

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service

Dear Mr. President...

The Kansas City Regional Forum on Service and Volunteerism

On May 21, 2003, eighty-five residents of Kansas and Missouri gathered at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation for a Regional Forum on Service and Volunteerism. The event was co-sponsored by the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, in partnership with Kansas City's Promise, the Kansas Volunteer Commission, the Missouri Community Service Commission, the Metropolitan Association for Philanthropy, American Humanics, Inc., Youth Service Alliance of Greater Kansas City, and Youth Volunteer Corps.

Featured speakers were Adele Hall, Kansas City community volunteer and philanthropist, and Dr. Leslie Lenkowsky, chief executive officer of the federal Corporation for National and Community Service. Janine Lee, Vice-President of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, and Robert Goodwin, President and CEO of the Points of Light Foundation, also addressed the group.

The Forum participants represented foundations, nonprofit organizations, businesses, government agencies, schools and universities, and individual civic leaders and donors. Participants worked in small groups to share their knowledge and experience and discuss what needs to be done to increase and strengthen service, volunteering, and civic engagement in the region and the nation.

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to you with our recommendations and thoughts on strengthening service and civic participation in our communities and in the nation. These recommendations were developed at the Kansas City Regional Forum on Service and Volunteerism in May 2003.

Mr. President, we support and appreciate your call to all Americans to volunteer and serve our nation and communities. We know the benefits that accrue when there is a thriving spirit of service and civic engagement. To that end, our discussions at this regional forum examined the challenges and obstacles to greater civic involvement, and we submit here our suggestions for the purpose of informing the policy, funding, and leadership decisions that ultimately impact our ability at the local level to strengthen and develop civic life and community service.

We applaud your commitment to expanded civic engagement in this country, and we hope that these suggestions will be helpful to you and to other leaders.

Sincerely,
Participants of the Kansas City Regional Forum
on Service and Volunteerism
May 21, 2003
Kansas City, Missouri

WHAT WORKS WELL

The Kansas City region and the states of Missouri and Kansas have strong traditions of service, volunteering, and civic partnerships. The city of Kansas City extends across two states, and this alone has motivated us many times to work in collaborations and use the power of voluntary leadership and service to overcome barriers and build bridges of

understanding. Civic leaders, grantmakers, and policy makers in other parts of the country may be interested to know that the following four factors have been critical to our recent successes in addressing community problems.

1. Strong spirit of philanthropy. There is high interest and support for volunteering and service, and a strong tradition of philanthropy.

Kansas City has the highest percentage of its community doing volunteer work on behalf of children and youth. The region has a base of generous and involved donors, both institutional donors and individual contributors. With this base of private and individual donors, many grassroots groups and non-profits have been able to diversify their sources of funding and survive through difficult economic times when grants and government funds are reduced.

2. Collaboration. We can proudly point to several successful bi-state and multi-county collaborative efforts which have attracted and effectively used volunteer resources, changed community attitudes, and achieved impressive outcomes. Our region's track record with public-private partnerships demonstrates the benefits that can be derived through community-wide investments of volunteer time and money. We have learned that to tackle the most pressing problems in our communities, we need to assemble more power, resources, and creativity than can be mustered by single organizations, government agencies, or funding sources. We are fortunate to have many regional institutional leaders who are skilled in convening and brokering the partnerships that are needed for these collaborative endeavors.

3. A clear and compelling community priority. The Kansas City community widely agrees that our children and youth are our priority. This common commitment, forged through community dialogue, has enabled us to launch innovative projects. We are more effectively serving the neediest children and families in our communities, and our shared vision and purpose inspires our sustained efforts on their behalf.

4. Engaging young people early and effectively. Our youth are a major resource for our community problem solving. Their knowledge and understanding, their creative energy and ideas, and their service are all community assets that we value. With their active participation, we have been able to reach more broadly within our communities and develop strategies with staying power. For years, we have invested time and money in programs that facilitate young people's early involvement in civic efforts – including service, volunteering, activism, and political activity – and we see the return on this investment when we measure our region's active, vibrant civic life and community leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

We have a dozen recommendations for what you and other national and regional leaders could do to further the development of service, volunteering, and civic engagement.

1. Keep service and volunteering in the public eye.

We encourage you, Mr. President, to continue to use your position to recognize and give visibility to service and volunteering. We need more consistent and regular messages promoting the ethic and practice of service. We ask that you recognize not just individual volunteers and single organizations, but also the innovative and successful community collaboratives that are effectively addressing national needs, usually with a strong component of community volunteers. Please continue to recognize and commend businesses that support service and volunteering. Encourage more businesses to get involved, either through support for their employees' volunteering or with financial and in-kind support for national and community volunteer and service programs.

2. Support federal funding for national service.

Mr. President, we want you and our representatives in Congress to support federal funding for service and volunteering. We value the programs that are sponsored and funded through the Corporation on National and Community Service, and we have many examples of how our communities benefit from their presence. We recommend that the Corporation work to simplify its program guidelines and requirements, and find ways to give local programs more flexibility in their use of government funding. We value opportunities for two-way dialogue between local programs and the Corporation, and we suggest that the Corporation and the state service commissions conduct statewide forums for this purpose. Such forums would provide an added benefit to both the federal government and the national service field — an opportunity to provide the public with more knowledge about federally-funded national service.

3. Youth are resources, now and for the future. We need to support and encourage programs that engage youth in civic life, and provide them with role models and a range of examples of how to participate in the democratic process. Service programs at schools and universities, as well as youth service programs for out-of-school time, need support from public and pri-

vate funding sources. Programs that link youth volunteering with punishment (alternative sentencing programs) are confusing to young people's understanding of community service, and it would be beneficial to revise the language used in these programs.

4. Invest in the support and management of volunteers. We call on national, regional, and local leaders to support the infrastructure needed in the nonprofit sector for effective recruitment and management of volunteers. In order to attract and keep people engaged in quality volunteer work that benefits our communities, nonprofit organizations need to pay more attention to how they are supporting and managing volunteers. There is a great need for nonprofit leaders, donors and policy makers to better understand and acknowledge that volunteer programs have a cost. In community-wide collaboratives with a desire to engage leadership from a large geographic area or across different sectors, this need is even greater.

5. Expand training for those who work in service. As you promote volunteerism and civic participation, please encourage government and private funders to support more professional development training for people who work with volunteers. Even with the depth and breadth of experience represented at this regional forum, many of us want to know more about working in collaboratives, about managing volunteers, and about recruiting and retaining new supporters for our work.

6. Support staffing for collaboratives. We encourage funders and policy makers, who often advocate for the creation of coalitions and collaborative efforts, to examine and acknowledge the amount of work needed for coordinating collaborations and engaging volunteer leaders. Financial support for collaborations should include funding for staff support and coordination. Our experiences with successful collaborative efforts are testimony to the benefits of well-coordinated, well-staffed ventures.

7. Support nonprofits to improve their effectiveness. All businesses, including nonprofit organizations, have basic operational expenses as well as some costs for planning and forecasting. The public and donors need to better understand these operational and capacity-building costs in nonprofit organizations. Many nonprofits could do their work

more effectively with the addition of some of the basic support elements that are assumed to be necessary in for-profit businesses and government. For example, human resources expertise, stable office space, adequate communications equipment and technology are all essential elements of a well-run venture. Perhaps it is time to coin a new term for community-based organizations, one that will encourage entrepreneurial efforts and results, rather than continue to focus on the fact that these organizations are not supposed to make profits.

8. Encourage nonprofits to share resources. We believe that regional and national leaders can further help nonprofit organizations to more effectively use their financial resources through economies of scale and sharing resources. Technology holds promise for finding and reducing duplication of services, and despite the potential difficulties, we recommend that regional and local leaders help organizations with similar missions to work together, and in some instances, consolidate.

9. Strong downtowns foster civic involvement. To continue to build civic engagement in our communities, we need strong, healthy downtowns – centers of community that draw people together, celebrate diversity, and create the sense of place that inspires people to give service and get involved. Mr. President, we ask that you and your administration continue to support funding for revitalizing the urban cores of our cities. We urge you to listen to local civic leaders who are knowledgeable about how government structures, such as state lines, get in the way of community problem solving. Listen to the leadership of bi-state cities such as Kansas City, and seek to find ways that the government can support flexibility, encourage public-private partnerships, and reduce administrative barriers to solving community problems.

10. Media matters — especially local community-based media. Contrary to the recent trend of media consolidation, we need media that is community-based. We need a broad range of media outlets that are able to report on and share information for diverse populations, and provide easy local access for residents who have information to be reported, including information about local events and small-scale initiatives. Civic engagement is not served by simplification and homogenization of the media.

11. Investing in children now will ensure a bright future for all citizens. We ask you to provide strong support for funding for education and other children's services. Our experience has shown that a community can match what government resources provide for children and youth with tremendous contributions of time and money from individuals, businesses, and philanthropic institutions, but the government investment must not falter.

12. Generate public interest in civic issues. With the knowledge, dedication, and resources of the institutions and groups represented at this forum, we have confidence in our abilities to continue to move the Kansas City region toward solutions to our most pressing problems, and toward the engagement of all our community members in the work at hand. However, to accomplish this, we need a public that is more aware and better informed about national and community needs, about the programs that are working to address these needs, and about the opportunities to get involved

WISE WORDS ABOUT COLLABORATIVE CIVIC EFFORTS

Community volunteer and philanthropist Adele Hall listed six factors that she had found in successful partnerships and collaborative efforts:

- + A vision and mission that are clear and financially viable.
- + An enterprise that is innovative and creative, but not duplicative.
- + A deep appreciation of diversity, at all levels of the project.
- + A consciousness about building and maintaining a strong relationship between the project and the community at large. "New voices were brought to the table....there were no lone rangers."
- + Strong, capable leaders. "The leadership is critical. 'Bet on the jockey, not on the horse.'"
- + Dedicated volunteers committed to building and sustaining partnerships. "The volunteers involved *believed* – not thought, but *believed* – that trusting relationships could be built. They recognized that people learn in different ways. They understood that partnerships must be mutual. They had faith that their values would carry them over the rippled waters that occur whenever new relationships are being formed."

From her perspective, the six factors most likely to impede a coalition's progress are:

- Confusion about the vision and mission of the effort.
- Low trust levels. "In many instances this was only because the coalition members did not really know one another and did not take the time to get to know each other."
- Coalition members holding on to individual agendas. "The participants did not truly believe in the added value of a collective voice, and were unable to step away from their personal or single-issue agendas."
- Coalition members concerned about their personal image and status. "Big egos can get in the way."
- Unrealistic expectations or poor planning. "Some projects over-reached and failed – sometimes because the participants did not understand the importance of infrastructure, or did not involve the programs and experts with years of previous experience in the issue area."
- Incomplete financing, either because of the amount available or too short a time frame.

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, founded in 1993, is an organized group of grantmakers representing the whole spectrum of philanthropy including private foundations, individual donors, corporate foundations, and community foundations. The Forum provides leadership and information about the value of service and volunteering, and encourages private and public investment in the field

as a means of strengthening communities and building a healthy democracy. For more information visit www.gfcns.org, call 510-665-6130, or email info@gfcns.org.

Staffing for the Grantmaker Forum is provided by BTW Consultants-informing change, a Berkeley, California firm specializing in organizational development, planning, and program evaluation for the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. www.informingchange.com