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Voices from the Past

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Volunteer Centers: Changing Rationale and Roles

by Susan J. Ellis

The attempt to provide some coordination to a community's volunteer efforts is not new. There are many examples of collaborative projects to mobilize citizens towards common goals in all countries. For the most part, however, the earlier volunteer activities were crisis-oriented or project-centered, and they disbanded once the need was met. The concept of institutionalizing an agency with the mission of increasing and supporting volunteering on behalf of many different local causes took root in the second half of the 20th century.

In this *Voices from the Past*, we examine some of the history highlights of volunteer centers. We look at efforts in a sampling of countries – the United States, Canada and Japan – and also note developments in other parts of the world. We also look at some common issues and emerging trends that are likely to affect volunteer centers (whatever they are called) in the years to come.

History

United States

American volunteer centers trace their roots back to 1919 when a Bureau of Volunteer Service was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota to mobilize those released from service in World War I.

The Great Depression evoked large numbers of volunteer-based relief activities and, in 1932, the National Committee on Volunteers was formed to address the overwhelming demands. It became an Associate Group of the National Conference of Social Work in the following year. The Committee was concerned with fostering the relationship between volunteers and the growing profession of social work, and had the objective of encouraging more volunteering. It sponsored the creation of "volunteer bureaus." By the end of 1933, such bureaus existed in 28 cities, often affiliated with the local council of social service agencies. The main purpose of these volunteer bureaus was to refer potential volunteers to the various social agencies in a community.¹

World War II brought major changes. The need to organize civilian support for the war effort became the country's priority. When the federal government formed the Office of Civilian Defense in 1941, the National Committee on Volunteers suspended operations and the 50 volunteer bureaus then in existence became an official part of the newly formed Defense Councils. By 1943, an estimated 4,300 civil-defense volunteer offices were operating around the country, recruiting volunteers for a wide variety of defense-related activities.

As the war drew to a close, the National Committee on Volunteers again began to press for the formation of volunteer bureaus to aid in the recruitment of volunteers on behalf of needed community services. In 1944, the Association of Junior Leagues of America and the Community Chests and Councils of America jointly financed a study of postwar plans for mobilizing volunteers. When the Office of Civilian Defense disbanded in 1945, the Community Chests and Councils renewed their commitment to the support of volunteer bureaus by establishing the Advisory Committee on Citizen Participation in cooperation with the National Social Welfare Assembly. By 1950, there were 81 formal volunteer bureaus across the United States and Canada.

In 1951, the Association of Volunteer Bureaus (AVB) was formed and continued as an independent organization for more than 30 years. AVB created a network of volunteer bureaus, offered training in volunteer management, developed standards of excellence for volunteer programs, and generally pro-moted volunteerism in local communities. For a time, AVB received funding from United Way of America (UWA) and its national office was located in UWA headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia.



began to be called "VACs."

During the 1970s, UWA worked with a number of bureaus to upgrade their operations and encouraged a name change to "voluntary action center," conveying a new image of "doing." It is interesting to note that the name "volunteer center" was considered at that time, but rejected because of its acronym. In the 1970s, "VC" was widely recognized as referring to the American war enemy, the "Viet Cong." So volunteer bureaus became voluntary action centers, adopted a consistent logo of an arrow in a heart shape, and quickly

In 1971, in tandem with the federal legislation that created ACTION (the predecessor of today's Corporation for National and Community Service), United Way of America was asked to spearhead the establishment of the National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA) to provide training and consultation to the volunteer field. AVB continued as an independent organization.²

NCVA went through a number of mergers and name changes. In 1984, AVB merged into what was then called "VOLUNTEER: The National Center," but maintained an advisory council to represent the volunteer center perspective. By 1988, the merged organization had changed its name to The National VOLUNTEER Center. In 1991, this entity in turn merged into the Points of Light Foundation, initiated during the first Bush Administration. In 2003, the importance of volunteer centers was made more visible by expanding the organization's name to the Points of Light Foundation & Volunteer Center National Network. Approximately 350 volunteer centers operated in 2005.

A new chapter in the history of American volunteer centers began in 2007, with the merger of the Points of Light foundation and HandsOn Network. HandsOn, formerly called City Cares, was started to provide short-term volunteering assignments targeted at young business professionals.

Across the country, millions of concerned Americans face the challenge of finding a way to reconcile a busy lifestyle with an interest in volunteering. Local CityCares organizations were formed in response to this challenge, with the goal to make volunteering possible for everyone. CityCares affiliates, known as "Cares" or "Hands On" organizations, engage over 250,000 volunteers in direct service to their communities each year. In cities large and small, 30

*Cares affiliates have been established in the U.S., one affiliate in the Philippines, and an additional 13 partner organizations in the U.K.*³

Ironically, in some cities the HandsOn affiliate was started in opposition to the local volunteer center, which was seen as nonresponsive to the desire for short-term volunteer opportunities. At the time of the national merger, some cities had both a volunteer center and a HandsOn organization.

Today, HandsOn Network (a division of the re-named Points of Light Institute) is working hard to get individual (and independent) volunteer centers to officially join their network. Approximately 240 have done so, but there is still resistance to any name change. Further, the new organization is urging the adoption of the name “HandsOn Action Center” for every agency in the network, eliminating all mention of the word volunteer. It is too soon to know whether this effort will succeed or whether the United States will end up with parallel and possibly competing systems of networked and independent centers.

Canada

The Volunteer Bureau of Montreal was founded in 1937 by the Montreal chapter of the Junior League as its Central Volunteer Bureau. During World War II, the Bureau developed close links with Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS), a British organization founded in 1938 and heavily involved in the war effort. In 1947, the Bureau adopted the WVS name.⁴

In 1943, the Canadian War Service Department designated the first National Volunteer Week from September 12 to 20 to promote nationwide volunteering for the war effort. The week was organized by WVS to enlist women for wartime voluntary service, with events in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. Mrs. Paul Hamel, Associate Director of Women’s Voluntary Services, Montreal, explained:

*When the women of Canada shifted from peacetime work to meet the demands of war, they left many breaches that could be filled only by part-time volunteer labour. It is to glorify this work that we are holding Volunteer Week throughout Canada. Close to 50,000 women across Canada are doing some kind of service.*⁵

In Montreal, the merged WVS bureau produced not only home front services but also incubated a number of social services that eventually became autonomous agencies. In 1957, the Junior League of Montreal incorporated the earlier association as the Volunteer Bureau – to signal that volunteering was not just for women.⁶

During the 60s and 70s, volunteer bureaus were established across Canada to promote and support effective volunteering. By the end of the century, more than 200 such organizations were in operation, each with a unique mix of programs and services. Like their American counterparts, the name “volunteer bureau” was changed to “volunteer centre.” In the late 1960s, the idea of a designated week to honor volunteers was revived, and the focus was broadened to include all volunteers, not just women.

As a natural evolution, in 1977 the Canadian Association of Volunteer Bureaus and Centres was established to be a national voice for volunteerism. Today it is known as Volunteer Canada (<http://volunteer.ca/>). In 1990, Volunteer Canada proclaimed the third week in April to be National Volunteer Week in all communities across the country.⁷

Japan

Japan has a centuries-long custom of mutual aid, witnessed primarily when members of village communities would gather to help each other with agricultural and other tasks. In modern Japan, local communities have neighborhood associations that organize events such as festivals and town clean-up days.

Such activities are volunteer work in a sense, but they are basically communal duties since the participants are doing them as members of their community, rather than voluntarily of their own accord.

In Japan, the Japanese word hoshi, meaning "service," is sometimes used as an alternative for the English "volunteer," but the Japanese word implies serving one's country or society or one's seniors, sometimes not necessarily of one's own free will. For this reason, the English loan word "volunteer" is used most of the time.⁸

Government-led efforts to promote volunteerism were very active in Japan during the 20th century, especially for social welfare. Most localities had a type of social welfare oriented volunteer center (government funded), through which area residents could volunteer their time to those in need.

In 1963, volunteer groups in Osaka City came together and started to have monthly coordination meetings; by 1965, the Volunteer Association Osaka Bureau was formed as a non-official organization. This new entity started the first volunteer course in Japan. By 1969, following the pattern of their counterparts in other countries, the Bureau renamed itself as the Osaka Voluntary Action Center (OVAC) and moved to official status. In 1993, OVAC changed to a social welfare corporation.⁹

The Tokyo Voluntary Action Center (TVAC) was founded in 1981. Similar voluntary action centers were established in most of the major Japanese cities, while the very local government centers continued to recruit and deploy neighbors as volunteers in community projects. However, all of these centers proved inadequate to cope with major crises, notably earthquake destruction.

Earthquakes have been pivotal moments in Japanese volunteering history. Consider the scenario in 1923, when a devastating earthquake hit Tokyo. Volunteer relief efforts were immediately started, included organized help from university students. Kwansai Gakuin University, founded by Canadian missionaries who stressed the importance of service as the mission of education, was very active in responding to public need after the Tokyo Earthquake. Students and faculty from Tokyo Imperial University (now University of Tokyo) founded the University settlement house in a neighboring slum district of Honjo in 1924, which some consider to be the birthplace of modern Japanese volunteerism movement.

Despite the importance of the Tokyo Imperial University Settlement House, it was banned in 1938 by order of the then military government. That same year, Japan went to war with China and enacted the National Mobilization law. Quickly the Japanese government transformed Japan into a controlled, highly centralized society. Japan maintained this controlled environment even after adopting a new democratic constitution so that it could concentrate energy on the economic recovery of the nation.¹⁰

The great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, most commonly known as the Kobe Earthquake, changed the mindset of Japanese people and galvanized volunteers. The quake

left 6,425 dead, injured 25,000 people and displaced 300,000 more, and damaged or destroyed 100,000 buildings.¹¹ Thousands flooded to the area to help, but coordination of their efforts was poor at the beginning. As the months went on, however, better methods and structures of helping were developed, leading directly to an understanding of the value of a “volunteer center.” Ever since, it has become standard practice to set up a coordinating center immediately after a disaster in order to manage incoming volunteers. Here is an eye-witness account:

For three months after the Kobe earthquake, we have experienced a modern day frontier in metropolitan areas. Suddenly, we were put in a situation where we cannot count on the city office to take care of all public needs or any public needs. The city office itself became the earthquake victim. We learned how hard it is to survive as an individual. That is, if you were not connected to other people. We then learned that not the city officials but people can respond to public needs and people can weave public interests.

The earthquake literally changed the way people constructed the reality of the society. [Before] public interests were equated to government and people were only to private interests. No wonder why we used not to think about volunteerism seriously. It is because the figure contains no domain of people based weaving of public interests. Our reality was constructed that public needs had to be responded by the statutory body, so that people can concentrate all their energy for profit making.

The earthquake caused a shift in our view of society, simply because the government also became a victim and its functions were paralyzed for about three months. What happened during this time was the emergence of volunteerism all over the earthquake disaster hit frontier.

The earthquake literally changed the way people constructed the reality of the society. Suddenly emerged was the domain of volunteerism in people. Now, you understand why Japanese mass media coined the term, “The Year One of Volunteerism” in order to describe this sudden emergence of a volunteer movement. I would now argue, however, that 1995 was not the “Year One” but the “Renaissance” of volunteerism in Japanese society.¹²

A survey of 10 disaster-hit cities discovered that only one, the city of Takarazuka, delegated the volunteer relief management to their government-led volunteer center. In other cities, the responsible department for the other cities varied from the general affairs department, personnel department, accounting department, to even the international exchange department.¹³

The Kwansai Gakuin University Relief Volunteer Center and other universities were fully involved in deploying their students as volunteers during the crisis. The Hirayama Ikuo Volunteer Center (WAVOC) at Waseda University was founded in 2002 and still registers 15,000 people each year.¹⁴

Other Parts of the World

The United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and other English-speaking countries have all evolved volunteer center systems that are active in most of their major cities. There are also “peak bodies” at the state or provincial level and national bodies to coordinate those.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s and fledging democracies emerged throughout

Eastern Europe, established democracies provided all sorts of civil society consultation and training, including urging the formation of volunteer centers.

Norway first established volunteer centers, or *frivillighetssentral*, in 1991, described by some observers as “a solution without a problem.”¹⁵ Despite an early lack of enthusiasm for applying formal infrastructure to civil society in a welfare state, the Norwegian government funded the centers but looked to each community to determine its own volunteer projects. By 2008 there were more than 260 volunteer centers throughout the country.

The European Volunteer Centre (Centre européen du volontariat, CEV) is a European network of over 80 national and regional volunteer centres and volunteer development agencies across Europe. Together, they work to support and promote voluntary activity.

CEV channels the collective priorities and concerns of its member organisations to the institutions of the European Union. It also acts as a central forum for the exchange of policy, practice and information on volunteering. The member organisations of CEV represent thousands of volunteer organisations, associations and other voluntary and community groups at local, regional, national and in some cases international level.

CEV's vision is a Europe in which volunteering is central in building a cohesive and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. Our mission is to create an enabling political, social and economic environment in Europe for the full potential of volunteering to be realized.

- *To be a representative voice for volunteering in Europe*
- *To strengthen the infrastructure for volunteering in the countries of Europe*
- *To promote volunteering and make it more effective*¹⁶

The United Nations' 2001 International Year of the Volunteer was influential in getting many more countries to examine their volunteer traditions and to establish some sort of center for volunteering, particularly throughout Africa and southeast Asia.

As in Japan, natural disasters often evoke a volunteer response that further entrenches a volunteer mobilization system. For example, the double whammy of the tsunami and the SARS epidemic forced the National Volunteering and Philanthropy Centre of Singapore to rise to the occasion in 1993 and 1994, only a short while after it was established in 1999.

Common Issues and Emerging Trends

The Internet has profoundly and universally changed what volunteer centers do. Ten years ago, most volunteer center members spent the majority of their time collecting information on available volunteer opportunities and helping individuals connect with them. This was done first through paper records, index card files and printed directories, then by computer programs that people could access by coming to the centers' offices. No more. Today, organizations can post their opportunities on their own Web sites or dozens of general and specific online registries; individuals can browse such listings from their homes or offices at their convenience, 24/7.

The change to Web-based volunteer matching was met with some resistance; some volunteer centers wondered what their purpose would be if freed from the work of compiling and update these local lists. But the change came very quickly and it soon became apparent that there was no going back. The most resilient centers have responded by re-focusing on

developing the volunteer management skills of agencies; running special projects for students, court-ordered service, and people with disabilities; and becoming engaged in disaster response or local priorities such as working with the unemployed. Now the evolution of online's social media is having a large impact, with volunteer centers developing online communities on forums such as Facebook and Twitter.

Throughout the world, volunteer centers (by any name) have been responsible for mobilizing millions of volunteers on behalf of thousands of important causes. Yet, by and large, these organizations are relatively unknown as a national movement. Even in their own countries they are often unnoticed. They are chronically under-funded and understaffed. Many are also remarkably uncreative in recruiting volunteers to help in volunteer center operations.

Volunteer centers have difficulty obtaining operating funds, for several reasons: 1) the general low status of volunteering and 2) the lack of value placed on coordinating volunteer efforts or educating leaders of volunteers. Many centers report frustration in having to demonstrate "impact" in a role as middle man; they are in-between the volunteers and the agencies that deploy them, not directly responsible for actual service provision.

Governments waffle between support and neglect, with different political administrations alternately emphasizing volunteer service as necessary to democracy or cutting funding because they believe volunteers can generate their own resources. For instance, right now the new Cameron government in the UK is extolling something called the "Big Society," calling for greater self-help neighborhood organizing; at the same time, deep cuts in government programs are putting the country's network of volunteer centers into jeopardy.

The year 2011 marks the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Volunteer, and a number of countries are again using the "2001 + 10" opportunity to examine or shine light on their infrastructure. Volunteers have named 2011 the "European Year of Volunteers" and plans are underway, coordinated by the European Volunteer Center, to promote and highlight volunteering in serious and fun ways. Research studies done in 2001 will be revisited and updated.

Volunteering, as always, is changing to meet the interests and demands of the moment. How volunteer centers cope with developments such as micro-volunteering or voluntourism – and whatever else may be just around the corner – will affect what they look like in the years to come.

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About the Author



Susan J. Ellis is President of Energize, Inc., a training, consulting, and publishing firm that specializes in volunteerism. She founded the Philadelphia-based company in 1977 and since that time has assisted clients throughout North America (48 states and 5 provinces), Europe (8 countries), Asia (3 countries), Latin America and Australia to create or strengthen their volunteer corps. The year 2007 marked Energize's 30th anniversary.

Ellis is the author or co-author of eleven books, including *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*, *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers* and *The Volunteer Recruitment Book*. All her books can be found in the [Energize Online Bookstore](#). From 1981 to 1987 she was Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*. She has written more than 90 articles on volunteer management for dozens of publications and writes the national bi-monthly column, "On Volunteers," for *The NonProfit Times*. [Complete [bibliography](#) of Susan's books and articles.]

Ellis' interest in new technology has taken Energize into cyberspace, where its innovative Web site has won international recognition as a premier resource for volunteer program leaders: www.energizeinc.com. She co-authored *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*, which is available in electronic form on the Energize Web site. In 2000, she and Steve McCurley launched the field's first online journal, *e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community*, for which she serves as editor.

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