



NEIGHBORS
HELPING
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SERVICE TOGETHER



SUMMIT ON
VOLUNTEERISM
A Response to
Economic Crisis

Kevin O'Brien, Jesuit Volunteer Corps

It's great to be here. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps is a full-time Roman Catholic volunteer organization affiliated with the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, that has been placing volunteers in organizations and agencies for over 50 years. And what I mean by full-time, these volunteers are people who are usually recent college graduates who will take a full-time staff position in a grassroots human service agency or inner city school or any place that works with people in need.

This year there are over 300 volunteers domestically in the United States and we have over 50 overseas in seven different countries. The types of agencies and organizations where we place these volunteers run the gamut. We've got, as I said, the schools, AIDS hospices, employment services, economic development, housing, refugee services, services to developmentally challenged persons, women's services, youth work, and just about anything else that there's an agency serving a need, we have a Jesuit volunteer usually affiliated with them.

In addition to the really 40-plus hours a week of service, because again they serve as a staff person in the agencies, we also have a formation program that consists of a series of retreats and workshops that deal with not only the personal spiritual lives of the volunteers but also a reflection on their experiences, how to process this experience of meeting the needy and the poor on a daily basis and really reflecting on the causes, what put these folks in this situation.

There is a small cost to the agencies in terms of the volunteers receive room and board and health insurance just in order to live for the year. We place them together in each location in intentional communities so that the volunteers living in a particular locale live together. They share meals. They live in a neighborhood that's very similar to those, the people that they're working with.

So we say our four tenets are simplicity of living, spirituality, social justice, and community. And they spend one full year challenging themselves in those areas. The savings to the agencies we figure is between \$5 and \$7 million a year and it wasn't that long ago that that sounded like a lot of money. Nowadays it's possibly a drop in the bucket.

Many of our partner organizations have seen an increase in demand for these services and consequently there's a demand for more of our volunteers to be able to serve in a staff capacity for them. We have heard a few of the agencies say that they're unable even to financially support a volunteer's living expenses but that hasn't been widespread so far. There's actually been more of an increase in interest in having our volunteers as they lose the ability to fund full staff positions.

We've also seen a rise in applications to be volunteers and we have seen this in terms of people coming out of college. The opportunities are getting tougher for them in the work force, which provides an opportunity for them to explore this year of service with us. They also find not only can they do the service but it's a great way for them to get a year of really good service working in an agency and



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developing some of the skills useful to whatever career they end up in, and they will have had their foot in the door.

A challenge that we've have is finding financial resources for our agencies to run our program. This year we are consolidating what had been five regional Jesuit volunteer organizations into one national structure. That's what I was hired to do. So it'll be quite an interesting ride in this economy because it's new for us. We need to try to keep our program going without missing a beat while we develop this new structure.

We do see that the need is greater. We stay committed to finding, placing, and supporting these idealistic young volunteers and continuing to build up these partnerships with the agencies that are serving the folks.

If I had to say what our niche is in this world of volunteerism, I would identify two pieces here that are certainly not unique to us but are what we concentrate on. First is staffing these under-funded grassroots and human services organizations, and then second, developing young leadership for the church and society for the future.

Thank you.