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# Volunteerism and US Civil Society

by Susan N. Dreyfus August 29, 2018

Everyone in the public and nonprofit sectors has a role to play in fostering volunteerism, and engagement can pay dividends for all.

In 1831, French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States to research and study the American penal system. Over the course of his nine-month tour of America, he was inspired to write about the broader workings of American society, including the uniquely American tendency toward volunteerism. In his seminal *Democracy in America*, he notes:

In the United States, as soon as several inhabitants have taken an opinion or an idea they wish to promote in society, they seek each other out and unite together once they have made contact. From that moment, they are no longer isolated but have become a power seen from afar whose activities serve as an example and whose words are heeded.

As a former public sector leader now working in the social sector, I have witnessed the tremendous impact volunteerism has on American society—on both the people providing social services and the people receiving them. These altruistic interactions often serve a broader purpose: They bond together neighbors and communities in a common cause, and enable us to see and appreciate each other's humanity. When we recognize the humanity in each other, we lay the foundations of understanding, empathy, and compassion. These then form the building blocks of a healthy civil society in which citizens are more likely to focus on what unites us than what divides us. For these reasons, I firmly believe that everyone in the public and nonprofit sectors has a role to play in fostering volunteerism, and that engagement can pay dividends for all.

## The decline of volunteering

Volunteerism has been a unique part of American culture and democracy, and a hallmark of American civic life, since our nation's founding. In 1736, Benjamin Franklin founded the first volunteer firehouse. In the 1800s, the rise of the social reform movement around issues like poverty, temperance, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery mobilized a new generation that had not previously been involved in civic life, including women and young people. This led to the founding of the YMCA, Salvation Army, American Red Cross, and the United Way—institutions formed largely to connect this new volunteer force to social services that improved the lives of others.



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Social scientists have long noted that volunteerism plays a significantly larger role in American civic life than it does in other countries. In fact, Americans are 15 percent more likely to volunteer their time than the Dutch, 21 percent more likely than the Swiss, and 32 percent more likely than Germans.

And yet, despite these statistics, they have begun to raise alarm bells about a decline in US volunteerism. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, volunteerism [peaked between 2003 and 2005](#), when 28.8 percent of Americans reported having volunteered the previous year. Today, that number is 25.3 percent.

This decline is consistent across every single age and education group, representing a loss of millions of volunteers. What's more, as the number of volunteers has decreased, the need for them has grown. The nonprofit sector, which relies heavily on volunteers as a strategic resource, [has grown by 25 percent](#) in the past decade, according to researchers.

The nonprofit sector must reverse these trends and do more to increase the engagement of the communities we serve—particularly in the human services sector, which relies heavily on the support of volunteers to fill the gaps in federal, state, and local funding. A University of Pennsylvania study found that community-based, human-service organizations are the third-most reliant on volunteer staffing behind the religious and education sectors.

## The impact of volunteering

Volunteerism not only supports the impact of community-based organizations in the places where they serve, but also connects individuals to one another and to the issues facing their community. It has the power to unite people of different races, ages, religions, and sexes together for a common cause. We saw this phenomenon in the outpouring of volunteerism after the tragedy of the September 11 attacks, when tens of thousands of people from across the nation came together to support victims of terrorism. Just two and a half weeks after the attacks, the American Red Cross reported processing 15,570 new volunteers from among 22,000 offers of assistance.

Studies have also long touted the mental health benefits—including feeling more socially connected, warding off loneliness and depression, and lending a greater sense of purpose to life—for those who contribute their time, and more recent studies have begun to examine the physical health benefits of volunteering. New research from Carnegie Mellon University, for example, notes: “Older adults who volunteer for at least 200 hours per year decrease their risk of hypertension, or high blood pressure, by 40 percent.” The study suggests that working as a volunteer could be a non-pharmaceutical option to reducing cardiovascular disease caused by hypertension, which affects nearly 65 million Americans and is a leading cause of death.

Finally, a culture of volunteerism also opens up opportunities for communities traditionally closed off from employment, such as persons living with disability and older adults. For example, the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, recently launched [Second Acts for Strong Communities](#), an initiative to help our network of human-services organizations leverage the time and expertise of older adults who want to positively impact their communities. Through a cohort model led by senior fellows, the Alliance is gathering knowledge, creating replicable tools, and building a network of ambassadors to support the sector. We are also a partner of the Gen2Gen campaign, an effort to encourage older adults to “show up for kids” in volunteer roles. The campaign, which has a goal of mobilizing one million older adults in the next five years, even [offers a toolkit for other organizations](#) interested in mobilizing older volunteers.

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Other online resources include [VolunteerMatch](#), [Twenty Hats](#), and [Points of Light](#), all of which aim to match volunteers with appropriate organizations in their communities. Special events also offer a way forward. For example, United Way Worldwide is working to increase volunteerism through its annual United Way Day of Action event—one of the largest, single-day, volunteer mobilization projects in the United States and around the world.

As I mentioned at the beginning, government also has great opportunity to help foster US volunteerism—indeed, it has historically played an important role. In his first inaugural address, President Kennedy issued a call for public service by asking Americans to, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” President George H. W. Bush established the Points of Light Foundation, likening volunteers to “a thousand points of light,” to help create a culture that encourages volunteerism and offers ways to connect volunteers and organizations. President Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act into law in 1993, launching a new national service corps for America known as [AmeriCorps](#).

Yet AmeriCorps, and other government-funded civic and volunteer programs, may be in jeopardy. President Trump’s 2019 federal budget proposal [eliminates funding](#) for The Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that funds programs such as [AmeriCorps](#), [Senior Corps](#), the [Social Innovation Fund](#), and the [Volunteer Generation Fund](#). These programs all help promote volunteerism by connecting Americans to service opportunities, connecting nonprofits to volunteers, and raising awareness about the benefits of volunteerism.

If we are to continue to see the benefits of volunteerism, we will need a focused and concerted effort from the public, philanthropic, and private sectors to promote and foster the continuation of our national volunteer movement. I urge all leaders to continue to nourish the American spirit of volunteerism, which lies at the heart of a free, just, and civil society. For, as Alexis de Tocqueville so eloquently noted, “The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.”

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