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SUMMIT ON  
VOLUNTEERISM  
A Response to  
Economic Crisis

### Alex Knopp, Yale University

First, let me thank the Knights and Fairfield University for inviting me and let me say what a privilege it is to see Bishop Lori again, who I worked with when I was Mayor of Norwalk, Connecticut, before I was at Yale and Dwight Hall. As was mentioned, Dwight Hall is the largest and oldest student run community service organization in the country. It started in 1883 as the YMCA of Yale and became nondenominational and now has about 80 student groups, about 3,500 Yale students in any given year are involved in our programs. And we're also called The Center for Public Service and Social Justice at Yale.

At these kinds of conferences for many years, it seems like we've come to light a candle about volunteer service. And today I think the difference is that we are here holding up a bright torch on behalf of a new national policy toward community service and volunteerism. And I guess the main message I'd like to bring today is that it's sometimes difficult to shed old ways of thinking as you begin to enter a transformative period in which many institutions will change and relationships will change. But I think as leaders in this society on behalf of the public interest, that's our obligation right now.

For the first time, citizen service is being promoted as a key strategy to address many of the human problems arising out of our economic problems. But the difference is that whereas in the past we might have gathered in a grassroots conference learning from each other, what we have now is a new national leadership, and the outcome of an election in which national service was a bipartisan effort by both parties, and that there was a clear mandate out of this election to move forward with some kind of national service model. It was reinforced when President Obama in his speech at the beginning of this week mentioned it in his address to Congress, there's money in the economic stimulus package to do it, and there are new programs in the budget he presented yesterday to accomplish these same ends. So that's the difference.

And therefore, when we talk about collaboration, somehow over the last seven or eight years when I've been involved in projects, collaboration obviously has been a necessity, whether public/private partnerships, collaborations between municipal and state government, collaborations between municipalities, United Way, and other very important public service organizations. But it's always had a kind of minimalist dimension, into which to some degree collaboration has been an unmentioned word for consolidation. We've all been forced by lack of resources to consolidate our outreach and our operations. We try to extend resources through collaborations, through partnerships, but really we have not had sufficient national resources to deal with the many social service and public interest needs of this country, and therefore have tried to be creative and use smart governing techniques, all of these things that we've talked about the last five, six, or seven years.

I think one thing that we need to do today as a conference and all of us in our individual communities is to now make clear that our efforts need more resources, and that we are getting ourselves in a position to use those resources wisely, to make sure that they are spent efficiently, but we can't keep doing



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more with less. I think that period is over. We need to be able to have a commitment from the national and state governments to provide us the resources to provide the important public services that everyone in this country has come to rely on us to have.

I thought I would talk a little bit about students now. In the economic stimulus bill there is, for example, \$200 million to deal with the federal student work program in which the federal government pays 75% and the nonprofit entity or university pays 25% to help students get involved in community service work. Now the difference is that we're not only expanding the quantity of volunteer opportunities through this program, but the legislation and the policy to be developed in Washington will also improve the quality of those opportunities. For example, there's serious talk of a set aside from the Federal Student Work funds so that a portion of that would have to go toward real community service work by students, and not just being bus boys and bus girls in student cafeterias, as important as that experience is to how everybody runs.

Similarly, there's support for what's called service-based learning or community-based learning to give students opportunities for academic credit, and academic enrichment by doing community service work.

These are all ways that we're both expanding the quantity and improving the quality of work that students can do. I've seen at Yale recently obviously the needs that we all see in our community are growing with the state government shutdown, funding for New Haven. New Haven ended up closing its men's overflow winter shelter, and as a result, students at Yale joined with United Way and their college and the community to raise \$40,000 in a few weeks, challenging Yale to come up with matching money, going on a fast and donating their student funds, having a sleep out of tents on the New Haven green and on the old Yale campus, where we're located, and raising pledge money. And in a few weeks these great efforts by students also raised the \$40,000 needed to keep the shelter open. But we also made sure there was an advocacy part of that, and had a wonderful panel of experts on homelessness in Connecticut to educate students about the policy reasons why there are so many unmet needs for supportive housing in Connecticut. And now many of these students have gone on to work on legislative initiatives and to try to find other ways to carry on their service work.

I also want to stress that these things are happening nationally. Just last weekend in New York we participated in what was called an Ivy League Summit of student service organizations. Columbia hosted Yale, Harvard, Cornell, UPenn, and the Columbia folks who all do student service work, provide some kind of financial support, some academic credit here and there for service-based learning. And we really learned from each other all of the different models that we use to engage in this kind of work. And so we are going to start forming a New England regional based college alliance to try to see how we could help each other be effective and work on these issues in the future. One example will be circulating these draft regulations that we hope to see soon about how the new Federal Work Study money will be implemented to make sure that there was a strong community service dimension to these funds.

And finally, let me say one kind of last thing if I could on behalf of students. It's been a fabulous year or fabulous year-and-a-half or so for student activist. And they were registering to vote in record numbers,



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being engaged in the election in record numbers, came out to vote in record numbers, and now seem willing to engage in volunteerism in record numbers. But I think it's important for us as we do our advocacy work not to get stuck on an out-of-date, one dimensional view about student volunteers. And I would like to suggest to you to remember that students of many families are as much victims of the erosion of the middle class in this economy as anybody else. They leave, from four years of undergraduate school or graduate school, with \$100,000 of debt that will take them 15 or 20 years to payoff, with high credit card debt, find housing unaffordable, daycare unavailable, you name it. And yet we still think of asking these students to volunteer on the same basis as we have in the past.

I don't think it's anything to be ashamed about to suggest that the kind of national policies that we're advocating to support community service work ought also to support efforts of students to make sure that they can sustain an affordable career in college, in higher education, and come out of it not so saddled with debt and obligations that a career of public service and a career of volunteerism are somehow impossible for them. And I'm glad that so much of the economic stimulus package was dedicated to education related programs to make sure that higher education is more affordable than it is now, that student loans are more available than they are now, that Pell Grants are larger than they are now, that Federal Work Study money is more available than it is now, so that in the end we can give students the opportunity for the same kind of public service opportunities that all of us enjoyed without having to face a lifetime of debt and being engaged in jobs they don't like merely to pay it off. Thank you.