

Research Brief:

## Pathways to Service: Learning from the potential volunteer's perspective

July 2009



### Key Findings

- **Personal Invitations to Serve Are More Appealing to Prospective Volunteers.**
- **Non-Volunteers See Themselves As Essentially Different From Volunteers.**
- **Non-Volunteers Worry about Having Enough Time to Volunteer.**
- **Poor Volunteer Management Turns People Off of Service.**
- **Skills-Based Volunteering Can Bring In New Volunteers.**



### Introduction

As a result of the economic crisis, the nation is grappling with high levels of lost jobs, foreclosed homes, and new fears about what the future holds. In the midst of this unsettling time, however, many individuals continue to reach out and serve their communities. They continue to volunteer, continue to help their neighbors, and continue to organize service projects within their communities. In fact, in 2008 alone, 61.8 million adults donated approximately 8 billion hours of service. This represents 26.4% of adults who volunteered through or for an organization to address pressing needs such as hunger, homelessness, illiteracy, environmental disasters, and other community concerns.<sup>i</sup>

Today, over one-third of volunteers (35.5%) drop out of service each year, and do not serve with any organizations the following year.<sup>ii</sup> While new volunteers may be walking through the door of an organization, they may not stay, or they may be replacing an existing volunteer. This high rate of volunteer turnover stunts the productivity of nonprofit organizations as they focus on replacing volunteers instead of maximizing impact. This report examines the perceptions around volunteering and the barriers that may inhibit prospective volunteers (either new or returning volunteers) from service.



By looking more closely at the reasons why volunteers stop serving and non-volunteers do not serve, the nonprofit and service community can help address volunteer turnover, continue to encourage lifelong volunteering, and promote more active civic engagement. As the country faces broadening and deepening social challenges, it is a critical time to learn about what motivates volunteers to start and continue service. President Obama's call to service will also encourage new and existing volunteers to engage in communities across the country. Specifically, the President is asking for participation in the nation's recovery and renewal through the *United we Serve* initiative. This initiative works to engage Americans in addressing community needs in education, health, energy and the environment, community renewal, and safety and security. Partnering in this effort, the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) is also dedicated to helping volunteers connect with service opportunities through its mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

As community needs across the country grow and volunteers respond to the President's call to service, there is a significant challenge facing the nonprofit community. This challenge will be to create a strong foundation that encourages volunteers to keep serving and helps former volunteers and those who have never volunteered before come through the doors of community organizations.

## Methodology:

To learn more about the factors that contribute to volunteer drop-out and other barriers that may keep individuals from service, the Corporation conducted a series of 15 focus groups across the nation.<sup>iii</sup> Three types of individuals were invited to participate, with each group representing a specific population on the service continuum. Participants were organized into:

- Current Volunteers – Having volunteered through or for an organization in the previous 12 months;
- Former Volunteers – Not volunteered through or for an organization in the past 12 months; and
- Non-Volunteers – Never volunteered through or for an organization.

Within these focus groups, approximately 180 individuals discussed their respective motivations to volunteer, why they left, and why they do not volunteer. Individuals who participated represented diverse demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.

## Key Findings:

### **Personal Invitations to Serve are more Appealing to Prospective Volunteers.**

In focus groups across the country, many non-volunteers said they had never volunteered because they had simply never been asked to do so by someone they trusted. These same non-volunteers also said that if they were asked, they would be open to volunteering. This coincides with statements made by focus group participants who were current volunteers. A common theme underlying current volunteers' entrée into volunteering was that a friend or family member asked them to serve. This is also consistent with findings from the Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, which shows that 43.7 percent of volunteers became involved with their main organization after being asked. In fact, over 27 million volunteers in 2008 started serving after someone asked them to serve. Nonprofit organizations can capitalize on this tactic by working with current volunteers to bring new volunteers with them to serve.

*“If someone I worked with or a friend volunteered somewhere then I would probably do it.”*

*Non-Volunteer*

### **Non-Volunteers See Themselves As Essentially Different From Volunteers.**

Non-volunteers expressed that they did not have a lifestyle in common with most volunteers and that this was one element that kept them from volunteering. Upon further discussion, it became evident that non-volunteers saw volunteers as retired, without children, and with an abundance of leisure time. While these characteristics may be true for some volunteers, data show that this is not the majority. Contrary to general perceptions, volunteers tend to have a busy schedule filled with work, children, and other commitments. Married people, women (particularly mothers), and adults in their 30s and 40s are all especially likely to be volunteers.<sup>iv</sup>

The differences between perception and the data clearly illustrates a disconnect between what is perceived and what is actually taking place. Addressing this misconception may be important for organizations looking to recruit new volunteers, especially if they have not previously participated in service. Organizations may want to showcase current volunteers by letting them share their stories of service. By seeing who is volunteering and what their experiences have been, non-volunteers may begin to see connections to established volunteers. This may help non-volunteers see that they are just like volunteers.

The current volunteer may in fact be an untapped resource in helping recruit new volunteers and acting as spokespeople in the community. Developing voluntary spokespeople for the organization is a practice referred to as creating “evangelicals” by the authors Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant in the book *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*.<sup>v</sup> Crutchfield and McLeod Grant state that high-impact nonprofit organizations recognize that volunteers can be more than free labor or membership dues. These organizations bring together individuals who are uniquely connected to the success of the organization's mission.

Through meaningful service experiences, individuals take a greater responsibility in the outcomes of the organization's work and thus become even more involved as a spokesperson in the community. This idea of evangelists or ambassadors can be a powerful mechanism for maximizing an organization's impact. By leveraging the power of one volunteer, donor, or

advisor to access the strength of the community, nonprofit organizations can more fully address their goals and mission. Crutchfield and McLeod Grant state that creating evangelical volunteers is one of six key practices that successful nonprofits share.

Finding the right opportunities for volunteers can be a challenging but worthwhile effort. *The New Volunteer Workforce*,<sup>vi</sup> an article highlighting innovations in volunteer management, shows that the March of Dimes has reinvented how volunteer talents are used within the organization. As one example, Jim is a March of Dimes volunteer who worked on strategic planning, marketing, information technology, training, and research. This role effectively incorporated Jim's extensive 41 years of professional finance experience with both General Electric Co. and J.P. Morgan.

Jim's meaningful volunteer role contributed to his strong connection to the organization and he became a champion spokesperson, recruiting his wife, daughter, and grandson to become involved as volunteers. His wife assisted in volunteer recruitment and helped to bring in 42 new volunteers who donated a total of more than 11,000 hours. Jim's daughter engaged in fundraising and raised \$3,000 for the organization and his grandson is currently putting together a walking team. Jim's positive experience with the organization encouraged him to engage those around him to become involved in the organization. As community organizations continue to use volunteers as key spokespeople in the community, the outreach potential grows exponentially.

### **Non-Volunteers Worry about Having Enough Time to Volunteer.**

Many non-volunteers within the focus groups feared the time commitment of volunteering, and felt that signing up for a volunteer activity meant they would be required to continue with that organization or activity indefinitely. Some even spoke of a life-time commitment and worried that once they walked in the door they would have to sign their life away. Concerns were also voiced that if they signed up for something small they would be asked to take on additional responsibilities without the opportunity to say no and would eventually end up overburdened.

*"It's a life time commitment; I'll never have any time to myself again."*

*Non-Volunteer*

Organizations looking to address this concern may consider offering different levels of commitment and responsibility. Data show that nationwide, 65.5% of volunteers are episodic volunteers (volunteering less than 100 hours a year with all organizations) whereas 34.5% of individuals are intensive volunteers (volunteering 100 hours or more per year). The challenge to organizations is in finding the right match between the desired amount of commitment and the opportunities available.

### **Poor Volunteer Management Turns People Off of Service.**

As former volunteers discussed why they left volunteering, one theme was repeatedly voiced. If they had a bad experience with one organization, they were turned off from volunteering altogether. Many of the focus group participants described poor volunteer management as contributing to a bad experience and made them less interested in volunteering for other organizations.

The testimony of the focus group participants is supported by research related to volunteer management. The *Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers* report found that investment in volunteer management practices enhances organization's ability to retain volunteers.<sup>vii</sup>

*Common complaints about negative experiences included:*

- Disorganized volunteer experiences;
- Unprepared and untrained leaders;
- Lack of recognition;
- Insufficient materials;
- Absence of team motivation;
- Mismatched skill and interest with a task assignments;
- Lack of proper training, especially when facing critical situations; and
- Restrictive volunteer assignments.

*Good volunteer management was described by current volunteer focus group participants as:*

- Matching skills and interests to a volunteer's assignment;
- Training the volunteer on the task to be performed;
- Offering new skills training (this could lead to personal capabilities enhancement such as learning computer skills, employment, internships, etc.);
- Sharing the expected time commitment for different volunteer activities (e.g., 1 day vs. 6 months);
- Promoting volunteering with friends or a social group;
- Helping the volunteers understand the meaning of their work and the connection to the organization's mission; and
- Showing the volunteers that one person's help can really make a difference.

***“You get a couple of bad experiences and you start changing your views about volunteering. Not just the kind of volunteering you want to do, but even if you want to volunteer.”***

*Former Volunteer*

***“People showing their appreciation keeps me coming back. I really feel I have helped make a difference.”***

*Current Volunteer*

### **Skills-Based Volunteering Can Bring In New Volunteers.**

Many of the focus group non-volunteers said that using a skill that they already had might make them feel more comfortable about volunteering. While this might work to get some individuals in the door, non-volunteers also said that they could see the value of building a new skill within the volunteer organization. Given that opinions were voiced about the value of using an established skill and adding a new skill, this might be a topic to explore further in the volunteer interview to establish how a new volunteer would like to start. This highlights the importance of talking frequently with volunteers about the type of work they would like to do. For example, while an accountant may be looking to volunteer using their skills to help a nonprofit with financial management, another accountant may be interested in tutoring or mentoring a child or other tasks unrelated to their professional skills.

***“If you could be taught a skill you can take with you, I would be interested.”***

*Non-Volunteer*

This finding also illustrates that there may be a benefit to checking back in on the volunteer after time has passed to see if they are still comfortable in their current role, or would like to learn a new skill.

Integrating skills-based volunteering can also have significant benefits for nonprofit organizations as well as the volunteers engaged in service. Pro bono and skills-based volunteering give nonprofits access to needed expertise to develop sound business strategies, models, and protocols. In support of this effort, the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation recently initiated a challenge to leverage \$1 billion in skilled volunteering and pro bono services from the corporate community. This three-year campaign, titled A Billion + Change, is led by the Corporation to help nonprofit organizations benefit from professional skills, skills-based volunteering, and pro-bono contributions.

## Conclusion:

Today, there are multiple circumstances affecting volunteering and organizations that rely on volunteers. The President's call to service will galvanize citizens to volunteer, yet we know that on average one in three individuals who volunteer in one year do not return to service the following year. The current economic crisis has created a greater need for services provided by religious institutions, nonprofit groups, and community organizations. At the same time, many organizations are facing financial uncertainties and also seeing reductions in charitable contributions. In fact, two-thirds of public charities receiving donations saw decreases in financial contributions in 2008.<sup>viii</sup> Helping individuals cultivate a new or more established relationship to volunteering and civic engagement is critical now more than ever.

As organizations continue to maintain their current volunteer pool and recruit new volunteers to the organization, there are simple steps to take. Organizations can:

- Use their current volunteer pool as key recruiters for additional volunteers;
- Integrate effective volunteer management practices;
- Emphasize the positive aspects of the experience including acquiring new skills, friends, and meaningful experiences;
- Offer a variety of opportunities, both related to the task and time commitment;
- Provide highlights on current volunteers so that new volunteers can see personal commonalities;
- Offer episodic and skills-based volunteer opportunities that might also bring new volunteers to help with the organization; and
- Refer interested volunteers to partner organizations if the volunteer is not the right fit for one organization as referrals may keep the volunteer in the volunteer pool.

Now is the time to address the issues that keep potential volunteers from service. By enhancing service opportunities, the nation can address critical issues and help community organizations meet pressing needs across the nation.

## End Notes:

---

<sup>i</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Volunteering in the United States, 2008" (available at [http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/volunteer\\_study\\_08.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/volunteer_study_08.pdf)); and internal analysis of data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) Volunteer Supplement, 2008, by Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) staff.

<sup>ii</sup> CNCS, internal analysis of CPS Volunteer Supplement data, 2007-2008.

<sup>iii</sup> Focus groups were held in Atlanta, GA, Chicago, IL, San Diego, CA, Tampa, FL, and New York City, NY.

<sup>iv</sup> CNCS, internal analysis of CPS Volunteer Supplement data, 2008.

<sup>v</sup> Crutchfield, Leslie R., and Heather McLeod Grant. 2007. *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

<sup>vi</sup> Eisner, David; Grimm, Robert, Maynard, Shannon, and Washburn, Susannah. *The New Volunteer Workforce*. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Winter 2009.

<sup>vii</sup> The Urban Institute. June 2004. *Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers*.

<sup>viii</sup> GivingUSA Foundation press release, "U.S. charitable giving estimated to be \$307.65 billion in 2008," June 10, 2009. Available at [http://www.givingusa.org/press\\_releases/gusa/GivingReaches300billion.pdf](http://www.givingusa.org/press_releases/gusa/GivingReaches300billion.pdf)