

## **Volunteer opportunities abound in the city**

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Our office was disappointed by The Bee's misguided characterization of Mayor Kevin Johnson's volunteer staff in its July 25 editorial ("Mayor should lift veil on staff"). The editorial's tone exemplifies the kind of knee-jerk negativity citizens are tired of. Amid an unprecedented economic downturn, we have received an equally unprecedented outpouring of citizens eager to serve. To date, 1,000 citizens have asked a simple question: "How can we help?"

This is an opportunity to embrace, not a challenge to chase away. Alongside City Hall leaders, we developed several innovations for citizens to take ownership of their government. We expanded internship opportunities for high school and college students. We created a prestigious Fellows program for top graduate students across the country. The mayor voted with the City Council to update volunteer guidelines for midcareer professionals with expertise in community issues. And we launched Volunteer Sacramento, a citywide effort that has inspired 15,000 citizens to log 235,000 hours of service this year.

We also adhere 100 percent to policies governing all 2,600 city volunteers . Our office submits required paperwork promptly and personally introduces volunteers to City Hall leaders. Full-time staff supervise all volunteers , and provide monthly reports to human resources. Volunteers work in the "Bullpen," a public space featured in a press event spotlighting their contributions. The Bee attended this event, observed meetings involving volunteers , and printed their photo with an article.

These are hardly traits of a "shadow government" fostering a "climate of suspicion."

On the contrary, our volunteers foster inspiring results. Through 7,200 service hours -- or \$110,000 in value at no cost to taxpayers -- they have made an enormous difference amid furloughs and budget cuts. They allow us to respond to constituent concerns more effectively than would be possible with one of the nation's smallest mayoral staffs. Above all, they provide an important tool to give City Hall back to citizens.

In truth, our volunteers are ordinary citizens with an extraordinary desire to serve. Their work isn't glamorous, but their impact is profound. They are not "unknown persons" who "scurry" through City Hall with "special agendas," but committed citizens who work early mornings and late nights to better the city . They represent a governing philosophy based on possibility, not paranoia.

Put simply, there is no "veil" to "lift." We take pride in the growing community that shares Johnson's vision of a city that works for everyone. Now more than ever, Sacramento needs their service.

Kunal Merchant is chief of staff to Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson. To join Johnson's Volunteer Initiative, visit [www.volunteersac.com](http://www.volunteersac.com) or call (916) 808-5300.

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