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SUMMIT ON
VOLUNTEERISM
A Response to
Economic Crisis

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I'd like to add my words of thanks for the opportunity to be a part of this summit which is dealing with a very critical issue in society today, that of volunteerism and what we can do to address the current challenges of our country.

I'd like to take the conversation a little different direction and offer some reflections on the practical necessities of the reality of having volunteers in an organization. These reflections come from the fact that as we look at Catholic Charities nationwide, we have over 60,000 employees but over 200,000 volunteers, which means for every paid staff we have four volunteers. Also, these reflections come very concretely from my experience of running Catholic Charities of Minneapolis-St. Paul, where we had 700 employees and over 10,000 volunteers, so the ratio is a little higher, about 10 volunteers for every paid staff.

There are three practical realities about having volunteers in an organization and the first is if you're going to do it and do it well, you must have an infrastructure that will support it. When you look at just the processes that you have to go through of screening, appropriate placement, orientation into the values of the organization, then monitoring the placement, and finally, recognition of volunteers, you can see this is something that cannot be left to happenstance, that there is a need to have a professionally trained coordinator who is skilled in this. Fortunately I think there are professional organizations now that support this kind of work, because ultimately if you're going to invite volunteers in, your goal is to not only engage them but also to retain them because this is an investment, an investment in people to further the mission of the organization.

Now the challenge that we are facing right now is that this is not really an attractive thing for people to fund, to say we fund the volunteer coordinator. There exist many more attractive things that appeal to donors and yet, I would say to philanthropic organizations and corporations, "Your dollars will have a far greater impact in this area than perhaps in a lot of other areas."

Again, unfortunately, in difficult times when resources become scarce and needs become dramatically increased, unfortunately the role of volunteer coordinator might be one of the first to be cut just because we can get along without that, and we can't get along without somebody actually feeding the poor. I think that's probably not a wise thing to do because ultimately you lose more than you gain.

Just one final thought about that is when you realize that the vast majority of non-profits are actually small organizations, how do you sustain and support an infrastructure like this? And there the challenge becomes exactly what we're talking about today. How do we have smaller non-profits grouped together so that they can access these resources together.

The second reflection that I would offer is that as you invite volunteers into the organization, you need to prepare your staff. You can't just do it without preparing staff as well. A couple of things here: You



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don't want to give volunteers simply the work that your staff doesn't want to do. They have to be engaged in a significant and meaningful way in the mission of the organization, so much so that in St. Paul-Minneapolis we had paid staff and we had unpaid staff who were our volunteers so that staff realized that they would be given work that was seen to be on a level playing field with them.

Now, the problem becomes that staff may then get the impression that if you get more volunteers you're not going to need me, which I think is a totally wrong impression because actually volunteers are there to enhance the work of your staff. Volunteers are there to complement the human dimension of providing services to people for the most part whose lives are in crisis.

Now the reality here is again that much of our funding in the social safety network comes from the government but is always incomplete. Usually if you're lucky you can get 75 percent funding from government but you've still got 25 percent to raise. A lot of these programs are programs that deal with children. You don't want to be short staffed when you are providing services to children. Volunteers can and do make an incredible contribution in these people to people kinds of programs so that they should be seen as a partnership. Again, you need to prepare your staff though for that kind of a culture.

The third thing I would say in the practical realities is you have to follow the trends. A few years ago it was the fact that most volunteers were individuals coming for a specific time slot and a specific job every week or every month and times are changing. We still have those folks. But we also now see, as somebody mentioned in the first panel, families wanting to volunteer together. And that is an incredible way for parents to help instill values, the values of citizenship but also faith values into their children.

How do we incorporate that? We can't say, "I'm sorry, we only need individual volunteers in this organization." If so, you're cutting out an incredible number of people from sharing in your mission. And along with families I would say there is also a huge interest now in corporations to have corporate volunteering together in groups and we need to accommodate that.

One other group that I think we should not lose sight of in our organizations are the clients who are asking to volunteer as well, even as they themselves are receiving assistance. So don't lose sight of them.

Another thing that we have to look at as we market volunteers or volunteer opportunities is the fact that there's a difference in age groups. People my age have a tremendous brand loyalty, meaning that I am far more likely to volunteer in a Catholic organization because when I grew up that became a very strong part of who I am.

The same is not true for the younger generation. They do not have the same brand loyalty and I think others have mentioned this as well. They're far more likely to volunteer for a cause and they will search until they find who they think is having the greatest impact in this cause and they're going to volunteer there.



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So again, you can't have one-size-fits-all for volunteers. You have the brand loyalty folks that you need to engage but you also have the folks who are interested simply in a cause.

I'd like to now make a couple, two philosophical groundings if you will from the experience I've had in having volunteers in agencies. And the first is that to me, having volunteers in an agency is an incredible opportunity if not the best way to bring about social transformation. You cannot substitute a person-to-person exchange for the greatest literature or the greatest videos. It is being able to put a face on this issue of homelessness or hunger or nutrition and being able to really interact with that person.

Nothing can substitute for that because what happens is an understanding of the human situation and I think that is where we actually run into a lot of myths in our society about who the poor are or those accessing social services. We need that understanding and then with that transformation and understanding, volunteers tend to become our best advocates. And I know that was one of the questions earlier today, "How do you get people to advocate?" Once they understand the population that they are volunteering with, they're going to want to advocate.

And finally, my last observation is about the motivation of volunteers and the motivation for having volunteers in an organization. It's not primarily economic that we can save money and we've seen how incredibly dramatic these figures are about the the monetary contribution in services provided that volunteers give us. I speak here primarily as a leader of a faith-based organization. In our tradition, we have a Gospel mandate to serve our neighbor in need and the image of the Good Samaritan could not be more powerful for us. In specifically Catholic terms we see that the Gospel demands that we participate in the corporal works of mercy as we call them. In other words, it's not enough for a believer to say, "Well, here's my \$20. I'll give it to this organization and they'll take care of it for me." You can't do that with the corporal works of mercy. You have to personally be involved.

As I look at the work of Catholic Charities, many other Catholic organizations, many other faith-based organizations, those works are integral to the mission of our church and if we do not invite volunteers in to help fulfill the obligation that they have from their religion, then I think we're doing them a great disservice, for all of us must do their part and we don't all have to do everything but we all have a specific part to do. And in sacramental terms we'd call that our baptismal call to holiness. This is one of the ways we fulfill it.

I bring that up because one of the things we're looking at today is how to collaborate. As we look at the obligations of religion -- and it's not just Christian -- it is Jewish and Muslim religions that have the same obligation, we have an incredible base to build on for collaboration.