

New Award Program Created Amid Concerns Over Decline in Public Service Volunteers

by Bart Russell, principal of the Barton Russell Group

Points of Lights has joined other prominent organizations in supporting the new **Small Town America Civic Volunteer Award** (STACVA) program that was created to shine a spotlight on a growing national problem. For many years, there has been a serious decline in the availability of people willing to serve as civic volunteers in their local communities. This issue threatens the very fabric of small town America, and has more significance today than ever before.

We are facing perhaps the greatest global crisis since World War II, with the spread of COVID-19, and its impact is being felt throughout all aspects of our lives. The issue has placed a particular burden on smaller counties and communities that already face a challenge in retaining and recruiting local volunteers to support a wide range of vital public services.

Research conducted in 2018 by the Do Good Institute at the University of Maryland, showed the percent of citizens volunteering in rural areas dropped for 12 straight years beginning in 2003, from a high of 30.9% that year to 25.3% by 2015. Evidence suggests the trend has continued. I believe Points of Light's support of this important initiative will draw much-needed grassroots attention to the problem and, hopefully, help reverse the disturbing trend of fewer people willing to volunteer in our smaller communities.

CivicPlus, the leading platform of integrated technology for local governments, is underwriting the **Small Town America Civic Volunteer Award**. The program will recognize the top 100 nominees who fill critical roles such as volunteer firefighters, EMTs, advisory committees for libraries, public recreation programs, municipal boards and councils, and more. STACVA is open to all counties, cities and townships with populations of 5,000 or less. Local governments represented by the top three winners will receive cash awards, and all localities served by the top 100 honorees will receive new CivicCMS websites (including a volunteer module to aid in future volunteer recruitment efforts) at no charge.

Joining Points of Light as co-sponsors of the award are the National Volunteer Fire Council, the National Association of Counties, the National Association of Towns and Townships and Main Street America.

The **Small Town America Civic Volunteer Award** program will launch on June 1. Local government representatives may nominate citizens or citizen organizations for STACVA using an online application (www.civic-volunteer.com) that will become active on the program's start date. Nominators will be asked to describe their candidate's compelling story of local volunteerism and its positive impact on their community. Winners of the award will be announced in the fall. We are excited about the program and especially about the support of an organization as prestigious as Points of Light.

(Note: The **Barton Russell Group** is managing the **Small Town America Civic Volunteer Award**. BRG has built several national award and grant programs including the Best Small Towns in America contest, the American Hometown Leaders Award and the America's Best Communities competition. BRG was founded by Bart Russell, a nationally recognized expert on "everything small town." One former U.S. President called him "the voice of small town America.")