

Benefits of Volunteering



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Who is a Volunteer?

Volunteering is any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause. It entails more commitment than spontaneous assistance but is narrower in scope than the care provided to family and friends (Wilson, 2000).

Volunteers may be engaged in a wide variety of activities and volunteering can take a number of different forms. Volunteers may come together in response to a natural disaster such as flood, hurricane, or fire. Professionals such as doctors or lawyers may donate a certain amount of their time to pro-bono work. Individuals may come together on a one-time basis to support causes important to them, or they may work on an ongoing-basis with a non-profit organization. Some volunteer programs are run by the US government, such as Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. High school and university courses often incorporate service-learning into their course design. And a number of service clubs – such as Kiwanis, Rotary, and the Lions - exist for the sole purpose of connecting volunteers with unmet needs in their communities.

What are the Benefits of Volunteering?

Each individual who volunteers has his or her own motivation for doing so, often with roots in the benefits that they themselves receive through the act of volunteering. One of these benefits can be summed up as the “helper” therapy principal: by helping others, they feel more competent and feel that they have ‘given back’ or ‘paid it forward’ in their community (Riessman, 1965; Skovholt, 1974). For many individuals, helping others in need can provide a sense of perspective, increasing an individual’s optimism and positive outlook on life (Mellor et al., 2008). Volunteering can give an individual a sense of purpose, particularly if the individual has recently experienced the loss of a major role identity such as wage-earner or parent (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). For seniors in particular, volunteering can reduce the likelihood of depression and the increases in life satisfaction and positive outlook are even more profound than for younger volunteers (M. Musick & Wilson, 2003).

While almost half of volunteers are involved in their work because of the emotional benefits (Gallup Organization, Inc., Americans Volunteer. Survey for Independent Sector (Princeton, N.J., June 1981).), volunteering has also been demonstrated to have positive impacts on physical health. This is especially for health conditions affected by the stress response such as chronic pain (Arnstein, Vidal, Well-Federman, Morgan, & Caudill, 2002),

heart and coronary disease (Sullivan & Sullivan, 1997), and high blood pressure (Sneed & Cohen, 2013). Overall mortality is lower for those who routinely volunteer, with a strong dose response – the earlier and more often someone volunteers, the better their health outcomes (Grimm, Jr., Spring, & Dietz, 2007; M. A. Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999; Rogers, 1996). Volunteering even influences an individual's perception of his or her health, whether or not their health status has improved (Fiorillo & Nappo, 2015).

Volunteering can also increase the social capital of an individual in a number of ways. For example, skills-based volunteering allows non-profits to benefit from skills more commonly found in the for-profit world, such as marketing, operations, strategic planning, finance, and technology (Letts & Holly, 2017). An individual early in their career, looking to make a career shift, or looking to strengthen certain skills can certainly benefit from the 'on-the-ground' experience of volunteering at a nonprofit and subsequently improve their technical and professional skills. Volunteering has also been used to strengthen interpersonal and leadership skills. According to Forbes magazine, C-suite leadership skills are closely akin to being a leader of volunteers, as 'it is not about carrots and sticks but about persuasion and getting people to grasp and follow your vision' (Moore, 2011). Many volunteer programs intentionally incorporate leadership development opportunities into their model, striving to foster leadership identity in volunteers (Lockett & Boyd, 2012). Aside from professional, technical, and leadership skills, volunteering of all sorts provides networking opportunities for the individuals involved, increasing the number of quality of their personal and professional connections.

In addition to individual benefits, volunteering has a number of benefits at the community level. The health benefits listed above have been shown to be statistically significant on the community level – communities and states with higher rates of volunteerism have lower rates of mortality and heart disease (Grimm, Jr. et al., 2007). Volunteering (both giving and receiving services) has been demonstrated to reduce feelings of social isolation and disconnect at the individual level (Cornwell & Waite, 2009), and there is no reason to suspect it is not scalable in the same manner as physical health benefits. Volunteering has been shown to increase an individual's tolerance of people from different social classes, even when the environmental segregation is high (Elias, Sudhir, & Mehrotra, 2016). Volunteering itself is a form of civic engagement, and individuals who volunteer are often active as advocates and community mobilizer and have extensive knowledge about problems facing their community, and these other forms of civic engagement typically continue even after the formal volunteer engagement ends

(Jastrzab et al., 2004). Communities with higher rates of civic engagement are able to implement programs and policies more quickly and easily, engender trust between citizens and government, have a stronger sense of community, and develop more creative ideas and solutions with greater buy-in (Institute for Local Government, 2011).

Another benefit on the community level is that volunteering effectively boosts the labor force. In Minnesota, the value of volunteer time is estimated at \$26.40 per hour ("Independent Sector," 2016) and volunteers contributed an estimated \$3.3 billion worth of services to the economy in 2015 ("Corporation for National & Community Service," 2015). Volunteers generally do work that directly benefits individuals with numerous or complex barriers, and non-profits utilize volunteer labor to increase organizational sustainability and keep overall administrative costs low. Grassroots volunteer efforts are often developed to address emergent or highly-specific needs. In short, volunteers can help make the social and human services sector both more cost-effective and responsive.

All of these benefits are leveraged when kids are engaged in volunteer work from a young age. Youth who volunteer are more likely to feel connected to their communities, do better in school, and are less likely to engage in risky behavior (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2005). When disengaged youth are involved in quality volunteer opportunities, their level of social trust increases and the likelihood that they will engage in risky behaviors decreases (Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, 2005). Volunteering increases youths' civic awareness (Davila & Mora, 2007) and can increase family bonding when volunteering is done together (Roehlkepartain & Friedman, 2009). Most importantly, volunteering is a habit that can be passed down. Kids are twice as likely to volunteer if at least one of their parents does, and when both parents volunteer there is an 86% chance that their children will as well (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2005). Two-thirds of adults who volunteer began volunteering while they were young, and adults who volunteered as kids (regardless of whether they volunteer as adults) are more likely to donate and volunteer with nonprofits than adults who never volunteered (Troppe & Michel, 2002).

Successful Models

The Mission Continues is a national nonprofit that deploys veterans on six-month volunteer service missions with community agencies. Before starting their civic service missions, 50% had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, 20% reported symptoms of depression, and nearly 50% had received treatment for a mental health condition. At the end of their

volunteer service, veterans reported significantly fewer PTSD and depression symptoms and reported feeling less isolated as well as in improvements in perceived health (Matthieu, Larence, & Robertson-Blackmore, 2017; "Saint Louis University," 2017).

The Little Give is an employee volunteer program run by Endelman, a PR firm in Vancouver, Canada. The office is divided into 10 team, each of which donates 48 hours of their time to nonprofits facing PR challenges. At the end of the 48 hours, the teams gather to celebrate and a "winner" is declared. The volunteer activities are in alignment with the brand, the nonprofits are unlikely to achieve the same results without partnering with the PR firm, and the volunteers gain additional professional experience which benefits both them and the company. Employee report that the annual event is one of the most enriching experiences that the staff take part in as a collective, reporting that the teams come back reinvigorated and with a new sense of purpose and camaraderie (Bassra, 2016).

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJDD) Volunteer Services Program matches community volunteers with youth in juvenile detention in order to promote the necessary pro-social, educational, and emotional growth youth need in order to become responsible and productive citizens. Mentors are screened and selected, and make a six-month minimum commitment to their mentee. When compared to non-mentored youth in the same center, mentees were more likely to read a grade level upon release, obtain a high school diploma or equivalent, and were less likely to be rearrested, commit a violent offense, or be incarcerated (Holland, 2017).

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