Getting Started: Russ Snyder, CEO, Volunteers of America’s Chesapeake chapter

Adam Stone

Even as much of this presidential campaign touches on the role of the government in helping the needy, Volunteers of America’s Chesapeake chapter, based in Lanham, is broadening its role in the community.

The organization is exploring more partnerships with other nonprofits and offering more services for the elderly. Today, one of the first branches of the Volunteers of America network has grown to 29 programs, 600 staffers, more than 2,000 volunteers and 10,000 beneficiaries across Maryland, D.C. and Virginia — all led by CEO Russ Snyder.

What is it? Volunteers of America is a faith-based nonprofit that provides health and human services to the homeless population, to men and women who are intellectually disabled and to others who need services.

When was it founded? 1896.

Who helped? I have a good friend who became blind five years ago, and he encouraged me to go into the nonprofit world as a way to jump-start a second career. I saw his incredible need to be connected to services: All of a sudden he was 60 years old and struggling to get connected to services for the visually impaired. That inspired me to look at the nonprofit world to see where I could use my business skills and contacts to help connect vulnerable people to services. I was an owner and operator of a professional services firm that operated trade associations in D.C., and what led me to Volunteers of America was, first, my faith, and also my efforts in missions throughout the world and in the U.S.

How is it financed? The Chesapeake chapter is 92 percent funded by state, local and federal governments, and that has been typical for the last 25 years.

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Where do the ideas come from? As a human service organization, the recent expansion we have had is in veterans’ housing. Thinking about the social needs of veterans coming back from having been deployed for the last 10 years or so, we have begun providing housing to homeless veterans who may be suffering from mental illness in order to stabilize them, to eventually move them into permanent employment and permanent housing. We want to take care of those who are in a place where they are not able to take care of themselves. That’s the central idea.

Annual revenue? The annual budget is $24 million.

Is it profitable? It’s a nonprofit. If we have a year when revenue exceeds expenses, we reinvest that into the populations we serve.

Challenges?

The challenge has to do with continuing pressures in the economy to either reduce services or reduce payment for the service. Local, state and federal governments are all pressured every day to cut expenses and the clear target is these safety nets, these human services. So we have been advocating and educating policymakers that we can do this in a very efficient way, that we can save more with the same dollars, but we need their support. No more cuts.

Growth plans? We really want to focus in on diversifying our services. We are evaluating providing health services for the elderly, for example.

Next big idea?

To collaborate with other nonprofits to provide a higher level and more economical quality of services. Nonprofits have to work together. That's the big idea. That's the bottom line.

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