

[News and Hot Topics](#) » From Organizing Charity to Building Community

From Organizing Charity to Building Community

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

December

2008

December is the month in which “charity” is on the agenda. Traditionally, it is a major time of philanthropic giving (regardless of whether donations are driven more by end-of-year income tax planning than concern for those of lesser means). It certainly is filled with toy and food drives in countless variety, to assure that poor families have at least one day of abundance. (I discussed my opinion of this back in 1997, with a Hot Topic called [“The Holiday Season - Going Beyond ‘Feel-Good’ Volunteering.”](#)) Continuing [last month’s topic](#), we’ll all be watching how the worsening economy affects holiday charity this year.

The problem, for me, is that the charity model is one-way. It centers on givers, “those who have so much,” providing aid to recipients, “those who have so little.” It creates a hierarchy in which people of means are elevated above those without, and the recipients of the giving get the message. They may be grateful for the compassion and generosity, but sometimes have to swallow their pride and self-esteem to accept the hand-out. This will be even more evident with the growing number of newly unemployed people who have not seen themselves before as “in need.”

The challenge for volunteer resource managers is how to redirect the giving model to one that focuses instead on *community building*. This requires moving from concentrated holiday events to year-round support and starts by looking *inside* a neighborhood or organization before looking outside.

Assess the Talents and Will Already Present

We have got to stop categorizing people into givers and receivers. For years we’ve spoken of the best volunteering as an *exchange* through which both the volunteer and the person served benefit. But do we still think the “client” gets the tangible benefits of help while the volunteer gets intangibles such as feeling good?

Consider some real-life projects to see what a true exchange is all about:

- A nursing home near an elementary school was asked to open its dining room from 3:00 to 5:00 as a safe place for “latchkey” children who otherwise had no adult supervision in the late afternoon to do homework. Older residents who were able were encouraged to greet the youngsters, give milk and cookies, and help with the homework. As you can imagine, the kids responded and pretty soon it was very hard to tell who was giving or receiving more. The seniors suddenly had young visitors and the students suddenly had tutors. Win-win.
- Urban community gardens (Philadelphia has many) are great examples of mutuality. Tending small plots of land side-by-side can’t help but introduce neighbors to one another, and in a multi-generational way. An abundant crop of fresh produce is naturally shared, not only by the families working the garden, but often with donations to local food pantries and other programs fighting hunger or poor nutrition.
- A kidney dialysis unit in a large hospital was given a few hundred dollars to spend on improving the facility and the nurses asked the patients what they needed or wanted. The unexpected reply was exercise bicycles. Many patients were bored just sitting through their treatment and preferred some mild exercise. And then creativity kicked in. The patients decided to compete against one another to see who could accumulate the most miles on the bikes during a set time, found sponsors, and ended up raising money to give to those “in need.” (See, need is a matter of perspective.)

What would happen if we stopped asking “what new people can we find out there to give us help?” and instead talked to our members, audience, visitors, clients – whomever our focus is – and found out what they wanted and *were willing to help create?*

This might begin with a skills and interests inventory. What can people do? What might they have that they would share, loan, or even give away? Using the holidays as a focal point, let’s imagine some ways we could organize a project that 1) meets real needs, 2) does not depend on cash, and 3) makes all the participants feel good about themselves.

- **Holiday Service Exchange:** Bring participants together and have them write something they are willing to do for someone else on a piece of paper – something that might take between one and three hours to complete. Some examples might be weeding the garden, shoveling snow, hemming skirts, baking bread, etc. (Note that people might have to be given a starter set of ideas to get their creativity going.) To be part of the exchange, everyone has to submit a service. The papers then get mixed up and everyone draws from the pile. After that, people can further exchange the slips to get what they need most (not everyone has a garden or a skirt!). But by the end, each person receives something and *gives* something.
- **The Gift of Time:** Have everyone in your group pledge two hours to be shared sometime by the end of January. Put all the names in a hat and each person draws their two-hour companion. They can figure out what to do together, but it can be as simple as watching a football game on

television or even long telephone conversations. This is really four hours of companionship, since everyone is a giver and a receiver.

- **Junk-to-Treasure Gift Exchange:** Pick a day and have everyone bring in items from home that they no longer want but are in good condition – from clothing to toys. Arrange everything on tables and each participant can take one item for each item he or she donated to the mix. This allows everyone to clean out closets while obtaining new things they might want themselves or can gift to others.

Think about how some of these ideas can be appealing – and even fun – for people who have just been laid off or are worried about losing their jobs in the new year.

Taking It Further

Moving away from holidays, the concept of engaging the people directly involved in a situation in finding ways to address it ought to be a key element of every volunteer resource manager's job.

- With other volunteer programs, respond to lay-offs in your area by organizing a "Keep Your Credentials Current" fair. Advertise it specifically to people who are newly (or long-term) unemployed. When they arrive, have them fill in a form that asks for their skills and interests, and specifically what they would like to show potential new employers they are capable of doing. Prepare a number of volunteer facilitators in advance in how to assess these forms and to help people find one or more agencies in the room that might be able to provide a volunteer experience to match the talents and interests identified. Make sure every agency has agreed to act as a reference for any successful volunteer recruited through the fair.
- If your organization "serves" children, families, older people, or people with any type of special needs, develop ways to *talk with these people* several times a year. What can they do to help each other? What would they like to do if an outside volunteer taught them to do it? It may take several sessions before everyone gets the hang of this, so try different ways of eliciting suggestions.
- Post your agency's "wish list" where all visitors to your facility or office can see it. This should include volunteer opportunities, the cash costs of specific items or projects, and sought-after furniture, equipment, and other goods. Keep it current and – just as realtors mark "sold" across for-sale signs – mark when a wish is fulfilled. Never assume your visitors have nothing to give; instead consider everyone as having the potential to be a time, money, or item donor. So why not invite them to become one?
- Make people aware of mutual needs. Can you help patient visitors car pool? Might parents be willing to exchange times for watching each others' children? Does anyone have personal experience with a treatment, court hearing, job interview, or anything else someone might be facing, and be willing to share information and offer support? Can you set aside a table in the

cafeteria for family members (who want to do this) to sit together informally and talk about what they are facing?

It may take some internal education to help your organization understand this approach to “volunteering.” Do other staff see this as imposing on clients? How can you report on these sorts of activities so that they are recognized as additional services generated by the volunteer office?

I don’t have all the answers but I am convinced that this is a critical time for us to develop our community building skills. People really do want to help each other but – especially in a time when most of us don’t know our neighbors very well – they simply don’t know they can be of help. That’s our job.

- How are you already involving service recipients as service givers?
- What else might you organize specifically to address bad economic times?

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Submitted on 20 February 2009 by Priscilla Prather, University of North Texas - Student, San Antonio USA

Holiday charity is often viewed as a onetime shot or feel good charity so that some deserving family can feel good for at least one day out of the year. But with the down fall of the economy how will this be affected? However, Mrs. Ellis’ focus is more on the fact that during this time we tend to fall into two categories; the giver and the receiver. As unfortunate as it may be ... most charity work is viewed that way. But do not begrudge the giver – more often than not, the giver has been a receiver as well and simply wants to give back.

There is much truth and benefit in “taking it a bit further”... any ideas that are mutually benefiting are always good ones; moving beyond the holidays to the everyday needs of everyday people. I’ll be honest the percentage rule will apply here as it does in most situations. 20% of the people do 80% of the work. You simply have to decide which category you want to be in. I will have to also agree with Ms. Ellis, that is indeed a critical time and we must develop our communities to be stronger in assisting one another. I, too, believe that people really do want to help each other especially now.

Submitted on 16 December 2008 by Bonnie J. Vesely, Monroe County Circles Initiative, Coordinator/Community Organizer, Bloomington, IN US

We asked the community to “adopt” the nine families in our program for the holidays and fulfill their wish lists. The lists were snapped up very quickly and the generosity has been overwhelming. One church wanted to adopt a family but all of our families had been adopted. They said they’d like to put together baskets - and those turned out to be laundry baskets, filled to the brim, for all nine families. Two women in our group needed tires to get to work and school, and churches quickly contributed to make this happen. Perhaps the fact that the recession is affecting us ALL is creating more

understanding and empathy, so that more people are giving what they can in terms of time and money/material goods.

***Submitted on 10 December 2008 by Chris Jarvis, [Realized Worth](#), Senior Consultant
Toronto, Ontario Canada***

Volunteerism 2.0 demands that the traditional distinctions of 'giver' and 'receiver' are dissolved. Everyone stands in equality as contributor. Together we face the problem. Together, in community, we contribute parts of the solution. And that means everyone benefits as well.

This is a great article that touches on a much needed evolution in the thinking around social justice issues. I love the practical examples that have a 'plug and play' utility to them.

Submitted on 8 December 2008 by Marcia Rose Fuoss, Manager, Volunteer Membership, Community Preservation and Development Corporation, Washington, DC

I shared your holiday "gift giving" ideas with about other staff members and some of them have already told me they are excited about using at least one of the ideas. I copied and saved your ideas so I can draw on this resource again in the future.

***Submitted on 8 December 2008 by Margaret Redsell, Skylarkers 60 and Better Program,
Program Manager, Inala Australia***

One day one of my volunteer tutors had an accident on the way to our centre. He was stressing out about how he was going to get to our centre and I said "Don't worry, we will make alternative arrangements for your students." His reply showed the value he got out of volunteering. 'It's not my students I am worrying about, it's me. I need my volunteering.' Yep, it is a two way street.

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