

## Volunteerism Creates Community Vitality National Volunteer Week is April 27–May 3

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We know warm weather is just around the corner when volunteer master gardeners join the extension educational team each spring. University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Master Gardeners volunteer time to educational extension programs.

Master Gardener Sharon Stibal works at the Lincoln Children's Zoo as part of her volunteer service. She says, "When I help maintain the landscape and answer questions from children and parents, I know thousands of people enjoy what they see and learn. It's fun to keep up-to-date about the many aspects of horticulture from UNL experts and fellow Master Gardeners. It gets me outdoors and is a great way to relax."

Master Gardeners are a part of the 72,231 Lincoln/Lancaster County citizens (27.6% of the population) who volunteered in 2006. The 1,293,008 hours, reported by 94 local non-profit agencies, are valued at \$18,412,427. Nationally, over \$60 billion is estimated to be contributed to the U.S. economy through volunteer service. In 2007, 60.8 million Americans (26.2% of the population) volunteered their time and talents.

In addition to documented volunteerism, friends and neighbors serve each other in a variety of ways. Providing a student transportation to



Volunteers such as Ron Suing (right) are the "Heart of 4-H." He teaches rocketry at Clover College and is superintendent of 4-H Engineering areas at the Lancaster County Fair.

school, shoveling snow for a neighbor, picking up groceries for a disabled friend, or helping a peer understand algebra are all ways people volunteer. Volunteerism is a part of the American culture.

### Volunteers Contribute to Extension's Success

Lancaster County Extension trains and supports, as well as coordinates, the efforts of a variety of volunteers: Master Gardeners, 4-H leaders and superintendents, Family & Community



Each year UNL students share skill during their school breaks. During the January break, several UNL students helped build homes for hurricane victims in Hancock County, Mississippi.

Education (FCE) volunteers and Nutrition Education Program (NEP) volunteers. Last year, extension programs in Lancaster County benefitted for a total value of 1,897 volunteers investing 28,572 hours valued at \$536,296.

In addition, FCE and 4-H members often volunteer in community-related projects.

### Youth are Serving Our Community

The majority of youth (59%) in the U.S. are involved in some type of service to their communities. Part of the 4-H pledge is, "I pledge my HANDS to greater service." Lancaster County 4-H presents Community Service Awards to 4-H'ers who have completed the most hours of service (see 4-H Achievement Night results on page 9). Twenty hours of

community service are required in order to graduate from Lincoln public high schools.

Youth who are connected to the community through volunteerism are more likely to stay or return to their communities. They contribute substantially to the vitality of the community. According to the Bureau of Labor, youth are most likely to become involved because they were asked by organization members, school officials, relatives or friends.

### College Students Contribute Through Community Service

Over 10,600 UNL students invested a total of 162,537 hours of volunteer service during 2006–07 school year. The UNL Student Involvement Office (on the Web at

[http://si.unl.edu/service\\_learning](http://si.unl.edu/service_learning)) serves people in need by developing linkages between community partners and faculty, staff and students.

UNL students build and repair homes during college breaks, help low-income families prepare tax returns, provide birthday parties for residence of the People's City Mission, mentor students at local community centers, donate blood, as well as a variety of other community service projects.

The 2007 President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll includes UNL and Nebraska Wesleyan. Union College was honored with "High Distinction."

### Lincoln/Lancaster Volunteer Partners

Volunteer Partners matches volunteers' interests with the needs of organizations in Lincoln and Lancaster County. It includes an average of 150 active volunteer opportunities listed by 220 local agencies. Ongoing opportunities include volunteer service days, youth volunteer clubs, Ride for Five - bus pass program, emergency volunteer program and court-mandated community service. The annual "volunteer-a-thon" is currently underway through April asking people to pledge 8 volunteer hours and/or donate \$8. For more information about these volunteer opportunities in Lincoln/Lancaster County, visit [www.volunteerpartners.org](http://www.volunteerpartners.org) or call 435-2100.

## Inspire Youth to Volunteer — Action Steps for Parents and Educators

The experience of volunteering provides youth with the social and practical skills that can help them succeed in life, and get them engaged and more invested in their own communities. While youth today are involved in many extra-curricular activities such as sports and music, volunteerism can provide unique experiences and have many positive benefits for development. Here are some suggestions on how adults can encourage youth to volunteer.

### Provide youth with information about volunteer opportunities.

One of the top reasons youth do not volunteer is very simple, they do not have the information about opportunities. Parents and involved adults should help youth find opportunities in their own communities, schools, local organizations and churches. It might just take a few phone calls, visits to volunteer sites or even searches on the Internet to receive more information. Adults should also help youth consider their choices. This includes studying available information to make sure the activities are safe, lead by competent people, experiences offered are engaging and activities are well organized.

**Invite/ask/encourage youth to volunteer.** After finding information about volunteer opportunities, it is also important to invite the youth to volunteer or to directly communicate expectations for service to others.

Many youth report they did not think of volunteering because nobody ever asked them.

**Help youth work through practical barriers.** Go through the practical issues and logistics of how the child/youth could actually volunteer. Help them think about and work through issues such as scheduling, transportation, how to put in an application (if there is one) and other steps entailed in volunteering. For instance, the top reason youth do not volunteer is lack of time. Parents can help youth structure their time better and consider the amount of time they might want to commit to volunteer work.

### Help youth find an opportunity that fits his or her interest/skills.

Many youth drop out of volunteering because the activity is too hard, too easy or simply uninteresting. There are a host of opportunities that can match each person's interests and skills. Consider whether the potential volunteer enjoys face-to-face interactions (e.g., mentoring) or solitary activities (e.g., community gardening). Also, try to help youth find volunteer opportunities that are age-appropriate.

**Alert youth to the rewards of volunteering.** While the essence of volunteering is really to provide service without rewards, there are some tangible benefits youth can get out of volunteering. Alert youth to these practical benefits. For instance,

point out to youth they can gain skills that might improve their marketability and volunteer activities enhance their resume. These benefits might make them more attractive to future employers or colleges. Many schools also have service learning components, so youth might actually get school credit for their services.

**Be a role model.** It goes without saying parents and other adults can encourage youth to volunteer by being volunteers themselves. Getting youth to volunteer is more effective if the person asking sets a good example. If the person asking is a volunteer or volunteered in the past, youth are more encouraged to volunteer.

**Make it a family event.** Parents are always looking for ways to have family time and to find activities the whole family can do together. Finding a volunteer activity, or even starting their own, could be a great opportunity for a family to be involved in something together. Perhaps a family can think of something to do each month to help others.

Source: UNL Extension NebGuide G1750, "Youth Volunteerism," by Dr. Maria de Guzman, Adolescent Specialist. On the Web at <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1750.pdf>

### FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE IDEAS

For "366 Community Service Ideas," go to <http://lanaster.unl.edu/4h/serviceideas.shtml>

## Volunteering Produces Health Benefits

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research indicates volunteering provides not just social benefits, but individual health benefits as well. This research has established a strong relationship between volunteering and health: those who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability and lower rates of depression later in life than those who do not volunteer. A more comprehensive review of this research can be found in the full report, "The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research," which can be downloaded at [www.nationalservice.org](http://www.nationalservice.org)

Older volunteers are most likely to receive greater health benefits from volunteering. These benefits include improved physical and mental health and greater life satisfaction. Volunteers must meet a "volunteering threshold" to receive significant health benefits. That is to say, volunteers must be engaged in a certain amount of volunteering in order to derive health benefits from the volunteer activities.

A number of studies demonstrate individuals who volunteer at an earlier point experience greater functional ability and better health outcomes later in life.