

APPENDIX O

Volunteering in Michigan

Michigan, with its long history and strong commitment to volunteerism, frequently is referred to as “one of the leading states in the nation” in the field. This proud distinction reflects Michigianians’ high degree of collaboration and innovation in their approach to volunteer service. The distinction is no accident—it grew from many years of effort and innovation and a willingness to put aside the partisan political agenda to serve the common good.

Although the greatest strides in volunteerism have come in the last decade, the foundation of the modern volunteer movement was laid more than 30 years ago with George W. Romney’s election as governor of Michigan. He lived the concept of citizen service and championed its cause throughout Michigan and the nation. Governor Romney saw volunteering as vital and necessary to community problem solving and considered it to be the responsibility of every individual. Few who met him failed to be moved by his passion for service or challenged by his conviction. Among his permanent contributions to the field of service are the establishment of Volunteer: National Center (1970) and the Points of Light Foundation (1990). He also receives credit for conceiving and instigating the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future (1997); although the summit did not occur until after Governor Romney’s death, it is testament to his legacy that it marked the first time in U.S. history that all the living presidents joined forces to address a volunteer issue.

Today, Michigan has a extensive network of public and private organizations that support volunteer service, and these are supplemented by the work of national, regional, and local affiliates. To name but a few, state organizations include the Council of Michigan Foundations, Michigan Association of Volunteer Administrators, Michigan Campus Compact, Michigan Community Service Commission, Michigan Nonprofit Association, United Way of Michigan, and Volunteer Centers of Michigan. Although each serves a particular constituency (with a small degree of overlap), all work closely at the state level to coordinate their efforts and foster community collaboration. As other state networks and organizations evolve to promote volunteerism, they inevitably become part of this growing circle of support.

WHAT IS VOLUNTEERISM?

Voluntary action is popular in Michigan, but its nature is difficult to formally capture. Many volunteer activities are so central to daily life—such as helping in a school—that they are not seen as volunteering but as routine. Whether a given activity is seen as “volunteering” is matter of personal interpretation, and such designation varies by culture, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic group. Volunteering also is affected by a number of societal phenomena, including single-parent families, dual-income households, family and corporate volunteer programs, national service, and changing lifestyles.

Moreover, there sometimes is confusion about the difference between “volunteerism” (voluntary action) and “community service” (typically used in reference to mandated involvement through the judicial system). The terms increasingly are used interchangeably, and there certainly are no boundaries imposed on the realm of activities that may be considered “volunteering”: Tasks range from raking a local park to helping organizations raise funds to advocating for a cause to serving on the board of a community organization. The absence of a universal definition or established parameters makes it difficult to quantitatively measure the extent of volunteerism. It also makes it difficult to characterize a “volunteer.” Community experience tells us that the “traditional” volunteer—typically middle class, Caucasian, Christian—is largely a thing of the past, although researchers find this conventional image still reflected in most statistical data.

There are many ways for a person to become involved in volunteerism: at one’s own initiative, as part of an elective group (e.g., family, youth organization, service club), or as part of a prescribed group (e.g., classroom, work place). However one comes to be a volunteer, his/her efforts generally fall into one of three categories: service learning, service corps, or mandatory/compulsory service.

- *Service learning* is tied to an education curriculum or has a specific education component. Not only is a service rendered for the common good, but the volunteer gains from the personal development that comes from helping others.
- A *service corps* is a team of volunteers organized to perform service over an extended period. Full-time corps members may receive living allowances and/or education awards; examples are AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps*VISTA, National Civilian Community Corps, and Peace Corps. Programs involving shorter-term commitments, such as the Youth Volunteer Corps, may offer no financial support.
- *Mandatory or compulsory* service is carried out when an authoritative body, such as a school or court, requires such service as a way to earn credit or discharge an obligation.

WHO VOLUNTEERS IN MICHIGAN?

A number of surveys have been conducted to ascertain the extent of volunteerism in Michigan and gain information about the people who do it. A 1994 survey found that Michigan volunteers averaged 18.8 hours of service in the month prior to the survey, with men and women offering approximately the same hours. African-Americans were found to be volunteering more time (an average of 28.5 hours in the prior month) than Caucasians (17.5 hours). In 1997 the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (Michigan State University) surveyed 975 Michigan residents on their nonprofit and voluntary activity. More than 40 percent of respondents reported volunteering during the prior 12 months. Although this is lower than the national rate (50 percent), the survey found that Michiganians devote more time to volunteering than do their national counterparts. Following are a number of the 1997 survey's broad findings.

- *Gender* Men (42 percent) and women (40 percent) are equally likely to volunteer.
- *Age* The youngest and oldest age groups volunteer less than others; the highest instance of volunteering (49 percent) occurs among those aged 35–54.
- *Race* More Caucasians volunteer than do African-Americans (44 percent and 20 percent, respectively).
- *Education* Fifty percent of those who have college education volunteer, while for those with less education, the figure is only 26 percent.
- *Partisan affiliation* Republicans (47 percent) and independents (47 percent) volunteer more than Democrats (35 percent), who volunteer more than those who have no political affiliation (30 percent).
- *Religion* Catholics volunteer the most (49 percent), followed by Protestants (31 percent) and those with no religious affiliation (23 percent).
- *Geography* More than half of all east central Michigan and northern Michigan residents volunteer, while only a quarter of Detroit residents volunteer. The Upper Peninsula has the second lowest rate of volunteerism (35 percent).
- *Contributors* Of people who financially support an organization, 80 percent also give of their time.
- *Non-volunteers* Almost 60 percent said they do not have enough time to volunteer; other reasons for not volunteering include physical or emotional disability (10 percent) and not having been asked (7 percent).

Twenty-five years of surveys (by Gallup, JC Penney, and Battelle Institute) indicate the primary reason people volunteer (42–62 percent of respondents over this period) is because “somebody asked.”

WHAT ARE THE PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES AFFECTING VOLUNTEERISM?

Although volunteerism would seem to be a private-sector venue, it is affected by public policy. Here, three specific areas are outlined.

- Current *welfare reform* provisions could have a significant effect on the field because of the new requirements that recipients of state and federal assistance become employed or engage in volunteer work. Many nonprofits do not have sufficient staff to train or supervise an influx of volunteers. Moreover, most have limited office space in which to put volunteers to work, and most cannot help volunteers with daycare for their children or transportation. If volunteering is to be a meaningful form of personal development and community benefit, the programs that are providing the experience must receive the support they need to make it so.
- Sustainable *funding* is a key issue for most volunteer programs. Despite the fact that most nonprofit agencies rely heavily on volunteers in delivering their services (and the need to do so is increasing with welfare reform and devolution), volunteer programs are run with administrative funds, which are the hardest to obtain and usually first to be cut when there is a budget squeeze. Moreover, what funding there is for volunteer recruitment, training, and supervision/management varies from year to year, making it difficult for most small nonprofits to establish solid volunteer programs (many now rely on outside agencies, such as volunteer centers, to help them recruit and coordinate volunteers). In 1997 the State of Michigan instituted Volunteer Investment grants, coordinated through the Michigan Community Service Commission; although this is a step in the right direction, the program requires local fund-raising for an endowment, which presents its own set of challenges. People in the field are hoping for sustainable administrative funding that will complement the private grant monies that organizations receive and permit them to develop and sustain strong volunteer programs that will expand their ability to meet community needs.
- Volunteer *liability* is a serious concern for most nonprofit organizations. While liability insurance is available to cover the actions of volunteers, most is inadequate, particularly with regard to youth volunteers and where transportation is involved. The federal Volunteer Liability Act (1997) protects volunteers who work with nonprofit organizations and government agencies from personal liability in most cases but not all.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering is a popular way to make a difference in Michigan communities. It is promoted through such large-scale national events as America's Promise, Make A Difference Day (annually, in October) and National Volunteer Week (annually, in April) and through such individual organization and local efforts as Day of Caring, Alternative Spring Break, and Nickelodeon's Big Help Day. As the

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nonprofit sector takes on new and expanded functions, the role of volunteers is likely to increase. In addition, welfare reform and other initiatives are drawing volunteers from nontraditional sectors, and this will increase the frequency of volunteering. All indicators point to volunteerism continuing to have a strong presence in Michigan, with volunteers becoming more active, vocal, and selective (that is, they are looking for opportunities through which they may help to meet real community needs) in their efforts.

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