



# Volunteering: the American pastime

by Steve McCurley

Want to make your community a better place to live? Want to learn a new skill? Want to meet new people? Or would you simply like to help others?

Every year millions of Americans answer "Yes" to these questions by doing volunteer work in their communities, donating their time to thousands of local causes and activities. They have all learned that by helping others you can help your community and help yourself.

## An American Tradition

Volunteering has always been identified as an American characteristic. From colonial times, Americans banded together to help one another—whether in building a cabin for new settlers or in aiding long-time neighbors. In 1831, the French political-philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote the following description of the new American nation:

*"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations....As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found each other out, they combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions serve for an example, and whose language is listened to."*

From the first settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia through the westward expansion to fill the continent, American leadership has come from individual citizens who have taken the initiative to challenge and conquer the unknown, and who have joined freely in

association with their neighbors to attack common concerns.

## Volunteering Today

Perhaps the most common question of those just learning about the volunteer community is, "How many people volunteer?" The answer is that no one really knows. Volunteering is such a pervasive activity that it is almost uncountable. In 1974, a Census Bureau study found that 1 in 4 adults performed volunteer work, donating an average of nine hours per week to community causes. Those figures would give us a current volunteer population of almost 50 million people.

Volunteering, however, is not just limited to adults. Increasingly, children and students 'learn' volunteering as part of experiential education classes, applying classroom knowledge in working with community groups. VOLUNTEER, the National Center for Citizen Involvement in Washington, D.C., for example, has recently written the curriculum for a course on volunteering that is being offered in over 50 high schools across the country. Many colleges offer similar programs. The youngest volunteers may be the second grade students in Minnesota and Indiana who have done volunteer work in nursing homes.

Volunteering has no upper age limits, either, as Laura Wisham can testify. At age 103 she was actively volunteering for a Retired Senior Volunteer Program. Many senior citizens have turned to volunteering as a means of occupying their spare time, maintaining contacts, and passing on the skills and experience they have gained.

Volunteering has sometimes had the image of a leisure-time activity for middle-class women. The true facts could hardly present a more different picture. Nationwide, almost equal numbers of men and women do volunteer work. Volunteers come from all ranges of the economic and educational spectrums. And, although the familiar volunteer roles with the Red Cross and the hospital auxiliary are still present, volunteers are increasingly moving into new areas, including:

- Earthwatch of California, whose volunteer observers study animals in attempts to forecast earthquakes;
- Mended Hearts, a national self-help organization for heart surgery patients and their families;
- Touch Toys of Washington, D.C., whose volunteers design safe toys for the handicapped;
- The Green Guerillas of New York City, who care for trees along public streets; and
- Price Watch, AFL-CIO members nationwide who monitor prices in an anti-inflation campaign.

Individuals also contribute as volunteers apart from organizations. John Olmstead of California is an excellent example. For years he has conducted a one-man campaign to establish nature trails for the handicapped, donating his own money, time, and energy.

There is almost no aspect of society that is not touched by the efforts of volunteer workers. The familiar figures of the volunteers for the Junior League, the United Way, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Boy Scouts, the 4-H, or the Jaycees are simply the tip of an iceberg of human commitment which reaches out to every aspect of community life. Volunteers are counselors, fundraisers, advocates, interpreters, and facilitators—coming from all walks of life and helping all types of people.

As Betty Lowenstein, a Washington volunteer notes, "There are as many dif-

ferent kinds of volunteers as there are kinds of people."

### The Value of Volunteering

Volunteering adds to the individual helped, to the individual who volunteers, and to society.

Millions of individuals are aided by volunteers each year, both through organizational efforts and through individual helping relationships. Volunteers raise the funds to operate shelter programs, or to provide food for the needy, or to conduct research to combat disease. On a personal basis, volunteers provide individual caring assistance. Often the simple fact of knowing that another cares enough about your problems to donate his own time freely to solving them works a greater healing than all the professional counseling in the world. The one-to-one volunteer relationship, whether as a Big Brother, a counselor to prison inmates, or as a tutor to students, creates a bond which is as valuable as any information that may be shared.



One rapidly growing area of volunteering has been in the area of self-help. In Greensboro, N.C., for example, the visually handicapped have formed their own steering committee to act as a linkage between the blind community and social service agencies. In other communities

the handicapped are actively involved as volunteers both for themselves and for others who might be in need.

Volunteering is also of value to the volunteer. In a society that is increasingly depersonalized, volunteering is a way to break the barriers of isolation and reach out to one's community. Volunteering provides a means to contribute to one's community and to make a difference. Volunteers achieve a sense of self-worth because they *are* worthy, donating of themselves to help others. And, increasingly, volunteers are finding secondary values in volunteer work. Many volunteers are discovering that skills acquired in volunteering can lead to paid employment, as did Jewelle Bickford of New York City, who went from civic volunteer to director of a community organization at an annual salary of \$30,000. She notes, "Everything that I do now that makes me good at this job, I have been doing for years." Many government agencies and large companies are recognizing the valuable skills gained through volunteer work by crediting volunteer jobs in making employment decisions.

The families of volunteers also benefit from the volunteer experience. VOLUNTEER is now conducting a Family Volunteer Project, which utilizes family members as a team of volunteers. By working together in the community, the family can strengthen its own bonds.

Society finds value in volunteering as well. We are rapidly discovering that we cannot afford to turn to governmental agencies for solutions to all our problems. As a nation, we simply lack the financial resources required to hire assistance for all those in need, and spiraling inflation only renders this lack more acute. Volunteers in self-help and mutual aid programs provide an economical alternative to government action. In the wake of Proposition 13 in California, for example, volunteers stepped in to operate many of the state's libraries following budget cut-backs. Many government agencies are be-

coming active users of volunteers. At the federal level, the Veteran's Administration operates a volunteer program with over 100,000 participants. The economic contribution of volunteers, both in public and private agencies, is difficult to fully measure. Dr. Harold Wolozin of Boston University has estimated that volunteer workers donate over \$70 billion worth of services to the nation every year.



Society also benefits from volunteering in other ways. Volunteer programs are more innovative and less restricted by red tape than government programs. They can deal more easily with small-scale

problems, such as the church-connected home meals program that provides food to only a half-dozen invalids in a neighborhood. Volunteer programs, relying on the community itself, tend to be more familiar with the 'real' causes of problems than do far-away government agencies.

### Getting Involved

Bob Wiedrich, columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, recently wrote: "You've got to help. You've got to pitch in. You have to voluntarily contribute your eyes and ears to the benefit of the community. You can't just live out your life as though you were alone."

Getting involved in volunteering is as easy as deciding that you care about your community. Community agencies are always looking for volunteers, and can adapt their needs to your skills and your time limits. Whether you have an hour a week or an entire day, whether you have a unique talent or simply an urge to help, you can find a group that will value your assistance.

You can locate a group needing volunteers by asking friends, listening for pub-

lic service announcements, or simply calling an organization involved in a subject area that interests you. Your local church or fraternal chapter can be an excellent source of volunteer projects.

Over 300 communities have local organizations called Voluntary Action Centers or Volunteer Bureaus which specialize in matching the skills and interests of citizens with appropriate volunteer jobs. Check your phone book for their listing in your community.

Want to make your community a better place? Try being a volunteer—America's greatest natural resource!



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For a free catalogue of books and resources on volunteering, write Volunteer Readership, P.O. Box 1807, Boulder, CO 80306.

## LB's need for volunteers

"Every time you take on additional responsibility it's frightening, but it's also exciting and rewarding..." says Henry Hanson, Portland, OR, one of LB's volunteer Communicators.

Lutheran Brotherhood offers many opportunities for volunteers to be active. The first level of involvement is for all members to be active in their local LB branches. The branch provides a unique structure for members to meet together and have access to financial and program resources. By attending events, voting for branch officers and getting involved in special projects, the volunteer time of members is used to ensure wise use of branch resources.

Adult benefit contract members who are also members of a Lutheran congregation may become more involved by volunteering to become *Fraternal Communicators* in their geographic branch. Communica-

tors serve as liaisons between their branch and their Lutheran congregation and community. Their task is to know, receive and share information about our fraternal benefit society, especially concerning branch activities and LB resources. They also help branches serve the needs of members and other Lutherans by relaying the concerns of their congregations and communities to branch officers and Society headquarters.

When taking on volunteer duties of a Communicator, Dean Musgjer, El Paso, TX, wrote, "I plan on trying to meet this winter with our church youth groups about scholarships and grants. My wife will be meeting with the ALCW about resources available to them. Our purpose is to attempt to relay as much information about LB programs as we can to our congregation."

The next level of involvement for a

volunteer for LB is to be elected and serve as a *branch officer*. Branches usually have seven officers to provide leadership for successful branch programming. Branch officers may also become involved in their State Fraternal Congress, where they can exchange ideas with counterparts in other fraternal benefit societies. A few branch officers may become involved at the national level by being elected delegates to the annual meeting of the National Fraternal Congress of America.

Your time, talents, interests and concerns are important to your branch and Lutheran Brotherhood. If you wish to become involved as a volunteer and would like more information, contact your local LB district representative or write or call the LB home office. Collect calls about volunteer opportunities at LB will be accepted at (612) 340-7284.