

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**Volunteering: Running Out of Time**

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The result: serious problems for groups such as suicide hot lines and programs for battered women that require training and long-term commitments. These and other organizations that deal with depressing work are struggling as harried volunteers gravitate toward agencies that combine good deeds with entertainment or socializing. Other groups, meanwhile, are going to extraordinary lengths to combat the problem -- offering activities that can be shoehorned into a coffee break or even handled via e-mail. And many agencies report that they must increasingly coddle volunteers with "appreciation" parties, thank-you notes or even cash stipends.

Full Text:

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[Americans are volunteering less time than ever. Can coffee-break do-gooders and `email mentors' take up the slack? Eileen Daspin looks at commitment phobia.]

With her 14-hour workday and hour-and-a-half commute, the one thing Amy Smith never seemed to find time for was volunteering.

Then she heard about Hands on San Francisco, a group that encourages do-gooding in spurts as little as a couple of hours once a year -- with no fixed obligations. Now the 28-year-old Internet program manager squeezes in a little time with Hands On every month. "There isn't any pressure," she says. "No one calls you up to say `You haven't volunteered in a month.'"

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"The 'I'm here as long as you need me' type of volunteering is dead," says Susan Ellis, a consultant for volunteer groups. "People don't make commitments. They are stressed and don't want to do something that sucks time out of their lives." WOO WOO

Take computer executive Stacy Litvak. He did some volunteer work when he was between jobs, but says he doesn't have time now that he runs his own business. "You say, 'It's only an hour a week,' but you have to get there and get back, so an hour becomes two hours," says Mr. Litvak, of San Mateo, Calif. "It doesn't sound like a lot, but there's weeks when you'd kill for 15 minutes."

That's the kind of concern that Chris Homes Inc., an Atlanta agency that places abused children in group homes, is hearing with alarming frequency these days. It's inundated with help for the fun stuff such as wrapping Christmas gifts. But what it really needs is 25 long-term mentors -- 15 more than are currently on board. Melody Neal, director of resources, blames the shortfall on her recruiting material, which emphasizes themes such as "commitment." So she is rewriting it. "I'm taking out all those nasty words," Ms. Neal says. "They scare people."

Same with Sanctuary Inc., a San Diego organization that provides housing for battered women. Because of a lack of interest, it has cut in half the number of training classes it offers; the fall session attracted only 11 volunteers, down from 30 two years ago. And the Prince George's County Hotline and Suicide Prevention Center in Hyattsville, Md., is now using paid staff people to handle hotline calls. With a 40-hour training requirement, it has seen its volunteer pool shrink to 50 volunteers from 80 over the past five years.

It isn't only the most emotionally wrenching tasks that are going undone. Even a group like Literacy Volunteers of America -- long popular with volunteers looking to do meaningful work with measurable results -- is feeling the squeeze. While the number of students seeking help has soared since 1993, the number of volunteers has held steady at around 50,000. One reason: The group requires at least 20 hours of training and a once-a-week commitment from volunteers for a year.

For those in need, the cutbacks may be pulling away a crucial safety net. Quadir Shabazz, a 12-year-old Newark, N.J., boy, says he has long hoped for a mentor or big-brother to "give me a better example for the future." Last year, after spotting a sign posted at his elementary school for a local group called "10,000 Mentors," he immediately contacted one of its representatives.

But the four-year-old group couldn't deliver. Because of difficulty recruiting volunteers, it is thousands of volunteers short of its mission to enlist 10,000 mentors for young kids. Quadir, like hundreds of other students, went on a waiting list.

Next week, a full year later, Quadir will finally be assigned a mentor. "They told me to give them time," he says.

Part of the difficulty, organizers say, is that some volunteers have a highly developed sense of psychic entitlement. Unlike their predecessors -- the stay-at-home moms who handled back-office chores for the local charity -- today's volunteers often turn up their nose at administrative work and other less-glamorous tasks. "It dismays me," says Sarah Cohn, executive director of Sanctuary. "To me, stuffing envelopes is important work."

But some volunteers say that, with spare time so precious, they want to make more substantive contributions. Diane Mulvey, an airline-parts importer and volunteer at Denver Health Medical Center, says she always gives the same spiel before she volunteers: "I'm not a child... I have a real desire to be useful. It has to do with limited time."

People are flat-out saying, 'I don't want to waste my time,'" adds Mark Owens, volunteer manager for Project Inform Inc., a San Francisco AIDS group. Their attitude is: "If you can't work with me on this, I can go somewhere else."

Jeff Wiedner did just that. A 33-year-old marketing executive in Fairfax, Va., who attends graduate school at night, Mr. Wiedner decided to volunteer his skills as a marketer. But the environmental groups he initially contacted seemed most interested in his ability to file. That "left a bad taste in my mouth," says Mr. Wiedner.

So he decamped to the Virtual Volunteering Project, an Austin, Texas, nonprofit that promotes online volunteering. Now he volunteers from his computer at home, doing research and public-relations work. "If I'm online at 3 a.m., it's OK," he says.

Online volunteering is perhaps the most unusual, and some say most promising, of what has come to be called "flexible volunteering." Web volunteers not only do administrative tasks from home, such as data entry and legal research, they can also interact with clients. Several years ago, for example, Hewlett-Packard Co. launched a mentoring program in which employees could communicate with fifth through 12th graders in biweekly e-mail exchanges on subjects ranging from physics to land forms. From one classroom of students, the program has grown to serve 3,000 kids and now is administered by a new nonprofit, the International Telementor Center at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo.

"You avoid drive time, you avoid the commitment of a certain time and a certain day," says Cathy Lipe, a program manager at Hewlett-Packard. "Doing it live, we might get a couple of dozen mentors from each Hewlett-Packard site. By e-mail, we reach a couple of thousand."

Similarly, the Catlett, Va., Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement sends real-time volunteers out to test water samples. The results are passed on to an online volunteer who puts the data into a computer system. Without such help, we "wouldn't have been able to monitor the water supply in Pennsylvania," says Karen Caron, administrative director. "The costs and logistics would have been prohibitive."

Virtual volunteering is only one of many new approaches. Some of the most successful groups are holding one-day events where people can pitch in for an hour or two. The Calvert Group, a mutual fund in Bethesda, Md., has employees make peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches for a soup kitchen on their coffee breaks.

One of the pioneers of flexible volunteering was City Cares of America, Atlanta, an organization built on the premise that young professionals want to volunteer but don't have time to commit to regular hours with a single agency. Instead, groups affiliated with City Cares -- including the various "Hands On" agencies around the country -- work as clearinghouses for other community groups. For example, Hands on San

San Francisco will promise to deliver 10 volunteers a week to a specific soup kitchen; it won't always be the same 10 people. Every month, City Cares sends out a schedule of events; volunteers can sign up for as many or as few activities as they like.

What seems to appeal to many people about this kind of volunteering is the fun factor. Indeed, a 1998 study by Do Something, a group that encourages young people to volunteer, reports that 30% of young adults volunteered because it was fun. A mere 11% said they did it because they were committed to the cause.

Michael Norelli, a 31-year-old map maker in San Francisco, says he signed up with Hands on San Francisco because "the whole point was to make [volunteering] fun." The first assignment he got sent on was to scrape wads of gum off theater seats. "People weren't just working quietly by themselves in a corner." After that experience, Mr. Norelli says he was "hooked." Now he is a project manager, overseeing other volunteers.

Some organizers decry what they see as "volunteering lite." Ms. Neal of Chris Homes, for example, says virtual volunteers often lose interest and don't complete assignments. But many agencies say they are seeing positive results. Since instituting a flexible-volunteering program three years ago, Project Inform, the San Francisco AIDS group, has seen its volunteer numbers jump to 220 from 165. The group also sends volunteers to sensitivity training and computer classes and throws them bowling parties and dinner dances.

Similarly, Hands on San Francisco, the group that allows busy professionals such as Ms. Smith, the Internet manager, to give small chunks of time, has more than tripled to 3,000 volunteers from 700 in 1997, when it was founded. City Cares had three affiliates 10 years ago; today it has 27. One member group, Chicago Cares, saw its volunteer roster swell to 5,081 this year, about three times where it was in 1994.

In addition, groups that have adopted flexible volunteering say it's a good way to get people in the door with the hope that their level of commitment will grow over time. If someone doesn't have a good time on their first project, "they won't come back," says Elizabeth Ross Lieberman, director of marketing for Chicago Cares.

Even some more-established volunteer organizations are trying to be more flexible. Denver Health Medical Center, a hospital in a relatively low-income section of Denver, once used volunteers more as candy strippers -- putting them in desk jobs or having them give water to people in the emergency room. Now, it allows volunteers to do everything from working at health fairs to checking the hearing of newborns. Since making the change, the hospital has seen its volunteer roster bounce to 300 from 200.

Of course, the drawback to volunteering-as-entertainment is that the less-amusing jobs don't always get done. Mr. Norelli points out that in San Francisco, organizers often have to turn volunteers away from the popular projects involving kids or animals. At the same time, however, environmental projects come up short. "People are willing to volunteer," he says, "but not break a sweat."

For the time-challenged volunteer
Here's how to get involved if you only have a few hours to give:
New York Cares
116 East 16th Street
New York, NY 10003-2112
212-228-5000

www.ny.cares.org

The grand-daddy of "flexible volunteering," New York Cares -- and its 26 City Cares affiliates -- offers time-pressed volunteers long-term, short-term and even one-day-only projects to help the environment, children, the homeless, senior citizens and others. They are most famous for their winter coat drive, publicized through a memorable poster of a shivering Statue of Liberty. Volunteers must attend a 45-minute orientation.

ImpactOnline
325 B. Forest Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94301
650-327-1389
www.impactonline.org

A pioneer of the virtual-volunteer concept, ImpactOnline is working to promote the concept of online volunteering. Its VolunteerMatch service hooks volunteers up with nonprofits in a dozen cities, for either one time or long-term commitments. Their Virtual Volunteering site lists projects that can be done on the Internet and provides links to the sponsoring organization.

Points of Light Foundation
1400 Eye Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20005
202-729-8000
www.pointsoflight.org

Yes, the same Points of Light made famous by George Bush, pere. Affiliated with 450 volunteer centers across the country, this group encourages volunteerism of all kinds -- short-term, long-term, corporate and single-day -- including National Family Volunteering Day on Nov. 20, where families will do everything from clean up parks to sign in donors at blood drives.

For the time-rich volunteer

Here, a few groups that need help, but require a long-term commitment:
Experience Corps
425 Second Street
San Francisco, CA 94107
415-430-0141
www.experiencecorps.org

A sort of AmeriCorps for older people, Experience Corps sends seniors into schools and neighborhoods to mentor, tutor and inspire young people. The Corps is known for innovative programs that reflect their volunteers' interests -- from tap-dance workshops to letter-writing campaigns. Volunteers must complete a 40-hour training program and commit to 15 hours a week for one year. Of course, Experience Corps does provide a small incentive: Volunteers are paid a \$150 monthly stipend.

Literacy Volunteers of America
635 James Street
Syracuse, NY 13203
315-472-0001
www.literacyvolunteers.org

Although it is moving away from the one-on-one tutor/student model, Literacy Volunteers still offers tutoring both for adults with basic literacy problems and for people who speak other languages. Volunteers generally are required to complete a 20-hour training session, which some groups break into modules, and commit to a year of service, meeting with students on a weekly basis.

10,000 Mentors
33 Washington St.
Newark, N.J. 07102
973-242-1142
www.10000mentors.org

This organization provides mentors for students eight to 13 years old in eight schools in Newark. Volunteers are required to meet with a student for a minimum of four hours a month for one year. They must also attend a several-hour training session.

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