

Growing Volunteers

Americans volunteer. And we do so in huge numbers:

According to research by Independent Sector, 83.9 million adults—or 44% of Americans over 21—volunteered an average of 3.6 hours a week in 2000, the last year for which statistics are available. The actual number of volunteers across the country is likely much higher, since these figures only reflect individuals who volunteered with organizations and do not take into account people who might work through their houses of worship or in a more informal setting, like tutoring kids or helping out seniors in the neighborhood.

Without the billions of donated hours—15.5 billion in 2000 alone, according to Independent Sector—nonprofits would not be able to do even a fraction of the work they do.

Often people come to an organization because of a particular event or activity. Known as “episodic” volunteers, these people might sign up to help out with a once-a-year walkathon, a clean-up day or even a black-tie event. They might be attracted to the event itself, or they might become involved through their employers, church or social group. Or they might decide to take part in a national volunteering event. This past Oct. 26, for instance, an estimated 3 million

people participated in Make A Difference Day.

Volunteer ranks also swell in response to a great celebration, like



St. Anthony Foundation

Volunteer at St. Anthony Foundation in San Francisco prepares holiday meal.

the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, or a great tragedy, like the events of Sept. 11. And regardless of what initially motivates people to volunteer, the challenge facing nonprofit organizations across the country is how to take those “one-timers” and nurture them into long-term volunteers.

Soul Food

For 15 years, the Village Temple Soup Kitchen in New York City has been serving a Saturday lunch to 150 homeless and needy people. “We feed about 8,000 people a year,” says J. Dean Chavooshian, chairman of the Village Temple Soup Kitchen, which is affiliated with Congregation B’nai Israel.

The soup kitchen receives food and supplies through in-kind donations and from distributions from the New York City Food Bank and City Harvest, a nonprofit organization that is the largest and oldest food rescue program in the world.

Every week, they prepare sandwiches, fruit salad and soup—15 to 20 gallons a week. “We take great pride in making excellent soup,” Chavooshian boasts.

Like New York City itself, the group’s volunteers are diverse. “We are fully staffed by volunteers. Some are temple members, but most are not,” he says. “Our volunteers come from the entire region, not just New

York City. More schools are requiring kids to have community service hours before they graduate, and some of them come here. We have volunteers in all age groups. I have one lady who’s 95 who works there every week.

“People hear about us from word of mouth and through the Internet.

How to Transform One-Timers into Long-Timers

by Roy DeLaMar

In the past year, we have had hundreds of volunteer inquiries from people who heard about us online," he says.

When it comes to converting a one-time volunteer to a regular, Chavooshian says, "There's really only one thing I can do, and that is encourage people to come back. Once they're here, I can make sure they're engaged, busy and feel like they're making a difference. And at the end of the day, I thank them. The key is to make people feel important and needed."

Chavooshian believes it is essential for a nonprofit of any size to be realistic about how many volunteers it can really use at one time. "Since Sept. 11, more people are interested in getting involved in a very hands-on way," he says. "I've gotten calls from entire church groups that want to come in and volunteer, but we just don't need that many people at one time. It's important for us to limit groups to four or five people at a time. You don't want to have too many people and not enough work to go around."



NAMES Project Foundation

Volunteers assemble AIDS Quilt panels in Washington, D.C.

Conversely, there are times when finding enough people is a struggle: "Many people assume it's hard to find volunteers around the holidays," he says, "but in fact, the summer is much more challenging."

He adds, "The best advice for creating regular volunteers is to foster a warm, friendly atmosphere. We stress

that this is a family of people. There really is no hierarchy or jealousy here," he says. "Everyone takes ownership and feels that it is his or her kitchen."

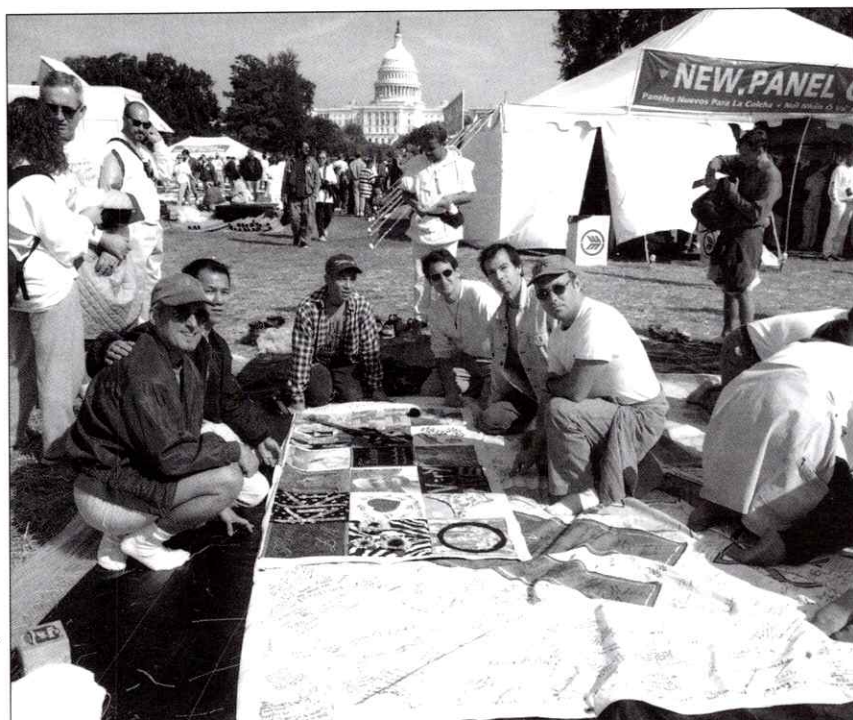
Stitches of Hope

"Many of our volunteers initially come in to make a panel in honor of someone they have lost to AIDS. It's a very emotional connection," says Aida Rentas, manager of Volunteer and Community Relations for the NAMES Project Foundation.

Headquartered in Atlanta, the NAMES Project is made up of 23 chapters across the country, and is best known for the 44,000-panel AIDS Quilt.

"There are so many reasons people volunteer," she says. Besides memorializing a loved one, some have to do some sort of community service and come to us. And still others just like to quilt."

Rentas believes it is essential to become familiar with all volunteers. "I profile my volunteers. I peer into their lives and see what their skills



Volunteers show their contribution to the AIDS Quilt.

and availabilities might be. And I try to connect with them, to understand why they are volunteers," she explains. "They might have come in with the intention of just working on a panel and not coming back. But when I have something I think they might like to do, I call them. If they will come once, they will come twice. And I always suggest that they bring their friends, too."

Volunteer Gold

The entire country was swept up in the excitement of the Winter Olympics last February, but nowhere was it felt more strongly than in the games' host city, Salt Lake City. People were eager to lend their time and talent just to be a part of the international sporting spectacular.

"We had a tremendous response during the Olympics," says Joshua Pederson, director, 211 Volunteer Center, in Salt Lake City. "Sixty thousand people signed up during the games. In fact, we were con-

cerned that other organizations would be losing regular volunteers to the Olympics.

"And," he adds, "the Olympics generated a tremendous spirit of volunteerism that is still very active here in Salt Lake City." Many of those Olympic volunteers have gone on to join other organizations through the



Volunteer Center.

The 211 Volunteer Center, which is part of the Volunteer Center National Network, is an information and referral center. "We make it easier for people to get connected," explains Pederson. "We offer information about finding volunteer opportunities and work with a volunteer coordinators network of about 300 trained professionals. We help bring 37 new volunteers into the community each day."

"One-time projects triple during



211 Volunteer Center

Volunteers serve drinks at the Salt Lake City Olympics.

the holidays, but people are looking for long-term commitments," says Pederson. "It's important to remind people that you still feed hungry people in January and February. Let them know there are needs throughout the year."

He believes that the person who first interacts with potential volunteers plays a crucial role in making people feel welcome and wanted. "I can't stress enough the importance of the volunteer coordinator in the entire process," he says. "Organizations need to recognize that the volunteer coordinator really is like a staff supervisor, except their staff isn't on

the payroll.

"Understand why the volunteer is there: Is he or she looking for some recognition, or more comfortable with anonymous service? Work with volunteers' expectations," he suggests. "Invite them to come back, and make coming back easy: Return phone calls; don't create barriers. Let them know you appreciate what they did. Remember, volunteers feel good if you just remember their names and say, 'We need you.'" ♦

Roy DeLaMar, a freelance writer based in Philadelphia, is a regular contributor to Volunteer Leadership.

Tips for Nonprofits

VolunteerMatch.com is a nonprofit online service that helps interested volunteers get involved with community service organizations throughout the United States. Jason Willett, VolunteerMatch.com's director of communications, offers these tips for turning the one-time volunteer into a repeat customer.

- **Sell your goals.** People respond to an organization's mission. If they believe in what you are doing, they're more likely to sign up for the long haul. And once they participate, they will feel like they're contributing to the group's overall success.

- **Know your needs.** Assess your group's needs and communicate them effectively. People want to help, but they have limited time.

- **Develop detailed descriptions when listing any volunteer opportunities.** Make sure people know what they're getting into. And remember, one communication approach does not fit all; tailor your message to your audience.

- **Do not make assumptions.** A person's profession will not necessarily dictate the kind of volunteer work she'd like to do. The bank president, for instance, might enjoy stuffing envelopes for a change of pace.

- **Keep volunteers happy.** Be careful about moving a volunteer to another opportunity that you think might be a better fit. Value the volunteer's satisfaction above your immediate needs.

- **Coordinate the coordinator.** It is really important to have a solid, highly skilled volunteer coordinator who is really adept at reading people and responding to their needs. But the volunteer coordinator should not be the only point of contact for volunteers. Everyone should welcome volunteers and make them feel at home.

- **Organize a recognition event.** It doesn't have to be a big shindig, just a casual opportunity for volunteers to meet staff and feel valued and connected with the organization.

Plug in to CVCs

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the centers usually run the CVC as one of their programs, providing administrative and program support for CVC members. Volunteer Centers also benefit through their partnerships with CVCs, often resulting in increased support in the form of funding, board members and in-kind donations.

The Points of Light Foundation, in cooperation with The National Council on Workplace Volunteerism, conducted surveys and focus groups that indicated CVC leaders wanted a national membership program. CVC leaders expressed the desire for greater collaboration, networking and sharing of resources among counterparts nationwide.

The current membership program provides such benefits as a quarterly newsletter, unlimited technical assistance, a CVC directory and foundation discounts for conferences, meetings and publications. ♦

Reed Dewey is director of corporate partnerships at the Points of Light Foundation. Katie Davies formerly worked in Corporate Volunteer Development at the Foundation.

Want to Know More?

The Points of Light Foundation's Corporate Volunteer Development Department supports a national network of CVCs. A variety of tools are available to help establish and strengthen CVCs.

For assistance, e-mail cvc@pointsoflight.org or call Reed Dewey at 202/729-8175.

To access a list of CVCs nationwide: www.pointsoflight.org/organizations/corp_vol_council.cfm