

Ten Tips for Wise Volunteering The Independent Sector

- 1. Research the causes or issues important to you.** Look for a group which deals with issues about which you feel strongly. You might already be giving money to one of these organizations, and that might be a good place to begin your volunteer experience. If you can't find such an organization, here's a challenging and intriguing thought: why not start one yourself? You can rally your neighbors to clean up the vacant lot on the corner, patrol the neighborhood, paint an elderly neighbor's house, take turns keeping an eye on the ailing person down the street, or form a group to advocate for a remedy to that dangerous intersection in your neighborhood. There is no end to the creative avenues for volunteering, just as there is no end to the need for volunteers.
- 2. Consider the skills you have to offer.** If you enjoy outdoor work, have a knack for teaching, or just enjoy interacting with people, you may want to look for volunteer work which would incorporate these aspects of your personality. Many positions require a volunteer who has previous familiarity with certain equipment, such as computers, or who possesses certain skills, such as ability in athletics or communications. For one of these positions you might decide to do something comparable to what you do on the job during your work day, or something which you already enjoy as a hobby. This sort of position allows you to jump right into the work without having to take training or prepare for the assignment.
- 3. Consider volunteering as a family.** Think about looking for a volunteer opportunity which would be suitable for parents and children to do together, or for husband and wife to take on as a team. When a family volunteers to work together at a nonprofit organization, the experience can bring them closer together, teach young children the value of giving their time and effort, introduce everyone in the family to skills and experiences never before encountered, and give the entire family a shared experience as a wonderful family memory.
- 4. Would you like to learn something new?** Perhaps you would like to move into areas which will provide you with novelty or change. Then seek a volunteer opportunity involving training in an unfamiliar skill. Many nonprofits seek out people who are willing to learn, especially in the needs they serve are specialized or unique. Many nonprofits have a demonstrated need, but few volunteers skilled in what it takes to fill that need. Realize beforehand, however, that such work might require much more of an effort or a time commitment for training before the actual volunteer assignment begins. Make sure you are willing to commit to the necessary responsibilities.
- 5. Don't over-commit your schedule.** Make sure the volunteer hours you want to give fit into your hectic life, so that you don't frustrate your family, exhaust yourself, shortchange the organization you're trying to help or neglect your day job. Do you want a long-term assignment or something temporary? If you are unsure about your availability, or want to see how the work suits you before making an extensive commitment, see if the organization will start you out on a limited number of hours until you get the feel of things. Better to start out slowly than to commit yourself to a schedule you can't—or don't want to—fulfill.
- 6. Nonprofits may have questions, too.** While most nonprofits are eager to find volunteer help, they have to be careful when accepting the services you offer. If you contact an organization with an offer to donate your time, you may be asked to come in for an interview, fill out a volunteer application, describe your qualifications and your background—just as you would at an interview for a paying job. It is in the organization's interest to make certain you have the skills they need, that you are truly committed to doing the work, and that your interests match those of the nonprofit. Furthermore, in volunteer work involving children or other at-risk populations, there are legal ramifications for the organization to consider.

7. **I never thought of that!** Many community groups which are looking for volunteers may not have occurred to you. Most of us know that hospitals, libraries, and churches use volunteers for a great deal of their work, but here are some volunteer opportunities which may not have crossed your mind:
- day care centers
 - Neighborhood Watch
 - public schools and colleges
 - halfway houses
 - community theatres
 - drug rehabilitation centers
 - fraternal organizations, such as the Elks, Moose, Knights of Columbus or Rotary Clubs
 - retirement centers and homes for the elderly
 - Meals on Wheels
 - church or community-sponsored soup kitchens or food pantries
 - museums, art galleries, and monuments
 - community choirs, bands and orchestras\
 - prisons
 - neighborhood parks
 - youth organizations, sports teams, and after-school programs
 - shelters for battered women and children
 - historical restorations, battlefields and national parks
8. **Give voice to your heart through your giving and volunteering!** Bring your heart and your sense of humor to your volunteer service, along with the enthusiastic spirit which is, in itself, a priceless gift. What you'll get back will be immeasurable!
9. **Virtual volunteering?** Yes, there is such a thing! If you have computer access and the necessary skills, some organizations now offer the opportunity to do volunteer work over the computer. This might take the form of giving free legal advice, typing a college term paper for a person with a disability, or simply keeping in contact with a shut-in who has e-mail. This sort of volunteering might be well-suited to you if you have limited time, no transportation, or a physical disability which precludes you from getting about freely. Virtual volunteering can also be a way for you to give time if you simply enjoy computers and want to employ your computer skills in your volunteer work.
10. **Be a year-round volunteer!** We all tend to think more of those in need during the holidays; but volunteering is welcome and necessary all year. The need for compassion doesn't stop with the New Year, and warm spring weather doesn't fill empty stomachs or decrease the litter in the public parks. We all need to be aware that making our communities, our nation and our world better is a 365-day-a-year responsibility—and there is always something we could be doing to help!

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