Speech on Volunteerism at the 9th annual Slovenska Filantropija's Volunteerism Congress: Volunteerism - "Habits of the Heart"

Thank you for the invitation to join you for the ninth annual Volunteerism Congress. The focus this year--looking to unify efforts among institutions both public and private--is especially appropriate given these difficult economic times. Volunteerism is a good dose of medicine for these hard economic times and it is crucial that efforts among institutions and individuals be coordinated and strive to complement one another. It is fine for businesses to compete in the market place, but volunteer organizations should, I think, focus more on cooperation and less on competition.

Volunteerism normally comes into focus with the holiday season –- Thanksgiving, which we just celebrated in the United States, and Christmas. But we know that people like you are carrying out this important work all year long. Indeed, what you all do to assist others is remarkable, and I must confess bluntly that it is disgraceful that I don't think of helping and volunteering more often. One should not need the holiday season to prod one to wake up and realize how many people are in need all year round.

Volunteerism as a concept is not about charity in the ugly sense of the word. It is not about people taking pity on one another. Volunteerism is the cornerstone of a strong economy and nation – the way in which an active, apolitical citizenry recognizes needs and provides services to address them well before the government or other institutions do. Volunteers work not because of coercion or profit, but because they recognize a need and are willing to take responsibility for meeting that need.

Ironically enough, in this way, volunteerism is not truly voluntary: It is based on obligation and our duty to help each other as people, separate from the government, political or religious affiliation, or any other grouping we belong to. It is a moral imperative to help and allow oneself to be helped, not a legal one. For those who are at all religious, I think it an intriguing fact that the first question any human ever asks God in the Bible is a question Cain poses. Cain asks: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Equally intriguingly, God never answers the question. Why would he? Why would anyone answer such a question? The answer is so obvious it is almost an insult to have asked it. But just in case any of you are not sure of the right answer, the answer is: Yes! We are each other's keeper. Yes, we have a moral obligation to care for each other. Yes, regardless of whether we are good or evil, whether we believe in a God or not, whether we come from one side of the political spectrum or another, whether we fought on this side or that side in a war. Regardless of all distinctions and differences, we are entrusted to care for one another.

This all brings up a sharper point, perhaps one that is more controversial, but I think just as true: All volunteerism is founded on self-interest. This seems counter-intuitive at first, but I think it is obvious. Because we are each other's keepers, because we have a moral inclination as social animals to support one another, deep down we know that we will never be satisfied with ourselves if we don't help others. And volunteerism also promotes a practical self-interest because helping others makes the community and country we live in a safer, more stable place.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who wrote so insightfully of America over 170 years ago, put it this way: “Americans show how an enlightened concern for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state.” De Tocqueville had a nice phrase to describe volunteerism that has always been one of my favorites: “habits of the heart.” Things we do instinctively like breathing. Things we cannot stop doing without hurting ourselves.

The roots of U.S. volunteerism are far-reaching and deep. Volunteer services composed of citizens have always played a major role in our own history. Because our society was so undeveloped for so many generations and our government was so distant and so severely restricted until the New Deal in providing any support for people when they were in need, people inevitably had to rely on themselves and their neighbors for support. Americans have been banding together to help one another since colonial times. The settlers of the new American colonies all had the same priority -— survival. Cooperation frequently meant the difference between life and death. Today our needs may have changed somewhat, but the choice is no less stark, and the roots are very much the same. Who donates blood in society? Who works to preserve the environment around us? Who leads youth groups and sports teams? Who blogs, tweets, and uses other forms of social media to advocate for political and social change? These are all volunteers. In a typical year, about one-fifth of the American population, more than 62 million people, serve as volunteers, according to U.S. government statistics. They contribute more than 8 billion hours of service to local and national groups, valued conservatively at $173 billion.

Conversely, in European countries where the governments were more developed and where social support was more institutionalized, volunteerism did not develop as quickly. Because people always looked to the government to assist them, volunteerism did not until recently start to really become ingrained into the fabric of society here as in the United States. This is especially true of former communist regimes, like Yugoslavia: whatever their many flaws, such societies at least focused on providing basic needs of all people. But people got used to the government taking care of them and so volunteerism was unable to expand and become as significant a part of the civic culture of those countries.

Volunteering does not happen in a vacuum; it has always been shaped by changes in demographics, family composition, employment patterns, and economics. With men and women now in the workforce, many U.S. companies have now established corporate social responsibility programs that encourage employees to volunteer by offering time off ranging from a few hours per week to a year’s sabbatical. For example, this past September, we were honored—and had great fun--taking part in a “Diplomatic Day of Service” with other embassies as a part of the Corporate Social Responsibility Week organized by AmCham and Slovenska Filanthropia. Our Embassy has also established an Alumni Volunteering Program, through which a small group of alumni of U.S.-funded exchange programs visit the Ljubljana Children’s Hospital each month to read in English and spend time with the kids.

Into the future, the causes served by volunteering and methods used will continue to evolve, but the commitment of volunteers will not. The common thread that binds all examples of volunteerism together is the need to accomplish a greater good.

So you ask – what can I do, I am only one person? The playwright Henrik Ibsen once wrote: “A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm.” You can teach or coach; canvass or campaign for social issues; raise funds; or collect, make, serve or deliver basic necessities. We are sometimes reluctant to get involved because we really don’t think we can make a difference. There is no error more serious than this: to think we cannot make a difference. No lasting progress has ever been made except one person at a time, one good deed at a time, one life at a time, one dream at a time.

Thank you once again for your time today. We will now be joining Hiša Sadeži Družbe to serve a meal to celebrate the spirit of volunteerism – the greatest of the habits of the heart.