



Tips on Volunteering

- 1. Think about what issues or causes are important to you.** Look for a group that works with issues that you care about. 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 that 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 experience 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 that you already enjoy as a hobby. This sort of position allows you to jump right into the work without having to take training to prepare for the assignment.
- 3. Ask yourself if there's something you want to learn.** Perhaps you would like to learn a new skill or gain exposure to a new situation. Consider seeking a volunteer opportunity where you'll learn something new. For example, volunteering to work on the newsletter for the local animal shelter will improve your writing and editing abilities (skills that may help you in your career). Or, volunteering can simply offer a change from your daily routine. For example, if your full-time job is in an office, you may decide to take on a more active volunteer assignment, such as leading tours at an art museum or building a playground. Many nonprofits seek out people who are willing to learn. Realize beforehand, however, that such work might require a time commitment for training before the actual volunteer assignment begins.
- 4. Combine your goals.** Look for volunteer opportunities that will also help you achieve your other goals for your life. For example, if you want to lose a few extra pounds, pick an active volunteer opportunity, such as cleaning a park or working with kids. If you've been meaning to take a cooking class, try volunteering at a food bank that teaches cooking skills. If you are a college student or professional trying to build your resume, look for a position that provides the practical training and experience you seek.
- 5. Take your schedule into account.** 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 job. Do you want a long-term assignment or a one-time activity? If you are unsure about your availability or if you want to see how the work suits you before making an extensive commitment, see whether the organization will start you out on a limited number of hours until you get the feel of things. It's better to start out slowly than to commit yourself to a schedule you can't - or don't want - to fulfill.
- 6. Realize that 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 best interest and more beneficial to the people it serves to make certain you have the needed skills, that you are truly committed to doing the work and that your interests match those of the organization. Furthermore, in volunteer work involving children or other at-risk populations, there are legal ramifications for the organization to consider.
- 7. Consider volunteering as a family.** Think about looking for a volunteer opportunity suitable for parents and children to do together or for a 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 that will be a wonderful family memory.
- 8. Don't forget virtual volunteering.** 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 that 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.
- 9. Expand your options.** Many community groups are looking for volunteers, and some 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 that may not have crossed your mind: day care centers, neighborhood associations, public schools and colleges, community theaters, drug rehabilitation centers, civic clubs, retirement centers and homes for the elderly, animal shelters, soup kitchens or food pantries, museums, art galleries, community choirs and orchestras, prisons, neighborhood parks, youth organizations, sports teams, after-school programs, shelters for battered women and children · historical restorations, and national parks.
- 10. Give your heart.** Bring your heart, your sense of humor and your enthusiastic spirit to your volunteer work. What you receive in return will be immeasurable.