
Building the Bridge from Episodic Volunteerism to Social Capital

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The volunteers had discovered a powerful sociological truth: the most satisfying selves we will ever know are those that attach to communities and purposes outside of ourselves.

—Doug McAdam, in *Freedom Summer*¹

Service, reaching out to help others, is a powerful and important platform for building community and social capital. For purposes of this analysis, the terms community service and volunteerism are used interchangeably to refer to giving time in hopes of benefiting a cause, organization, larger community or persons. Volunteering has been celebrated as a critical element of the American experiment for hundreds of years. This article will look at the evolving nature of volunteerism in the United States, and then explore some of the pressing questions that confront service activity in America today. For instance, what is the relationship between the rising number of volunteers and parallel declines in political and civic engagement? How are changing patterns of volunteerism affecting the creation of social capital? Are there ways of supporting and transforming current volunteer efforts to increase their impact on communities?

Specifically, this article will highlight the changes, uncertainties and potential dangers that lurk behind current volunteer trends, while emphasizing the

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emergence of what has been termed “flexible” or “episodic” volunteerism. Episodic volunteerism means that individuals give time sporadically, without an on-going commitment, often in the form of self-contained and time-specific projects.

This article combines research, reflection and specific recommendations for changes in volunteer programs. It is divided into two principal sections. The first section will examine the trend towards episodic volunteerism, interpreting its potential and limitations. The second section will offer specific, actionable recommendations for CityCares, an alliance of nonprofit organizations that mobilize volunteers by offering flexible opportunities. Recommendations for programmatic changes at CityCares’ affiliates (with applicability for other volunteer programs) aim to maximize flexible volunteerism and its impact on the community and on building social capital.

The following preface overviews some of the roles that volunteerism plays in society and its connection to social capital. As Robert Putnam demonstrates, through a variety of sociological indicators, volunteer participation is “strongly predicted by civic engagement” and an important “diagnostic sign of social capital.”² Volunteering is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which individuals build community. Service offers a sort of community commons, where people can come together to create layers of social connection and relationships. From traditional service clubs like Kiwanis, to neighborhood associations, to nonprofit boards, volunteerism threads individuals together into the tapestry of a community. Volunteers run and manage the independent sector, comprised of the nonprofit or non-governmental organizations that make up civil society. Millions of volunteers allow voluntary associations to feed the hungry, advocate for social change, research new discoveries, protect neighborhoods and worship together in communities. While volunteers work, they make new friends and connections, building their own sense of community, learning new skills, fostering heightened self-esteem, and cultivating leadership capacities. Additionally, volunteering has been shown, particularly among youth, to develop citizenship skills and greater political efficacy.³ Importantly, volunteering seems to lead to greater overall altruism and participation. Putnam states, “In 1995 volunteers contributed two or three times as much of their household income to charity as did non-volunteers.”⁴ A critical, but often unrealized role that volunteerism can play is to bring people together across differences, to allow for bridging social capital. Service provides unique ground for a diverse group of people to work together toward common goals. Additionally, service is an opportunity, through meaningful volunteer exchange, to allow individuals to bridge cleavages based on class, race and power.

**THE CHANGING FACE OF VOLUNTEERISM AND THE
EMERGENCE OF EPISODIC VOLUNTEERISM
TRENDS IN VOLUNTEERISM IN THE U.S.**

Despite a decline in many indices of civic engagement, the number of volunteers has been on the rise over the last decade. The Independent Sector's Giving and Volunteering Survey tracks national patterns in philanthropy and volunteerism. In 1993, 48 percent of respondents reported some volunteering activity, while in 1995 there was a slight increase to 49 percent.⁵ In their most recent survey, tracking 1998 activity, 56 percent of adults, aged 18 or older, reported volunteering. "This is the highest ever recorded level of participation in volunteering during the Independent Sector Survey series, a 13.7 percent increase in the rate of volunteering."⁶ A look at the broader pattern over time, however, reveals that the rate of growth is less dramatic; the rate of volunteer participation in 1989 was 54.4 percent.⁷

Interestingly, despite these increases in rates of participation, the total number of hours contributed was 2 percent lower than the hours contributed in 1995. This means that more volunteers are giving a lower number of total hours. In fact, the average number of hours that volunteers are contributing has steadily decreased since 1987. This could be the result of broader participation levels of individuals who did not regularly volunteer. In the 1998 survey, 41 percent of volunteers contributed time sporadically and considered it a one-time activity. Nine percent reportedly volunteered only at special times of the year, such as during a religious holiday. Only 39 percent of volunteers preferred to volunteer at a scheduled time, either weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. Although informal volunteering has declined by 11 percent, the capacity of social capital and human connections to generate volunteerism is still quite strong. Ninety percent of individuals volunteered when asked and 42 percent of volunteers found out about activities through personal contact.⁸

Who are these volunteers? The majority of them are women. Approximately 49 percent of men and 62 percent of women surveyed reportedly participated in volunteering. The 35-44 year olds (67 percent) and 45-54 year olds (63 percent) reported the highest participation and the highest average weekly volunteer rate of the age groups. In addition, seniors over the age of 75 as well as college age 18-24 respondents reported an 8 to 9 percent increase in participation rates.⁹ Socio-economics and education play an important role in the profile of volunteers. Only 42 percent of households with an average income under U.S.\$20,000 reportedly volunteered in 1998, whereas 68 percent of households with an average income between U.S.\$40,000 and U.S.\$49,000 reported volunteering. Finally, those with college degrees were 50-60 percent more likely to volunteer than individuals who had only a high school diploma.¹⁰ Therefore, discretionary income and time are critical in enabling individuals to volunteer in the U.S.

So, what trends and changes lay behind these numbers? Although the number of people volunteering is rising, many of the factors that have affected a broader civic decline in well-being are also working against community service. Changes in the role of women have depleted the reserves of volunteers who are available for extended periods of time and during the day. The increasingly hectic pace of life for individuals and families and their perceived, or real, limitations in time, make commitments from volunteers hard to extract. In an article about the growth of episodic volunteerism in the *Wall Street Journal*, Susan Ellis, a consultant for volunteer groups, articulated this dilemma: "The 'I'm here as long as you need me' type of volunteering is dead. People don't make commitments. They are stressed and don't want to do something that sucks time out of their lives."¹¹ The trends of modern society, including the increased number of hours dedicated to TV and other isolating forms of entertainment, has created many competing demands that, in effect, cannibalize the total number of hours that individuals might contribute to the community. As a result, we see the evolution of a new type of volunteer.

Emerging out of these changes comes a growing number of volunteers that make short-term commitments to a variety of projects or agencies. Nancy Macduff, a volunteer consultant, who coined the term "episodic volunteer," profiles this new trend in a *Seattle Times* article: "If you're an episodic volunteer, you thrive on short-term measurable projects, jobs where you can jump into the fray, accomplish something, and jump back out."¹² Macduff characterizes these volunteers as caring as much about relationships as causes: "It's true that you're interested in making the world a better place. But personal relationships count the most. You're altruistic, but rarely committed to a single nonprofit agency. You look for people who share your values, your interests, your skills."¹³ Thus, service becomes an intentional social opportunity and participation is often in group or team projects. Increasingly, volunteer agencies are adjusting to the changing needs of volunteers. Agencies are offering more flexibility in terms of commitment, cutting down on training requirements, promoting the social element of service, and recognizing volunteers through a variety of mechanisms.

CITYCARES

One manifestation of these emerging trends is the creation and growth of The CityCares' volunteer organizations. In 1987, a group of young adults in New York came together to create a new way for people to make a difference in their community. They developed a program that offered scheduling flexibility with lots of evening and weekend projects, a broad diversity of quality service projects managed by experienced volunteers, and group activities. They offered volunteers a spirit of innovation, fun and the promise of direct and tangible community impact.

The idea spread quickly. Today there are 27 affiliates around the country and nine affiliates in the U.K. with a combined budget of approximately U.S.\$15 million annually. In 1999, CityCares' affiliates provided and managed 18,000 "hands on" service projects addressing a broad spectrum of social needs. Projects represent a wide range of scale and purpose. For example, one project in Atlanta consisted of 800 people renovating a community center, another project in Los Angeles relied on a half dozen volunteers to meet monthly to help homeless persons write their resumes, and a project in New York City organized teams of volunteers to take children each week to the New York Public Library. Many volunteers come out for one-time projects according to their schedules, others find a project that they are committed to and become regular participants with an agency or group. CityCares affiliates partner with 3,200 nonprofit and educational organizations, offering citizens more than 15,000 monthly individual opportunities to serve. Although CityCares did not emerge out of a study, it was a response to the changing needs of volunteers and the evolving obstacles to participation.

THE CHANGING NEEDS OF VOLUNTEERS

A study commissioned by The League of Women Voters entitled "Working Together: Community Involvement in America" identified potential suggestions for overcoming barriers to community involvement in America. Key solutions identified were: 1) community service opportunities should be flexible in both schedule and required time commitment; 2) organizations people are serving need to be credible; 3) volunteers need assurance that their time will not be wasted; and, 4) volunteers should be able to choose assignments that match their skills and interests.¹⁴ There are opportunities in these trends. Some of the possibilities highlighted in studies, such as Peter Hart's New Leadership for a New Century Poll, point to the new attitudes that young people bring to their volunteer service. In summary, young Americans place "a heavy emphasis on direct, one-on-one, individual service,... a premium on the efficacy of small groups of people working together to effect change in tangible ways," and a new importance on "reaching out to connect to and work with people from different backgrounds to address problems and formulate solutions."¹⁵

The reality of the changing needs and interests of volunteers is clear, but the effect on nonprofit organizations, and the volunteers themselves, is less certain. Nonprofit organizations are struggling to fulfill their missions with a shrinking pool of long-term daytime volunteers. They seek alternative ways of using short-term groups of volunteers. An article in the *Washington Post* highlighted the challenges and opportunities of this trend of flexible volunteerism. Aaron Heffron, of the Independent Sector, summarized part of the challenge: "As the pool of regularly available working-age people has shrunk, volunteer agencies

have had to tap into untraditional groups. Today, teenagers and seniors form the most dependable core of volunteers for many groups.”¹⁶ Jacqueline Davis, one of the founders of an organization coordinating episodic volunteers suggests that by bringing people into service a first time, they were more likely to return. She writes, “This is a catalyst to bring people into a higher level of commitment. When they see that community service can be fun and can fit into their lives, some are willing to do more.”¹⁷

THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERISM ON VOLUNTEERS

There are at least two major outcomes of volunteerism: 1) the quantifiable product or fruit of the volunteer effort upon an individual, nonprofit organization or neighborhood; and 2) the changes that the volunteer undergoes in the process of serving. This analysis is concerned with the latter. A number of questions remain unanswered about the impact of flexible volunteering. Can the changing needs of volunteers be met and still provide the essential volunteer support that nonprofit organizations need? Are efforts like CityCares increasing the total number of volunteers, but diminishing their long-term commitment and thus the total number of hours invested from volunteers? In other words, is this effort alleviating the trend towards disengagement or hastening the decline of long-term commitment? Does short-term volunteer involvement lead to longer-term volunteer commitments or to other forms of civic engagement? How does episodic volunteerism change one of the by-products of service, social capital? What is the minimum threshold of service engagement that enables benefits for volunteers around attitudinal changes, skill development, and personal well being? Are there programs or strategies that can be introduced to move people from short-term volunteerism to longer-term commitments? How can we translate flexible volunteering into long-term social capital?

Despite many uncertainties about the impact of these shifts in volunteerism, scant research specifically addresses these questions. Nevertheless, there have been a variety of studies conducted on the participation and perceptions of volunteers. These range from the BluePrint survey of citizen attitudes on community and civic life, to the Points of Lights’ Survey on Volunteering for Serious Social Problems, to the League of Women Voters’ look at obstacles to involvement. What is lacking still, however, is a study on episodic volunteerism that uncovers patterns of increased or decreased involvement and the threshold of volunteer activity necessary to influence and transform participants. Such a study would examine broad areas of individual reflection that might reveal the impact of volunteerism on the volunteer. See Table 1.

TABLE I: POSSIBLE IMPACTS OF VOLUNTEERISM ON VOLUNTEERS

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- 1) Changes in level of political interest or activism.
 - 2) Sense of personal efficacy in creating change or making a difference.
 - 3) Leadership capacities.
 - 4) Understanding of critical local issues.
 - 5) Tolerance and compassion.
 - 6) Changes in vocation and avocation.
 - 7) Personal well-being.
 - 8) Personal connections- bridging and bonding.
 - 9) Social trust levels.
 - 10) Community and individual values.
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Reflecting upon the potential ways that volunteers could be influenced by service raises a variety of programmatic implications. For instance, many of the studies focused on youth service have determined that community service, devoid of service learning activities, have yielded little impact. Only when coupled with reflection and a carefully structured curriculum does volunteerism with youth generate changes in attitudes or capacities. This is likely to be mirrored, perhaps to a lesser extent, in adult volunteer activity. The next section of this paper will propose a variety of “vitamins” to infuse new energy into the programs of CityCares affiliates to maximize impact.¹⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CITYCARES TO CATALYZE VOLUNTEER TRANSFORMATION:

I. EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR VOLUNTEER ALLIANCES AND NETWORKS

In Doug McAdam’s book that charts the effect of Freedom Summer on its volunteers, one of his key findings is the resulting network of relationships and solidarity among the volunteers enabled a long-term commitment to social change. In his words, “Activism depends on more than just idealism. It is not enough that people be attitudinally inclined towards activism. There must also exist formal organizations or informal social networks that structure and sustain collective action.... Those volunteers who remain active today are distinguished from those who are not by virtue of their stronger organizational affiliations and continued ties to other activists.”¹⁹ In a similar manner, CityCares’ affiliates have powerful possibilities to provide fertile ground for people with social interests to plant seeds together and create alliances of change. Bringing individuals with shared community concerns together, and allowing them to form networks to motivate, sustain and re-inspire one another

would encourage volunteer retention and, more importantly, a broader level of civic engagement and community connectedness.

Some of this relationship building is already a natural part of the volunteer experience, and particularly the group nature of many of CityCares projects. There are, however, other more deliberate ways to encourage relationships among volunteers and the development of social networks. One idea would be the expansion of a program within CityCares called TeamWorks. This initiative gives interested individuals an opportunity to be a part of a team that participates in a variety of different projects over a period of several months. It provides an opportunity for volunteers to work together consistently with the same group and try a variety of projects. Teams can also focus on particular areas, such as homelessness, the environment or public education. By focusing on this program and trying to raise the level of participation, CityCares could further encourage relationship building. Additionally, CityCares affiliates should consider raising the bar of commitment for certain teams. CityCares could offer these teams a more comprehensive curriculum and a vigorous team-oriented experience. Unfortunately, CityCares has evolved towards a sort of "TeamWorks Lite," in order to capture a broader audience. However, a broader spectrum of commitment levels would likely present the opportunity for interested volunteers to build stronger levels of relationship and experience.

CityCares should consider a variety of other potential organizational tactics. All volunteers attend a short orientation before participating. This orientation could be expanded to allow for further training and relationship building. Currently, CityCares treats each orientation group as a disparate assembly of individuals rather than as a group with a collective identity. CityCares could shift these orientation sessions to become more of a group experience. Each orientation group could be considered a "volunteer class" that would be tracked by their collective volunteer involvement and would be encouraged to coordinate their first volunteer experience together. With technology, CityCares could create a group e-mail exchange to initiate correspondence, post bulletins about recent activities and construct a virtual community as a pathway towards a community built on service relationships. Generally, through this effort, CityCares affiliates should seek to enable volunteers to immediately enter the organization with a group identity that they could build upon.

Other ideas for creating dialogue include additional forms of virtual communication among volunteers to enable carpooling, sharing stories of volunteer experiences and recruitment and retention efforts between volunteers. Additionally, CityCares can provide opportunities for discussion groups around community issues of interest and other forms of social opportunities that are built around community engagement. These kinds of efforts are likely to reinforce and deepen commitment and feed the hunger for community that volunteers seek through their engagement.

2. FIND WAYS OF DEEPENING VOLUNTEER UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE OF ISSUES

Volunteerism can be an important window to allow us to see issues from another angle and to come to understand critical issues affecting our community. We can see this lived out in social movements throughout history. The Settlement House volunteers of the late 19th century and early 20th century provide a dramatic and important example of this possibility. These idealists and students moved into poor urban neighborhoods to study living conditions and to serve the community. In working in the Settlement Houses and creating relationships with immigrant communities, Settlement workers came to new ways of thinking about the critical issues. They went on to become advocates for social change, government reformers, and founded important nonprofit organizations that have profoundly changed American life. Doug McAdams also points to this kind of experience for the Civil Rights volunteers who, for the first time, directly confronted what they had understood only abstractly. "No such comfortable distance was possible in Mississippi. The volunteer's generally optimistic, idealistic upbringing had not prepared them for the underside of the American dream."²⁰ Of course, it is ambitious to replicate the intensity of the confrontation of the Settlement House volunteers or the Freedom Summer volunteers in the service experience of short-term volunteers. CityCares can, however, use the experience of volunteerism as a platform to better dramatize the critical issues of our day and our community.

CityCares can find a variety of mechanisms to disseminate factual information about critical issues. Without advocating for any particular position, CityCares affiliates can offer facts about problems that confront us as a community. Small, but important, programming changes might include disseminating fact sheets around each of the volunteer content areas that CityCares purports to address (i.e. facts about homelessness in Phoenix and in the nation). Additionally, CityCares affiliates can use the publication of their monthly calendar of activities as a way of creating a written dialogue around critical issues, with articles by community activists or volunteers on different sides of issues. One important programmatic initiative that will tie a variety of these suggestions together in what is being termed the "Citizen Academy." This effort will offer a variety of forums, round-tables, classes, lectures and group discussion opportunities to volunteers around issues of interest. This effort will provide common ground for volunteers to dialogue and grapple with issues of importance. Some of the classes will be offered to wrestle with specific issues, such as the current challenges faced by Atlanta's public education system or urban sprawl, while other forums will be broader in subject, such as the connection between spirituality and service. Each session will allow volunteers to dialogue, meet with experts in the fields of service

they are addressing, form alliances with other volunteers and mix reflection and action to reach new levels of understanding of issues and community.

3. INCORPORATE PRACTICES OF SERVICE LEARNING INTO THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

There has been a good deal of research on service learning curriculum and activities and their effects upon the development of young people. Evidence that meaningful volunteer work, combined with service learning opportunities, can make a difference in the attitudes, political efficacy, skill development, and citizenship capacities of young people. There has, however, not been a great deal of application of these findings or this methodology to the experience of adult volunteers. CityCares would be well served to adopt some service learning reflection exercises and methodologies and make them a part of every volunteer experience. This can be accomplished by ensuring that every volunteer project has an opportunity for de-briefing, reflection, and sharing from volunteers. More ambitiously, this might involve the training of project coordinators to lead a variety of exercises or implement specific curriculum for certain projects. At any rate, CityCares could certainly benefit from the adoption of best practices of service learning programs to the context of volunteering with CityCares organizations.

4. APPLY SOCIAL CAPITAL LESSONS TO VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

There is a variety of research, including John Wilson and Marc Musick's work on the Contribution of Social Resources to Volunteering, that demonstrates the important role of social networks and community connection in who volunteers. They state, "Social scientists agree that a high level of civic engagement depends on an abundant supply of social capital."²¹ Surveys reveal that most volunteers begin volunteering because they were asked by someone or introduced to the project through a friend. These facts should profoundly influence the way that CityCares recruits volunteers. CityCares affiliates have largely grown organically and through word of mouth, but as the organizations have grown, they have turned to more "sophisticated" forms of volunteer recruitment (i.e. media, advertising). There is an opportunity to now apply more deliberate methods of recruitment through individuals. Affiliates should experiment with a variety of forms of grassroots volunteer recruitment. For instance, asking new volunteers to suggest five additional friends that they would be willing to contact to volunteer. Additionally, we should try and recruit pre-formed groups to volunteer together, versus simply targeting individuals. There is a powerful dynamic of self-reinforcing commitment in getting already assembled work, faith, or other types of civic

groups to serve together. CityCares affiliates should deploy its volunteers to be the front-line recruiters, ambassadors of volunteerism, creating recruitment mechanisms to allow for exponential growth through networks of friends.

Additionally, CityCares should employ volunteers to support its volunteer retention efforts. "Research suggests that the nature of the contact volunteers experience with others while serving as volunteers may be even more influential on their level of satisfaction than the nature of the task."²² Volunteers should, themselves, be deployed in thanking and encouraging other volunteers to return to their activities. Technology can be an effective and cost-efficient mechanism through which CityCares' affiliates can encourage this kind of personal thank you and relationship development between volunteers. Additionally, CityCares can create opportunities for volunteers to be part of groups based upon their level of commitment, thereby pulling the most active volunteers together as a way of creating bonds of reinforcement and support. Strategies of volunteer rewards and personal recognition should focus on enabling personal connection between volunteers. People want flexibility, but more than that they also want connection. By offering flexibility, CityCares can lead them to connection, which is likely to be what keeps them participating.

5. BRIDGE SERVICE WITH CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Traditionally, individuals who volunteered in direct service were more likely to be involved in larger political and community issues. But increasingly, young people are distinguishing between an interest and willingness to do direct service as opposed to being involved in political activity or voting. While volunteer rates for young people are at an all time high, voting turnout rates continue to be low. In a recent poll conducted by the Mellman Group 73 percent of college students have done volunteer work in the past two years.²³ Yet, 66 percent of eligible students reported that they did not vote in the 1998 election.²⁴ Nonetheless, it was reported that many students expect to spend part of their careers in jobs that reflect their civic-mindedness; 63 percent expected to work for a "non-profit."²⁵ Only 25 percent expressed an interest in pursuing careers in politics.²⁶ In the words of the New Leadership for a New Century study, "Young people respond much more enthusiastically to this more personal and direct concept of assisting others than to the more traditional notion of 'service to your community and being involved in community affairs.'" ²⁷ This signals a positive sign for direct service and relationship building, but heralds a dangerous larger alienation from political and community participation.

There is an opportunity for CityCares affiliates to create a path that leads people from direct service to larger civic engagement. The Citizen Academy concept, mentioned earlier, should respond to this opportunity by offering forums

and classes on political advocacy and grassroots organizing. Additionally, CityCares can play a role in advocating more publicly for the marriage of volunteerism and citizenship, and reminding the public that volunteerism needs to work in tandem with government and political participation, not as a substitute. A good example of this kind of advocacy is captured by the response from the President of Youth Service America, Mr. Steven Culbertson, to the Mellman survey. According to Culbertson:

My colleagues and I are thrilled that this current generation of young people is volunteering at historic rates. But when young people see volunteering as an alternative to voting, they are missing a key component of their service experience.... Otherwise the children of this current generation of volunteers will be cleaning the same dirty rivers or supplementing the same lousy school systems. Voting matters to every volunteer's work to make the world a better place.²⁸

6. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BRIDGING AND BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The opportunity and importance of “bonding” social capital when getting volunteers started and keeping them going is clear. However, if volunteer service is going to reach its greatest potential, it must provide common ground for people to meet and know one another across differences. There is an opportunity to allow for this exchange between volunteers who are serving together and also in the interaction between volunteers and those served. But the promise of this opportunity to create bridging social capital often goes unrealized. Volunteer groups tend to grow in ways that reflect the divisions of society. Therefore, CityCares affiliates need to strive to ensure that their volunteer pools represent the full diversity of communities, especially across racial and socio-economic lines. Additionally, CityCares must ensure that volunteer projects allow both sides of the volunteer exchange—between the server and the served—to learn from one another. A powerful volunteer exchange is one in which the reciprocal nature of the volunteer experience is evident. If CityCares enables the creation of the valuable social capital that builds relationships across differences, much will be accomplished.

CONCLUSION

Volunteerism seems to be one of the few vessels that is comfortably afloat in America's desiccated landscape of social capital. While there are clear threats, perhaps the current trends in volunteerism also signal new opportunities to further capitalize upon and build social capital. In order to ensure that volunteers are engaging in meaningful service with possibilities for self-discovery and community connection, we must, however, create intentional structures and support systems.

There is clearly much that can be done to utilize the principles and promise of social capital to enhance these support systems and deepen the volunteer experience. We must ensure that volunteers are being channeled and encouraged in ways that are likely to lead to the alleviation of critical problems and the production of stronger citizens and networks of social connection. In doing this, we will ensure a self-reinforcing escalation of social capital and volunteerism. ■

NOTES

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