

**The Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations (COVAA):  
Looking Forward**

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**Abstract**

*The Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations (COVAA) formed as a result of a historical convening of official representatives of existing associations of volunteer program managers throughout the United States. Mandated by the delegates, COVAA's Steering Committee is committed to forming a new national association for leaders in volunteer engagement that is positive, relevant, and sustainable. Maximizing the opportunity to create a vibrant, healthy organization, the building process has been intentional, strategic, and inclusive of a variety of stakeholders, both inside and outside the traditional volunteer management field. The following article describes the origins of COVAA, its goals, and the exciting opportunity that faces the field in this birthing process.*

**Keywords**

volunteers, professional association, leadership, professional, congress

Every leader of volunteers recognizes the power of citizen involvement in creating change in communities. To ensure maximum impact, such power must be harnessed and channeled through effective volunteer management practices and systems. To enhance and sustain the positive impacts of volunteers in our diverse communities, the Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations (COVAA) serves as the catalyst to foster collaboration, promote professional development, define best practices, and advocate for leaders in volunteer engagement.

**A New Approach**

In 2006, after the dissolution of the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), representatives from the field of volunteer management engaged in lengthy dialogue about the feasibility and need for a new national professional association. In December, a group of roughly 90 delegates, representing more than 6,000 volunteer managers from across the United States, gathered in Denver, Colorado to begin to organize around questions such as:

- What are existing associations already doing well?
- What might a national organization provide that is value-added?

- How might a congress encourage the formation of new associations in geographic areas without such a group now?
- What might be the interrelationship between a national congress and local associations?

In short, COVAA began as a grassroots *event* to ensure that all involved with the field of volunteer management would have the opportunity to participate in determining the future of the profession. It was a first-ever convening of official representatives of existing associations of volunteer program managers throughout the United States. During an intensive two-day process of thoughtful dialogue, delegates of the congress voted to form a new, national member association for leaders in volunteer engagement. Funding for these activities has been provided by the Volunteer IMPACT Fund and The Leighty Foundation, as well as many individual donors.

### **Guided by Passion and Purpose**

Since the Congress in Denver, a select group of delegates have been charged with designing this new national entity. The Steering Committee—made up of dozens of passionate leaders in volunteer management from around the country—is working very thoughtfully to ensure that the new membership association is relevant, positive, and sustainable. All of these leaders are donating their expertise and time by serving on a sub-committee. The sub-committees are led by the volunteer Steering Committee with the assistance of a paid project strategist.

COVAA is following a broad, inclusive path that will lead to a strong professional association. Steering Committee members are systematically building a national membership association to assist in meeting the needs of volunteer managers as well as serving as a primary connector between

efforts across the field of volunteer management. Besides being a resource for the profession and local DOVIA (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) chapters, the new organization is going to be an advocacy organization on behalf of the profession, a standard bearer, and a developer of leaders for our communities.

Part of the Steering Committee's mandate is to establish a formal association quickly, while taking the time to do it well. The goal is to complete organizational development and hand off the new association to its first board of directors by January 2008. The Steering Committee believes that this building process is as important as the ultimate goal. They are dedicated to maximizing this opportunity to build a healthy foundation for the new organization by thinking strategically about its direction, the future of volunteerism, and the implications for the field.

### **Maximizing the Opportunity to Create a New Direction**

Since the demise of AVA, a vacuum has been created. Many organizations have stepped up to fill the gap or take advantage of the opportunity to become part of the volunteer management sector. The result has been sector fragmentation. The sector needs alignment. COVAA has observed all of this and is looking intentionally at the various fragments in the sector to better understand what role we can provide and what gap in the sector we can fill.

To date, several exciting possibilities are being sketched through dialogue and collaboration. A sampling of these possibilities include: providing support on a regional basis to ensure accessibility to members; using the model of an association of associations to unite the field across areas of geographical and resource differences; and the potential of creating a certification process for volunteer programs so that

organizations would be rewarded for fully investing in their volunteer program structure. COVAA is looking to help provide uniformity in the field as a convener and collaborator.

In addition, there is recognition of the increasing number of volunteers who are engaged in less formal, grassroots, community engagement activities. The leaders of these volunteers may not see themselves as “professional volunteer managers”, yet they would appreciate and benefit from the support of a network like COVAA. We are exploring how to broaden our reach to all leaders in community engagement (paid or unpaid) and enhancing the spirit of volunteerism in America.

### **Following a Broad, Inclusive Path**

COVAA’s building process has and continues to incorporate representatives of the profession that will ultimately be served. In addition, COVAA is looking outside of the usual sphere of volunteer management to obtain input from other people or organizations with a broader perspective. COVAA is especially interested in the input of potential partners to ensure an approach that is relevant. For example, the process for naming the new entity will include thinking about language that resonates with potential members, collaborators, and the general public too. As a result, the new organization that is born will be positive and sustainable.

This past summer, the Steering Committee held a retreat to finish the discussion from the Congress event of last December. At the retreat, delegates worked on organizational identity as a foundation to the business plan and developed project timelines and work plans to ensure sub-committees have a clear picture of the next steps required to build the COVAA foundation. The Steering Committee is working very diligently and thoughtfully to

ensure that the new organization has a solid foundation.

The following mission statement is a result of the ongoing work of the Steering Committee. While not yet finalized, it articulates the vision and direction of this new organization. The Steering Committee and the entire delegation are very excited about the potential of this new national association to revolutionize the field of volunteer management and we welcome input and feedback on our progress.

### **Draft Mission Statement**

*(New entity name to be determined)  
serves to enhance and sustain the spirit of volunteerism in America by fostering collaboration and networking, promoting professional development, and providing advocacy for leaders in volunteer engagement.*

### **Laying the Foundation for the Future**

Effective volunteer management is a vital component of effective citizen engagement and creating change in communities. COVAA is committed to revolutionizing the field of volunteer management and taking advantage of this juncture in the field to create an organization that will meet the current needs and the future needs of leaders of volunteers. At the same time, COVAA is committed to avoiding duplication of existing resources and serving as a conduit to the wealth of knowledge and information that is available to the field. COVAA will fill a unique niche as an advocate to promote the critical role that leaders of volunteers play in our society. Without a larger entity that represents the best of volunteer management, it will be difficult for the profession to obtain the respect and visibility needed to support volunteer capacity on the local level.

Ultimately, COVAA's vision is to inspire and empower leaders of volunteers to be an effective catalyst for social betterment and change, and that these leaders of volunteers are viewed by all as essential catalysts for invigorating community engagement. To

learn more about the Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations and to get involved, please visit our Web site at [www.covaa.org](http://www.covaa.org).

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### **About the Authors**

Rita Chick has been employed by the American Red Cross since 1989, and is responsible for 110 employees and over 2000 volunteers. She has served on multiple task forces and has given many presentations on volunteer management at Red Cross conferences. Currently, she is a member of the California Diversity Council and states that "The opportunity to serve as Co-Chair of COVAA has been exciting and rewarding."

Joanna Johnson has served as the Volunteer Services Coordinator for a municipal animal shelter in Austin, TX for seven years, and is responsible for the management of 400 volunteers. A former elementary school teacher, she completed her CVA in April of 2007. Her current volunteer experiences include the Central Texas American Red Cross, Pets America, a local Campus Advisory Council, the Parent-Teacher Association, Boy Scouts of America, and church ministry teams.