

Volunteer Organization Profile: Virginia Beach Office of Volunteer Resources

Volunteering in America 2011

When Mary Russo founded the Virginia Beach Office of Volunteer Resources in 1978, she envisioned an organization run by volunteers that would engage members of the community in all aspects of city government. “I realized that without citizen involvement, there’s no way a city can be all things to all people,” says Mary, who still volunteers her time as head of the organization. “We needed to start partnering with the city to improve the public services that we need and want.”



Thirty years later, the Office recruits and trains nearly 18,000 volunteers each year, fosters organizational collaboration, and engages residents in hundreds of community projects. Most notably, volunteers engage in more than 30 city departments and services, including Parks and Recreation, Fire, Police, Public Works, Courts, Libraries, Schools, and Mental and Public Health. Not only do volunteers serving through the program provide vital support to the city—Mary estimates that volunteers perform the work of over 650 full-time staff and save the city more than \$19 million in annual labor costs¹—but the experience also promotes the benefits of volunteering for the individuals who serve. “Volunteerism helps keep the community healthy and strong,” says Mary, “but it also gives you a chance to build friendships, gain skills, and open up new career opportunities. It’s a win-win.”



Volunteers are matched with opportunities for all ages and levels of involvement. Residents participate in the “Go Green” community program to clean up public spaces and help homes and businesses be more energy efficient; receive disaster-relief training; and lead innovative education initiatives, including a high school program where docents educate students about the court system, helping discourage criminal behavior. Its reach has even crossed international borders, by way of a ten-year Sister Cities partnership with Miyazaki, Japan. The Office has organized training trips for Miyazaki staff and has guided the organization as its own network expands to over 10,000 volunteers.

¹ Calculated using city pay scale for job completed. In fiscal year 2010, 1,378,314 volunteer hours were worked, valued at \$19,678,644—an average of \$14.27 per hour.

“I hate to think what Virginia Beach city government would be without our wonderful volunteers,” said Deputy City Manager Cindy Curtis. “Our whole community would be a whole lot poorer, I can tell you that. The range of services our volunteers provide is staggering—emergency medical calls, youth mentoring programs, help for seniors, athletic coaching, neighborhood cleanups. We couldn’t possibly provide all that on taxes alone.”

To help promote these opportunities and encourage volunteers, the Office has made use of numerous media—from videos to written stories—and many different communication channels, including radio and Facebook.”But at the end of the day,” says Mary, “our volunteers are our best recruiters.”

The numbers help show just how many of Virginia Beach’s residents benefit from the work of the Office of Volunteer Resources. Virginia Beach has an all-volunteer EMS—the largest city in America with all-volunteer squads. In 2010, the 686 EMS volunteers responded to 39,000 calls for service, treating and transporting 26,000 patients. The Office has engaged more than 250 teen volunteers serving on advisory boards at each of the community’s nine library branches, meeting monthly to propose and provide programming for teens; and in 2011, more than 4,000 young people (age 10 to 18) participated in city-sponsored, volunteer-coached sports leagues.

Looking back, Mary is proud of the city Virginia Beach has become, one in which volunteers—whether individuals, families, work colleagues, religious organizations, or school groups—are actively supporting community programs. “We have volunteers in hospitals, in school systems,” she reflects, “It’s just a city of volunteers.”

More information about The Office of Volunteer Resources is available at www.vbgov.com/volunteer. You can also follow the organization at www.facebook.com/pages/City-of-Virginia-Beach-Office-of-Volunteer-Resources/.

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