

Unemployed volunteer to kill time, network, help out



APRIL 18 2009 -- Stephanie Edwards, a student at the Career Academy in St. Louis, volunteers at **Food Outreach** through the College Bound program. Edwards worked to fill orders at the grocery run by **Food Outreach** at its Midtown St. Louis location, where program participants can order staples and prepared foods. (Photo by Sid Hastings)

By Adam Jadhav

Mark Denk was on vacation in January attending his brother's wedding when he received a 3 a.m. e-mail from the downtown ad agency where he worked.

"They said, 'If your name is on the list below, you are no longer employed,'" Denk recalled. "I scrolled down the list, and there was my name."

He had been on the job only about a year when the company's biggest contract, from Anheuser-Busch InBev, was cut, meaning jobs had to go, Denk said.

In the first month, he sent out nearly 100 job applications, with no luck. Boredom began to set in. Even his favorite hobby, cycling, couldn't fill all the hours he used to spend working.

So he found a new pastime: frequent volunteering. He started by taking on more hours with a young service group run by the United Way and eventually landed at other organizations in need, even as he himself struggled.

Local and national nonprofit groups say they see more people coming through the doors in these trying times, asking for a way to help. And many of them are like Denk, with time on their hands due to unemployment.

"Beyond the benefits of helping others, if you're unemployed or underemployed, volunteering gives you a chance to hone skills, learn new skills, make contacts and stay positive," said Sandy Scott, spokesman for the Corporation for National and Community Service. "The economic climate, it's an unfortunate backdrop, but volunteering is a terrific way to cope with economic hardship."



Volunteers in the Grocery Center at Food Outreach

Volunteer service rates for much of the decade were flat for those 25 and older, according to a new study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement that looked at service data from 2002 through 2007. But as the economy went into recession in 2008, many groups reported an uptick.

For example, the number of people applying to AmeriCorps — one way to gauge national interest in service — was up more than 230 percent this winter over the previous year, according the Scott's organization.

Locally, examples are more anecdotal. Food Outreach, a pantry that specializes in meals for people with HIV-AIDS or cancer, estimates a volunteer increase of 20 percent in 2008, said volunteer coordinator Kathy Spencer. The St. Louis Crisis Nursery's volunteer ranks have gone up 50 percent, said Laura Coatney, the organization's senior grant director.

On his furlough from the General Motors plant in Wentzville, David Hurst became a new volunteer at the nursery. He had donated time elsewhere before, but spending as many as six hours a day working with children was a new experience. Picture "a good-sized guy who likes to hunt and fish" feeding, burping and rocking a tiny baby, said Hurst, who lives in Lake Saint Louis.

When the union and the company worked with the United Way to organize a volunteer fair in February, Hurst estimated 500 people showed up.

"We figured there are a lot of people who have time on their hands," said Hurst, who is now back at the plant working in electrical and mechanical repair. "This keeps them busy; this keeps them not worried about the economy and gives them something to do."

Nonprofit coordinators and volunteers alike also tout the practical benefits of experience, putting their professional skills to use or learning new talents, which can look good on a résumé.

We have people who come and build community presentation skills or leadership skills from disaster action teams," said Mary Rosen, director of volunteer resources for the American Red Cross St. Louis Area Chapter. "For people that are out of work, their main focus is getting back to work. These all are skills that might help them get hired."

Denk, who has a degree in e-marketing from Maryville University, has found freelance work, partly through his volunteer experiences and connections. He now donates up to 60 hours a month with various groups and boards. He does work for the United Way's GenNext volunteer group, chairs a

young networking organization called Connect With and sits on local committees or boards for the Family Support Network, the American Marketing Association and his alma mater.

Similarly, volunteering turned into employment for Kathy Hill, a St. Louis mother of six, who was laid off from her job working in medical billing in June. She and her husband tightened belts and fell behind on bills as she looked for work, but she still had extra free time.

"I couldn't take sitting at home and staring at the four walls," Hills said. "I've done all the laundry, I've washed all the dishes, the house is spotless, I still need something to do."

She started working in computer classes at Grace Hill's Patch Neighborhood Center and gradually increased her time, helping clients apply for food stamps, processing paperwork and serving on a program board.

Hill is now in a paid job with Grace Hill — though the post is temporary — doing data entry, among other tasks.

The flood of volunteering comes at a crucial time as many nonprofit groups that serve the needy are seeing more people in need of services. **For example, at Food Outreach, yearly client demand was up 25 percent in 2008, Spencer said.**

The group relies heavily on volunteers, with only about 10 full-time staff, but roughly 650 people who donate their time at least once a month. Because of the influx of help, the nonprofit group has doubled the number of weekends per month that it cooks and packages ready-to-heat meals for clients.

Still, organizations sometimes have to come up with odd jobs for the extra bodies. **Food Outreach uses volunteers to weed its parking lot.** Habitat for Humanity St. Louis puts people to work in data entry or at its home goods recycling store.

This can put nonprofit groups in an awkward position in this troubled economy. While no organizations want to turn down help, they fear that the increased number of hands could replace donations. At some point, every organization still needs money to complete its core mission.

"Yes, we absolutely depend on volunteers, but really if we don't have the financial support, there are no homes to build," said Courtney Simms, Habitat for Humanity's director of resources. "We can have tons of people waiting to swing a hammer, but if we can't buy wood, nothing gets done."