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## The USA Freedom Corps and the Role of the States

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*An early assessment of the implementation of the USA Freedom Corps and a review of the public policy literature suggests the need for greater attention to funding, infrastructure and inter-agency partnerships in developing and sustaining this volunteer initiative.*

**T**he tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001 revealed a need to devote more government resources to homeland security. The energetic response of the public to the devastation underscored the willingness of citizens to supplement government emergency preparedness efforts. Recognizing these factors and hoping to institutionalize the wave of civic involvement that Sept. 11 unleashed, President Bush launched the USA Freedom Corps, a new volunteerism initiative unprecedented in terms of its potential impact on public volunteerism.

### Establishment and Purpose of the USA Freedom Corps

President Bush established the USA Freedom Corps on Jan. 29, 2002 to “coordinate and strengthen” federal and private volunteer opportunities.<sup>1</sup> The USA Freedom Corps is an umbrella effort intended to “inspire and enable all Americans to find ways to serve their community, their country, or the world.”<sup>2</sup> A major building block of Freedom Corps is the President’s call to Americans to fight the war against terrorism by serving their communities. In his State of the Union address in Jan., 2002, and in numerous public appearances since, the President framed this message as a general appeal to all Americans to commit at least two years of their lives – the equivalent of 4,000 hours – to volunteer service.

The USA Freedom Corps is designed as an “interagency initiative” with the task of “recruiting, mobilizing and

encouraging” citizen service, providing concrete opportunities for volunteers, facilitating public access to information about volunteer opportunities, and rewarding and recognizing public service.<sup>3</sup> A cabinet-level Council will perform a coordinating role to oversee the initiative.

The most novel element of the USA Freedom Corps is Citizen Corps, which “focuses on opportunities for people across the country to participate in a range of measures to make their families, homes and communities safer from the threats of terrorism, crime, and disasters of all kinds. Citizen Corps also brings together a community’s first responders, firefighters, emergency health care providers, law enforcement and emergency managers with its volunteer resources.”<sup>4</sup> Given this mandate, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is charged with coordinating Citizen Corps. At the local level, the existing network of voluntary organizations active in disaster have been encouraged to join with local government agencies to form Citizen Corps Councils to coordinate their activities. As of mid-July 2002, 70 coordinating groups had been formed or renamed as Citizens Corps Councils in communities across the United States. Table 1 briefly summarizes USA Freedom Corps/Citizen Corps programs.

At the state level, the governor is to appoint a state coordinator for Citizen Corps. Although not all coordinators have been appointed as yet, in most states the governor has designated the director of emergency management. In addition, in seven states the governor has

appointed the director of the state service commission as the Citizen Corps coordinator, and in several other states, a member of a state public safety agency or member of the governor’s office has been designated.<sup>5</sup>

### Implementation of Citizen Corps in the States

The role envisioned for the states in these federal volunteer initiatives is to promote, support and coordinate volunteer efforts at the local level – “to encourage every community in the state to participate in Citizen Corps.”<sup>6</sup> Little research has considered the efficacy of such activities as a policy instrument for encouraging volunteerism.<sup>7</sup> Given the increased use of volunteers by U.S. governments over the past several decades – and plans to rely on them still more, as evidenced by President Bush’s proposals – the subject commands greater attention.

A series of questions was asked to examine the role of the states in Citizen Corps and to obtain an early assessment of the prospects of this volunteer initiative from the front lines; in June-July 2002 we conducted semi-structured confidential telephone interviews with the designated state emergency management offices.<sup>8</sup> A series of questions were asked to elicit a frank assessment of these state officials’ understanding of their role, and their opinion on the progress, opportunities, concerns, potential barriers and resource needs as the implementation of the Citizen Corps unfolded.<sup>9</sup> Although this survey provides only one snapshot in time of the implementation process, it nonetheless offers an apt opportunity to compare this program’s direction to the

best practices described in the implementation literature.

Each section below addresses a key concept related to successful implementation of government volunteer programs, based on the literatures in policy implementation and volunteer management. We present our findings in relation to recommended practices from past research, and make comments and suggestions regarding the course of implementation of Citizen Corps in the states.

### Goal Clarity:

Many scholars have identified goal clarity as a factor in successful implementation of a program. A policymaker

must be able to provide clear "marching orders" so that those charged with implementing a policy can understand its purpose and salience.<sup>10</sup> When asked to describe how clearly defined their state's role was in implementing Citizen Corps, 13 state emergency management officials (45 percent of the 29-state sample) said they understood their role and were on their way to creating an implementation network. However, the majority of respondents – 55 percent of the officials – indicated that the state role was not clearly defined, and that they needed more direction from the federal government. In a related question, most state respondents described the role of

their state office as coordination or implementation of Citizen Corps at the local level (n = 21), but nearly a quarter (24 percent) indicated they were doing little in regard to Citizen Corps or were unsure of what was being asked of them (the remaining respondent said that the agency was to advise the governor).

One sees in federal volunteerism policy a strong dependence on the assumption that messages about the value of civic engagement will reach potential volunteers. This study did not assess levels of goal clarity at the local level, but it is fair to point out that confusion at the state level will only serve to hinder local efforts. What is accomplished

when a federal message is sent depends on how positively and clearly the message is received at the state and local levels, as well as what kind of "receptivity climate" one finds among implementers.<sup>11</sup> When knowledge of a national policy and its opportunities is weak, implementation (not surprisingly) is less successful.<sup>12</sup>

### Funding:

Past implementation studies have pointed to the pre-eminence of funding in policy success.<sup>13</sup> In our study, too, 62 percent of respondents expressed great concern over the adequacy of funding. A few officials told us that they were tapping into tight

**Table 1 Proposed USA Freedom Corps/Citizen Corps programs and goals**

Name of Program (Parent Agency)	Purpose	Current # of Participants	Goal	President's FY2003 Funding Request
Citizen Corps Councils (FEMA)	Provides tools and funding to local communities to coordinate emergency planning and response	70 Citizen Corps Councils in mid-July	Every community in America	\$144 million
CERT: Community Emergency Response Teams (FEMA)	Provides training to citizens in community emergency planning and response	~200,000	Triple by 2004 to 600,000	\$61 million
Medical Reserve Corps (Dept. of HHS)	Recruits retired healthcare professionals to serve as supplemental emergency responders	New	2002: 10-city pilot program	\$10 million
VIPS: Volunteers in Police Service (Dept. of Justice)	Adds voluntary citizen support to police activities	New	Unknown	\$3 million
Operation TIPS: Terrorism Information & Prevention System (Dept. of Justice)	Provides terrorism awareness and reporting tools to public workers	New	1,000,000 volunteers in 10 cities	\$8 million
Neighborhood Watch (Dept. of Justice)	Adds terrorism prevention element to neighborhood safety programs	Current number unknown	Double by 2004	\$6 million
Peace Corps (Autonomous agency)	Overseas community-building program	7,000	15,000	\$320 million
AmeriCorps (CNCS: Corporation for National & Community Service)	Stipended direct service volunteers in variety of roles, including public safety	50,000	75,000	\$403 million
Senior Corps (CNCS)	Volunteer opportunities for seniors	500,000	600,000	\$268 million
Learn and Serve America (CNCS)	Youth service learning	1,477,350	1,500,000	\$43 million

Source: President's Budget, FEMA, CNCS, Peace Corps and Dept. of Justice press offices and Web sites.

state emergency management budgets to begin planning activities, but that federal support was needed to move forward. Some respondents complained that Citizen Corps was another “unfunded mandate” of the federal government.

Funding alone does not guarantee success, however. For example, funding that does not build infrastructure to support volunteer programs may be considered less useful by implementing agencies.<sup>14</sup> Outlined briefly below are some of the most important indicators of funding efficacy in volunteerism and non-profit service delivery:

#### *Length of funding commitment and adequacy of funds.*

State and local programs that depend on federal pilot or demonstration grant funding will require a willing state legislature and/or private grants to continue these USA Freedom Corps initiatives over time. On July 18, 2002, the Corporation for National and Community Service announced the first USA Freedom Corps grants for expansion of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. The amount of the grants – a total of \$10.3 million awarded nationally to 43 programs in 27 states – illustrates the scope of the job to be done. These grants represent only the bare beginnings of the kind of funding infusion that states and local communities need to develop a lasting volunteer infrastructure.

#### *Flexibility in funding purpose.*

According to our survey, many state legislatures are unlikely to finance an expansion in state volunteer programs given the state of the economy. In addition, a sometime criticism of certain federal volunteer programs has been their emphasis on direct subsidies to volunteers, even while it is difficult for agencies to secure the funds needed to manage those volunteers. For example, AmeriCorps volunteers are prevented by statute from engaging in administrative tasks. Whether states or local agencies will have to find the resources for administrative support is as yet undetermined.

#### *Funding mix.*

Academic research supports the argu-

ment that organizational health is compromised by over-reliance on a single source of funding.<sup>15</sup> Yet many agencies – particularly rural agencies – may have few other options aside from limited public funding to implement their volunteer programs. The health and longevity of these programs over the long-term will be determined by their ability to find sustainable sources of funding.

#### **Promotional activities:**

In the survey of state emergency management offices, eight respondents said that promotion or marketing of President Bush’s volunteer initiatives would be a major challenge in implementing Citizen Corps. Over time, the strongest predictor of volunteer activity continues to be whether or not citizens were asked to give their time.<sup>16</sup> The President’s frequent public appeals, the placement of public service messages, and the creation of user-friendly Web sites and toll-free numbers all help to reach those individuals. However, this “layering” of a general call to volunteer on top of programs with specific needs may not produce volunteers with sufficient qualifications for all tasks. In addition, given the tradition of autonomy encompassed in the concept of an “independent sector,” the federal government may find that some promotional effort is welcomed, but that too much is not.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Volunteer management, recruitment and retention:**

President Bush’s frequent public messages about the value of volunteer service have had some impact on the “input” side of raising volunteers. The White House reports tens of thousands of phone calls to national hotlines and an increase in applications to Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. Nevertheless, experts suggest that the federal policy is also prone to a number of recurring problems, due largely to misplaced assumptions by political leaders about what volunteerism can accomplish and what local agencies can accommodate.<sup>18</sup> Three issues of particular concern to experts are the isolation in which certain political decisions about volunteerism policy have been made; the over-emphasis on volunteer recruitment without paying sufficient

attention to what occurs next; and inconsistencies among agencies or levels of government in volunteer policy.

Extensive academic and professional literature supports the rather obvious argument that successful volunteer programs require more than a call for warm bodies. Volunteer programs also require an infrastructure and a set of management tools in order to place the right volunteers in the right positions, involve them effectively and retain them.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if a call for more volunteers is not linked to the means for placing and involving volunteers using appropriate management tools, its effectiveness is greatly diminished. One of the nation’s most prominent volunteer advocates, Susan Ellis, described the launching of the USA Freedom Corps as a “surprise announcement” for public and non-profit officials involved in volunteerism, based on a “flawed premise” that organizations were ready or willing to accept more volunteers.<sup>20</sup> Missing was the planning required to increase the capacity to involve volunteers more effectively.

An agency’s goal should be a targeted recruitment plan, since the opposite situation – creation of a program without a recruitment strategy – can also create effectiveness problems. One analyst describes this problem as a “volunteer availability myth,” an assumption that recruitment will take care of itself once opportunities for volunteer involvement are created.<sup>21</sup> He claims: “the only situations for which any evidence exists that ...volunteers will come forward spontaneously are ... emergencies and crises.... These situations are transient, however.... As emergencies fade from view, ... the help of citizens recedes(s) with them.” This argument suggests that once certain USA Freedom Corps programs are in place, highly targeted and adequately funded recruitment and retention efforts must continue over the long term.

Drop-off can be minimized if sufficient attention is paid to volunteer management “best practices.” Yet, even while our survey respondents overwhelmingly anticipate that their past experience with volunteers will be helpful to their new responsibilities under

Citizen Corps, almost one-third of those surveyed said that effective volunteer management would be a major challenge to successful implementation; four other responses expressed particular concerns about volunteer liability. Moreover, because they were waiting for federal funding to materialize, 62 percent of state officials reported that they had not yet established guidelines for volunteer management, and only two reported that they were adhering to some professional or national standards of volunteer management. These results suggest lack of preparedness rather than lack of interest in adherence to standards.

### Implementation network:

One key ingredient in the implementation “mix” is that sufficient attention be devoted to communication and coordination among the various agencies involved in implementing volunteer policy. Our survey found that while statewide coordinating bodies were taking shape or already in place in some states to implement Citizen Corps, in others communication was absent even among those agencies most centrally involved. One-fourth of our state respondents felt that one of the greatest challenges facing the new federal volunteerism policies was gaining support of organizations and groups at the local level. These results suggest the need for more education among emergency preparedness officials regarding the high degree of coordination, communication and collaboration required in the “mixed economy” in which nonprofit, for-profit and government institutions jointly provide social services.<sup>22</sup>

Observers of this network from an emergency management perspective view emergency management as a “bottom-up” activity developing out of “first responder” programs, and heavily dependent on existing local networks, rather than a “top-down,” hierarchical process.<sup>23</sup> These networks thrive under conditions of commitment and cooperation, rather than command-and-control approaches – approaches that may in fact be counter-productive. The same can be said about other aspects of the USA Freedom Corps initiative, such as

the development of Citizen Corps Councils. The danger may be in the inadvertent weakening of existing local emergency response partnerships with the imposition of new authorities and the distortion of current funding streams.<sup>24</sup> For example, despite a commitment of \$3.5 billion to first responder programs under the Office of Homeland Security and FEMA, President Bush chose to delete \$100 million for the existing Fire Investment and Response Enhancement (FIRE) program from his FY2003 budget request.<sup>25</sup>

In these intergovernmental and interorganizational networks, in which power and authority are decentralized, strong empirical evidence points to the value of a lead facilitator or central coordinating unit to help negotiate partnership agreements.<sup>26</sup> Yet, as the USA Freedom Corps takes shape, the agency or individual that will assume this role at times seems unclear. In terms of agency choice at the state level, the two principal candidates appear to be the director of a state’s emergency management agency or the director of the state service commission. Both of these offices bring advantages as well as disadvantages: emergency management officials are well placed to understand gaps in preparedness efforts that volunteers might fill, but are often unaccustomed to volunteer management, while state volunteer service commissions understand the volunteer resource network but in some states are less centrally involved in emergency preparedness, understaffed and incapable of taking on much expansion in responsibilities without help from state legislatures. Respondents to our survey indicate that the governor’s designated choice varies, but suggest that in the majority of states an emergency management director will assume this role.

In our view, a disappointing aspect in the development of the USA Freedom Corps policy to date has been the lack of attention to the state role. In *Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials* (2002), states are described as supporters and advocates in the principally local task of developing Citizen Corps Councils. The Citizen Corps publication reflects what scholars have observed:

that states are often overlooked actors in federal policy implementation, but nonetheless important since they exercise administrative discretion over implementation.<sup>27</sup> States are sometime promoters of volunteerism policy, creators of part of the infrastructure on which implementation depends, recipients and distributors of federal volunteerism funds. States are also potentially in the best position to understand and communicate local needs upwards, and to provide leverage to help build and connect local Citizen Corps Councils. States already have developed an increasingly sophisticated network of resources to implement volunteer programs, including the Points of Light Foundation, the National Association of State Service Commissions, and the America’s Promise Organization.<sup>28</sup> As we have observed, federal promotional messages have largely been directed at individuals and localities rather than states. Emphasizing the states’ role may help to strengthen the results of volunteerism promotion.

### Conclusion

The extraordinary national events of the past year have combined a heightened interest in civic engagement with the political will to make it happen by giving volunteerism greater resources and support in the public sector. Such “windows of opportunity” in public policymaking do not remain open for long.<sup>29</sup> Although it is still early in the life of the USA Freedom Corps and the Citizens Corps program, our survey uncovered issues that if not addressed will greatly hamper their potential impacts. If the ambitious goals of this national service initiative are to succeed, federal expectations must be more clearly defined; promotional messages must effectively target volunteers with the right qualifications; and funding must be adequate to the task and to supporting a full package of volunteer management tools, including training, supervision and retention activities. New federal initiatives should also aim to enhance existing organizational networks that have in many states built up levels of trust and reciprocity into effective public/private collaborations – and must allow states sufficient resources to develop these networks where they do not yet

exist. Americans have shown an impressive willingness to volunteer in times of emergency and disaster. The challenge is to create lasting programs that will sustain their involvement.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Executive Order 13254 of January 29, 2002: Establishing the USA Freedom Corps.
- <sup>2</sup> *Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials*, Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2002): 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Executive Order 13254 of January 29, 2002: Establishing the USA Freedom Corps.
- <sup>4</sup> *Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials*, Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2002): 7.
- <sup>5</sup> These states are California, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Washington and Washington D.C.
- <sup>6</sup> *Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials*, Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2002): 20.
- <sup>7</sup> J. L. Brudney, *Fostering Volunteer Programs in the Public Sector: Planning, Initiating, and Managing Voluntary Activities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc. (1990). J. L. Brudney, "The Effective Use of Volunteers: Best Practices for the Public Sector," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 62, (Autumn 1999): 219-255. S. M. Chambré, "Kindling Points of Light: Volunteering as Public Policy," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 18 (3), (1989): 249-268.
- <sup>8</sup> The interview schedule was designed to elicit discussion with the state officials. The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board approved the survey. Mr. Aldo Davila assisted the authors with the interviews.
- <sup>9</sup> To provide further background information, we interviewed directors of six of the 10 regional FEMA offices.
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- <sup>11</sup> M.L. Goggin, A.O. Bowman, J.P. Lester and L.J. O'Toole, *Implementation Theory and Practice: Toward a Third Generation*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company. (1990).
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  - <sup>15</sup> K. Gronbjerg, *Understanding Nonprofit Funding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (1993).
  - <sup>16</sup> Independent Sector, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States: Key Findings*. Retrieved April 14, 2002 from the World Wide Web at <http://www.independentsector.org>. (2001).
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  - L.S. Salamon, *America's Nonprofit Sector: A Primer*, 2nd Ed. New York: Foundation Center. (1999).
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  - <sup>19</sup> Brudney, *Fostering Volunteer Programs in the Public Sector: Planning, Initiating and Managing Voluntary Activities*. Brudney, "The Effective Use of Volunteers: Best Practices for the Public Sector." J.C. Fischer, and K.M. Cole, *Leadership and Management of Volunteer Programs: a Guide for Volunteer Administrators*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (1993). S. J. Ellis, *From the Top Down: the Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*. Philadelphia, PA: Energize, Inc. (1996). S. McCurley and R. Lynch, *Volunteer Management*. Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing. (1996).
  - <sup>20</sup> Ellis, "The Wrong Way to Encourage Volunteerism."
  - <sup>21</sup> Brudney, "The Involvement of Volunteers in the Delivery of Services: Myth and Management."

- <sup>22</sup> Salamon, *America's Nonprofit Sector: A Primer*.
- <sup>23</sup> W. L. Waugh, Jr. and R. T. Sylves, "Organizing the War on Terrorism," *Public Administration Review*, 62(Special Issue), (2002): 81-89.
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- <sup>26</sup> A.M. Thomson and J.L. Perry, "Can AmeriCorps Build Communities?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 27(4), (1998): 399-420. M.M. Brown, L.J.O'Toole, and J. L. Brudney, "Implementing Information Technology in Government: an Empirical Assessment of the Role of Local Partnerships," *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory*, 8, (1998): 4, 499-525.
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- <sup>28</sup> For example, on July 16, 2002 all 50 governors signed a joint letter supporting a House bill to reauthorize the Corporation for National and Community Service.
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## Bios

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