

WISE GIVING™

GUIDE

A PUBLICATION OF THE BBB WISE GIVING ALLIANCE : HOLIDAY 2009

Volunteering





A Publication of the
BBB Wise Giving Alliance

The *Wise Giving Guide* is published quarterly to help donors make more informed giving decisions. This guide includes a compilation of the latest evaluation conclusions completed by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance.

If you would like to see a particular topic discussed in this guide, please email suggestions to give@council.bbb.org or write to us at the address below.

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president's MESSAGE

Most often I use this space to comment on aspects of charities' operations from a donor's perspective. This time I'd like to speak from a recipient charity's point of view.

That recipient is of course the Alliance. Like most charities, we have learned that in these stressful times, past giving patterns no longer hold. It is far more costly to identify new donors and to keep present ones than it once was. In this climate we are especially heartened by your gifts and your confidence in our work.

Among the gifts made to us this year was a generous bequest from Harriet Seymour, a long-time supporter of the Alliance who, like you, received the *Wise Giving Guide* regularly. We are deeply appreciative of this gift, which arrived coincidentally just as our August *Guide* article on charitable bequests was published.

But we are no less grateful for the contributions that you have sent us. They enable us to produce the evaluative reports summarized in the *Guide* listing. They help us continue to promote accountability throughout the charitable sector.

I am sure that many of you give your time and talent to charity, or are thinking about it, and I hope that you'll find useful the perspectives on volunteering that we include in this issue. I hope as well that like many volunteers, you discover that your charitable work brings you incalculable rewards.

Thank you for the loyalty and generosity you have shown us this year. All of us at the Alliance wish you happiness and peace in 2010.



H. Art Taylor, *President*



With the need for charities' services straining their resources, the call for volunteers this year is especially intense. It comes with more urgency, and from new sources. Exhortations to serve issue regularly from the White House and other government offices. Volunteerism has a role in over 60 national TV programs during a full week in October. Multiple Web sites list opportunities for service, where visitors can apply at the click of a mouse. It's not even necessary to surf and search; if you're in an online social network, ways to serve may come to you.

donate time to charity is in many ways similar to deciding to make a cash contribution. You want to know that the charity you're considering is accountable. You want to know that it will use your time and talent effectively. And of course you want to have a good grasp of the work it's trying to do.

You'll also want to know, if you're not already serving, about how to find the opportunities open to you. You'll be concerned about how to be an effective volunteer. You'll like, perhaps, to have some perspective on volunteerism as a whole, including the problems it



Much of what you've been seeing or hearing focuses on the very real benefits, challenges, satisfactions and even joys of volunteering. These are hard to exaggerate, and they're deeply familiar. History has left us vivid images of American volunteers, from those neighborly barn raisings in the 1800's, bandage-rolling in World War I, canteens for armed service personnel in World War II, Mothers' Marches to combat polio in the 50's and today's Habitat for Humanity home builders.

But such stories can give an incomplete picture of what volunteering entails. Call them nuts and bolts or the nitty-gritty, there are aspects of giving service, beyond the inspiring images, that any prospective volunteer will want to consider. In fact, deciding to

faces. You might even want to know if your donated efforts can affect your taxes.

Below, then, you'll find not only a few suggestions about where to look and how to choose but some wider angles on volunteering:

- If you want to volunteer, what should you consider before you apply?
- What should you expect of the charities when you offer your time and talent?
- What should they expect of you?
- How many of us actually volunteer—and what holds the others back?
- Why is volunteering, with so many potential rewards for both charity and volunteer, not always a win-win arrangement?
- Can charities have *too many* volunteers?

Into the volunteering marketplace

If you desire to serve but don't know where, you'll find a world of open opportunities on the Web. Whether you contemplate finding work you'd like to do online or already know of possibilities in your neighborhood, the Web offers a great overview of both specific jobs and all kinds of advice and research. Several of these sites are listed in the box on page 7.

Pursuing openings online is easy. Most of the sites ask you for your location (zip code, usually) and your

about? What are your special skills? Do you want to use them or try something new? How much time do you want to give? How far do you want to travel to your work site?

And it's not selfish to think about your immediate motives. Do you want to fill empty hours, oblige a friend, build the basis of a new career or work your way into a particular social group? Such reasons need not be disqualifying, but acknowledging them doesn't hurt.



interests, sometimes with a drop-down list of "job" possibilities, along with the time periods you wish. You might choose such categories as animals, veterans, mentoring, etc. Some sites allow you to apply for a volunteer opening by email to the advertising charity; others send the information you provide directly to the charity. Of course applying does not guarantee acceptance.

There are occasional roadblocks: Internet links to more information about certain listings are dead, possibly because the opening is no longer available. You'll find overlap, too, as charities often post their volunteer openings on several sites.

Before you even turn on the computer, though, ask yourself some serious questions. *What kind of work interests you? What causes do you feel passionate*

Almost certainly, though, you have reasons that run much deeper, and that will sustain you: you want to "give back" for help you, your friends or family have received, or to help further a cause you believe in. You want to make a difference.

Just as you want to be an informed giver when your donation is made in cash, you want the same for your gift of time and talent. If a charity you're considering is unfamiliar to you, investigate. Write or call and ask questions. If it has a Web site, study it. Check with your state charity regulator to see whether it is properly registered. Try www.bbb.org/charity for information.

Finally, think about the commitment you're willing to make. Volunteering can be fun, but at root it is serious. What volunteers do can have consequences, good or bad, for the charities that employ them and, more importantly, for the causes they exist to serve. If you say you'll help stuff envelopes and don't show up, a strategically planned mailing schedule may be

disrupted. If you've promised to help teach other volunteers but back out, you may have turned away permanently some very willing workers. If you agree to mentor a child and then don't appear as expected, you can weaken the child's trust in adults' dependability.

Taking on volunteers...and risks

Identifying where you'd like to give your time is just half the story. Once you offer to volunteer, your chosen charity will want to judge your suitability; your willingness to serve is not always enough. Okay, willingness plus dexterity with a rake may be enough if you're going to clean up roadside trash, but for many positions of more extensive involvement a charity will ask volunteers to complete an application form, provide references and have a face-to-face interview.

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If you are going to be working with vulnerable populations such as the poor, elderly, disabled, or children, the sponsoring charity needs to be especially wary. Any volunteer position that includes handling money or access to personal information about donors, like their credit card or bank account numbers, for example, also requires safeguards. Background checks for criminal convictions, including DWI, are a regular part of many charities' screening process.

The dangers are real. A charity must protect not only its clients but itself. An article on the need for nonprofits to screen volunteers published by LexisNexis®, for example (www.choicepoint.com/documents/Background_Screening_Nonprofits.pdf), cites a case of a volunteer who stole over \$90,000 from a performing arts

school through bad check writing, forgery, grand theft and money laundering. He had previously been imprisoned for money-related convictions in his then-resident state and two adjacent ones.

However, not every blot on personal history automatically disqualifies a prospective volunteer. A poor driving record should rule you out of driving assignments but not necessarily affect your qualifications for other tasks.

The precautions the charity takes should encourage rather than deter you. In laying out responsibilities, time commitments, and expected behaviors before signing you on, the charity is trying to assure that your gift of time will truly enhance its work. That's the same kind of treatment you want charities to give your cash gifts.

Once taken on, however, volunteers cannot assume they have permanent positions. Charities need not tolerate behaviors in their volunteers that they would not accept from staff members, advises the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, in Leesburg, Virginia, on its Web site (www.nonprofitrisk.org). Firing them is an option. "The belief that nonprofits should treat volunteers with kid gloves as a way of compensating for the volunteer's unpaid status is an outdated and dangerous practice," the Center says.

Volunteers, care and handling of...

But when volunteers leave charity work, as many do, they most often do so voluntarily.

"[M]ore than one-third of those who volunteer one year do not donate their time the next year—at any nonprofit," according an article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2009). Much responsibility for this loss falls on the charities that accepted them: "most nonprofits are...letting volunteer talent slip away like water through a leaky bucket."

Where do charities fail? The authors of the article say that their surveys of non-returning volunteers find that, among other things, charities

- don't do enough to match volunteers' skills to their assignments
- provide too little training
- don't adequately recognize the value of volunteers' work
- don't train staff to work with them.

This suggests enormous waste of time and talent (and money, too: it's reported that volunteers are much

more likely than non-volunteers to make charitable contributions). For volunteers, it's frustrating and discouraging to feel that their gift of time is squandered.

There are many excellent volunteer programs, of course. Some of them, like the AARP Foundation's Tax-Aide program, which trains volunteers to provide free tax counseling and preparation, are managed by volunteers. But the need for better handling of volunteers is widely acknowledged.

A nation of volunteers?

No matter what the challenges, volunteerism persists. In July 2009, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), a government agency, reported that 61.8 million Americans, about 26 percent of the adult population, had contributed 8 billion hours of volunteer service in 2008.

The CNCS study, *Volunteering in America 2009*, defines volunteers as "persons age 16 and older who serve through or with an organization without pay at any point during a 12 month-period between September of one year and September of the following year."

This study, conducted annually, showed volunteering holding steady despite the troubled economy, with even a slight increase in the number of volunteers since 2007. In a period where the need for their services exceeds charities' means, these figures were seen as reassurance that bad times haven't made us so focused on our own problems that we were ignoring the needs of our neighbors.

In August 2009, however, the annual *America's Civic Health Index* reported that 72% of Americans said they had cut the time they spent volunteering and in civic activities in the past year. The National Conference on Citizenship, the nonprofit organization that conducted the study, called the fall-off "a civic depression."

What to think? Is volunteerism up or down? The later study attributed the difference in findings to timing: the downward change came after the first study was completed, and was influenced by the continuing rise in unemployment. According to this view, recessions stimulate volunteering only to a certain point; volunteers decline when unemployment exceeds 9 percent or so.

But the same study looked also at whether people are helping one another in personal ways, like giving food or money to a needy person who was not a relative (50% of those surveyed answered yes to that). The



study's authors proposed that such private actions also be considered indicators of "civic engagement." This activity may not be quite the same as volunteering as most people define it, but the finding could be seen as a sign that Americans have not become totally self-absorbed.

Who volunteers?

People who volunteer are retired, childless and have time on their hands. At least, that's the stereotype held by people who don't volunteer, as reported in the CNCS study "Pathways to Service."

Not true. The belief that volunteering is pretty much the domain of the elderly doesn't hold. As noted in the *Index* mentioned above, volunteering is growing most quickly among younger generations. In the past year, the *Index* notes, "younger people (currently, members of the Millennial Generation and Generation-X) have emerged as leaders in formal volunteering: 43% of Millennials and Generation-Xers volunteered in their communities, while 35% of Baby Boomers and 42% of Age 65+ did."

[For those not up on generational titles: Millennials are aged 15-29; Generation-X (also called Gen-X), 30-44; Baby Boomers, 45-64; and 65+—well, age is apparently ID enough.]

Childlessness also does not characterize the typical volunteer, according to CNCS: working mothers have the highest volunteer rates.

Is it then the lack of time that deters volunteering? Non-volunteers see themselves as so busy that they couldn't possibly contribute the time that they see volunteers giving, though in fact those gifts of time

vary. About two-thirds of volunteers are “episodic,” contributing less than 100 hours a year to all organizations, and about a third are “intensive,” contributing 100 hours or more per year.

Yet time is an issue, in a sense. According to a study described in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2009), “...the primary difference between volunteers and non-volunteers, when measuring what they do with their time, is the amount of television they watch. People who do not volunteer watch hundreds of hours of additional TV a year compared to people who do volunteer.” Ouch.

An important note from the CNCS’ *Pathways to Service*: as volunteers, men lag behind women. Twenty-three percent of men, compared with over 29% of women, volunteered in 2008.

There’s one big reason that non-volunteers give for not volunteering; *they haven’t been asked by someone they trust.*

That’s backed up with a statistic in the CNCS study: “...over 27 million volunteers in 2008 started serving after someone asked them to serve.”

What can volunteers do?

These days, almost anything. There’s always the traditional fund raising work: planning events, stuffing envelopes, soliciting door-to-door or joining walk-a-

thons. Tutoring children and dishing up meals for the needy attract many volunteers. There are many off-beat jobs, as well: if you can “lift 15 pounds and read small print” or are “willing to work and get dirty” you might be just the person to help archeologists clean and label artifacts from national parks or clean, repair or otherwise spruce up a 1914 railroad barge, as described in recent Web listings.

Currently there is great need for volunteers who can provide kinds of expertise that is not directly related to a charity’s program but is vital to its operation—know-how that can raise the drawing power of its Web site, streamline its computer operations or improve its financial accounting, for example. Such expertise often comes at a price beyond charity budgets.

Charities in need of these pros may find individual volunteers, but they may also find professional firms or businesses that will provide their employees’ time *pro bono*—without charge. Of course pro bono work has a long tradition—many a charity has received free legal advice from a lawyer on its board of directors—but the range of specialties has expanded even to marketing managers, technology and human resources experts. They are much in demand.

Then there’s government-sponsored national service, a whole category of volunteering that we don’t mean to overlook. A central provision of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed by President Obama in April 2009, increases the number of AmeriCorps volunteers from 75,000 to 250,000 over the next eight years. Adults of all ages can apply, and thousands have. In certain cases there are stipends.

Through partnerships with local and national nonprofits, AmeriCorps volunteers work in a wide range of programs, including teaching computer skills, building affordable housing, tutoring disadvantaged youth and cleaning up parks.

Time, talent...and taxes?

The millions of Americans who contribute their service to charity might like to know that for 2008, the estimated dollar value of volunteer time is \$20.25 per hour.

Independent Sector, a coalition of nonprofit groups and foundations which makes this calculation annually, acknowledges that quantifying volunteer services is very difficult and doesn’t capture the many intangibles that volunteers provide. (More information about the calculation method is at www.independentsector.org/programs/re-search/volunteer-time.html.) Still,



Right now, there's widespread hope that the call for volunteers is inspiring millions of Americans to join the millions of others who have long been giving their service.

8 billion hours of volunteer service at \$20.25 comes to \$162 billion, as CNCS reports.

As useful as that dollar figure is in suggesting the value of your volunteer time, it won't help your income taxes. "You cannot deduct the value of your time or services," the IRS says firmly. However, you may be able to deduct some out-of-pocket expenses that you incur in your volunteering, such as gas, parking fees and tolls. IRS Publication 526, available at www.irs.gov, gives details.

"Contributed services" in charity \$\$\$

Though hours of volunteer service don't have a dollar value for an individual's tax purposes, they may, in certain cases, have dollar value in charity financial statements. You may have noticed a dollar figure for "Contributed services" in the "Source of funds" section of some Alliance charity reports.

Accounting rules allow contributed services to be given dollar value in a charity's financial statements only if certain criteria are met, a central criterion being whether the volunteer provided a specialized skill for a service that the charity would typically have purchased if it had not been contributed. The donated time of a doctor who performed medical services, for example, could be included, at fair value, but the donated time of a doctor who helped build a house would not. (The charity's accounting has no bearing on the doctor's own taxes.)

In the Form 990, the report that most charities file annually with the Internal Revenue Service, however, donated services are not included in the charity's Statement of Revenue, though the charity has the option of noting them elsewhere in the form.

Be careful what you wish for?

It will be many months before anyone has firm statistics on how many Americans have answered this year's calls to volunteer.

It's apparently not too soon, though, to worry about the downside of success. Will there be a glut of volunteers? Can charities effectively use all who come offering their time? There are reports that charities are anxious about coping, and that some are ignoring calls from prospective volunteers.

There's reason to be concerned. Attracting and using volunteers well has long been a challenge for charities. As we've tried to show, volunteers don't really come free. But the problem is getting renewed attention. During the week in October that gave volunteering prime time on TV, a task force of government, nonprofit and business leaders was already issuing recommendations for improving volunteer management. Other projects like this are sure to emerge.

Looking forward

Right now, there's widespread hope that the call for volunteers is inspiring millions of Americans to join the millions of others who have long been giving their service. There's hope that charities, with growing volunteer help, will be able to make noticeable improvements in health, living conditions, education and the environment, for starters. But with the economy straining so many lives, that hope is a little shaky.

Still, the number of volunteers, both new and experienced, is not really the point. What will matter is what charities, with volunteer help, can achieve. ■

Starting your search

Here are just a few of the many sites that list volunteer openings. If you already know of a charity whose work interests you, try its site.

www.allforgood.org

www.idealists.org

www.iparticipate.org

www.networkforgood.org

www.serve.gov

www.volunteermatch.org