

## **Step up - What once was nice has become necessary -- and Americans are answering volunteerism's call**

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Communities across California and the United States face an uncertain future. The economic downturn is leaving many people suffering and looking to government and community organizations for support. Funding for these services cannot keep up with increased demand. In fact, many people and organizations expect to give less next year.

At the same time, we are experiencing a renewal of civic spirit and an increase in interest and participation in volunteering. Many wonder what would be possible if we transformed public good will into solutions for our neighbors and the organizations that serve them. Increased donations of volunteer time and talent are critical additions to our current philanthropic gifts of money and goods, but it will require a major shift in the way many people think about service.

Fortunately, that's starting to occur. The entire notion of volunteering is undergoing a radical transformation; what has long been seen as nice has increasingly become necessary.

In the 2007 Southern California wildfires, thousands of people answered the call to serve. They answered phones; they staffed shelters; they supported first responders. Today, volunteers continue to help by clearing debris and brush from the lots of elderly or those with disabilities so they can get permits to rebuild. Every one of those volunteers is a necessity for our community.

That necessity has an economic impact. Last year, statewide, 6.5 million volunteers contributed nearly 900 million hours of service valued at \$17 billion to the California economy. Every dollar we at Volunteer San Diego receive is turned into \$3.64 of community service. Volunteers provide a 360 percent return on investment -- a strong case for more seriously considering service as a solution for community needs.

The numbers are impressive, but they don't tell the full story of necessity. Volunteers are on the front lines of sustaining the welfare of our community. Without them, Meals on Wheels can't deliver meals as efficiently; soup kitchens struggle to staff their meal distribution; libraries don't have tutors to assist students; our beaches and canyons fill with trash. And the companionship, dignity, role modeling and health benefits that volunteers offer in response to each of these situations cease to exist, leaving our communities much poorer.

If any doubts remain about what volunteers can achieve, we need look no further than the presidential election. Barack Obama's campaign, in particular, mobilized tens of thousands of people in an impressive show of volunteer force. Regardless of your politics, the campaign demonstrated what the nonprofit sector already knows to be true -- volunteers matter. And volunteers who are highly engaged are very powerful.

That power is summed up well in the saying: "Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy." We vote in elections about once a year, but when we volunteer, we vote every day

about the kind of community we want to live in.

The campaign slogan "Yes we can" resonated with many people. It held promise and opportunity. Inherent in that promise was the challenge for each of us to take responsibility for transforming our communities. It was a challenge that President-elect Barack Obama reissued in his victory speech when he asked each of us to serve and take responsibility not only for ourselves but also for each other.

Closer to home, Sacramento Mayor-elect Kevin Johnson said he wants to encourage a "citywide initiative" to increase volunteerism and philanthropy. "That's one of the things I'd like to do, especially in a down economy."

The challenge is real and urgent and requires not just service from us, but leadership, leadership that is embedded at all levels of our country, our state and our community.

We cannot wait for legislators to try to fix the country. Problems and opportunities aren't waiting; it is time for each of us to take action.

The good news is that the stage is set for this action. There is a growing recognition among all sectors about volunteerism's importance.

Earlier this year, California became the first state with a Cabinet post dedicated to volunteerism and more states are moving in that direction. In September, the Serve America Act was introduced to dramatically increase support for national service and build the capacity of community volunteering.

The corporate sector is getting involved. A national campaign is under way to contribute \$1 billion of pro-bono work to nonprofits by 2010. The initiative intersects well with growing employee interest in service. A Deloitte & Touche survey found that nearly two-thirds of 18-to-26-year olds want to work for companies that give them opportunities to contribute their talents to nonprofits. Ninety-seven percent said they believed companies should offer opportunities to serve. To attract the best and brightest, and advance business goals, businesses are beginning to implement high-caliber corporate volunteer programs.

Further along the age spectrum, baby boomers represent an unprecedented resource. By 2020, one in five Californians will be over age 60. As skilled people leave the workplace, their talents and time will prove invaluable to the nonprofit sector.

Those looking to make a difference now can start by asking the organizations where they serve already how else they can help. What other professional or personal skills can they contribute? Can they step into a leadership role? For those who aren't sure where to start, volunteer centers share listings of organizations and their needs at [www.californiavolunteers.org](http://www.californiavolunteers.org).

Our window of opportunity to tap this potential is opening. Our most pressing social issues are in desperate need of the coordinated forces of philanthropy -- cash, volunteers and goods -- combined with leadership in communities and across corporate, nonprofit and government

sectors. We all have an opportunity and an obligation to participate. To fail to do so means our communities will suffer. To do so successfully weaves the fabric of our society more tightly, creating stronger communities in good economic times and a safety net to help us weather downturns.

### IT' S REWARDING TO HELP SICK KIDS, THEIR FAMLIES

I have been helping them for about 10 years. I have some rentals, and I was renting one to the manager of the Ronald McDonald House. She saw the kind of work I did on her place, and she said she couldn't find anyone to do maintenance at the Ronald McDonald House. I said, "I will do it for you."

So I started doing odd jobs, just maintenance work. Anything and everything. I didn't care what it was . She starting introducing me as her "chief of maintenance." It was all volunteer. I was probably the only volunteer in Sacramento who carried the key and the credit card for the place he was working for.

Mostly now I am advising, showing some of the younger people what to do. I tell them it has to be perfect. If it is not worth doing right, it' s not worth doing. I do household-type maintenance -- electrical, mechanical, appliances, plumbing. I am not a professional in anything, but I am a jobber at everything.

I do it to get out of the house, to do something for somebody else. When you see some of those kids down there, all you have to do is look at them and you know why I'm doing it. It' s the feeling it gives you doing something for those people who cannot do it for themselves. It' s just really rewarding.

Chuck Evans of Sacramento is a retired Air Force flight engineer and former Defense Department employee who volunteers for the Ronald McDonald House, which provides temporary housing for families who have children being treated at local hospitals.

### PLEASURE AND BLESSING TO MAKE OTHERS SMILE

I started volunteering when my children were in elementary school. First with the PTA, then as troop leader with the Blue Birds, soccer team mom and soccer coach. In 1990 I began volunteering for the Telephone Pioneers of America. The Pioneers is a service organization sponsored by telephone companies that works with people who are disabled and with the schools, among other things.

I have found that I really enjoy helping people, working with children, seniors and the disabled. I enjoy making them smile and making a difference in their lives and in turn it has also made me smile and made a difference in my life.

Currently I am involved with several ministries at St. Philomene Church, here in Sacramento. I teach second- and third-graders in our Faith Formation program and I volunteer at St. Vincent de Paul, our food closet, and at Sharing God' s Bounty. Both are at my church. The latter two

ministries help people through rough times.

At St. Vincent de Paul, we package and distribute bags of food to needy individuals and families so that they can prepare meals for their families in their own homes. Some of our clients are homeless, so we try to provide them with foods they can easily prepare, even without a stove or microwave oven. Sharing God's Bounty is a wonderful program, providing a hot meal every Tuesday night for everyone who comes. We serve about 2,000 meals a month.

I know volunteering is the right thing to do. I have met so many wonderful people, both those volunteering and those being helped. It is very pleasant to be with people who foster good values and those willing to make the world a better place for all of us. I have come to call them my friends. It is truly my pleasure to be able to do what I do. I thank God for allowing me this blessing. I am truly blessed!

Ann Gamboa volunteers on several projects at St. Philomene Church in Sacramento, including the food closet and a program that provides hot meals on Tuesday nights.

### IT'S GRATIFYING TO BUILD STRONG, HEALTHY KIDS

I was working at a car shop for four years and one of my good friends from school told me about the START program. I love helping people, love working with kids, so I applied to AmeriCorps and I got in.

I am a fitness instructor at Woodridge Elementary School in North Sacramento. We have about 100 kids in the program. Every day after school I help the kids with their homework for about an hour. The rest of the time we spend doing sports and fitness activities.

We try to get them to learn about eating right, doing exercise, teaching them all the stuff they need to know that would help them later on to keep a healthy lifestyle.

My partner teaches the kids about good foods, about the vitamins and minerals that are in your fruits and vegetables. She teaches them to understand that you can have a bag of chips, but you should know what you are eating, know what you are putting into your body.

I teach them about cardiovascular fitness, keeping in shape, how to keep themselves paced when they are playing football or basketball or other sports.

Last year, 80 percent of the kids tested had test scores for fitness and nutrition that went up after they were in our program.

It feels good to really give back to the community, especially when you see people in need who have something you can give them, that nobody else has, or can give them. It feels good to be able to provide something to somebody who really has a need for it.

Franklin Muniz of Sacramento volunteers for the Sacramento START program, a project of AmeriCorps and the city Parks and Recreation Department to provide after-school programs in

the city's schools. As an AmeriCorps volunteer, Muniz gets a living stipend and is eligible to receive financial aid for college or job training.

## ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES FOR THE COMMUNITY

I got involved with the American River Parkway Foundation through my Rotary Club. I am a member of Point West Rotary, and one of the projects undertaken by the club over the last several years has been to serve as a volunteer steward for the parkway. Point West Rotary also acts as a financial sponsor for a mile of the American River Parkway Bicycle Trail. Through this involvement I got very enthused about the parkway and ended up being asked to serve on the foundation's board. I am an avid bicyclist and use the parkway frequently. The parkway is a great asset to the community and needs to be cherished and preserved.

On the board I help with policy decisions for the foundation. One of our major functions is to raise funds for projects in the parkway. We review those as a board and allocate funds to the various worthy projects that are proposed to us. The foundation also coordinates the efforts of hundreds of volunteers who contribute thousands of work hours each year maintaining and improving the parkway. Volunteers remove invasive plant species, collect litter, plant oaks and other trees, and generally work to increase the public's stewardship of the parkway.

The foundation board is made up of committed people who are not afraid to get their hands dirty. It's not just office work. In the past month, on one Sunday afternoon we were helping with the interpretive garden next to the foundation office in William Pond Park. We hauled several tons of river rock to help create that garden. The next weekend we helped other volunteers plant the different native seedlings required for the garden.

I enjoy the work. Over the years I have been active in a lot of different charities and nonprofits. It's the way I was raised, and it makes me feel good to help.

Dan Hall is president of Wickland Oil Co. and a longtime volunteer for many area charities and nonprofits. He currently serves on the board of the American River Parkway Foundation.

## ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Here are some places you to volunteer

- \* California Office of Volunteers [www.californiavolunteers.org](http://www.californiavolunteers.org)
- \* Senior Corps [www.seniorcorps.gov](http://www.seniorcorps.gov)
- \* Hands on Sacramento <http://handsonsacto.org>
- \* Ronald McDonald House [www.rmhcnc.org](http://www.rmhcnc.org)
- \* St. Philomene Parish [www.stphilomene.com](http://www.stphilomene.com)

\* American River Parkway Foundation [www.arpf.org](http://www.arpf.org)

## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

### ONLINE FORUM

\* Could more of our needs be met by volunteers?

\* The Bee's Daniel Weintraub moderates "The Conversation," where you can discuss this week's issue.

[sacbee.com/conversation](http://sacbee.com/conversation)

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