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Volunteering

Giving freely of your time to make your neighborhood, your community or your country a better place is about as American as mom and apple pie. Volunteers bringing compassion, justice and a helping hand have shaped this country just as sweat and hard work have built it. There are as many volunteer activities as there are people who are willing to give time. Volunteering benefits those giving their time, as well as those receiving help. Volunteer! It's good for you.

Ways to Volunteer

There are two basic ways that people volunteer: informal and formal. Informal volunteering includes all those ways we help people or the environment on our own, without the guidance or oversight of a supporting organization. Examples of informal volunteering could include:

- Taking groceries to an elderly friend,
- Watching a friend's child after school,
- Cooking and freezing a meal for a couple with a newborn,
- Helping a neighbor in a wheel-chair build a raised bed garden, or
- Picking up trash along side the road near your house.

Formal volunteers usually join with a group or non-profit organization such as the AARP, a hospital or, a volunteer center. This type of volunteer experience will frequently include orientation, training, supervision, structured hours and activities and some type of volunteer recognition. Formal volunteer opportunities are activities such as:

- Preparing a meal at an emergency shelter for people who are homeless,
- Delivering food to people who are homebound,
- Mentoring a child after school,
- Donating blood at a local blood drive,
- Teaching an adult to read through the local literacy council,

- Editing the newsletter for a local animal adoption group,
- Helping the Girl Scouts work on their horticulture badge or
- Visiting hospital patients as part of the hospital's volunteer program.

Reasons People Volunteer

Former President Jimmy Carter, known throughout the world for the volunteer time contributed with his wife Rosalyn to Habitat for Humanity, is a great example of a senior volunteer. President Carter wrote in his book *Living Faith* about why volunteering is so important him. "All of us wonder about our real purpose in life. For a few, this question can become a profound source of anxiety. When we have inner turmoil that needs healing, uncertainty about the meaning of life can grow into an obsession with self-pity or depression. For many people the best solution is to think of something we can do for someone else."

While Jimmy Carter volunteers to bring meaning to his life, others may volunteer to:

- Learn a new skill,
- Find a creative outlet,
- Spend time with family or friends,
- Impact public policy or social change,
- Give in return for all they have received,
- Meet new people or, to
- Give more meaning to their time.

Finding a Volunteer Opportunity

With over one million charitable organizations operating in the U.S., volunteer opportunities abound! Before contacting any organization give some thought to:

- How much time you can give,
- Whether you are restricted to certain days and hours during the week,
- Why you want to volunteer and what you expect to get out of volunteering,
- If you prefer to volunteer regularly or occasionally
- Whether you want to work with people, paper, plants or something else,
- Special needs you might have such as access to public transportation or a wheel-chair ramp,

- How quickly you want to get involved: many places have extensive training programs and some can require background checks or in-depth interviews before final placement.

Once you are clear about the kind of work that you would enjoy, you can begin searching. You may already know of an organization that needs volunteers or you might try contacting one of the volunteer programs listed here.

The **National Senior Service Corps operates three federally funded programs for seniors: Foster Grandparents, RSVP, and Senior Companions.**

In Virginia, the local [Area Agency on Aging](#) is often the local sponsor of one or all three of these programs:

Foster Grandparents must be 60 years of age or older, meet certain income requirements and be able to serve 20 hours per week. They can serve as mentors, tutors, and caregivers for children and youth who may have been abused, neglected, or troubled. Foster Grandparents receive a small stipend.

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) includes over 450,000 volunteers nationwide - all of them over the age of 55 and seventy percent over the age of 70. Participants volunteer for a variety of activities in the areas of greatest need in their community. RSVP volunteers may be eligible for travel and meal reimbursement. There are no income requirements for RSVP. [Virginia RSVP Programs](#).

Senior Companions provide assistance and friendship to other seniors who are homebound. Senior companions help with light housework, provide transportation, and help alleviate the consequences of social isolation. Senior Companions may also provide respite care for live-in caregivers. Like Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions must meet income requirements, serve 20 hours weekly and they may receive a small stipend.

Volunteer Centers:

Find volunteer opportunities in your area by going to [Serve Virginia](#) at the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). Serve Virginia works to build a culture of service and volunteerism throughout the Commonwealth by helping individuals and organizations by connecting them with the resources they need to make a difference.

To find Volunteer Centers and opportunities near you search the [Virginia Volunteer Center Network](#). Virginia's volunteer centers are eager to help you match your skills to community needs and find unique ways to make your community better.

If you'd prefer one-on-one assistance with finding volunteer opportunities, check out Virginia's local volunteer centers. These centers serve about 70 Virginia communities and help provide creative solutions to community problems. Contact the center nearest you to discover the many opportunities available in your area.

Think Nationally:

The Virginia Commission for National and Community Service promotes service, volunteerism, and civic engagement on both national and community levels. It supports [Virginia AmeriCorps](#) programs throughout the Commonwealth. These programs engage members in many ways, such as tutoring, building homes, helping residents become employed, and visiting homebound persons. Many of the programs are actively recruiting full or part-time members. Other national service initiatives with volunteer opportunities in Virginia include [Senior Corps](#) and [AmeriCorps VISTA](#).

Other Opportunities to Volunteer:

You also can find volunteer opportunities near you by searching the Quick Search on this website using the keyword *volunteering*.

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