

Image

from Windber Hospice



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Volunteer-worker pool will shrink, service agencies fear

By Jim Lewis
The Tribune-Democrat

Most Johnstown hospitals, food banks and social service agencies have maintained an ample number of volunteers even though many people have left the city in search of jobs.

But some service agencies fear a volunteer shortage as women volunteers join the paid work force to provide for their unemployed husbands.

"Everyone is looking for volunteers now,

especially with women in the work force," said Mary Matthews, administrative assistant for the Blair County Chapter of the American Red Cross. "A lot of women don't have the time to give to volunteering now."

Almost 700 volunteers worked in Johnstown hospitals this year, while at least 410 volunteers aided food banks, thrift shops, rehabilitation agencies and counseling groups.

Approximately 4,100 volunteers in Cambria, Somerset and eastern Westmoreland counties aid the Keystone Chapter of the

American Red Cross.

In Blair County, the local chapter of the Red Cross has 600 volunteers, while approximately 150 additional volunteers distribute food and work in programs for the Altoona and Tyrone citadels of the Salvation Army. Hundreds more work at Altoona's two hospitals and two food banks.

Windber, Latrobe figures

Windber Hospital has 66 trained volunteers feeding, bathing and visiting the ill in its hospice program. Latrobe has at least 500 volunteers working in the borough's

hospital, food banks and social-service organizations.

They are retired people, high school students, unemployed steelworkers, ministers and teachers. Some must go through a training program before they can do certain tasks.

Volunteers in the Windber hospice program must take a 12-week training course and three orientation sessions. For volunteers who work with the bereaved families in a recent death, there is additional training required.

Many local volunteers are older adults. "We're an aging population here," said Dottie Pohl, director of volunteer services at Memorial Hospital. "Many of the younger people are moving out to find jobs."

Johnstownners, who have seen flooding destroy their city, are more willing to volunteer because they are more used to joining together to help each other, believes Capt. Edd Morris, commander of the Johnstown

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Volunteer shortage feared

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Citadel of the Salvation Army.

Capt. Morris previously commanded the Indiana Citadel, where he said that convincing residents to volunteer was "a hard nut to crack."

"The community in Johnstown is much more open," said Capt. Morris. "It could be the community is more used to coming together for a common purpose."

Some organizations have had difficulty finding volunteers with special skills. The Red Cross chapters sometimes have a shortage of volunteer nurses to do "mini-physicals" and medical histories on blood donors, a chapter spokesman said.

"Because of our economy here, nurses now are working full-time because their husbands are out of work," the spokesman said.

Goodwill drive

Goodwill Industries of Conemaugh Valley, Inc., began its first-ever drive for volunteers to help at its plant and five area thrift stores. Previously, Goodwill relied on a paid staff to supervise and help its handicapped clients.

It is difficult to find volunteers who want to work with the mentally and physically handicapped clients who clean and repair items at the Coleman Avenue workshop, said Harriet Lurye, Goodwill's director of community involvement.

Session set for volunteers

A seminar for health-care volunteers and managers of volunteer programs will be conducted Nov. 8 at the Holiday Inn in Johnstown.

Entitled "Health Care Volunteers... Sharing the Future," the day-long seminar will feature workshops that will show volunteers how to sharpen their skills and what career opportunities are available to them.

Susan Ellis, a volunteer training consultant with Philadelphia-based Energize Associates, will be the keynote speaker.

The seminar will begin at 8 a.m. and end at 4 p.m.

It is sponsored by the Windber Hospital hospice program and the Cambria-Somerset Council for the Education of Health Professionals. It will be held in cooperation with the state Association of Volunteers.

Goodwill currently has 16 volunteers. It has been nearly impossible to find a volunteer speech therapist, said Mrs. Lurye.

"Our type of client is of a very low

mentality, and some people are afraid of that," she said. "If they could work with them, they'd learn that they're very receptive and responsive. They like people to talk to them."

Can't afford gasoline

Several of the 40 unemployed volunteers at the Wives' Action Committee food pantry cannot help out because they cannot afford gasoline to drive there, said Mary Duranko, committee president.

"It's getting bad because of the gas situation," said Mrs. Duranko.

Some volunteers suffer from "burnout" and quit for a period of time, sending help agencies looking for new volunteers, according to John Sroka, spokesman for the St. Vincent De Paul Society.

"You can go only so far and you need a rest," said Mr. Sroka.

Some smaller agencies, such as Operation Touch, have a waiting list of people wanting to be volunteers.

"We've been very fortunate," said Janet Criste, head of Touch. "But we encourage people to volunteer with us."

New Day situation

Others, such as New Day, Inc., a youth ministry, have a waiting list of people seeking aid and a shortage of volunteers.

New Day's Operation Daybreak program, where disadvantaged youths from single-parent families are matched with adult volunteers, has 92 children waiting for an adult volunteer to spend time with.

"There's obviously a need," said Ron Baker, a spokesman for New Day. "Our waiting list has stayed pretty much the same size."

The Bedford-based Area Agency on Aging relies on its 200 volunteers to distribute government surplus cheese and butter to the needy in Bedford, Fulton and Huntington counties.

"If we lost our volunteers, we wouldn't have a distribution," said Alan Smith, executive director of the agency. "The government gives us money for storage and trucking, but there's certainly not enough money to pay a staff to do it."

Students volunteer

High school students volunteer at hospitals if they are interested in going to college to become doctors, nurses or other health professionals.

At Bishop Guilfoyle High School in Altoona, students are required to serve 15 hours a year as volunteers in area service agencies.

"This being a Catholic school, we believe our students should practice what we say we're about," said the Rev. Robert Mazur, principal of the school.