

Local governments get more strategic with asking for help

Skilled volunteers are becoming a key resource for strapped local governments.

By [Jessie Van Berkel](#) Star Tribune

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JIM GEHRZ Dan VanSloun of Eagan volunteered over the weekend at Lebanon Hills Regional Park by hauling buckthorn.

Is shredding paper your thing? Are you willing to unload containers of hazardous waste? Maybe you've got some free time to develop an internal control audit program for the city of Inver Grove Heights' Finance Department?

Then there's a volunteer opportunity waiting for you. Communities around the metro area are getting more strategic about how they attract volunteers and use their specialized skill sets — including some that are, well, less than glamorous. Dakota County, Roseville, West St. Paul and several other cities have added staff members in the past couple of years to market volunteer opportunities, network with community groups and manage existing volunteers.

"It's a huge resource in our community that currently I think is vastly underutilized," Kelly O'Brien, Roseville's volunteer coordinator, said of volunteers. As more baby boomers retire, there is a growing population of residents with free time and specialized skills who want give back.

"We are foolish not to create that opportunity for them," O'Brien said.

Bill Turner is one of those recent retirees. The Apple Valley resident has been spending four to five hours a week volunteering since he retired last year.

Turner has primarily helped out at parks such as Lebanon Hills Regional Park, where he spent Saturday hauling buckthorn. But recently, Dakota County's new volunteer coordinator, Garrett Zaffke, suggested that he get involved with an organization that volunteers at senior centers and nursing homes and shows older people how stay fit.



In Dakota County, volunteers can visit one website or call one phone number to find volunteer opportunities. Here, Dan VanSloun hauled buckthorn at Lebanon Hills Regional Park.

More

“One thing led to another,” said Turner, who’s going to try that, too.

Zaffke jokes that he’s a “glorified switchboard.” He spends a lot of time connecting people with county projects and nonprofit organizations. He also helps run the new county website where people can sign up for tasks — yes, even unloading hazardous waste or that Finance Department gig — that fit their interests and availability.

One-stop shops

Systems like Dakota County’s, in which volunteers visit one website or call one phone number to plug into all local volunteer opportunities, are growing in popularity, volunteer coordinators said.

But Carver County is one of many metro-area communities where the volunteer process is disjointed.

“We seek volunteers mostly by department, which is actually rather frustrating,” said Madeline Seveland, a county education coordinator in water management. She spends some of her time lining up volunteers for events such as community cleanups.

She plans to talk with parks staff members this week about ways to coordinate volunteers, and she eventually would like to have a one-stop portal for all of the county’s volunteer needs.

Local governments’ growing interest in volunteer coordination is spurred, in part, by a \$52,000 grant the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration received two years ago, said Karmit Bulman, the association’s director. The grant from the Bush Foundation has helped cities, including Roseville, develop better systems for managing volunteers, she said.

For years, Jackie Maas at the city of Plymouth has felt like one of the area’s only full-time volunteer coordinators. That has changed rapidly in the past two years, Maas said.

“It’s an area that’s really catching fire,” she said. “As cities are becoming more concerned about the bottom line, they are recognizing the community has so much to offer.”

The cost savings vary by task, but a report on volunteer work done in some Dakota County cities valued 1,218 hours of work at \$27,466 in 2014.

And sometimes, Maas said, people have skills to offer that you never would have expected.

In Plymouth, for example, a retired engineer with a passion for cabinetry built the city clerk’s office a customized cart to hold absentee ballots. A Roseville volunteer took the electronic signs that tell drivers how fast they are going and converted them from battery to solar power.

“Everyone wants to feel useful,” Plymouth’s Maas said. “If they can feel like they’re sharing their skills and talents in a meaningful way and helping us get our work done, that’s an amazing fit.”