



5450 Wissahickon Avenue, C-13
Philadelphia, PA 19144-5292

voice: 215-438-8342

fax: 215-438-0434

info@energizeinc.com

www.energizeinc.com

"A New Era of Responsibility": An Open Letter to President Obama

Posted to the Energize, Inc. Web Site as the "February 2009 Hot Topic"

<http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2009/09feb.html>

Dear President Obama:

I join with millions of Americans in welcoming you to the Presidency and feel the renewed spirit that you are engendering in our country. Because you have made a commitment to all forms of community service, including what is generally called volunteering, I'd like to take this opportunity to connect you with the professional field of "volunteer resource management." We're a field that has often been ignored by past Administrations in favor of establishing brand new campaigns that assume there are no existing resources for best practices in volunteerism.

You have already raised the visibility of volunteering through your speeches, writings, and actions – and you have provided the catch phrase of "a new era of responsibility." Thank you for including citizen participation in your very [first posting to the new White House Blog](#) on your first half-day in office, January 20, 2009. More specifically, thank you for taking the opportunity of the Martin Luther King Jr. "Day On – Not Off" to urge much more than single bursts of energy:

So today, I am asking you to roll up your sleeves and join in the work of remaking this nation. I pledge to you that government will do its part to open up more opportunities for citizens to participate. And in return, I ask you to play your part – to not just pitch in today, but to make an ongoing commitment that lasts far beyond one day, or even one presidency.

Of course we have heard such rhetoric before but I genuinely believe that your Administration will be different and add tangible resources to the lip service. Your hallmark is seeking solid information and educated opinions to develop your strategy, so this open letter is intended to give you input on the subject from professionals who work in the field of volunteer engagement and understand its complexities. Here is what we believe your Administration can do to strengthen volunteering in the United States. Below are some of my ideas and then our site visitors (who number in the thousands daily, from around the world) will add their perspectives in the response area.

- The problems confronting our society today need BOTH volunteers *and* money. It's not either/or. Too often your predecessors have turned to volunteer engagement as a way to *avoid* government responsibility for the common good. The more citizens see our tax dollars going to critical services, the more we will contribute our time and energy towards their success.

- Focus on examples of volunteering that work to *solve the causes* of entrenched problems and go beyond addressing only the symptoms. No U.S. President should ever again extol “working in a soup kitchen” without stressing how citizens can become activists in the fight to *end hunger*. A newly painted wall is certainly valuable to a homeless teen center, but think about the message sent to America if the volunteering modeled was instead mentoring those same teens to stay in school, finding their parents solid jobs, or removing street violence from their lives. Volunteers are already engaged in all those actions, too, even if they provide fewer “photo ops.”
- Spend money on national service programs because AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and the like allow thousands of dedicated participants to give a year or two of *full-time* service, which can be transformational to both the giver and the receiver. However, recognize that such expensive programs only deal with a minute percentage of the millions of volunteers out there who give a few hours when they can all year long. Daily volunteering by Americans of all ages is rarely acknowledged, often neglected, and usually underfunded. You will soon be appointing a new Director of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Please select someone who understands the *full spectrum* of citizen participation. Today, CNCS focuses on youth and seniors. What about all the people in-between?
- Seek to share the knowledge and best practices of volunteer management as they have developed here with the rest of the world – but never, never under the assumption that “volunteering is uniquely American.” It is not. Volunteering is truly international and we should go abroad to *exchange* methodology, not preach our own. Change the pattern of the U.S. being absent from collaborations and celebrations on the international stage. Most developed countries have a “national center” for volunteerism with the mandate to represent their citizen volunteers to the rest of the world. Unlike your predecessors, you can encourage the CNCS and the new Hands On Network/Points of Light Institute (which receives federal funds) to fulfill this role—which will also help all Americans in this field who work internationally.
- Understand that people are not unwilling to volunteer, but rather, organizations often are unwilling to welcome the skills and the *input* of community members. It’s the unhappy dark side of nonprofits that so few of them want strong volunteers or are able to harness highly-skilled volunteer talents effectively. Just look at how few nonprofits designate funds for volunteer program coordination or other tools that volunteers need to perform effectively. The federal government can assure that all its grant proposal guidelines ask:
 1. How will community volunteers be involved in this project?
 2. What funds are being requested to support volunteer involvement?

Fund those requests that include community participation in a strategic way and budget for a coordinator of volunteers position.

- Lift the ban against volunteers serving *in government*, rather than exhorting nonprofits to be open to community involvement. Right now, the federal government *prohibits* volunteers from working in all its offices except for a few designated programs (National Park Service, Cooperative Extension, veterans hospitals, and so on). CNCS cannot invite citizens to help in the work of the Corporation itself! State, county and municipal governments have long ago overcome this hurdle. It's time for Washington to get on board. [Note that this may force a confrontation with government worker labor unions who will misunderstand and fight this as a "slippery slope" threatening their jobs. As chief executive, you can assure that allowing taxpayers to volunteer in government *expands* the benefit of their tax dollars, in *addition* to the salaries needed to provide basic services.]
- Applaud that volunteers are active in all areas of society, way beyond human services. Museum docents, bike path advocates, youth soccer coaches, community orchestra members – all contribute to the quality of life as much as volunteers in homeless shelters or AIDS clinics. No one was paid to dump the tea in Boston Harbor, and still today all forms of cause-related activism rely on unpaid workers. Past politicians extolled volunteers as "quiet heroes." Given your community organizing background, you know that more things get done by noisy advocates!

Please read on to see what our colleagues want to say to you, too.

All our thoughts and wishes are concentrated on your success. And we'll roll up our sleeves, too.

Yours in service,

Susan J. Ellis
President
Energize, Inc.