote opportunities that were completely in the public sector at the expense of these public/private partnerships?

The management/provision of public services by the voluntary sector opens a similar can of worms and raises the question about when a voluntary organisation ceases to be a voluntary organisation and becomes a business.

Submitted on 6 August 2004 by Jana Mendez, Boulder County Government, Boulder, CO USA

As a volunteer coordinator in a county government that TOTALLY supports volunteers (we have 7,000-plus)I must agree that we are MORE fortunate in many ways than non-profits. We have a staff that supports the expansion of services we are able to provide, the one-on-one in many programs, and there is NO feeling that county employees feel threatened by volunteers re their jobs. In fact, there is more security in a county job than in private sector -- especially the last few years! -- although we are not unionized. The Commissioners present grants each year to expand/enrich programs....grants suggested by the volunteers themselves. Besides the value volunteers bring, it is a great way for them to be ambassadors for the great work done by the county. They are indeed team members...and know it.

Submitted on 21 June 2004 by Paul F. Goebel, Acting Director - TDMHMR Community Relations, Texas/USA

Volunteer program management in any sector or setting is dependent upon one factor - relationship building. Having oversight responsibilities for the volunteer program in the second largest state agency in Texas, I have seen firsthand the incredible impact volunteers have in an agency's provision of services and programs. Bureaucracy, rules, policies and procedures are a reality (and at times a burden) in any government setting. The same can be said for any nonprofit organization. With a

creative and positive attitude these factors can be worked to a volunteer program's advantage. The level of engagement of volunteers boils down to two major influences regardless of setting: 1) professional competencies of volunteer program managers and 2) infrastructure support and funding by the organization. Unfortunately, I have witnessed volunteer programs within both government and nonprofit sectors cease to exist not due to the skills of volunteer program staff, but from the lack of vision and program knowledge of senior staff members. Volunteer program managers in all settings can no longer afford to be silently effective.

Submitted on 14 June 2004 by Peg Reese, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Morgantown, WV

I found your Hot Topic about volunteer work in the government setting vs. nonprofit setting to be interesting and thought provoking.

Reading it made me realize that you aren't aware that our agency name changed from the Soil Conservation Service to the Natural Resources Conservation Service. *[Note: Correction made to Hot Topic page.]* Congress made the change so that our name would more closely reflect our mission. Our volunteer effort is still called the Earth Team.

As an employee and a state volunteer coordinator for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, I want to thank you for including us in your article. We are proud of our volunteers and pleased that their number and contributions have greatly expanded in the past 20 years. More information about the Earth Team can be found on our national website: www.nrcs.usda.gov. Look for a button under the Quick Access column on the left side of the website.

Submitted on 11 June 2004 by Mark Restall, Senior Information Officer, Volunteering England

There's a long history of volunteers working in the public sector in the UK. It has been a controversial issue in the past, but now I think it's something that's much better understood, and often welcomed.

There were fears from public sector workers that volunteers would be used to replace their jobs. That wouldn't just be a personal issue for a displaced worker - traditionally the public sector has been a key equal opportunities employer, so job losses would be disproportionately bad news for women, people from deprived areas and people from minority ethnic communities.

There were also fears that volunteers would be carrying out specialist 'frontline' services - physical care / quasi medical roles etc.

These fears were allayed through dialogue, and the active engagement of the volunteering sector with public sector employers and trade unions. This led to the creation of agreed principles underpinning volunteer involvement. See for example the 'Drain guidelines' (Guidelines for relations between volunteers and paid workers in the Health and Personal Social Services) - <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/> - and 'At one with volunteers' - <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/>

As important as such guidelines has been actual experience -volunteers are involved in libraries, hospitals, social services departments, prisons, schools, police stations - the list is endless. They work in partnership with paid staff without displacing them, providing an added value that is often beyond counting.

Submitted on 11 June 2004 by Robin Popik, Volunteer Resources Supervisor, Plano, Texas

Just a small change. I don't think the majority of government staff are unionized but even if they are many are still concerned about working with volunteers for a number of other reasons. (These are actually assumptions made by the staff personnel):

- Staff are concerned they can lose their jobs to a volunteer
- Volunteers will see what they do/don't do
- Volunteers have to be managed and the person working with the volunteer isn't on a management level
- Staff have to delegate parts of their job to the volunteer - but which part is usually the question and how do they figure it out.
- Staff thinks volunteers are not going to show up or do a poor job that will reflect on them.

Government Volunteer Managers can help alleviate these concerns by being a liaison and sounding board for staff if they will let them.

Thanks for keeping the government volunteer programs in the forefront.

Submitted on 8 June 2004 by Jayne Cravens, UN Volunteers programm Germany

Great topic. Brings to mind this cautionary TRUE story about reporting the "benefits" of volunteer involvement in government: once upon a time, I was contacted by a state historical office. The staff there had been involving volunteers regularly and quite successfully. Volunteers could provide one-on-one help to those visiting the state historical archives, for instance, and were VERY enthusiastic about state history already (it's why they wanted to volunteer). The office submitted its budget for the next year to the legislature, and touted how much volunteer involvement would be "saving" the state. The legislators were quite impressed. And said, "Since involving volunteers will save us so much money, we're cutting two of your staff positions -- please find volunteers to do their jobs." Doesn't mean the office shouldn't have involved volunteers, but does mean they should have been more careful in how they talked about the "benefits" of such involvement.

Submitted on 4 June 2004 by Keith Butcher, Chief, Voluntary Service, New York City, USA

I am the Voluntary Service Program Manager at a Department of Veterans Affairs medical center in Brooklyn, NY. I've been managing the volunteer program here since 1987 and I can tell you that the experience of working with volunteers who donate their time to assist America's veterans has been extremely rewarding. As a manager of volunteers in the federal government we are subject to regulations and laws that restrict how we fund raise and our ability to advertise and promote what we do but, we have a great deal of freedom in creating programs, activities and volunteer

assignments that benefit our staff, our volunteers and most importantly, our veteran patients. While our Board of Directors consists of the United States Congress and the senior management of our medical centers, the support and resources they provide negate many of the issues and challenges that face similar programs in the non-profit sector. The rewards from having this support and creative freedom are many - the burdens are few. It's a great place to work, to learn and to serve not only America's veterans but the community at large.

Submitted on 4 June 2004 by Sarah Jane Rehnborg, Ph.D., Lecturer and Consultant, Univ. of Texas, Austin, TX

For a variety of reasons, volunteering in the public sector has been a topic of considerable personal and professional interest. Recent research that we conducted in Texas showed that volunteer programs in the public sector are significantly better at record keeping and data collection than comparable programs in the nonprofit sector. We also learned that volunteers, once committed to a public sector issue actively create nonprofit organizations to support the public sector and are effective fundraisers to support causes in which they believe to support the effort of the public agency. Check out the research section of the the

<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/rgk/research/index.shtml> website for more information.

Submitted on 3 June 2004 by Christine Nardecchia, Volunteer Services Administrator, Dublin, Ohio, USA

I am a volunteer administrator for local government with a comprehensive, centralized program. I spent years in the nonprofit sector as a volunteer administrator and have seen first hand the differences between the two. While I agree somewhat that our impression of volunteers lies in the nonprofit sector realm, that is largely due to the history of volunteers in those organizations. This article tends to have more of a state and federal focus, but let us not forget, that many local governments have volunteer programs (see: National Association of Volunteer Programs in Local Government - NAVPLG). And let us not forget, too, that there are several forms of local government: Council-Manager, Strong Mayoral, County, Township.

Consider these as counterpoints for thought:

1. NPOs vs. GAs: While local governments are governed by elected officials who direct policy, elected officials rely on the expertise of staff (including the volunteer administrator - not just the "volunteer administrator's boss"...ahem) to make decisions, have an impact on ordinances, policy direction and community relationship, etc. We are empowered as staff members to do so. This is particularly true in the Council-Manager form of government.

2. The article states: NPOs "can collaborate with whomever they wish...yet GAs are "limited to designated jurisdictions." Wrong. The strongest link in government is partnership. We do outreach programming to other communities through volunteerism, not just in our own. AND, we encourage employees to do the same. We partner with schools, the corporate sector, the nonprofit sector and all other governmental levels. The most significant of these partnerships is with the volunteers themselves.

3. The article is also off base about the "scariness" involving staff/volunteer relationships. I have worked for both NPOs and GAs; the staff/volunteer relationships are no different. In fact, in my local government, it is seen as a plus to have the ability to serve alongside those you serve. It is a relationship-building mechanism with your own citizen base, not to mention, with elected officials as well.

4. The article notes that NPOs are responsible for finding their own funding sources, but that government agencies are limited to tax revenue. Not true. I can seek sponsorship and grants for this volunteer program as a governmental agency. I don't have to stop at the tax revenue allocated to me. Frankly, I think there is a greater sense of financial accountability in GAs than in NPOs.

More than anything, I feel that in a local government, I am able to be more proactive in this sector than in the NPO sector. Our programs are not reactive; they are proactive and offer a great range of diversity according to citizen interest, need and initiatives.

Submitted on 4 June 2004 by Sarah Elliston, President, Cincinnati, Ohio

I agree that the involvement of volunteers in government is hugely ignored except in cases like parks and recreation where their ab sense is obvious.

I started my career in this field as creator an manager of a volunteer program in city government, but as a United Way employee- talk about interesting funding. The city granted us a budget to manage their volunteer program. Most of the volunteers worked in offices although we recruited for the parks and recreation programs as well. As a result of our help, they hired volunteer coordinators of their own.

Where I came upon an interesting dilemma was in our evaluations, the civil servants were disinclined to say, "We couldn't do without them," about the volunteers because their managers didn't want it to appear that they couldn't do their jobs. It was a sticky spot because many supervisors of volunteers wanted to testify for the volunteer program at budget hearings and they were not allowed to since their department budget might then be lessened. That was the thinking. I hope it has changed.

Submitted on 2 June 2004 by Rita Hennessy, Outdoor Recreation Specialist, Appalachian National Scenic Trail, NPS, West Virginia, USA

I am a federal government employee, and serve as the volunteer coordinator for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, a unit of the National Park Service (NPS). Although the overall differences of government vs. not-for-profit administration may be true, I believe when it comes to government regional and field volunteer programs the differences are greatly diluted. Yes, priorities change with administrations, but in my 15 years of service for the NPS, each administration has shown HUGE support for volunteer programs. How these programs are implemented, funded and promoted is up to the staff of each park unit. Some are better at it than others, just as in the not-for-profit sector.

I totally disagree with the statement that many public servants are afraid of volunteers voting rights. I would argue that a volunteer has more power with their single vote in a membership-based, not-for-

profit organization then in a municipal or national election. Public servants also have the right to vote.

I realize that volunteer programs in the NPS may be different then in the IRS or in an urban city park. Maybe my view is different because I have the wonderful privilege of being only one of 8 government employees with active annual support of more than 4,500 volunteers. I would love to hear thoughts from other government employees, and I would bet that our hands and programs are not as tightly tied as portrayed in the article.

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