

Counties Find Strength in Citizen Volunteers

By Karen Barnes

Besieged by budget cuts and social ills, savvy county governments are rolling out their secret weapons: citizens who are willing to volunteer their time and talents to make their communities better places to live.

A recent survey found that in 1992 alone the value of volunteer services in county governments reached \$1.8 billion. The survey, completed by the National Association of Counties' (NACo) in the fall of 1993 and released in March, also showed that the number of volunteers in county government programs has doubled since 1990.

County governments are turning to volunteers says NACo President Barbara Sheen Todd because "in times of tight budget constraints, increasing demands for service and mounting citizen skepticism about government as a whole, promoting the development of local government volunteer programs only makes sense."

NACo's Volunteerism Project conducted the survey to determine the extent of volunteer services provided to county governments and to document governments' use of volunteer management practices. The survey was sent to the chief elected official in every county in the United States as well as to volunteer coordinators identified by a 1990 NACo survey. Officials and volunteer coordinators responded from 417 counties in 46 states. Counties surveyed ranged in size from Columbia County, Washington (pop. 4,000) to Los Angeles County, California (pop. 9 million).

Of the counties responding, 93% said that they currently use volunteers in some capacity. The top ten areas of volunteer service: fire/emergency medical service (66%); aging services (64%); parks and recreation (51%); social services (44%); youth services (44%); public health

(42%); environment/recycling (37%); education (36%); police/corrections (35%); transportation (34%).

In comparison with results from the 1990 survey, volunteer participation has increased significantly, especially in the areas of environment/recycling and public health. In counties large and small, the roles of volunteers are expanding from the traditional fire fighters and library aides to dispute mediators, AIDS educators,

recycling assistants and more.

As volunteer roles adapt to meet current needs, many counties are also expanding management practices and services to their volunteers. Of the 395 county volunteer programs identified by the survey, many have or are developing volunteer management systems. The counties employ more than 2,700 full or part-time staff responsible for volunteer management and 1,400 who fill this role as volunteers. The majority of volunteer programs

are managed by departments or agencies in the county with little or no central coordination. Only about 18% have a central office with a volunteer coordinator who is responsible for the entire county or who supports coordinators in other county departments.

But in spite of the lack of centralization, many county programs have or are implementing volunteer management systems. The most frequently used practices are: volunteer recognition (55%); benefits (47%); insurance for volunteers (46%); policies and procedures (45%); formalized volunteer training (43%).

The benefits of volunteer service in county government are exemplified by outstanding programs in several counties.



In San Bernardino County, Calif., AgeWise support groups are led by a trained volunteer peer counselor.

AgeWise: An Outreach Program for Healthy Aging

In San Bernardino County, California (pop. 1.4 million), the Department of Mental Health is addressing the mental health needs of its older citizens while giving them the opportunity to help others. Senior citizens are recruited, trained and supervised by program staff to provide counseling to other older adults who are experiencing mental health problems.

Forty senior volunteers act as peer counselors, combining their own skills and life experiences with the training they receive to serve an average of 125 clients each month. Approximately 90 individuals participate in support groups with the peer counselors each week. Peer counselors provide their clients with companionship, a listening ear, wisdom from their own experiences and a model of healthy aging. The counselors, in turn, gain satisfaction from helping older adults and are able to continue learning and growing themselves. For many, senior peer counseling has become a second career.

AgeWise currently has 4.5 FTE (full-time equivalent) employees to meet the mental health needs of the aging population in one of the largest counties in the country. According to AgeWise Clinic Supervisor Anne Stewart, "Without the volunteers we could never provide this level of service to so many people." The estimated value of the volunteers' service is \$78,000 per year. The annual program budget is \$372,250 funded by the county portion of the California State Sales Tax Realignment Revenues.

Citizens' Productivity Committee

In Collier County, Florida (pop. 168,500), the county Board of Commissioners sought to involve citizens more closely in county government, particularly in regard to operations within the county manager's agency. In 1991, the commission chose 13 private citizens to serve on the Citizens' Productivity Committee.

Collier County is a retirement community and two thirds of the volunteers on the committee are retired or semi-retired business people. They use their own skills and expertise to make suggestions for efficiency improvement and broad policy recommendations. Over the past three years, volunteers have examined almost every aspect of county government. A number of their recommendations have been adopted, including decreasing the number of county vehicles, standardizing fees at local parks to generate revenue, and adopting a four-day, ten-hour work week in certain cases. County staff have overcome their initial concerns and now view the committee as an important ally in presenting their information to the board.

County official Mike McNees notes that "getting the different input of volunteers [who are] private citizens is a real benefit to the community." The county has saved money through implementing the committee's recommendations. The cost to the county for the committee is approximately \$2,800 per year.

Health Department Volunteer Program

In Boulder County, Colorado (pop. 225,339), Health Department services have been extended to more locations, age groups and special target groups as a result of the efforts of volunteers. Since 1986, the Health Department has significantly expanded its volunteer

opportunities and county residents have responded. The number of Health Department volunteers has tripled over eight years, and today it is one of the largest volunteer programs in a local public health department in the country.



Currently, 1,876 active volunteers serve at 60 different locations and provide nearly 34,000 hours of service per year. Volunteers provide HIV/AIDS outreach and training; staff mass cholesterol screenings; immunize residents at special flu clinics; plan the curriculum for classes on air quality offered at public schools; provide outpatient counseling in the county substance abuse program; mentor teens in the Teen Health Program; serve as volunteer nurses and vision and hearing screeners.

According to Health Department Volunteer Coordinator Diane Maxey, "The Health Department could not carry out many of the programs to the extent it does without volunteers..."

There are programs functioning with one or two staff persons and the rest of the support provided by volunteers." The estimated value



At the 55 + Clinic in Boulder County, Colo., a volunteer registers clients for wellness screening, which includes flu/pneumonia immunizations, blood tests, thyroid surveys, skin cancer and hearing tests.

of the volunteers' service is \$390,530. The program's cost to the county is \$29,257 per year.

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Master Recycler/Composter Volunteer Program

In Montgomery County, Maryland (pop. 750,000), volunteers are helping county government to implement an effective recycling program with limited staff and even more limited funds. Between August, 1991, and January, 1992, the county phased in weekly curbside recycling of newspaper, glass, cans, plastic bottles, grass clippings and leaves. The county also established an inter-agency task force in 1991 to determine how to utilize volunteers best in these new efforts.



Master Recycler volunteers (above) demonstrate how Montgomery County, Md.'s recycling program works with community outreach. Below, volunteer prepares to answer recycling hotline calls.



The task force's goal is to increase citizen participation in recycling efforts by increasing their knowledge of recycling, composting, grass cycling, waste reduction, household hazardous waste and other related issues. Volunteers help realize this goal by educating the community about recycling and providing community outreach and information. Since the

About NACo

Founded in 1935, the National Association of Counties' (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments. NACo's purpose and objectives are to act as a liaison with other levels of government, improve public understanding of counties, act as a national advocate for counties and help counties find innovative methods for meeting the challenges they face.

Funded through a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, NACo's Volunteerism Project was initiated in 1991 to assist county governments to develop and administer volunteer programs. The project seeks to promote the concept of volunteerism in county governments as a cost-effective means for counties to maintain and expand public services as well as increase citizen participation and support. Staff provide training to support the development of organized, structured volunteer programs in counties across the country.

Surveys of county volunteer programs are just one aspect of the project's work plan. National Training Sessions are conducted at each of NACo's major conferences as well as at other selected national conferences of local officials or volunteer administrators. State Association training sessions are also conducted as requested at State Association of Counties' meetings and conferences. Staff produce "Best Practices Guides" to highlight successful, innovative county volunteer initiatives nationwide.

For more information, or to share information about your own volunteer program, contact NACo Volunteerism Project, 440 First St. NW, Washington, DC 20001. Or call Sandy Markwood, 202-942-4235 or Peter Lane, 202-942-4288. ■

program's inception, 220 active volunteers have provided about 6,000 hours of service per year, and 350,000 county residents have received information or training about recycling and composting. Volunteers staff a recycling hotline, provide training to local groups and schools, attend special events to heighten awareness of the recycling program, and demonstrate proper recycling and composting techniques. An intergenerational composting program matches seniors from a nursing home with middle school students. Seniors supervise the students in the construction and sale of compost bins.

The estimated value of the volunteers' service is more than \$60,000 per year—the equivalent of three full-time employees. The program is directed, coordinated and funded by the Department of Environmental Protection, with an annual budget of \$75,000. ■

Karen Barnes is The Points of Light Foundation's administrator of recognition and a regular contributor to Foundation publications.