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Jobless in Dallas-Fort Worth find benefits in volunteering

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By BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News

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When Doug Nickols lost his job as a plant manager last summer, he decided to turn his attention to others worse off. He began volunteering for his favorite charities.

The Plano resident has been a camp counselor for underprivileged children, worked at a shelter for hurricane victims and, lately, delivered beds to needy families.

"When I worked, I never had enough time to do anything else," he said. "But the past year has allowed me to fill a hole in my life and restore some balance to it."

Like Nickols, growing numbers of unemployed workers are giving time and talent to charitable organizations while trying to land paying jobs at companies.

The Volunteer Center of North Texas says the recession is largely responsible for the 25 percent increase in inquiries it has fielded this year from people interested in volunteering.

Last year, the center made 79,560 referrals to hundreds of area nonprofit agencies.

"People suddenly have a lot of time on their hands, and they don't want to sit at home and feel sorry for themselves," said chief executive Julie Thomas.

Altruism has its own rewards, but the laid-off are also finding that volunteering for a charitable organization often fits well with searching for a job.

"It keeps your job skills sharp. It puts you in touch with people who may have job leads. And it gets you through the door if you want to work for a nonprofit," Thomas said.

"Besides, no one can hunt for a job 24 hours a day and remain sane," she said.

Filling gaps

Nickols divides his days between looking for another plant manager job in the morning and working with other volunteers on the Bed Start program at his church, Custer Road United Methodist in Plano, in the afternoon.

For about 20 hours each week, he picks up beds from church members and other donors and delivers the furniture to low-income families in the Plano school district.

Nickols and his wife, who have two children in college, now live on her teacher's salary. They have cut their expenses to the bone and are relying on their savings.

Still, the unemployed manager takes pride in invigorating the Bed Start program in the three months he's coordinated it. Donations of furniture have more than tripled.

"We help families with the necessities of life so that they can focus on their children," he said. "I can't tell you how gratifying it is to see the smiles when we make a delivery."

Nickols has also gotten a few job leads for himself when he's picked up beds from donors.

The surge of volunteers comes at an opportune time for nonprofit groups hit hard themselves by the recession, said Cynthia Nunn, president of the Center for Nonprofit Management in Dallas.

"Giving is down, while demands for services are up," she said. "Volunteers are helping to close the gap."

The nonprofit agencies have capitalized on the professional job skills of the current crop of volunteers and often given them accounting, marketing and public-relations assignments.

"They aren't just licking envelopes or answering the phone," Nunn said.

Career moves

After Terri Williams of Carrollton lost her job as a human resources executive late last year, she attended an orientation meeting for AARP volunteers in Dallas.

"When you lose your job, you lose your sense of belonging," she said. "I knocked on AARP's door because I like being around positive and productive people."

Because of her background in human resources, the AARP staff asked Williams to help prepare a seminar for middle-aged women seeking work.

As much as she enjoys the camaraderie and the chance to use her business skills, Williams says she especially values the friends and contacts she's made.

Although volunteers' main motivation remains a high-minded desire to serve their communities, the recession has added a dose of pragmatism to workers' thinking.

Volunteer work gives laid-off employees something else to tout on their résumés and to discuss during job interviews, said Dallas career counselor Donna LaFreniere.

"It speaks well of their ingenuity and resourcefulness," she said.

People considering a change of careers are also turning to volunteer jobs to "test-drive" a new occupation before taking the plunge, LaFreniere said.

"If you're thinking of a career in the health care field, for example, volunteer at a hospital before sinking your money into schooling," she said.

Some people volunteer at nonprofit agencies in hopes that they will become paid employees, said Josi

Beck, director of the Senior Source's RSVP volunteer program.

"Volunteering gets them inside and lets them know when there's a job opening," she said.

Two of the three employees at Wipe Out Kids' Cancer began as volunteers, said program and events director Ginger Adams. She was one of them.

"It's easier to hire someone if you have a history with that person," she said. "It just makes sense. The learning curve for both employer and employee isn't as steep."

Thomas at the Volunteer Center says people who hope to parlay their volunteer experience into a paying job at the same charity should take things one step at a time.

"Let the agency know you'd like a volunteer opportunity where you can use your skills," she said. "Then settle in and perform for a while before pursuing a staff position."

Will they stay?

The big unanswered question at nonprofit agencies is whether today's volunteers will continue showing up once the economy improves and they re-enter the workforce.

Thomas hopes they will stay on, but she says that will depend partly on whether charitable organizations engage volunteers' skills and talents rather than give them just busy work.

Nickols intends to keep volunteering even after he finds a job.

"This recession has changed attitudes," he said. "People are looking for ways to become better connected to their communities. Greed brought this country to the brink of disaster. Maybe we've all learned a lesson."

JUST WONDERING?

Thirty percent of Dallas-Fort Worth residents volunteer – slightly higher than the national average of 26 percent – says the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Here's how to find volunteer opportunities that fit your interests.

Volunteer Center of North Texas: www.volunteernorthtexas.org, 214-826-6767. Database contains 10,000 volunteer opportunities.

Senior Source's RSVP program: www.theseniorsource.org, 214-823-5700. RSVP coordinators match people 55 and older with volunteer jobs.

AARP's Create the Good program: www.aarp.org/createthegood. Web site contains ideas, tools and resources for people who want to volunteer.

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* research

