## **DttP: Documents to the People**

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From the Chair

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As the father of two boys, an active church member, and occasional rec-league baseball coach, I have always thought that I had enough to do. While I still harbored some lingering notion that I should do more for my local community, I always fell back on the "when I have time" excuse. As more and more of my time began to be taken up by my kids' activities (I became a soccer/lacrosse/choir Dad) I began to realize that there really was never going to be a good time and if I was going to be more engaged in my community I really had to make the time. So, in fall 2002, when a call went out for volunteers to work on an upcoming election, I decided that I had to step up to the need and became a chief election judge for Baltimore County, Maryland.

I have since learned through Govdoc-l that many other GODORT members are election officials as well. I also discovered that GODORT members are active in their communities in myriad other ways, including Red Cross blood bank coordinator, community library volunteers, Big Brother/Big Sister volunteers, the National Guard, Habitat for Humanity, domestic violence counselors, literacy volunteers, the Sierra Club, youth baseball program coordinator, English As a Second Language tutor, public library board members, city planning commissioner, and community art project coordinator. This is an amazing and inspiring variety of volunteer commitments. The level of involvement seems to defuse, at least when it comes to government information librarians, the notion expressed in the 2000 book *Bowling Alone* that Americans are not actively engaged in their communities.<sup>1</sup>

This really shouldn't have surprised me, given the level of GODORT members' commitment within ALA. Our members are involved in a wide range of leadership and organizational activities in ALA. Interestingly, the level of outside involvement tracks closely with research suggesting that individuals with higher education levels have greater levels of community involvement. This research further suggests that it is baby boomers and older adults (although I am loathe to think of myself as a "baby boomer" and I'm certainly not an "older adult") that represent the leading edge of this involvement. The counterweight to this cohort's activity level is, according to research by Peter Levine of the University of Maryland, a dramatic drop off of volunteerism in the general population for people of college age and in the years immediately following college. Happily, I don't see that same trend represented in GODORT. Many of our new leaders, those who are challenging our round table to change with the times and technology, fall into the same age group as that identified by Levine as nonvolunteers.

This past year, GODORT sponsored two newer librarians, Justin Otto and Rebecca Hyde, as part of ALA's Emerging Leaders program and, by the time this column reaches its readers, we will have selected two additional "early career" librarians to join the 2008 class of ALA's Emerging Leaders. This year many of the GODORT committee chairs and task force coordinators are newer faces, individuals who have stepped up and said that they are willing to put in the extra time and effort to help shape our organization, to help the library community, and help shape the future of access to government information. One upcoming opportunity for GODORT members to develop skills that support the library community will be a two-hour advocacy training course planned to coincide with the FDLP meeting in October. I encourage our members to take advantage of this opportunity. We need your

voice to help ensure that government information from all levels remains freely accessible for all citizens. There are other opportunities to serve ALA as well. ALA president-elect Jim Rettig has recently put out a call for volunteers for ALA committees. This is a chance to be involved in "big ALA," and I urge our members to consider volunteering to help the association.

In this same vein, the GODORT Nominations Committee also is seeking members to run for office in the coming year, and I encourage you to take part. One of the pleasant surprises of being GODORT chair (and the surprises have all been pleasant so far) was the number of e-mails I received as I began making committee appointments that all began in a similar way . . . "I'm a new librarian and I want to get involved in GODORT . . ." Although it was not possible to appoint everyone who contacted me, I have done my best to make appointments for these newer librarians. If you did not get an appointment this year, I hope that you will not be discouraged and will continue to be active in GODORT. I know that we will all work together to help our newer members become leaders in our organization and, I hope, in their communities beyond work.

After all, being active in the larger community offers many of us the chance to acquire new skills or to use our library skills in a new way. More importantly, participating in civic and social activities helps us to keep our work life in perspective. What we do in GODORT is important for ALA, for our users, and for our libraries. But there are just as many other important issues and challenges facing our communities and our nation that our skills and abilities can benefit, allowing us to give back beyond the confines of our library and the expectations of our "duties as assigned."

Opportunities to volunteer are as many as there are things that need to be done. If you wait until you have the time, you may never do it. Your community needs your skills, your knowledge, and your interest. I encourage you to get involved in GODORT, in ALA, and in your community.

## References and Notes

- 1. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
- 2. James E. Hinterlong, "The Effects of Civic Engagement of Current and Future Cohorts of Older Adults," *Generations* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 10–17.
- 3. Michael Hill, "Q&A with Professor Peter Levine (University of Maryland)—Getting Them Involved," *Baltimore Sun*, August 8, 2007, 3F.