

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Is the Rising Cost of Gas a Crisis or an Opportunity for Volunteering?

Is the Rising Cost of Gas a Crisis or an Opportunity for Volunteering?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

June
2008

In the United States and in other parts of the world, the cost of gasoline for our cars is rising at a staggering rate. Those of us old enough to remember the gas crisis of the 1970s know that the situation feels very different today. Back then we were concerned with oil shortages, not necessarily prices. We endured “odd and even” days in which cars were limited to fill ups only on days their license plates ended with the right number. It got so bad, in fact, that certain professions and jobs were designated as so necessary to public service that those who did them were permitted fill-ups whenever needed – and volunteers who delivered meals to homebound people were included on that list.

I haven’t really heard much discussion yet about the effect of gasoline prices today, but it has to be an issue that will soon surface. It has the potential to disrupt volunteer services to some of our most vulnerable populations, especially those who are too ill or too old to leave their own homes and therefore need food and other services brought to them. Because these are some of our most “traditional” volunteer assignments, it’s easy for the public to take for granted how many people depend on volunteers to drive them to everything from doctors’ appointments to dialysis treatments, or to religious services or much-welcomed recreational opportunities.

Can we expect volunteers to donate \$40 or more in gas costs every time they also donate their time to do this sort of driving? What’s the magic number at which the pain of this expense becomes prohibitive?

There’s also important volunteering that requires transportation, but not for reasons of life and death. Ushering at orchestra performances or giving tours at an historic site, for example, fall more into the category of recreation than social services. If the audience or visitors think twice about driving to attend the event, how long before volunteers, too, wonder if the cost of gas is worth it?

Keep in mind that most volunteers will wait a long time before mentioning that driving expenses are hurting them and – even worse – might drop out of volunteering rather than ask for reimbursement. So silence is not necessarily a sign that people don't mind the cost. Rather than exploit the charitable nature of volunteers, shouldn't we be proactive in developing ways to help?

Can we coordinate carpools among volunteers – along with employees – working the same schedules, events or locations? Can we incorporate clients, too?

How can we raise funds to subsidize the costs of gas? How can we get official recognition of the critical nature of some volunteer driving assignments and perhaps obtain special rates or reimbursements from government or business sources?

What Might Happen Next

The cost of gas is certainly a call to action. But it gives us a good excuse to consider what else we may be doing that puts obstacles in the paths of volunteers. Maybe there's a silver lining in the cloud of the energy crisis, if some of the following things most volunteers dislike are changed in the name of gas costs:

- Maybe committee chairs will have to consider carefully whether all those endless meetings are really necessary or productive, if they require travel by each participant. Fewer but longer face-to-face meetings or online options such as listserv exchanges might be good alternatives.
- All those requirements for a pre-set number of hours of training might be examined to see if they really do have to occur on site with a group, or instead could be provided individually through at least some use of video or online training.
- Perhaps the situation will evoke collaboration among agencies (perhaps more shared office space) and more careful coordination of calendars. Can events be held concurrently or sequentially to allow participants to carpool or at least to make only one trip instead of several?
- For a parent chauffeuring children to sports or classes, might the resistance to drive back and forth twice translate into doing some new volunteer work while waiting for the kids to be ready to go home?
- Instead of recruiting volunteers from anywhere in a community, maybe we'll get better at looking locally for new people who can walk or bike to our sites, or who are in our area everyday anyway (work or school) and can piggyback time with us onto a commute they already make often.

My point is that the volunteer resources office has to make the rising costs of volunteering visible. We need to express appreciation for the extra financial donation every volunteer makes who drives

for us without reimbursement of expenses (this should show up on the organization's donor list!). We should do whatever we can to find money to reimburse volunteers for gasoline and other transportation costs – whether through a designated fundraiser, a corporate donor, or a line item in the agency's budget. We should convene interested people in forming car pools – among volunteers, among our employees and volunteers, and among the volunteers and employees in other nearby organizations. What a great new assignment for volunteers: The Gas Crisis Strategy Task Force!

Have you already seen the effects of the rising costs of gas on volunteering? What have you seen and how are you dealing with it?

What ripple effects, such as the prospective situations I raise here, are you seeing or do you anticipate?

What can/should a volunteer program manager do about all this?

Related Topics: [Ethics](#) | [Recruitment](#) | [For Individual Volunteers](#) | [Monetary Value of Volunteer Time](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

Posted on 26 June 2008 by Jill Agyekum, Anoka County Senior Caregiver Network Coordinator, Anoka, MN USA

Signing volunteers up with the RSVP program is not a viable solution to this issue. It certainly is a positive move to partner with our local RSVP programs however, they too have a mileage budget. Many RSVP programs are now inundated with mileage reimbursement requests and they cannot continue to meet the demand of volunteers.

I like the idea of using recognition funds to purchase gas cards for volunteers. It is a great way to show them that they are valued and that we are thinking of their needs.

Posted on 19 June 2008 by Susan J. Ellis, , President, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia PA USA

Thanks to Rob Jackson at Volunteering England for finding a very pertinent blog posting on June 16th on the topic of gas prices and volunteering, "Don't Let High Fuel Prices Stop You from Volunteering," on a site called "Punny Money." The author, Nick, makes some important points – once you scroll down past the volunteer-related (but not fuel-related) cartoon! Enjoy that and then learn from the posting.

Posted on 12 June 2008 by Marcia Long, Evergreen Healthcare, Manager, Volunteer Services, Kirkland WA USA

I am signing up our retired volunteers with RSVP, which reimburses gas costs monthly. It's a way we can partner with RSVP and help our volunteers at the same time.

Posted on 12 June 2008 by Lanny Shea, Desert View Regional Medical Center, Volunteer Coordinator, Pahrump, Nevada USA

I can see that the gas prices may create some problems with our volunteers. To date they are still coming and fulfilling their duties. We live in a small town and the distance to our hospital is not great,

but it may come to several of our volunteers having to car pool to meet the cost of gas. This is a very important topic and one that we are going to have to further explore. Thank you for the article.

Posted on 6 June 2008 by Trudy, SeniorsPlus, Hamilton, Lewiston, Maine USA

We have a small transportation program and a huge Meals on Wheels program. Our mileage is set by State reimbursement standards which have not kept up with rising gasoline prices. We already offer driver training/safety training, as our drivers have to have this training every two years.

So, how can we get around the constrictions of the mileage? We are using unrestricted funds and volunteer recognition funds to purchase gas cards for volunteers to use. We know what we want the reimbursement to be, so after a certain amount of miles, they receive a gas card to make up the difference. What better way to recognize these volunteers who perform a very special service during this struggle?

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Penny Grellier, Volunteer Chore Services, Manager, Tacoma, WA USA

I manage a volunteer transportation program and gas prices have been an issue for quite a while. Our volunteers take low-income elderly and disabled clients to medical appointments and the grocery store. We reimburse volunteers for mileage, and with the current prices for fuel, however, this has become a critical issue. We are now giving other incentives such as auto safety equipment and training classes (funded by grants), to offset the mileage reimbursement, but when you are dealing with driving, it always comes back to gas. Recruiting new volunteer drivers is very difficult, and keeping those we have is getting harder. We have just begun a new program in which volunteers accompany clients who are able to ride a bus but are perhaps a bit timid about doing so, or have challenges that prevent them from riding alone. We hope this will help those who can ride the bus do so, so that the remaining drivers won't be spread so thin. In our program, provision of transportation can mean the difference between someone getting their medications or groceries and going without, which over time can indeed become a life or death situation.

***Posted on 2 June 2008 by Chris Jones, HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties
Volunteer Coordinator, Lafayette, CO USA***

We have several thrift shop volunteers who may need to quit or cut back on their hours due to the effect of high gas prices. They are on limited incomes and the sacrifice may soon be too much for them. We have had some patient care volunteers refuse patient assignments because the distance was further than they wanted to drive because of cost of gas. I also have had a couple of potential volunteers tell me that they would volunteer if transportation costs weren't so high. Some of our thrift shop volunteers have begun to car pool but our patient care volunteers can't really do that.

***Posted on 2 June 2008 by Bob Hawes, Syracuse VA Medical Center, Volunteer Manager
Syracuse, NY USA***

I was begining to wonder about this topic myself, when Susan published this article. RSVP stipends volunteers who travel in from a certain distance; what will they do as more volunteers start to sign up due to the cost of fuel? We currently run a patient pick up service that uses volunteer drivers and

donated vans. Our rules currently preclude picking up volunteers themselves, but perhaps that will need to change...

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Kathy Campbell, VITAS Innovative Hospice Care, Manager of Volunteer Services, Fort Worth, TX USA

One of our responses at VITAS Hospice is to take quarterly volunteer in-services into the community. Traditionally, we had in-services here at our organization office and volunteers came here to eat lunch, network and attend an in-service. Now, the same in-service still happens here at the office but is also repeated in two other locations in our outlying areas. That way, many volunteers meet close to their community and one speaker drives to meet with them. Area churches are making their space available for these meetings. It also increases participation.

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Amy Astin CAVS, Director Volunteer Services, Floyd Medical Center, Rome GA

In a 325 bed hospital we have averaged about 265 volunteers per year for the last six years. Recently that average has dropped and the rising gas prices seems to be the reason for most of the resignations. Many of our volunteers not only can't afford to drive to their unpaid jobs anymore but are also looking for paid jobs now. The overall economy has been impacted to this point. We are looking for ways to reimburse volunteers who serve in more critical areas such as our Hospice program.

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Marilyn Dyson, Alzheimer's Association Delaware Valley Chapter, Volunteer Services, Philadelphia, PA USA

For meetings and orientations, the Alzheimer's Association Delaware Valley Chapter will have conference calls. This not only saves gas money but also save commute time for volunteers who live far away. It works even more for short meetings where volunteers would be driving to and from a meeting that might only last 45 minutes to an hour.

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Paula J. Beugen

You make very important and timely points, Susan. Perhaps now is also the time to do rate comparisons and point out to leaders and officials the disparity in the allowable mileage deduction for volunteers in contrast to the mileage rate that is allowed for business purposes. The dollar value of volunteers and examples of life-preserving and essential volunteer services could be emphasized at the same time.

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Yvonne Williams, L&A Family & Children's Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Ontario Canada

I coordinate a volunteer drive program for a children's protection agency in Ontario, Canada. We reimburse our volunteer drivers mileage - however even with that there are concerns being expressed by some that we should be providing a raise.

With a restricted budget, there are no funds to raise reimbursement. However we are looking at targeted recruitment to reduce mileage, determine if return trips home are necessary between a

short appointment, better coordination for piggy-backing pick ups in same areas and last on the list looking at approaching corporations - because everyone is under the strain of rising fuel costs.

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Donna, The RETHINK Group, Consultant, Ennismore Ontario Canada

Timely topic. I see the impact on church volunteering in my community (regarding your idea about limiting, eliminating or combining meetings) and hearing much discussion about solutions as well. Had a conversation recently about raising funds to purchase a van that could take many people to variety of places and coordinate this with needs of other organizations. Sometimes those organizations with vans only use them in the daytime; what about sharing an all day/evening use? I think each Manager of Volunteers could write articles for local newspapers that highlight the real costs of volunteering and local AVA's might host sessions to explore solutions and ideas for working together. This is a great time to be advocates for volunteering! Community Care Organizations, Driving services; Cancer Visits; Friendly visiting etc. all need support. If volunteers used for international emergency situations can get free insurance or waived/sponsorship for screening costs ...perhaps this! might also translate into some type of subsidy or support when driving costs impact on the cost of 'caring for others'?

Posted on 2 June 2008 by Jayne Cravens, Consultant, Bonn Germany

Great topic! I think online meetings require organizations to be much more organized and focused; it's interesting how easy organizations find it to invite volunteers and others to an onsite meeting that doesn't really have a focus or set agenda -- for some, it feels "nice" just to get together. However, participants want online meetings to be much more focused; they don't tolerate online time wasters (unless it involves, say, shooting a virtual basketball into a virtual net). I've fallen in love with online meetings, because I feel like my time is much more valued as a participant: start and end times are adhered to, staying on-topic is encouraged, I always get an agenda before the meeting, etc.

Also, the gas crisis is presenting an opportunity for organizations and volunteers to be greener! Gas prices or not, it's long-overdue for nonprofits to:

- add information on their web sites about what bus stops are nearest to their offices/venues, arrival and departure times for those bus stops, and links to the city's mass transit department web site for more information (what a great task for an online volunteer!)
- create a safe place for volunteers and staff to park their bicycles (this is something that can be done in cooperation with nearby businesses and other organizations)
- encourage car pooling (which is easy to coordinate if you already have an online discussion group, either email-based or web-based, for your volunteers)

Here in Germany, I see volunteers escorting elderly clients to and from the grocery, and its usually via a bus rather than a car. I know that mass transit in the USA is rather dreadful in terms of being conveniently available, but all too often, I see people ignoring the bus stop just a few blocks away that would take them very near their ultimate destination.

Posted on 1 June 2008 by Susan J. Ellis, President, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia PA USA In the few days between writing this Hot Topic and its posting, an article appeared in the *Border Telegraph* from Scotland with the headline: Soaring fuel prices leads to dramatic fall in volunteer ambulance drivers. It seemed too synchronistic not to share with you.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025