



## Benefits of volunteerism: How everybody gains

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By Paul Andrew and Bradley Contento, CARF International

Today, volunteer service opportunities exist to meet almost any person's skill set and time schedule. When service opportunities are well matched with what the person has to offer, volunteers can experience measurable health and social benefits. This type of fulfillment and reward is not often taken into consideration when thinking about volunteering.



### A new perspective

The Corporation of National and Community Service published a review of recent research on [The Health Benefits of Volunteering](#). The review found volunteers had lower mortality rates, reported lower rates of depression if over the age of 65, and enjoyed greater senses of self-worth and trust. The review also found many other physical and mental health benefits for volunteers.

These findings do not surprise Jim Gibbons, president and CEO of [Goodwill Industries International](#). Gibbons believes the benefits of volunteering arise because looking beyond one's self provides a new perspective. "If you look at any self-improvement program, it has a component of caring about somebody besides yourself," Gibbons observes.

### Who volunteers?

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), only about a quarter of the population aged 16 and older volunteered in 2009. Persons who volunteer are most often Caucasian, female, college educated, and between the ages of 35 and 55. The benefits of volunteering, however, can be experienced by everyone who participates. Young and old alike have great capacity for volunteering.

One factor that may contribute to the low rate of volunteerism might be failure of organizations to clearly identify their needs. Potential volunteers also may not recognize benefits to the giver as well as to the recipients of services, and may have perceptions that volunteerism is less important than paid work.

Gibbons believes that the United States has a great opportunity if more people outside the usual volunteer profile donated their skills and time. He stresses, “We would be a stronger country if a larger base of the population contributed through community service and volunteerism.”

### **Finding the right volunteer opportunity**

If you are looking for volunteer opportunities, first determine what you have to offer and what motivates you. “Try to connect with an organization that you feel excited about,” suggests Gibbons. You may want to choose services that use your professional skills, or you may want to do the opposite. “You spend your whole week solving a certain kind of problem, but you might want to help in another way,” he says. “It’s worth investigating a few options.”

A good starting place to look is 501(c)(3) nonprofits or faith-based organizations. “One of the facilitators for volunteerism in the United States is the not-for-profit infrastructure,” Gibbons says. Websites such as [VolunteerMatch.org](https://www.volunteermatch.org) can also help guide you to the right opportunity.

The best volunteer experience happens when both a potential volunteer and the organization have defined what they are looking for.

### **Volunteer opportunities for young people**

Gibbons specifically notes the strong benefits to be gained by youth from volunteering and applauds community service programs in schools. “Over time, these programs will lead to greater self-confidence, self-awareness, consciousness of the needs of the community, and ultimately a stronger society,” he says. Gibbons also emphasizes how volunteerism can complement paid work experiences. “If you are a young person in high school or college, you not only can gain what you actually learn from the experience, volunteering can also help tell the story of who you are to potential employers.”

Goodwill Industries International offers programs for youths to become involved in their communities in unique ways. One example is a partner project at Fresno State, part of Goodwill’s [Donate Movement](#). Students there teamed up with Goodwill to create a donation drive as part of a class project. Goodwill hopes to expand this type of program around the country. “It’s independent, it’s entrepreneurial, it gives a leadership opportunity as well as a service opportunity, and it connects that group of students into an organization where they can broaden their perspective,” explains Gibbons.

Another example is Goodwill’s mentoring program, which serves at-risk youths. Gibbons estimates that about 10 percent of their mentors are youth-to-youth mentors. He says, “It is essential to build the self-confidence of young persons, especially young persons at risk.”

## **Older people can benefit too**

Another group outside of the usual volunteer demographic are people aged 55 and older. This age group can enjoy the most pronounced health and social benefits from volunteering. In *The Health Benefits of Volunteering* review, older volunteers reported the greatest increases in life satisfaction and self-reported physical and mental health.

There is a wealth of opportunities for members of this group looking to become more involved in their communities. The Corporation of National and Community Service, which published the research review on volunteerism health benefits, offers a program called [Senior Corps](#). Senior Corps specifically caters to persons over the age of 55 looking for volunteer options. People in this age group looking for tutoring and mentoring opportunities may also consider [Experience Corps](#), a program offered by Civic Ventures. They can also mentor with Goodwill, where approximately 30 percent of youth mentors are over the age of 55.

## **Peer-to-peer volunteering**

Peer-to-peer volunteering offers opportunities for people who have faced a specific challenge in their lives, such as abuse, disability, or health issues. One example is matching mentors with youths who have had similar experiences. “A young person who is blind can gain a lot from an adult mentor who is blind. A teen girl who has dropped out of school may get the greatest mentoring benefit from a successful woman who had similar challenges when she was young,” Gibbons says. In *The Health Benefits of Volunteering* review, people suffering from chronic pain reported reduction in their pain intensity, levels of disability, and depression when they served as peer volunteers for others suffering from chronic pain.

## **You receive more than you give**

Gibbons reflects, “I will bet you get back more than you feel you ever gave. Volunteerism is as much for the volunteer as it is for the recipient of the volunteer service.”

Viewing volunteerism from this perspective brings an added incentive beyond the basic altruistic motivation. If more people took these benefits into consideration, perhaps more people would decide to volunteer.

## **About the authors**

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