



## **A Model of State Government Involvement in Volunteerism and Community Service**

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**V**olunteerism and community service is as much a part of American culture as the Declaration of Independence, baseball, and in-line skating. It transcends all aspects of American life, from religious to communal to familial. Every thinking person agrees that without volunteerism and community service, life in America would be vastly less productive, enjoyable, and fulfilling.

The degree of government involvement in community service and volunteerism in America has, over the past 200 years, been varied. At the federal level, it has ranged from compulsory and volunteer military service to Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps to the War on Poverty's ACTION programs. Today, the Peace Corps and the more recently instituted AmeriCorps offer citizens an opportunity to engage in service that meets needs of individuals at home and abroad.

At the local level, school boards have mandated community service as a requirement for high-school graduation. City councils rely on volunteers to serve on planning and zoning commissions, and libraries would close their doors were it not for volunteers who buoy up the efforts of paid staff.

State government involvement in volunteerism and community service is as varied as the states themselves. Some states have long-established State Offices of Volunteerism (SOV). These SOVs help promote and coordinate, on a statewide level, community service and volunteerism. The federal National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 have provided federal funds for states to create, in recent years, commissions on National and Community Service. These commissions are mandated to administer the federal AmeriCorps program in their respective states. With this federal funding, some states with existing SOVs have created separate commissions; others have established commissions that fall under the jurisdiction of SOVs. In

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states where no SOV existed, commissions have been established to administer the AmeriCorps program and conduct few, if any, activities to promote traditional volunteerism.

In some states, however, commissions have been established with federal funding not only to administer AmeriCorps, but also to promote, increase, and improve traditional volunteerism. Utah is one of those states.

### Historical Context

Utah's model of state-government involvement in community service and volunteerism is due, perhaps, to its history and its people. Utah's first permanent non-Native American settlers arrived in the state 150 years ago, on July 24, 1847. Led by Brigham Young, thousands of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — or Mormons, as they are often called — settled the arid desert valleys of Utah in an effort to find refuge from religious persecution in the East.

Because of their circumstances — arriving in the heat of summer, settling a valley virtually devoid of water, and living in utter poverty — the Latter-day Saint pioneers had no choice but to work together to survive. They built canals to bring water from the mountains. They pooled resources to build machinery. They banded together to build streets and community buildings. They divided the work needing to be accomplished among all members of their communities, according to the skills and needs of individual members.

That pioneer spirit of caring and pulling together seems to have survived to the present. While recent studies conducted by Independent Sector indicate approximately 48 percent of Americans currently volunteer in their communities, the most recent data available for Utah show that nearly 71 percent of Utahns volunteer at any given time. No doubt this is due in large part to the heritage of many of today's Utahns.

Prior to the establishment of the Utah Commission on National and Community Service — now called the Utah Commission on Volunteers — in February 1994, Utah had no state office of volunteerism. Local volunteer efforts were coordinated on a state-wide level through a few well-organized, good-intentioned, highly efficient, yet ill-funded organizations: the Utah Council of Volunteers, the Utah Directors of Volunteers, and the Serving Utah Network being the chief among them. In fact, one would marvel at the amount of work accomplished by these organizations with virtually no funding and no dedicated staff. Additionally, Utah had four volunteer centers whose directors met regularly to plan statewide recognition events, exchange best practices, and maintain a service network.

The Utah Council of Volunteers was a network of non-profit, government, and private-sector representatives who met regularly to organize volunteer recognition, coordinate efforts, and otherwise promote community service and volunteerism. Membership to the Utah Council of Volunteers was by election. The council merged with the Utah Commission on National and Community Service in the

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summer of 1995 to form the Utah Commission on Volunteers.

The Utah Directors of Volunteers (UDV) is comprised primarily of non-profit and government volunteer coordinators. UDV conducts regular training workshops open to anyone, and continues to thrive today.

The Serving Utah Network (SUN) was a loose network of higher-education administrators, faculty, and students who were involved in campus-sponsored community service and service learning. The State Office of Education and the Corporation for National Service were also represented. SUN has since become a chapter of Campus Compact, with all eleven of Utah's public and private institutions of higher education signing a founder's agreement in November 1996.

### **Utah's Model**

The Utah Commission on Volunteers was established in 1994 by state legislative act. The purpose of the commission is to increase and improve community service and volunteerism throughout Utah. It reports to the lieutenant governor, who is elected on the same ticket as Utah's governor. This reporting relationship is critical because it brings the commission a degree of authority, influence, and power that would otherwise be absent were it merely a program within a separate state government department.

The commission is composed of 25 members, appointed by the governor, who represent government, business, non-profit, and education sectors. It is staffed by an executive director, also appointed by the governor, and two additional full-time staff members. The Commission on Volunteers is organized into five standing committees: AmeriCorps/Evaluation, Community Collaboration, Resource Development, Volunteer Recognition, and Youth Voice. An executive committee directs the efforts of other committees. A nominations committee nominates officers and new commission members, who would then be approved and appointed by the governor.

From its inception, the commission has worked to establish relationships with existing organizations and agencies, government units, public and higher education, and the private sector. Perhaps two of the commission's many initiatives could serve as a model for others.

#### **• Volunteer Center Development**

The Utah Commission on Volunteers sees the establishment and nurturing of new volunteer centers as a critical link in its efforts to build the community-service infrastructure. Volunteer centers are private, non-profit agencies that link local volunteer needs with local volunteer resources. As late as December 1995, Utah was home to four volunteer centers. Three of the four are located along the densely populated Wasatch Front (in Ogden, Salt Lake City, and Provo), and one is located in the Northern Utah community of Logan. During late 1995 and throughout 1996, commission members and staff worked to establish additional volunteer centers. As of Decem-

ber 1996, the number of volunteer centers in Utah has grown from four to ten.

The establishment of volunteer centers has been a methodical, deliberate process. *First*, communities that could potentially establish volunteer centers were identified, with the primary determinant being population.

*Second*, contacts were made with people and organizations already in the community-service field, including United Way, retired and senior volunteer programs, schools, hospitals, and others. To be successful and sustainable, volunteer centers must be organized in a grass-roots manner by local community members; the commission and volunteer efforts as a whole would be ill-served if a community established a volunteer center merely because a bureaucrat from state government mandated it. To foster this type of local, grass-root support, commission staff would then meet with these key contacts to discuss community volunteer needs and current infrastructure. The commission and key contacts would next approach community opinion leaders — such as city councils, county commissions, Chambers of Commerce, and other key players — to continue discussing community volunteer needs. After this, the commission would leave discussions to local community members to determine ways a volunteer center could be established.

*Third*, the commission would provide initial seed money for startup of volunteer centers. The amount of funds available was intentionally kept low (\$15,000) so local communities would find other sources of funding to support the volunteer center over the long term.

*Fourth*, the commission would then continue to provide training and technical assistance through a variety of means, including contracting with established volunteer centers to provide one-on-one assistance. *Finally*, continual follow up is anticipated to ensure long-term viability.

#### • Private-Sector Partnerships

Because federal and state funding is inadequate to accomplish the commission's goals and mission, it has been and will continue to be necessary to form private-sector partnerships to fill the gap in funding.

For instance, early on the commission conducted a futile search for data regarding the status of volunteerism in Utah. No such data existed. A partnership was formed with Brigham Young University to conduct a statewide public-opinion poll at no cost to the commission. This study, conducted in September 1994, identified opinions, attitudes, and behavior toward volunteerism. One interesting finding was that people who volunteer the most are typically those who have the least amount of expendable time: 35- to 50-year-olds. These people are typically at the height of their careers and have children living at home. This finding is particularly intriguing when considered in light of the most common reason for not volunteering: *I don't have time.*

From this, the Utah Commission on Volunteers set a goal to promote volunteerism through a statewide mass-media campaign. This campaign would seek to change attitudes from *I don't have time to volunteer* to *I do have time*. However, such a campaign would require hundreds of thousands of dollars — more than the entire annual administrative budget for the commission.

Several steps were taken to meet this challenge. *First*, a partnership was formed with TeleScene Film and Video of Salt Lake City. The commission provided funding for "hard costs" of producing six television commercials, and TeleScene would donate its equipment, personnel, and expertise. The result was an in-kind donation of more than \$21,000.

Once the spots were produced, commission staff met with potential sponsors of the commercials. (The possibility of requesting local television stations to run the ads without charge as public-service announcements, or PSAs, was ruled out because prime-time runs could not be assured.) After only two visits to potential private-sector sponsors, a commitment was obtained from Geneva Steel of Vineyard, Utah, to provide approximately \$250,000 worth of television, radio, and print advertising in the commission's behalf. This advertising campaign ran from September 1995 to June 1996. In July 1996, Geneva Steel renewed its commitment to help, donating approximately \$180,000 between September 1996 and June 1997. TeleScene once again donated production of new television spots, which are now running on local stations.

Included in the television, radio, and print advertisements is an in-state toll-free telephone number (1-800-SERVE). When people call this number, their phone prefix is read and the call is automatically routed to the caller's local volunteer center for placement.

Other private-sector partnerships have resulted in donated office space, print advertisements, volunteer recognition awards, and cash.

The Utah Commission on Volunteers seeks to build win-win collaborations and relationships that improve and increase volunteerism and community service throughout Utah. It has met with some success and is now positioned, thanks to strong relationships with volunteer centers, universities, and the private sector, to achieve even greater results.

### **About the author**

Michael Call was appointed executive director of the Utah Commission on Volunteers in February 1994 by Utah Governor Mike Leavitt. In that role, he sets vision and implements strategies to accomplish the commission's objective of increasing and improving volunteerism throughout Utah. Call serves on the Advisory Board of the Salt Lake City Volunteer Center, the Public Relations Committee for United Way of Utah County, the Utah PTA Community Involvement Commission, and the Executive Steering Committee for the Western Regional Community Policing Training and Resource Center in Monmouth, Ore. A part-time faculty member at Brigham Young University, he teaches public relations courses and has published numerous works on public relations topics. He was the founding president of the Utah Valley Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and is accredited by that society.