Creating a Volunteer Infrastructure through Public Funding

Koen P. R. Bartels, Guido Cozzi, and Noemi Mantovan have authored an important article that engages policy leaders at all levels of government throughout the world in identifying ways to promote volunteer service as a catalyst to strengthen communities. Enabling individuals to serve their communities through volunteering supports and strengthens an active citizenry, a critical component in sustaining the foundations of any democratically based government. Volunteers are essential to supporting healthy social and economic development, addressing critical gaps in public and private service provision.

Rather than simply viewing government funding as a buoy to maintain volunteer levels, we suggest that it helps augment and strengthen services provided by the public and private sectors. Public spending that supports volunteerism establishes the critical infrastructure that allows volunteers to perform to their maximum potential, increasing their efficiency and effectiveness.

In many instances, some of our most vulnerable citizens and individuals needing one-on-one attention benefit from publicly funded volunteer infrastructure. For instance, AmeriCorps members, who are partially supported by public funds, are known for their capacity to leverage and organize significant numbers of volunteers who can be deployed to address critical needs beyond what public funds alone can support. Approximately 70,000 individuals served in AmeriCorps in 2012, working to increase the quality of education for kids, to serve our nation’s veterans, to protect our environment and respond to natural disasters, and to develop economic opportunities and healthy futures in communities. They receive a small living allowance of just over $1,000 per month, health insurance, and a $5,500 education award at the successful conclusion of full-time service that can help pay for posteducation expenses such student loans.

We are increasingly seeing the value of volunteers, most recently in the response to Hurricane Sandy. Many of the national service members serving in AmeriCorps have been deployed to affected areas to develop, coordinate, and operate volunteer reception centers. These centers serve as volunteer exchanges where individuals needing assistance in cleaning and repairing a damaged home can list their need, and community volunteers who have stepped forward to lend a hand are dispatched to assist residents in need. National service members manage logistics and operations, coordinating these unaffiliated volunteers as they muck flooded houses and clear debris. This type of effort is critical in disaster recovery, especially for residents on fixed incomes who have no insurance or for whom existing insurance will not cover damage. During the aftermath of the devastating tornado that struck Joplin, Missouri, in 2011, the estimated value of this contributed volunteer effort was $17 million, which significantly assisted the city of Joplin in meeting its required match contribution in order to secure federal disaster funds. The Corporation for National and Community Service is actively measuring and monitoring the response to Hurricane Sandy in an effort to demonstrate the impact of national service on disaster recovery; preliminary results show a modest number of national service members leveraging thousands of unaffiliated volunteers to address critical community needs.

Beyond disaster response, national service members are active in 1 of 10 American public schools, providing direct tutoring, mentoring, and supplementary education services. The Volunteering and Civic Life in America report, an annual effort by the Corporation, recently demonstrated that schools are civic hubs that engage millions of American volunteers. National service members not only provide direct service to students but also recruit, organize, and lead many of the 43 percent of parents who volunteer in youth service organizations nationwide. Without a volunteer coordination and management infrastructure, parents and community members would likely struggle to increase educational outcomes for all students.
The Corporation is dedicated to providing sound evidence that national service programs create healthier communities, better schools, and a more engaged citizenry. Volunteers are essential to supporting healthy social and economic development, and to addressing critical gaps in public and private service provision.