

Community Matters

Next Week is National Volunteer Week

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The 36th annual National Volunteer Week will begin on April 19. The observance began in 1974 with a proclamation by President Richard Nixon and every president has continued it since then. It honors volunteers for the many ways that they improve our communities.

Now, the national Points of Light Institute coordinates the celebration, which is sponsored by Target Corporation.

Nationally in 2007, 60.8 million volunteers gave 8.1 billion hours of service to community organizations. Locally, 32.1% of Pittsburgh region residents – 608,000 volunteers - served 73.2 million hours. That's an average of 38.7 volunteer hours per resident, to make the Pittsburgh area 20th in the ranking of the country's 50 largest cities.

So where are all of these people? They serve in your schools, your churches, your hospitals, your fire departments, your scouting troops, your children's athletic organizations, and your libraries. They work in countless service agencies – food pantries, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, health clinics, home delivered meals for the elderly, animal shelters, political organizations, and others. It's the volunteers who show up first after natural disasters. Fundraising "walks" raise millions of dollars for dozens of causes. Even your school board members are volunteers.

That volunteer time corresponds to an estimated \$1.4 billion economic contribution, every year, in the Pittsburgh region alone, and \$158 billion in the US. I've worked with and for nonprofit agencies for more than 26 years, and I can tell you that our social service system would collapse without them. In fact, volunteer coordination is a major facet of nonprofit organization management.

If you're a volunteer – Thank you! If not, you should try it. There are countless opportunities. Don't say that you don't have time. We all have the same 24 hours in a day. According to the federal Corporation for National and Community Service, people who volunteer watch an average of 15 hours of television per week. Those who don't volunteer watch TV an average of 21 hours per week. So turn off the TV, put on your shoes, and do something worthwhile.

Okay, what's in it for you? When you volunteer, you'll make new friends, share your skills and gain new ones, enhance your resume, make important networking contacts, and you'll contribute to a cause that's important to you. You'll also help a charity to spread its dollars further so the organization can help more people. And it feels great!

President Clinton formed the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1993 to coordinate the work of various federal volunteer agencies, including Foster Grandparents, Retired and Senior Volunteers, Senior Companion Program, VISTA, and AmeriCorps. VISTA and AmeriCorps are comparable to a domestic Peace Corps. Their participants commit to working for a year at a social

service agency in a low-income neighborhood. They are paid a very small salary – barely enough to cover living expenses. I’ve worked with many AmeriCorps volunteers, and their contribution is invaluable.

You may have heard that Congress recently passed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, formerly known as the GIVE Act. The Kennedy Act creates new service opportunities and programs and strengthens disaster relief efforts. It provides incentives for middle school, high school, and college students, as well as for veterans, retired people, and skilled professionals to serve their communities. Contrary to some rumors that are going around, the law does not create a “forced” volunteer corps. It does not require anyone to volunteer for anything. For more information on the Kennedy Act, go to www.edlabor.house.gov.

So, starting today, thank the volunteers in your community. They make the world a better place for all of us. And please volunteer somewhere – anywhere. Leave the world a better place than you found it.

For more information, go to www.nationalservice.org, www.volunteeringinamerica.gov, and www.pointsoflight.org.

To find places to volunteer, go to www.pittsburghcares.org, www.unitedwaypittsburgh.org, www.volunteer.gov, and www.volunteermatch.org

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