

Volunteers flood Bay Area nonprofits

By Laura Casey

Published March 30, 2009

Donna Fitzwater has never seen anything like it.

The current crush of volunteers has had her head spinning, the 20-year veteran of volunteer management said.

“I am just overwhelmed to the point where I just can’t handle all of them,” said Fitzwater, who works for Volunteer Hayward, placing people in positions with the Hayward Unified School District, the City of Hayward and the Hayward Area Recreation and Park District.

This year, nonprofit organizations across the country are reporting their numbers are up. Although no official tally has yet come out nationally or statewide, organizers said the first quarter of 2009 could log the most volunteer hours worked in decades.

Locally, the Volunteer Center of the East Bay, which places volunteers with nonprofits in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, cites involvement is up 16 percent from last year.

Some organizations, like the Alameda County Community Food Bank, are reporting even higher numbers. Suzan Bateson of the county food bank said there has been a 40 percent increase in people volunteering over last year. And, she said, last year was a record year for volunteer hours recorded at the food bank.

“We are really thrilled,” Bateson said.

Nonprofit volunteer managers are calling the phenomena a “perfect storm” of sorts, citing three factors:

- Then-President-elect Barack Obama’s call last December to designate Jan. 19 — which was Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the day before of Obama’s inauguration — as a national day of service got many people in the doors of nonprofits for the first time, these organizations have said.
- California’s unemployment rate, now at 10.5 percent, its highest point since 1983, has people looking for something productive to do while they continue searching for paid employment.
- The harsh state of the economy has inspired people to help the less fortunate.

Recent Chicago transplant Elizabeth Sanderson, who lives in a cottage in the Oakland hills, has logged more than 150 hours so far this year with the Alameda Food Bank.

She started at the food bank last July, shortly after moving to the Bay Area, as a way to connect with her new community.

Sanderson owns a consulting firm but business has been slow, she said.

“The best moment of the day is when I put on the headphones to work on the food bank’s help line,” she said. “When I make that first call, it just feels so right.”

Vann Ferber of Berkeley said she heeded Obama’s call to action. She had volunteered for the Obama election campaign and when she received an e-mail from the office of the newly elected president suggesting she direct her volunteer energies to a nonprofit in her community, she hooked up with Habitat for Humanity East Bay.

She said she has known about Habitat for Humanity, a national organization that builds low-income housing, for more than 20 years, and always wanted to volunteer with the group. Obama’s direction was the “kick in the pants” she needed, she said.

“I thought ‘Now is the time,’ “ Ferber said. “No more putting it off.”

Theresita Ortiz, of Shelter Inc. in Martinez, said the economic downturn is creating a greater sense of altruism.

“People have this awareness that there are people out there that need help and many feel fortunate they have a job,” said Ortiz, who said she hasn’t had to recruit volunteer for months. “I think (the effect of the economy) hitting home for more people.”

But there are practical factors at stake, as well, with the unemployed looking for new opportunities within the nonprofit sector.

“People are really trying to keep their momentum going,” she said. “They are trying to keep their resume updated and their options open.”

While help is always welcomed and appreciated, the increase has challenged some nonprofits who are simply not equipped to give productive jobs to 10, 20 or 100 new bodies, said Lorraine Meuleners, executive director of the Volunteer Center of the East Bay.

“I equate it to if you were going to throw a big party, that you need to do a lot of planning ahead of time for your menu and your organization,” she explained. “Friends may arrive and help you with it but you have to plan to give them jobs.”

Even if they don’t want to, some organizations are turning people away.

“Still, there are probably a lot of nonprofit organizations that can take volunteers,” Meuleners said. “It would be a mistake not to ask (a group you want to help).”

Hayward’s Fitzwater said the good news is that her new volunteers are coming through the door with more education and more skills than she is used to seeing.

“I have encouraged all the volunteer supervisors to dream big,” she said. “I want them to ask for everything they wish for in a volunteer because that person may be out there right now.”

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Volunteer centers

- In Contra Costa and Alameda counties, call 925-472-5760 or 510-232-0163 or visit www.helpnow.org.
- In San Francisco or San Mateo counties, call 415-982-8999 or 650-235-3550 or visit www.thevolunteercenter.net.

Tips for successful volunteering

- Decide how much time you are willing to give: If you only want to put in a few hours of work, consider joining a one-day community gardening or coastal clean-up effort. Someone with a single 40-hour week to spare may want to do a specific, small project. Make a long-term commitment only if you believe you will be in it for the long run.
- Research the mission of your nonprofit before inquiring about positions: Make sure you are committed to what the organization is doing before you commit to them.
- Pick your favorite nonprofit, then choose a couple of backups: Popular organizations like the East Bay SPCA may not have room for you in their volunteer training sessions, but your local animal shelter or a smaller animal rescue group might.
- Highlight your skills: Many nonprofit organizations would love to know if you have writing, Web design or accounting skills. Let them know how great you are!