A New York Volunteer Effort Will Soon Spread to 10 Cities

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Since April, they have spruced up a dozen city blocks, helped give 164,000 flu vaccinations and installed 178,000 compact fluorescent bulbs in public housing. They are volunteers, part of an ambitious New York effort to tap unpaid workers as a permanent, strategic element in solving city problems.

The program, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s response to President Obama’s call to increase civic service, began in April and includes nearly 200 AmeriCorps Vista volunteers who have fanned out across the city as a kind of consulting force, helping nonprofit agencies fine-tune their programs and recruit and deploy even more volunteers. Their work, city officials say, has resulted in 18,000 new volunteers serving 67,000 New Yorkers.

Now, that effort is going national. In Chicago on Monday, Mr. Bloomberg, Mayor Richard M. Daley and a coalition of mayors plan to announce 10 cities — Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Nashville, Newark, Omaha, Philadelphia, Sacramento, Seattle and Savannah, Ga. — that will receive grants to finance programs of their own design.

“We see this as an urban innovation,” said Judith Rodin, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, which is providing the grants. “It really brings the mayors and the city leadership together with the volunteers in a much more organized way that, we think, has the opportunity for much greater leverage and much greater impact.”

Conceived as a way to address the country’s most pressing needs during an economic downturn, as those needs grow and public money dwindles, the focus on volunteers has been received enthusiastically by cities across the country. The coalition, called Cities of Service, is modeled on the gun control group Mr. Bloomberg started in 2006, and it already has 80 members working together to develop programs, share information and promote their ideas.

It is too early to know, though, if all the enthusiasm will improve government’s ability to solve urban problems. There have been many similar campaigns in the past, said Thomas H. Pollak of the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute, a research group.

“The challenge has been to break through the widespread cynicism that it’s not just some politician’s or some organization’s P.R. effort,” he said. “Offhand I can’t think of any of these sorts of initiatives that clearly reached a tipping point where they’re self-sustaining and transforming people’s sense that they can be involved.”

Surveys suggest that Americans are highly willing to volunteer from time to time, he said, adding, “Can you get not just a person who will come out for 8 or 10 hours once a year, or once a quarter, but can you really match up the needs of a community with the needs of the volunteers?”
But those involved in the program say it is intended to do precisely that by creating a centralized office within government to coordinate and manage volunteer activities at city agencies and nonprofit organizations.

“I think what Mayor Bloomberg recognized was that there are a lot of New Yorkers and literally people across this country who want to participate and want to give, and there’s a lot of great nonprofits already doing that, but let’s have a coordinated strategy and let’s focus on some real results,” said Alan Khazei, a nationally known proponent of community service who helped design the New York program and suggested that Mr. Bloomberg form the coalition.

Mr. Khazei, whose recent failed bid for Senator Edward M. Kennedy’s seat drew support from Mr. Bloomberg, added: “And what this challenge grant process has done is led other mayors to say, ‘You know what, I want to do that too.’ It was already happening, but now it’s stepping up.”

The grants will provide $200,000 to each city over two years to pay for a “chief service officer” to run the volunteer programs. As part of their applications, cities had to identify at least two focus areas; all 10 chosen from the 50 applicants selected something related to education or youth, with public safety and the environment among the more popular other choices.

In New York, the program sweeps across several areas — strengthening neighborhoods, education, health, emergency preparedness and the environment — and seeks to make it easier for volunteers to find their way to the right organization, and to make sure the organization can efficiently use the volunteers. The emphasis has been on developing programs to advance the city’s most important policy agendas, a task made more urgent by the recession.

Thus far, the program appears to be meeting with some success, especially among the organizations using the AmeriCorps workers. New York Cares has been able to expand its programs by 20 percent, said Gary Bagley, the executive director, including its tax assistance program for low-income people. And Common Cents, which runs a youth fund-raising program called Penny Harvest, has been able to take on nearly 1,500 new volunteers, city officials said.

“These challenges aren’t going away, and we don’t necessarily have the money right now to weather this economic downturn without the help of volunteerism,” said Diahann Billings-Burford, the city’s chief service officer. “We are trying to build an ethic of service that will last infinitely.”