

VOLUNTEERISM - Jobless surge has a bright side - IN A STRUGGLING ECONOMY , MANY FIND WAYS TO HELP OTHERS

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At last, the up side of the worst unemployment to batter the country since the early 1980s: Americans are rediscovering volunteer work.

Take Donald Moore, president of the Sacramento Professional Network, a job-search group run by volunteers. Before he was laid off in May 2008, Moore worked for six years as an educator at a Bay Area technical college, a position that drew on his decades of experience in the automotive field.

While he looks for full-time paid employment, he's already found several part-time volunteer positions.

"I'm keeping my skills sharp, networking and making contacts," said Moore, 49, who lives in Natomas. "I've got this time on my hands while I look for work. I'm trying to pay it forward."

Career counselors routinely advise people who've lost their jobs to volunteer for charitable organizations, both to broaden their resumes and to fill their unemployed hours. As a result, community groups in Sacramento and across the country report that their volunteer numbers are on the rise.

Although the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, released last September, show only a slight uptick in the number of Americans doing volunteer work, experts think the numbers this year will tell a different story.

That's in part because the growing impact of the recession has combined with the Obama administration's call to service to create an enlarged national pool of volunteers.

"There's like a perfect storm going on," said Joel Bashevkin, West Coast director of the Taproot Foundation, which matches business professionals with nonprofits in need of pro bono assistance.

With a 178 percent jump in volunteer applications nationally over the past year, he said, Taproot accepts only one of five candidates for placement with a slate of nonprofits.

In Sacramento, the Community Services Planning Council has seen a 35 percent increase in volunteer hours from June 30, 2008, to the same date this year.

The group's president, Nancy Findeisen, said the number of volunteers registering with the council's Hands On Sacramento Web site last month was 443 -- up from 174 in June 2008.

Again, a civic call to activism plays a part, with those figures partially reflecting Mayor Kevin

Johnson's recent push to promote volunteer work in Sacramento.

"I can't attribute our increase strictly to the number of people who are out of work," Findeisen said. "But volunteering can be particularly meaningful for job seekers. It connects them with the community. There are skills they can contribute and learn, and it can lead to positions within the organization where they volunteer. It's a win-win for everybody."

Melissa Wolfe hopes so. In May, she was laid off from Sutter Health, where she worked in corporate communications.

"This time can be a gift for people less fortunate than I am and will allow me to put things in better perspective," said Wolfe, 33, who lives in East Sacramento. "People want to turn something not totally positive into a positive thing."

At the St. John's Shelter career center, people who are looking for jobs themselves are helping homeless women search for work, said executive director Michele Steeb.

And almost 20 percent of volunteer candidates at Sutter Medical Center have told volunteer services manager Diane Rhodes that they're actively job hunting.

"We're inundated with volunteers," she said. "Some of our sister hospitals in the Bay Area are seeing the same things we are."

Two mornings a week, Donald Moore still works at the Sacramento Food Bank's career learning center, where he first volunteered last October. He regularly checks the city's Web site for new volunteer possibilities on top of his Sacramento Professional Network duties.

For him, it's simple.

"I believe in helping others," he said. "It would be nice if I had an income, but it's not about me."

JOIN IN

For volunteer opportunities, a calendar of charity events or to post your group's needs, go to sacbee.com/helpingothers

Call The Bee's Anita Creamer, (916) 321-1136.

Caption: ANNE CHADWICK WILLIAMS / awilliams@sacbee.com Donald Moore, who lost his job last year, helps Kristina Winter with a school paper at the Sacramento Food Bank's career learning center in North Sacramento. Moore, who was laid off after working for six years as an educator at a Bay Area technical college, has been spending lots of his time volunteering as he searches for a new job, a trend reflected by other agencies in the Sacramento region.

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