

# Is the challenge recruiting citizens to volunteer *or* making sure agencies are ready for volunteers?

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Right now a lot of national attention is being given to stimulating increased volunteering. The upcoming Presidential Summit for America's Future is focused on this topic, with hundreds of major organizations committing themselves to quantities of community service by the year 2000.

President Clinton has further called for millions of volunteer tutors to assure that no child leaves third grade unable to read. Almost all the publicity about withdrawal of government and other funding for many social service and cultural arts programs concludes with speculation about whether or not citizens will come forward as volunteers to fill the new needs.

## **Here's the problem as I see it:**

No one is talking about the cost and extra resources needed to work with volunteers--or whether agencies even want them.

All the publicity and rhetoric is on recruiting people to become volunteers or do "community service." Precious little is ever said about what it will take to interview, screen, place, train, and work with all these new volunteers. While citizen involvement is a vital and important contribution to our society, the equation is not; volunteers instead of money;--we need money AND volunteers.

In this present climate of under-funding, volunteers are in danger of being resented as a second-best solution to serious social problems. All the mentoring in the world cannot make up for lack of decently-paid jobs, schools with adequate supplies, or available health care. On the other hand, when such resources are accessible, volunteers can make the difference between success and failure on the individual level.

We also need money FOR volunteers. As one example, who is going to cover the cost of thousands of child abuse police checks (something President Clinton never mentions when he calls for adults to work with young children)? Taking on more volunteers also means more staff time and resources--and too many agencies aren't able or willing to give either. Those individual citizens who want to help neighbors in need or students who can't read will also require some method of connecting.

Even in the best of economic times, too many agencies limit volunteers to unchallenging roles. We must educate professionals to welcome and respect the skills volunteers can bring. Perhaps the Presidential Summit will give us the opportunity to do the following:

- Articulate realistic expectations about the interconnected roles of volunteers, employees, government at various levels, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Volunteers are an

integral part of the community resource mix--but all the components need to expand their reach.

- Do thoughtful planning for volunteer involvement, with a clear vision as to what volunteers can contribute in unique ways--not as unpaid staff assistants, but as providers of service meeting a wide range of client needs.
- Prepare social workers, teachers, medical care givers and others to adapt their job descriptions in these new times. Volunteers should not be expected to fill in the slack while employees continue business as usual. Every profession must re-examine its priorities. This is a particularly difficult question in unionized work settings.
- Engage clients in the process of problem solving. The old paternalistic model of charity is discredited. We must be careful not to rush into such activities as mentoring under the assumption that the needs of children in poverty can be solved simply by an adult friend (as powerful a force as that relationship can be). We must learn to listen to what our neighbors think they need. Volunteers can be most effective as facilitators of self-help and advocates to prod the bureaucracy into doing its job. Not every client may want a mentor; not every citizen is best assigned to that role.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. ([www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com)), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the monthly Hot Topic essay for April 2007 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/april07.html>