

## **Making our city No. 1 -- one volunteer, one hour at a time**

Sacramento Bee, The (CA) - Sunday, March 8, 2009

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It's not just about donating cans or clothing. It's not just about raising money for a school band or sports team. Volunteerism is about building face-to-face connections to improve communities.

That's the pitch the Rev. Jesse Jackson made Monday in helping Mayor Kevin Johnson launch "**Volunteer Sacramento**" in partnership with Hands On Sacramento.

The goal, Johnson announced, is to make Sacramento the nation's leading city in terms of number of **volunteer** hours per capita.

This is doable. We'd just have to get back to the levels of volunteering that came after Hurricane Katrina. Sacramento peaked that year and has been dropping since.

Besides a willingness by individuals to commit time, getting to No. 1 will require an entrepreneurial spirit and attention to long-term **volunteer** retention by area nonprofits.

Here's an idea, an example that I know well from Duluth, Minn., where I lived for six years.

It began with the fact that 99 percent of **volunteers** in elementary schools were women, and women on the staff outnumbered men 7-to-1. So a local nonprofit, Men as Peacemakers, began to recruit for a school-based mentoring program.

Then one of those mentors, serving at a school in one of the city's poorest, least-served neighborhoods, saw that many more kids could benefit from adult role models. He suggested building a program that provided a mentor for every child at the school.

As Frank Jewell, executive director of Men as Peacemakers, described it, "At first this sounded impossible." They would need 300 **volunteers**. "As we talked," Jewell recalls, "it became clear that we couldn't find that many people to be mentors. They found the word 'mentor' a bit scary. People weren't sure that they knew what to do, how to be a role model, or how the parents might respond."

He continued: "After a great deal of conversation, we decided to call them 'reading partners.' The objective would still be the same, to add another caring adult to the child's life but with a specific task -- reading."

This totally changed the equation. Beginning in July 2001, they recruited 300 **volunteers** by fall -- including the mayor, business owners, college athletes and students, union members, a full range of people.

Retired teachers held training sessions. The total time commitment was just one hour a week (including travel time to and from the school). Reading partners spent half an hour with kids,

spreading out to hallways, even sitting on the floor to read.

The task was clear. **Volunteers** were not there to tutor or to play games. They were there to read with the child for one half-hour.

As Jewell said, "We felt strongly -- and had research to back us up -- that the **volunteer** was a caring adult who helped role model a love of learning and particularly of reading."

The Duluth program has worked because it is highly structured and limited for **volunteers**. And Men as Peacemakers has been an extremely effective coordinator -- developing a recruiting plan, doing background and reference checks, organizing training with retired teachers, working with the school (including setting up an oversight committee), and taking care of **volunteer** files.

It has worked, too, because the school principal supported it and teachers engaged in regular discussions about the role of the **volunteers**.

Sacramento also has mentoring opportunities. But to get to the next level of volunteerism, we need to get beyond a one-time Katrina-disaster mind-set to promote long-term, one-on-one opportunities that work.

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: EDITORIALS

Page: E6

Record Number: SAC\_0405259653

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