

[News and Hot Topics](#) » The Big Merger: Many Unanswered Questions

The Big Merger: Many Unanswered Questions

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

August

2007

The merger between the Points of Light Foundation (POLF) and Hands On Network (HON) has been in the works for many months. All of us in the American volunteerism field have been anxiously awaiting communication about the plans for the merged organization. The new entity clearly has potential for positive impact on our field and we want to feel connected to what is happening.

A Diversion into History

The merger has an historical context that might need explanation. For those of you who would like to understand the evolution of the evolution of POLF, HON, and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) – the three players involved today -- [I've provided some highlights.](#)

It was expected that the merger would be announced and explained at the National Conference on Volunteering and Service, held last month in Philadelphia. With 3,000 constituents of the new organization on site, it seemed the perfect opportunity to provide insight about the merger. Instead, the announcement was the last item on the opening plenary agenda. By the time it occurred, the session was 50 minutes over schedule and half of the ballroom had cleared out. The announcement was brief with very little substantive information, including no presentation of what HON actually is.

When I questioned insiders whether they had any plans to share more information with people who felt confused or left out, I was told repeatedly that the decision was only hours old, “the boards are exercising due diligence,” and more details would be announced when the time was right.

More Questions than Answers

A July 24 2007 press release (posted on both the POLF and HON Web sites) headlined that the merger

“Creates World’s Largest Volunteer Organization”

What does this mean? Is it to be a “volunteer organization” or an organization “for volunteering”? There is a big difference.

The release further stated:

Hands On Network and the Points of Light Foundation today announced mutual board approval to merge their two organizations. The announcement transforms the landscape of the volunteer sector, creating a network of 370 affiliate organizations covering 83% of the US market. The merger will also create three million new volunteers over the next two years, generating an additional 90 million volunteer hours and transforming the landscape of the volunteer sector, according to a joint statement issued by the two organizations today.

This verbiage refers entirely to the HON affiliates and volunteer centers, with the implication that they will be the source of more individual volunteers nationwide. But this merger *affects many more people than volunteer centers and HON affiliates!* The ripple effect reaches to all the corners of the volunteer world.

And, where did the goal of 3,000,000 new volunteers come from? Why is simply increasing the *numbers of* volunteers important when we in volunteer management know the problem is NOT recruitment, it’s limited *agency capacity* to utilize volunteers effectively?

The press release also announced the following targets for the new organization:

- *triple National Service Member impact resulting in 30 million national service volunteer hours;*
- *create a model to increase corporate volunteering by ten percent;*
- *recruit, train and place 500,000 new volunteer leaders over three years; and*
- *triple volunteer placement efficiency through seamless and scaled technology tools.*

Why has a goal of the Corporation for National and Community Service about national service found its way into the verbiage here? What is the relationship meant to be between the federal government and the new entity? ...between stipended national service participants and unremunerated volunteers?

What exactly is meant by “500,000 new volunteer leaders”? Is it a reference to organizational volunteer coordinators or to individual active citizens?

Can the goal of “*placement efficiency*” truly be met by “technology tools” that are designed mainly to inform and *refer* prospective volunteers?

So, these first “attempts” at joint communication by the two organizations leave me less informed and more concerned, when so much is at stake for so many.

Merging Different Perspectives

POLF and HON come from different perspectives. It’s important to openly recognize and discuss these differences, and then to understand how they will ultimately be reconciled.

Points of Light Foundation

The Points of Light Foundation & Volunteer Center National Network (its full name) was funded to be the national focal point/representative/advocate of volunteering in the United States and can best be understood by looking at some of its counterparts around the world, such as [Volunteering England](#) and [Volunteering Australia](#).

In the last few years, POLF became more and more focused on volunteer centers, almost to the exclusion of other programs and services. Yet unfortunately, too many existing volunteer centers are still weak, ineffective, and woefully under-resourced. Most of the public knows nothing about them and their impact has been minimal. There are indeed some outstanding volunteer centers, but right now a lot of work still needs to be done to reach the enormous potential of what a volunteer center could be in every community.

Hands On Network

Hands On (formerly City Cares) originally fought the resistance of local volunteer centers to its “new” approach to volunteering: single days of service on a monthly calendar of events, especially to appeal to younger business people. But despite the organization’s roots as an alternative to traditional volunteer service, a look at the current roster shows that the majority of new affiliates are volunteer centers themselves!

The Hybrid

So a relationship between POLF and HON has been percolating from the ground up.

The hybrid that results when a volunteer center becomes a HON affiliate raises some interesting contradictions of mission. For example:

- Volunteer centers always positioned themselves as neutral go-betweens in referring people to organizations needing volunteers. These people did not consider themselves volunteers *for the volunteer center*, but for the agency where they ended up.
- Conversely, in the HON model, volunteers *join and identify with HON* and then deploy themselves out temporarily to many community agencies.

- Volunteer centers were meant to support all sorts of volunteering for all sorts of organizations and causes.
- HON is focused on the single-day model (mainly) and selects specific organizations to receive service.
- POLF's purpose is to focus on the United States; HON has been creating affiliates in other countries as well.

And so on.... This sea of conflicting missions makes it clear why the volunteerism field might wonder what model the new organization wants to pursue. Clarification is much needed.

Furthermore, Hands On Network is privately funded, created its own board, and has a solid, single focus. Its main constituents are its affiliates. Therefore, it makes sense that HON discussed the merger mainly with its affiliates. HON folks with whom I've spoken see the merger as recognition – even as vindication – for their “form” of volunteering.

The Points of Light Foundation, however, has a much broader and complex mandate, and a range of different constituencies. They receive millions of dollars in government money, several of their board members are appointed by government officials, and POLF has a direct relationship with the Corporation (the co-sponsorship of the annual conference is but one example). So POLF is quasi-governmental, has a roster of paying “members” and subscribers, and therefore is accountable to others beyond their board of directors.

So the two huge, unanswered questions are:

- What is being done to examine, reconcile, and then communicate the *philosophy and values* of the new, merged organization?
- Who are the constituents of the merged organization and who, therefore, has the right to hold it accountable for serving the real (and not the political) needs of the field?

What You Can Do

There is also a two-page FAQ document that explains some other details. There, at the very end, is this invitation:

It is too early to announce definitive new programs or initiatives, and we want to have the benefit of input from our affiliates and other partners. We invite everyone to join with us and take this opportunity to help re-imagine what's possible. An e-mail box and a blog have been created to capture your ideas and to spark a dialogue over the next few months to inform and shape our goals and implementation plans: blog -

<http://handsonpointsoflight.wordpress.com>. E-mail address: POLF@handsonnetwork.org.

As of July 31, only seven comments were posted (and you have to hunt to find them), none really addressing issues other than praising volunteerresources.org. Unfortunately, the wording of “*input from our affiliates and other partners*” still does not open the discussion to anyone in the United States concerned with volunteer issues, but I’m asking all of you to give input anyway!

Please consider posting BOTH a response here and also on <http://handsonpointsoflight.wordpress.com>. What do you think?

- Should the new organization focus on recruiting more volunteers or on building the capacity of organizations to welcome and engage citizens in their work?
- Do you agree that volunteer centers should be the priority over all the other possible constituencies in the field?
- How can (and should) the new organization also involve and serve volunteer program managers?
- What should happen in communities currently without either a volunteer center or a HON affiliate?
- What is and should be the role of CNCS in all of this?
- What do you think about the strong involvement of political families in the new organization, including Neil Bush as chair-elect (son and brother of two Republican Presidents) and Michelle Nunn as CEO (daughter of retired Democratic Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia) – even if this is clearly bi-partisan?

If we stay silent, we will deserve whatever we get. This could be a glorious opportunity to contribute to an important resource for our field. Let’s get involved.

Related Topics: [Trends and Issues](#) | [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#)

***Posted on 18 August 2007 by Nicolette Winner, United Way's Volunteer Connection
Community Volunteer Liaison, Dayton, OH USA***

I attended the Philadelphia conference and was excited to learn that the long-anticipated merger was finally happening.

Both Volunteer Centers and Hands On Network affiliates were surveyed multiple times prior to the merger announcement. Representatives from both also have had multiple opportunities to participate in individual interviews with Accenture, the company assisting pro bono with the merger.

As a Volunteer Center director and a former volunteer program administrator who benefited from Hands On activities routinely, I think the field is being represented very well during all of these discussions. I wish the conference had highlighted more information about both groups and the

potential this merger has. Rather than boasting about volunteer numbers, I would prefer there to be a concentration on increasing the capacity of local nonprofits to effectively engage volunteers. We have the tools as members of this new organization already.... I think the tools being made available to us are going to be better, stronger and more effective.

The goals announced seem premature. Provide input that will be proactive as the merger details are worked out (it's being heard!), but please give the new staff involved time to work out some of the differences. The wait will be worth it.

Posted on 13 August 2007 by Pam Simmons, Sheikh Khalifa Medical City-Takatof Program Volunteerism Consultant Abu Dhabi Uae

I have heard the audio and read the topic. We are fortunate to have someone like you, Susan, who can distill the issue. I agree on many points:

- A contradiction of missions - absolutely!
- 3 million volunteers? Who has asked for them? I thought we moved beyond the "warm body" method of recruiting. How about recruiting specifically for us?
- It sounds like a huge bureaucracy and sadly, will not be able to respond quickly to those of us who need their help internationally. They are not on the same wave length as those that involve volunteers at the grassroots level.

Thanks for your comments!

Posted on 9 August 2007 by Sarah (Sam) Elliston, SarahElliston Consulting, President Cincinnati, OH USA

As I posted my comments on the [HON website](#), echoing what Susan wrote about the lack of support for Volunteer Managers, I had another thought:

The Hands On Network (HON) develops projects through team leaders who are volunteers, right? And the Baby Boomers are bringing their instinctive "we'll do it our way," approach into the world of volunteering.

What if, if we don't get our volunteer management act together, they just reinvent our organizations? I mean, if the local Drop In Shelter has too many rules, a Boomer is going to go start his own, right? So if that Boomer is part of the HON and has a team supporting him, who's to say it won't work?

Are the bureaucracies of our agencies and our volunteer programs inevitable?

Will these structures always develop as an organization grows? Maybe we COULD have a BRAVE NEW WORLD of volunteering where people could do what they wanted without being tied down by the restrictions of the paid staff? Maybe it would work?

I have no idea and I am not sure if it is preferable but what if? isn't it possible?

***Posted on 8 August 2007 by Wendy Moluf, The Citizen Advocacy Program / The Arc of New Jersey
Coordinator of Volunteer Services, New Jersey, USA***

I attended the Points of Light Conference in Philadelphia last month, and as a volunteer coordinator at a small non-profit in southern New Jersey, was both inspired and confused by the workshops, presentations, and especially the announcement of the merger. Many of us who work for smaller organizations and depend on volunteers to provide vital services to our communities know virtually nothing about the work of the National Organizations represented at the Conference who seem to be the powers behind decisions being made which will surely affect all of us in the future. I have been working in the field for over 10 years with little or no contact with either Points of Light or Hands On Network (they do not have an affiliate in our county), therefore it is difficult to even formulate an intelligent question regarding the merger and its future impact on volunteerism. My hope would be that those of us volunteer professionals working in the field (probably hundreds of thousands across the country) will be part of the discussion moving forward as to how the new organization can be a resource that is truly relevant to the work we are doing.

Posted on 5 August 2007 by Margaret Jones, Volunteer Manager, Orlando, FL USA

I imagine that much of the detail you are looking for, in terms of what this merger means to the field of volunteer management, will be determined with the input of the volunteer management field itself. It seems reasonable to assume that Volunteer Center and HON Affiliate leadership will work together to redefine the national support they need under the new organization. Obviously, that couldn't occur until a decision to merge was made. Finally, I imagine the field of volunteer centers and HON affiliates were consulted regarding the merger and assume that a merger decision would not have taken place had there not been significant support from that group.

Posted on 3 August 2007 by Jayne Hensch, Department of Parks, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Silver Spring, MD USA

"...The merger will also create three million new volunteers over the next two years, generating an additional 90 million volunteer hours and transforming the landscape of the volunteer sector..."

Maybe if we can figure out the technology they're using to create new volunteers (assuming it's not proprietary) we could just share it among ourselves and create as many volunteers as we all need! Then - at last - we could indeed have that freezer full of volunteers ready to defrost that our agencies have always wanted! Think of it - a master race of volunteers set to deploy to whatever "need" the POLF/HON Board wishes to tackle - with a machine like that in the wrong hands - who knows what could happen!

Sorry - couldn't help it. I think Susan is right on - and those of us who work to support the advancement of missions through the deployment of volunteer effort should take note - what supports may we be giving up if attention and \$\$ are focused more closely on volunteers as a sector rather than on the work that is in need of the support of volunteerism?

Posted on 3 August 2007 by Betty Stallings, Building Better Skills, Trainer, author Pleasanton, Ca USA

Susan, thank you for taking the painstaking time to put this informative and challenging piece together for us. I, like many, have many questions but am hopeful that this merger will not ONLY attract more people into all forms of volunteering but also keep equal focus on building the capacity of organizations to truly provide excellent opportunities/ experiences for community engagement. I shared the following on the POL invitation for ideas/response:

My challenge for those crafting this significant new organization is to place major focus on building commitment, capacity and competency with organizations/initiatives who partner with volunteers to accomplish their missions. Generating more hours and numbers of volunteers results in further stretching under-resourced organizations, thus often resulting in ineffective volunteer engagement as opposed to the exciting potential of volunteers, effectively engaged.

I would be happy to be involved in creative discussions to address this significant issue/gap. Attracting volunteers is the easy part.

Perhaps the new organization can also look at a partnership with the COVAA movement to regenerate needed support to the profession of volunteer engagement. A representative of that profession should be at the table of merger/vision discussions. They could offer input and creative options/ solutions to the serious organizational capacity gap to tap into the phenomenal potential of volunteerism, at its best.

My best wishes to you (POL and HON) in this most significant task. Volunteerism, worldwide, will be impacted by your decisions.

Posted on 3 August 2007 anonymously, Pennsylvania USA

Over 26 years ago I helped to start a hospice program and have held my positron since then! Hospice is the only organization in the nation that is MANDATED to have volunteers to have a certified program.

Our programs need an organization for guidance and development of the strengths of the individual volunteers who do the work, not an organization as another governmental arm or focus on a building.

Posted on 1 August 2007 by H Roberts, PLNJ, Inc., Pres, Keyport/NJ USA

Without a detailed, well distributed report on how this merger affects American nonprofits and volunteer resource managers, I am stifled. Have VRM's been included so far?

One would think that the largest volunteer association in our country would step up and be the long awaited guidepost of loud and clear concise reporting; inviting discussion and offering excitement to the merger.

Susan, if you are scratching your well traveled, well versed head...what does that say for the rest of us?! Initial speculation offers little evidence that this merger INCLUDES "us."

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025