

Volunteers: Who needs them? You need them!

*Gloria Sokolowski,
State Program Director, Corporation for National & Community Service*

As the echoes of the September 11 attacks were ringing in our ears, President Bush issued a call to service in early 2002. Between then and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina four years later, Americans increased their volunteer activities in their communities significantly: from 59.5 million Americans volunteering in 2002 to 65.4 million in 2005.

The need for volunteers to strengthen communities goes back to the days when Ben Franklin established the first Fire House in Philadelphia. Volunteering to help someone else knows no politics: President Kennedy established the Peace Corps; President Johnson established the VISTA program; President George H. W. Bush established the Daily Points of Light; President Clinton started the AmeriCorps program; President George W. Bush created the USA Freedom Corps.

Today Americans are making more time to improve their community through service. In fact, people of all ages are volunteering at schools, in social service organizations and in municipalities through a wide range of volunteer activities. Many of these volunteers teach and mentor children, help older individuals to live independently, work with communities to recover from hurricanes and other natural disasters, assist in neighborhood watch programs, serve as victim advocates in the court system and etcetera; the list goes on forever.

Baby boomers (persons born between 1946 and 1964) are the largest growing untapped natural resource we have in this country. Today's retirees are much more skilled and can perform tasks which are integral to the operations of a public or nonprofit agency. As they wind down their primary careers, millions of boomers are determined to apply their experience to make a difference for others. Neither young nor old, they represent an extraordinary pool of social and human capital which can be and should be tapped by municipalities.

Organizations (existing nonprofits and for-profit companies, as well as ventures yet to be formed) have an historic opportunity to tap this newly abundant resource to tackle social problems and enrich community life. Surveys show that most boomers want to continue working part or full-time, through what were once considered their retirement years.

Being the most densely populated state in the country, New Jersey is home to the largest number of 55+ communities in the country, second only to Florida.

Not utilizing this resource to better serve your municipality is as bad as doing nothing to protect our environment.

The number one reason people do not volunteer is because they were not asked. Ask someone to volunteer and change their life and that of someone in their municipality.

For more information on volunteer opportunities and resources in New Jersey contact the Corporation for National & Community Service (www.nationalservice.org).

The Corporation for National & Community Service is a federal agency which oversees AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America. The corporation works to foster a culture of citizenship, service and responsibility by engaging individuals of all ages to provide services to their local communities.