MANAGING

Governance and Regulation

Jayne Cravens, who joined United Nations Volunteers to expand Internet volunteer opportunities, says the key to success for nonprofit organizations is an "ability to work with people well online and manage them well."

A Virtual Army of Volunteers

Charities find new ways to let people do good works online

By Nicole Wallace

CHARITIES AND THE PEOPLE they serve are benefiting from a new wave of volunteers, many of whom they will never see. The Internet increasingly is giving people like Latasha Greer—a full-time graduate student at Columbia University who works part-time at a small family foundation and teaches a tenth-grade course each afternoon—a way to fit volunteering into their busy and sometimes unpredictable schedules.

She is one of 400 volunteers who exchange e-mail with New York high-school students through a charity called iMentor. Ms. Greer and the Brooklyn senior she has been paired with exchange e-mail messages several times a week on topics such as career goals and college applications.

The proliferation of such online opportunities reflects a growing demand for flexible forms of volunteering. In addition to tutoring students, thousands of people are providing friendship and support to people in need and offering their fund-raising and Web-design expertise online to help charities around the world.

Among the organizations that have seen growth in a trend often called virtual volunteering:

- VolunteerMatch, an Internet-based service, last year matched 15,523 people with online volunteering jobs—about 6,000 more than the previous year. Of the 25,000 volunteer opportunities currently listed, about 1,700 are for volunteer assignments that can be completed online.
- The International Telementor Center, in Fort Collins, Colo., this year will match 3,000 students around the world with mentors who work for corporations that support the center. Next year it plans to provide mentors to more than 12,000 students.
- Best Buddies, a Miami charity, has provided help to 500 people with mental retardation through its e-Buddies program, which began a little less than a year ago. The group currently has a list of 200 online volunteers waiting to be assigned an e-Buddy with a disability. Volunteers make a yearlong commitment to exchange e-mail messages at least once a week with their e-Buddies.
- Netaid.org, a joint venture of Cisco Systems, the United Nations Development Programme, and United Nations Volunteers, has matched 2,000 online volunteers with charities in developing countries since it started listing such opportunities on its Web site in April. David Morrison, president of the Netaid.org Foundation, says many of the volunteers come from developing countries. Recent prospective

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Growing Popularity of Online Volunteering Poses Challenges for Charities

JOAN JOHNSON, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Nancy Veeneman oversees online volunteers for a charity that helps women with difficult pregnancies. She joined the group after she had problems during her pregnancy with twins.

JON HAMELMAN, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Latasha Greer, a graduate student at Columbia University, uses the Internet to help a high-school senior in Brooklyn. Her packed schedule made it impossible for her to volunteer in person.

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volunteers have come from Argentina, the Philippines, and Tanzania, for example.

As interest in online volunteering grows, charities are experimenting to find out what volunteer opportunities translate well into the online world, which ones require face-to-face contact, and where there are opportunities to blend the two.

Even with the growing interest in such efforts, however, online volunteering continues to represent a fraction of all donated service. That is not likely to change, experts say, until more small charities and the people they serve gain widespread access to the Internet and become comfortable using it in their work and lives.

Helping Students

Many recent online volunteer efforts have been aimed at helping school students. The AOL Time Warner Foundation, with guidance from the National Mentoring Partnership, runs its own mentor program, Digital Heroes. Started in September, the program pairs 200 middle- and high-school students from around the country with America Online employees and with prominent figures recruited by *People* magazine, such as Michael J. Fox, Marion Jones, and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Other charities are setting up programs in which online volunteers offer one-to-one advice and support via e-mail.

Best Buddies has found that its e-mail friendship program not only encourages mentally retarded people to develop computer skills, but also helps to break down the social isolation that many of them experience.

Thirty-nine-year-old Daniel Thompson found out about e-Buddies through his participation in a Special Olympics bowling league. When he and his e-Buddy, a project manager at America Online, were first matched in August, the pair e-mailed back and forth about once a week. But Mr. Thompson says that as the two have gotten to know one another, their correspondence has increased to almost every other day.

What he has enjoyed most about the program is having "somebody to listen to me when I need somebody to talk to." He also believes that the non-disabled volunteers have a lot to gain from the relationship, including the opportunity "to know what people with disabilities feel and how we all interact in this world."

While the online program requires a smaller time commitment than the charity's in-person buddy program, volunteers are still subject to the same intensive screening process. E-Buddies checks several references for each potential volunteer, conducts a criminal background check, and verifies the applicant's social-security number. Volunteers who are not students are asked to pay $50 to cover the screening costs. In addition, all participants in the program must sign a code of conduct that prohibits the exchange of addresses and telephone numbers.

Battling Isolation

Since 1997, Sidelines, a nonprofit organization in Laguna Beach, Calif., has been using its online volunteer program to combat a different type of isolation.

The program matches women in the midst of high-risk pregnancies with e-mail volunteers who experienced similar medical complications in their own pregnancies. Last year volunteers provided online support to 1,566 women, many of whose medical problems required them to be confined to bed for weeks or months at a time.

"Most of them are so relieved to have someone to talk to," says Nancy Veeneman, the group's national online director, who started at Sidelines as a volunteer after her own difficult pregnancy. She says sometimes participants just need someone they can share their frustrations with and say, "Gee, today I'm feeling so sad and the walls are closing in on me and I don't know how much more I can stand being in bed."

The online format of the program allows Sidelines to match volunteers and clients by medical complication—some of which are very rare—without geographic barriers standing in the way.

Lesley Fail, a citizen of New Zealand who lives and works in a small German village about 40 minutes outside of Munich, has been on partial or complete bed rest for nearly seven of the first eight months of her pregnancy. It has been a difficult time, she says, one filled with fear and self-doubt.

Mrs. Fail discovered Sidelines when she was more than five months into her pregnancy. She says that e-mailing Patti Ramos, her Sidelines volunteer who lives

Online Volunteers: Sources of Information

Friends Across the Divide

Written by Martin Kimeldorf, a high-school teacher in the North Thurston school district in Lacey, Wash., this 52-page electronic book describes the Grandfriends Project Online, which he founded to pair his students with senior citizens in an online letter-writing program. The book discusses how to recruit senior-citizen participants, provides examples of letter-writing topics, and offers tips for sustaining letter-writing projects. It also includes the program's guidelines for privacy and safety and samples of the "letters of agreement" participants have to sign. The book, subtitled "Creating Community and Learning Opportunities One E-Mail at a Time," costs $4.95 and is available at http://www.energizeinc.com.

International Telementor Center

Over the past six years, the center, located in Fort Collins, Colo., has matched more than 8,000 students in eight countries with online mentors who work at the corporations that donate to the center. Its Web site features a mentor handbook and descriptions of the academic projects that the students are working on with their mentors. Go to http://www.telementor.org.

The National Mentoring Partnership

Based in Alexandria, Va., this organization promotes mentoring efforts and offers assistance to organizations that run them. The partnership is developing a National E-Mentoring Clearinghouse that will provide information about what works and what doesn't in online mentoring programs. Go to http://www.mentoring.org.

Netaid.org: Online Volunteering

A joint venture of Cisco Systems, the United Nations Development Programme, and United Nations Volunteers, Netaid.org posts on its Web site virtual-volunteering opportunities with charities in developing countries. Go to http://app-netaid.netlojix.com/OV.

The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook

Written by Susan J. Ellis, a volunteer-management consultant, and Jayne Cravens, former manager of the Virtual Volunteering Project, this 133-page electronic book, available free online, explains how to recruit, manage, and evaluate volunteers who do their charity work on the Internet. It also includes a chapter on how nonprofit organizations can involve people with disabilities in their online volunteer programs. Go to http://www.energizeinc.com/art/elecbooks.html.

Virtual Volunteering Project

A project of the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, this Web site discusses how nonprofit organizations can take advantage of volunteers who complete their tasks online. The site includes examples of how charities are working with such volunteers, information on how to start an online volunteer program, and advice for prospective virtual volunteers. Go to http://www.serviceleader.org/vv.

VolunteerMatch: VirtualVolunteering

VolunteerMatch, in San Francisco, is an Internet-based service that allows users to search for volunteer opportunities. It currently includes more than 1,700 online opportunities for volunteering among its 25,000 listings. Go to http://www.volunteermatch.org/virtual.

in San Francisco, has lifted her spirits.

Mrs. Fail says one of the program's strengths is its online nature, which made it easier for her to discuss what can be very private, sensitive topics. "I would never have contacted an in-person or telephone support person," she says. "That would have made me feel like even more of a freak."

While few charities try virtual volunteering because of cost savings, the e-mail approach can help some kinds of groups save money. Volunteers in Technical Assistance, or VITA, in Arlington, Va., for many years operated a service in which people working on projects in developing countries wrote letters posing technical questions on topics such as energy and agriculture. VITA would reproduce the letters and forward them to experts who had volunteered to answer such requests, and then collect the responses and send them to the person or organization that had asked the question.

But in the early 1990's the federal funds that supported the project were cut, and VITA had to find a less-expensive way to administer it. So now all such exchanges happen by e-mail.

Richard S. Muffley, the charity's technology manager, says he has noticed that the e-mail answers "tend to be a little bit slight." He adds, "People will write, 'Look at this Web site. Here's the U.R.L. Check that out.' So rather than getting tailored responses, people are being given more references." He notes, however, that if there are definitive Web sites on the topic, "that's a good response."

What Works Best

The future of online volunteering will depend significantly on efforts to figure out what types of charity efforts work best online.

Because so many of the early efforts have involved linking youngsters with mentors, that is where many questions have arisen—and where the answers may come first. The National Mentoring Partnership is using a $461,000 grant it received in December to create the National E-Mentoring Clearinghouse, which will distribute information about what works and what doesn't in online mentor programs.

One topic of debate is whether online mentor programs should have a specific academic agenda or whether they should resemble more loosely structured traditional mentor programs that aim to build trust between young people and their mentors.

David Neils, director of the International Telementor Center, in Colorado, believes having programs that are too open-ended can cause problems. He recommends pairing advisers and students to tackle very specific academic projects, such as conducting research on a particular animal or learning how to develop business plans.

"Stay away from a social type of telementoring program," Mr. Neils cautions, because otherwise mentors may find themselves in situations they are ill-prepared to handle. "Because of the trust that develops between the student and the mentor, if it's not project-based, things will be shared by the student that should not be shared—about parents going through a divorce or personal issues that should not be discussed," says Mr. Neils.

Managing Volunteers

Developing ways to effectively manage online volunteers will become a growing challenge for many nonprofit groups, says Jayne Cravens, who has spent the past four years studying virtual volunteering and helping charities start or improve their online volunteer programs. She says charity leaders too often focus on the technology, instead of the people who are providing the online service. "You can have the slowest computer and Internet connection," she explains. "What matters is your ability to work with people well online and manage them well."

Until last month, Ms. Cravens had directed the Virtual Volunteering Project at the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and she has now joined the United Nations Volunteers in Bonn, Germany, as online volunteering specialist.

Keeping online volunteers motivated is among the management challenges that programs face. A number of charities have found that volunteers are more likely to stay with an online program if they work closely with other volunteers. InterConnection, a nonprofit organization in Eugene, Ore., that matches charities in developing countries that need Web sites with online volunteers who possess the necessary technical skills, has found that volunteers perform better if they work in pairs, rather than alone.

The charity iMentor organizes volunteers into mentor circles, each of which has its own e-mail discussion list. The e-mail lists allow online mentors to share their frustrations—such as students who stop writing or who write short, impersonal messages—and offer advice.

Yet no matter how adept charities become at managing virtual volunteers, some experts say it still may be many years from now until online volunteering takes off.

Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, a Philadelphia company that helps charities manage volunteers, points out that people in need often don't have access to the Internet in their homes. She adds that many organizations remain hesitant to trust volunteers they cannot see.

She predicts that in the future much wider access to information technology and improved real-time video capabilities over the Internet will eliminate those concerns and allow for new online volunteer opportunities unimaginable today.

In the meantime, both she and Ms. Cravens urge charities that would like to start their own online volunteer program to bone up on the tenets of traditional volunteer management.

Says Ms. Cravens, "When virtual volunteering doesn't work it's because the volunteer management isn't working."

The Domain Group Fundraising Guide Chapter 7

"All's Well That Begins Well."

Up

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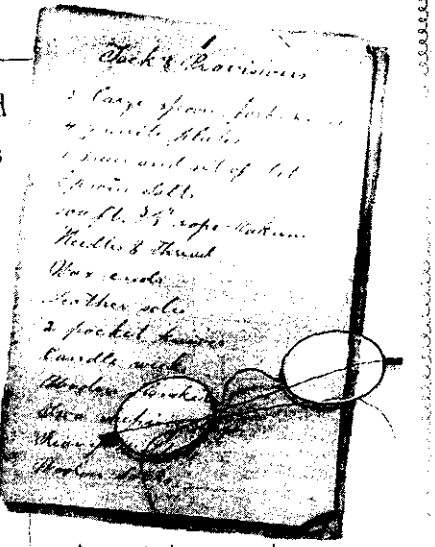

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