

[News and Hot Topics](#) » The Holiday Season: Going Beyond "Feel-Good"

Volunteering

# The Holiday Season: Going Beyond "Feel-Good" Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

December

1997

The December holiday season is gearing up and with it come countless charitable projects filled with the spirit of giving. I don't question the motives of anyone organizing or volunteering for any of these toy drives, turkey banquets, or other feel-good and help-those-in-need activities. It's just that I wonder whether some of the annual holiday cheer couldn't be rechanneled and/or rescheduled.

I am concerned because these holiday activities often return us to the old style view of volunteering. One side does all the giving in a quick, feel-good fashion and the other side humbly accepts. The giving of toys to children is a good example. This is not meant as a "bah, humbug" dismissal of the joy that a bright, new, huggable something brings to a young child. I just wonder how often we actually ask the youngsters who get these gifts how they feel about them. Is the thrill of the package counterbalanced by shame at being "on the list" of those in need? How does a child respond when the gift is pretty but totally opposite to his or her true interests--proving the disconnect between the giver and recipient?

Isn't the holiday season supposed to be a time of mutual giving and a time that we remind ourselves of the importance of caring all year round? I'm certainly not the first to question the tension between the spirituality of Christmas (as well as other religious holidays of all cultures) and the immediate self-gratification. But we in the volunteer community feed the frenzy with many of our holiday plans. And--forgive me for saying so--aren't we all getting bored with the same old stuff? Let's keep the best of the traditions but find some new ways to bring meaning to this time of year.

What can a leader of volunteers do? Here are some ideas:

- 1. Involve the recipients of holiday cheer in the planning-- and the giving.** Even young children can help to decorate the hall or set the table. Older children can be asked to select gifts for their younger siblings and given the chance to make things for their parents and other adults. Contributing singing

or dancing talent to the party may bring the gift of building self-esteem. If you are in charge of a holiday event, avoid noblesse oblige and keep the recipients of "charity" equal to the givers.

**2. Adult volunteers can assist young people in thinking of non-cash presents that really mean something.** For example, why not gather information about small projects that need to be done and have young volunteers wrap "certificates" promising to do the work? These can range from individual "gifts" such as yard clean up or one night's free baby-sitting to group/community projects such as monitoring the local playground after school or collecting books for the congregation's homework center. This will give children of all ages the gifts of fun and community spirit, not just consumerism. The recent movement to mark Martin Luther King's birthday with a day of service as a tribute to his memory, rather than just a day of leisure, is an excellent example of what can be done to transform a holiday. (And by the way, those of you working with older adults can apply the same principles, too. With some extra attention, even frail seniors can be involved in preparations and giving, not just catered to.)

**3. If you are inundated with groups wanting to do something during the Christmas period, try to redirect them.** Why not a Valentine's Day show of generosity or an Arbor Day neighborhood tree planting ceremony? Also, give people the chance to help more than once a year. Why not ask the group that comes to carol every December if they would also learn some summer songs and return at the 4th of July? Would your volunteer Santa be willing to don an Easter Bunny costume or be a leprechaun for St. Patrick's Day? I realize these ideas are still holiday related, but you will extend the opportunities for service throughout the year.

**4. With all the hoopla about Christmas, Chanukah and Kwanzaa, the new year is sometimes overlooked.** Use January 1 as the kickoff for new community service "resolutions." Initiate a support group for those looking for jobs, for people who want to exercise more, or for anyone divorced in the previous year who wants to start fresh. Herald the first meeting of these mutual-aid efforts with champagne and streamers, but keep them going with progress reports, say, on the first of every month all year.

**5. If you are working in a group facility of any type, "take stock" the week between Christmas and New Year's and ask everyone and anyone to discuss a "wish list" for things that need to be done.** Let these things range from tiny (clean out the supply cabinet) to large (write a strategic plan). Write each on an index card and place in a big bowl that you keep visible all year. Starting on January 2 (when you all return from the holiday), pick out a card with great fanfare. First see if anyone (employees and current volunteers) wants to tackle that job. If not, offer to recruit volunteers to get it started.

Any ways that you have found to bring meaning to the holidays and make the most of volunteer participation at this time of year? Please share.

*Oh, yes, and have a perfectly wonderful religious or non-sectarian, winter solstice celebration of your choice! See you here next year.*

Related Topics: [Ethics](#) | [Motivation](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#)

**Submitted by Carol A. Youngman, Shell Martinez Refining Company, Martinez, CA**

After reading your statement "avoid noblesse oblige and keep the recipients of "charity" equal to the givers", gave me food for thought as I volunteered for two events at Christmas time and it became all too apparent how truly "rich" I am. With your words ringing in my ears, heart and head, I removed all signs of "wealth" from my hands. I am so glad that I did for many of the hands I served were as naked as mine.

On another note, I am the administrator of an Office Education Program for 12 of our local high school students. As workers in a major organization they learn more than just work ethics but I also develop the desire to contribute back to the community through volunteerism. These students have volunteered to work job fairs, trade fairs, face painting, entertaining children, assist our business community in promotional events, help with Chamber events, crowd control, sell raffle tickets, preparing food baskets, serving food - you name it - these students are at the ready giving freely of their time, energy and enthusiasm. Do not discount teens as a great volunteer resource - I have twelve of the finest!

**Submitted by Carl D. Ekstrom, Riparius, NY**

Over the past month I have been one of those "feel good" volunteers--first helping in small ways with the community Thanksgiving dinner and more recently helping with Christmas food and gifts distribution. For me these are important activities since they put me in touch with people like the drifter that I shared Thanksgiving dinner with or the young mother I talked with today when she was picking up gifts for her children.

We live in a society that increasingly blames those in poverty for their condition. Admittedly these "feel good" volunteering activities do little to resolve these conditions but perhaps they make lasting impressions on volunteers and contribute to greater tolerance and understanding as well as generate some continuing interest.

It seems to me that volunteer leaders need to develop a better understanding of why people volunteer. Also voluntary organizations need to make additional investment in educating volunteers.

**Submitted by Marilyn Miller, 501 (c) (3) Monthly Letter, Editor/Publisher, Iowa**

I agree that generosity displayed at Christmas time would be better-spent spread throughout the year. When I read newspaper accounts and see photos of families being helped by some well-meaning group wanting to help disadvantaged people during the holiday season, I wonder if being labeled as "poor" embarrasses the children. Do schoolmates tease them? Call their mothers' names? Tease them about daddy running out on them?

These articles may help raise additional funds for the cause, and hardship stories may attract readers, but what a price for the recipients to pay: humiliation for a turkey dinner and a few inexpensive gifts that probably weren't even on the children's wish lists.

Your ideas for what leaders of volunteers can do to encourage more appropriate giving while, at the same time, respecting the dignity of the recipients.

There is one idea I have suggested to my readers that I would like to share with you. This is for "ecumenical" work. Since Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc. have different holidays, why don't they fill in for one another as volunteers on those dates? This means Christians could spend time with their own families on Christmas and Christians could relieve Jews, Muslims, etc. on their holidays. (Oh, I know some "regulars" of the sponsoring organization would have to be on hand for purposes of "public presence" of the organization, but those extra hands would certainly help.)

Keep up the good work, Susan. You have an abundance of a very rare characteristic: Common sense.

**Submitted by *Reenie Marshall, Virginia Office of Volunteerism, Richmond, Virginia***

When I worked in a social service organization working with children in foster care, a representative of a volunteer group asked ME if her organization could do more than just have a holiday party once a year for several children. We put our heads (and hearts!) together and came up with this plan. The group began to provide gifts for each child's birthday throughout the year. The idea spread to other volunteers as well. In addition to making the children's birthdays more giftful, it gave the foster families--volunteers themselves--help in celebrating birthdays. Simple idea, easy to implement.

**Submitted by *Pamela Kruse-Buckingham, Volunteer Coordinator - Kitsap County Historical Society Museum, Washington***

I am sometimes dismayed that charity is a coat that people wear only once a year. I was pleasantly surprised by the outpouring of charity and heartfelt giving here in Bremerton. A devastating apartment fire killed 4 elderly residents and displaced more than one hundred people, yet not one displaced resident spent the night in a shelter, or lacked for new items to replace what they had lost. People opened up their homes, offered available - furnished apartments, clothing, food, and money. Our community has come together and put on two benefit shows to raise money for the fire survivors. Young and old alike are involved in many ways! Asking for and accepting the gift of time from anyone willing to give it is truly a blessing for all.

**Submitted by *Alma Williams, President, Green Gables Neighborhood Assn., Arizona***

Thanks for an oh-so-truthful observation. I was greeted this morning by a front page article about children in North Carolina sending a truckload of gifts to "poor children" in a local school. Some of the PCs appeared in the color photo accompanying the article. How nice to be branded. Of course, the NC children were quoted in the best possible EC (emotional correctness) manner.

It seems every year more and more people are coerced into this shallow pretense of "giving." I loved your ideas. Now to see if I can resist the offers of "gifts" to my organization and extract commitments of helping hands - without all the piety and patronization.

**Submitted by Joe Copeland, AMBUCS, North Carolina**

I like your idea of redirecting the volunteer efforts to other times. How about on January 1 or the first week of the year a Volunteer Summit of local community service clubs and other volunteer action groups? Those folks could publicly talk about the plans they have for the coming year. It would place pressure on the service club movement to strive for more relevance to the community, and to identify current issues and events in the local community.

Also, we have a little project we do in our community for the sheltered workshop. A simple bag of fruit and candy for about 125 folks at their Christmas party. But I wonder if they truly value it? So, I'm going to pick up the phone right now and ask if there isn't something we could do that would carry more meaning for them and for our community action club. Thanks!

**Submitted by LuAnn Fransen Minneapolis, MN**

Susan, I met with a group of volunteer coordinators yesterday. Because they were all brand new to the field and were subject to the "Christmas Rush" of volunteerism, there was a lot of good dialogue as to the results of their Christmas experience. Two coordinators raised some very interesting questions. I would like your input and suggestions as to how to respond to their comments.

1. How do we educate "volunteers" who want 'feel good service' to a 'needs met service?'
2. How do we educate the hundreds of youth groups who want to serve on the weekends or at times that the volunteer coordinators do not have service needs?

Susan's Response:

1. The way to "educate" volunteers begins with making sure that "needs-met service" is ALSO "feels-good service"! I truly believe that volunteers want to do the most needed work. Often, however, the quick-fix, holiday party sort of thing is the only option they see. You can't counter this with "but we really need you to immerse yourself for a year in this problem." They aren't ready for that. When someone offers to help in a burst of seasonal energy, find ways to do "value added." So, have the

Christmas party, but also commit volunteers to come back in, say, March, for a "no-reason" party. Require volunteers to agree to do both (thereby screening out the people who only want involvement at the holidays).

I think the problem often is that we feel vaguely guilty or apologetic about re-directing holiday cheer into more substantive work. Be honest when people call. Appreciate their interest and enthusiasm and say: "My guess is that you want to do something really useful, right? So here are some things we have had on our 'wish list' for some time--can we get your group to tackle them as a holiday present to our clients? We'll celebrate along the way." Then add holiday cheer into the work--partner clients and volunteers in a clean up and have holiday refreshments, for example.

2. I have mixed reactions to the second question. If youth groups want to serve on weekends or some other time not useful to one agency, I'm not sure "educating them" is the answer. In fact, youth are truly limited in when they can volunteer, since school is mandatory and transportation often dependent upon when adults are available. Instead, I'd redirect youth groups to agencies that CAN give them work to do outside of a Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 schedule. When you consider all the residential facilities that operate round-the-clock, you can see how many options there can be. So share the wealth and refer youth groups to others. But you certainly can describe the work then COULD have at your agency if they could be more adaptable with their schedule.

Sometimes the problem is not that there are not "service needs" on the weekends or evenings, but that no one on staff is willing to coordinate volunteers at those times! Just because the volunteer program coordinator cannot be there is not necessarily a good enough reason to limit volunteering.

---

#### PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025