

Volunteering Pays Dividends

Karen Mundy

"I volunteer because I like helping those who need help." Volunteer for Haven of Rest

A community was once defined by the proximity of people to each other. Within a community, the people helped each other to build houses, barns, churches, and schools, and to plant and harvest crops. The "pay" was knowing each would be helped as the need arose. These times were not only for work but for socializing as well. Rural community dwellers, in particular, relied on the support of neighbors rather than the government.

Much has changed in rural America. Communications and travel have become easier and faster, and people have taken jobs outside the local area or outside the home. People perceive that they no longer have the leisure time to help one another. After the crash of the Stock Market Crash in 1929, President Roosevelt initiated programs that made the government responsible for people without jobs. People thought they no longer needed each others' help. "The Great Society" of President Johnson's administration reemphasized the role of government in place of volunteers.

But a place for people to help one another without involving the government has always existed. The term "volunteer" came into vogue after World War II. Servicemen returning from the war replaced women in the work force. Women, having become accustomed to working outside the home and wanting to continue to do so, organized church and civic groups to give their time to support community projects.

President Bush's "Points of Light" pointed to the continuing need for volunteers. One of the questions tied to

the Welfare Reform for rural communities is whether sufficient jobs are available locally to meet the needs of the community. Virginians cannot receive welfare payments for more than five years over their lifetime. They must find jobs (unless they are handicapped). If the resources, jobs, training, or child care, are insufficient, who will help the people who remain jobless since the safety net has been removed? Dr. Louis Swanson, Sociologist, University of Kentucky, said "We need to look at our churches and at our other voluntary organizations . . . to provide even more leadership and resources in addressing the local well-being than they have for the past 40 years. (p 4)." Once again the pendulum swings toward an emphasis on volunteerism.

What are volunteers?

According to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, a volunteer is one who "voluntarily undertakes a service . . . or takes part in a transaction while having no legal concern or interest." Voluntary, from the Latin *voluntarius* is "acting or doing of one's own free will without valuable consideration or legal obligation" (Webster's). Community involvement, public service, service learning, helping out, being a good neighbor, activism, self-help, mutual aid, social concern, citizen participation, and lay ministry are synonymous with volunteering according to Energize.

The parents who chaperone class trips, the children who bake cookies for the band bake sale, or the man who takes his elderly neighbor to the grocery store are "informal" volunteers. Some formal volunteer efforts may start out as just neighbors helping each other solve a neighborhood problem. These efforts grow into a grassroots organization as those involved see other communities facing similar problems.

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Formal volunteer programs such as Cooperative Extension, the church, Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps, Little League, Red Cross, and Salvation Army are easily recognizable as volunteer efforts. *By the People* includes in the history of volunteerism those people who gave time to the Civil Rights movement, to the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), to the Rotary Club and other such civic organizations, to religious organizations, to the Suffragette movement, and other political activist organizations.

New volunteer opportunities, both formal and informal, arise as society changes. People now volunteer for causes such as child abuse and neglect prevention, child advocacy, senior citizens' services, environmental issues, and handicapped people's rights, to cite but a few.

Even within the formal volunteer settings, volunteers use to give their time and resources freely. But now the definition of volunteer is being broadened to include reimbursement for travel, meals, and incidentals, or compensation in the form of educational debt repayment or extensions for the repayment time, continued retirement time accumulation, or stipends for college classes.

Some groups include court-imposed community service and welfare benefits for community service in their definition of volunteerism. While these types of services are not strictly voluntary, workers can often choose where they work. And they serve a role very similar to that of the traditional volunteer: they provide services that the agency could not afford to purchase.

Who volunteers?

Gallup does a biennial survey of volunteers. In 1996, the most current survey available, they found

- More women (52 percent) than men (45 percent) volunteer.
- People between 35 and 55 years old volunteer more than other age groups: 55 percent compared to 38 to 51 percent for all other ages.
- Increasingly, these mid-life people are volunteering for short-term projects with definite beginning and ending dates.
- Of people employed in full-time jobs, 50 percent volunteered.
- Of people employed in part-time jobs, 58 percent volunteered.
- Of unemployed people, 46 percent volunteered.
- Of retired people, 40 percent volunteered.

- Increasingly, families are volunteering together.
- Most older volunteers interviewed said they got their first experience volunteering as children, primarily through the church. They were included in church-sponsored visits to nursing homes, to help repair the homes of older citizens, and to take food to neighbors in need.
- People are four times more likely to volunteer if they are asked than if they have to search for an organization to which to give their time.
- Least likely to be asked to volunteer are Afro-Americans, Hispanics, singles, and those with incomes under \$20,000. These groups may not be asked by the volunteer organizations, but they "help out" in their communities.

Why are some volunteer programs more successful than others?

One measure of success is getting people to volunteer. Volunteer organizations need to "market" volunteer opportunities because people are willing to volunteer if they are asked, but they will not necessarily seek out volunteer opportunities on their own.

Furthermore, for the volunteer program to be successful, the volunteer "... can no longer be recruited to do unpleasant and unrewarding volunteer jobs. Volunteer programs which fail to recognize this change in self-perception will fail to survive as viable programs" (Schick, p. 6). As Fletcher points out, using volunteers is not *entirely* free for organizations. Paid staff must understand the role that volunteers play. The "right" volunteers must be found for the jobs. The volunteers must be trained. All this capacity building takes time and resources.

Why volunteer?

Often, the people who have been ordered by the courts to participate in community service continue volunteering after their required period is over. The barriers to involvement have been removed. These barriers include perceptions of lack of time to be involved, training given only during working hours, volunteer opportunities only during working hours, and lacking confidence in their own ability.

People usually volunteer because giving their time to a cause or a group helps them feel good about themselves. Some volunteers work in their areas of specialty, such as a

dentist who volunteers to work with low income people or an accountant who prepares tax information for a non-profit organization. Other volunteers give their time in areas where they may not have formal training but in which they have interest—a by-product of volunteering is gaining training and experience. Examples of these volunteers are the physicist who helps build houses for Habitat for Humanity and the lawyer who gives time to the Cooperative Extension Master Gardener program.

More specific reasons for volunteering include helping others, passing on good values to youth, feeling needed, helping a family member, demonstrating commitment to a cause or belief, repaying a debt, having an impact, being an agent of change, standing up and being counted. The list also includes some less altruistic reasons: because the boss expects it; because job experience can be obtained; because meals, transportation, or other benefits are provided; because the agency is geographically accessible. But whatever the reason, the volunteer reaps rewards.

Do volunteers make an economic impact?

According to the 1996 Gallup survey, over 93 million adults volunteered in 1995. These people gave an average of 4.2 hours per week and a total of 20.3 billion hours annually. If these volunteers had been paid, it would have cost approximately \$269 billion, an average of \$13.24 per hour, including social security but no other benefits. In Virginia, volunteers contribute 12 hours per month, on average; volunteers 65 and older tend to give an average of 30 hours per month. Virginia estimates show 3.2 million adults volunteering an average of 4 hours a week—the equivalent of 320,000 full-time workers (Virginia Office of Volunteerism). The contribution of volunteers to the economy is enormous.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) relies heavily on volunteers. In 1995, VCE used 40,712 volunteers statewide. These volunteers gave 863,904 hours, which VCE estimated to be worth \$14,185,303, based on the national average of \$16.42 per hour, including benefits. These volunteers worked in 4-H—Youth Development (46 percent), Community Resource Development (11 percent), Agriculture and Natural Resources (20 percent), and Family and Consumer Sciences (23 percent). An amazing increase in volunteer involvement occurred in Agriculture and Natural Resources (38 percent) and in 4-H-Youth Development (52 percent) from 1995 to 1997 (Neiland).

How do volunteers learn about volunteer jobs?

Michigan State University found, in a survey of volunteers, 44 percent were asked to volunteer; 29 percent had a family member or friend who volunteered; 31 percent were involved in a civic group, professional group, or the like; 25 percent searched for volunteer work on their own; 9 percent had other methods; and few could not remember how they got involved.

Interested in volunteering?

The following web site addresses were valid as of the date and time of accessing them (June 8, 1998). Web addresses can change without notice, thus, while we believe them to be accurate, we cannot guarantee they are. Many of these sites have links to other sites. Many more sites than are listed here exist: searching “volunteering” or “volunteer organizations” will provide additional sites.

VCE: <http://www.ext.vt.edu>

Virginia Office of Volunteerism: <http://www.vip-view.net/vovinfo.html>

Habitat for Humanity: <http://www.habitat.org>

American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org>

ACDI/VOCA: <http://www.acdivoca.org/home.html>

AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America): <http://www.libertynet.org/zelson/vweb.html>

Peace Corps: <http://www.shirak.am/ngo/peace.html>

Smithsonian Institute: <http://www.si.edu/youandsi/join/voluntee/behindsc.htm>

United Way: <http://www.unitedway.org>

U.S. Forest Service Volunteers: http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/opp_to_vol.html

Earthwatch Institute: <http://www.earthwatch.org>

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****If your address changes, please let us know.** Mail us a change of address card or the mailing label from *Horizons* with the new and old addresses on it. Thank you.

****At the printer:** *Community Preferences for Types of Businesses: A Case Study of Three Counties*. This report describes how to evaluate the choices communities face when they are trying to expand existing businesses or recruit new ones.

Economic and Environmental Impact of Nutrient Loss Reductions on Dairy and Dairy/Poultry Farms. This report discusses the impact of increasingly strict regulations on manure and litter disposal.

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