

NEWS

VOLUNTEER CENTER OF BERGEN COUNTY, INC.

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Do Good, Feel Good. Volunteering Provides Benefits for All National Volunteer Week is April 19-25

Northern NJ National Volunteer Week is April 19-25, 2009. Its theme this year is “Celebrating People in Action”. It is the time to recognize and celebrate the men, women and children who dedicate themselves to taking action and solving problems in their communities, and to call on every American to do his or her part to sustain the growing spirit of service to the community, whether by committing hours or dollars to the cause.

“A movement is growing out of the current economic climate, an interest in civic engagement, an appetite by Americans to pull together to help their neighbors,” says Janet Sharma, the Volunteer Center’s executive director. “We encourage North Jersey residents to play an important role in shaping President Obama’s call to service, and usher in a new era of volunteerism and responsibility.”

To volunteer means to perform or offer to perform a service of one’s own free will; to do charitable or helpful work without pay.

Volunteering is the hallmark of a healthy, active society. Whether it is done through a school, religious, governmental or social organization, or, less formally, through the concept of “neighboring”, where people help people they know—maybe a member of their church, maybe the senior next door—volunteers address a wide range of problems. In so doing, they enhance the well being of the community as a whole.

The estimated dollar value of a volunteer’s time is \$19.51 per hour, according to the latest statistics from the Independent Sector, a nonpartisan coalition of charities, foundations and corporate giving programs. Volunteer service to the community has a

dramatic positive impact to the economy. The Corporation for National and Community Service estimates that volunteers donate an average of 8 billion hours yearly—this is equivalent to approximately \$150 billion in contributed service.

There is no doubt that volunteering benefits those who are served, but studies have shown that volunteers themselves may enjoy physical, psychological and social rewards from voluntary action.

According to a research study conducted by the Ontario Ministry of Health in Canada, volunteering improves self esteem, reduces blood pressure, enhances the immune system and combats stress. Volunteer work improves the well being of individual volunteers because it enhances social support networks, and lessens social isolation. People with strong social support networks have lower premature death rates, less heart disease and fewer health risk factors.

New scientific research, conducted at many of the nation's top universities, including Harvard, Yale and Princeton, offers evidence of the cause and effect relationship between helping and good health.

Why Good Things Happen to Good People (Broadway Books, May 2007), written by bioethicist Dr. Stephen Post and science journalist Jill Neimark, includes a fifty year study indicating that those who are “giving” during their high school years have better physical and mental health throughout their lives. Other studies have shown that helping others brings health benefits to those with chronic illness such as multiple sclerosis, HIV and heart problems.

Volunteering also seems to improve physical and mental health for people of all ages. Additionally, research on health benefits specific to older volunteers at the University of Michigan and Cornell University have suggested that senior volunteers live longer than those who do not volunteer. These studies report that engaging in regular volunteer work increases life expectancy because social interaction improves quality of life. In a study of women over a 30-year period, those who were involved in volunteer activities retained higher levels of functional abilities compared with non-volunteers. The studies indicate that people of all ages who help others on a regular basis, even in small ways, feel happiest.

Volunteering also has social rewards. College graduates or business people looking for new opportunities or career changes can volunteer in the community and meet new people, some of whom may be influential community leaders. Volunteering helps to retain and sharpen old skills as well as develop new ones. Employers often seek well-rounded individuals who have good team work and goal setting skills. Serving on a volunteer committee or board is a great way to learn group dynamics and team work, as well as increase facilitation skills.

For those thinking of a career change, volunteering is a perfect way to explore new fields. Volunteering can be energizing and renewing, especially when it involves a personal interest or hobby. The fulfillment derived from knowing that one is doing good and being involved in the community can relieve tensions and give different perspectives on old situations. Strategic thinking, change management and conflict resolution skills can be learned by working in a volunteer setting. Volunteering can create leaders.

The Volunteer Center of Bergen County can help match individuals with opportunities to volunteer. The Volunteer Center provides a multitude of choices at hundreds of community agencies.

Individual volunteer opportunities, group projects, at-home projects, family friendly volunteering, student or school volunteer ideas—the Volunteer Center can help individuals choose an activity that is a good match for their particular talents, interests and time availability.

The Volunteer Center maintains up-to-date listings of volunteer projects suitable for students and youth groups which will be particularly helpful to those seeking to fulfill community service requirements. Visitors to the **BergenVolunTEENS** page on the Center's website can get ideas about volunteer projects, learn about national days of service and search for specific volunteer jobs available in and around Bergen County. The site also links to many other youth volunteer-related websites. The address is www.bergenvolunteers.org/teens, or log onto the bergenvolunteer.org site and click on the BergenVolunTEENS button.

The Center also works with companies that want to become engaged in the community through its **Northern New Jersey Business Volunteer Council**.

Bergen LEADS is a year-long learning and leadership program for adults who live or work in Bergen County. Participants will learn about Bergen County's unique challenges and assets, discover their own leadership strengths and potential and use this information to give back to the community. Further information about Bergen LEADS can be found at www.bergenleads.org.

People age 55 and older can share their skills and improve community situations through **RSVP** (Retired Senior Volunteer Program). Many of the current members of RSVP are not retired, but are very actively engaged in projects dealing with literacy, economics and senior issues.

For further information or referral, call the Volunteer Center of Bergen County at (201) 489-9454, or visit its website at www.bergenvolunteers.org and search the online database for the most current information and volunteer positions. The Center provides, upon request, the 2009 Guide to Volunteering, a comprehensive directory listing hundreds of volunteer positions and a wealth of other ideas for service to your community.

The Volunteer Center of Bergen County focuses primarily on people, organizations and volunteer efforts in and near Bergen County. However, there are 250 volunteer centers across the country. To find one, call 1-800-volunteer or visit www.1800volunteer.org.

Volunteers are people in action, and inspire by example. During Volunteer Week 2009, resolve to do good and feel good by volunteering.

The Volunteer Center of Bergen County strengthens the community by connecting people with opportunities to serve, operating model volunteer programs, building capacity for effective volunteering, and participating in strategic partnerships that meet community needs

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