

# Volunteer Service: A Guide for Mental Health Self-Help Groups & Self-Help Centers

*By Jeanne Rohach, Trainer & Group Consultant, New Jersey Self-help Group Clearinghouse*

Last year, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 61.2 million adults throughout the United States engaged in volunteerism to aid and assist people in need or to care for their neighborhoods and towns. The type of service activities that Americans committed to and continue to take part in as a means to help and improve their community is as vast and different as the people serving including, but not limited to:

- › Serving meals at community soup kitchens
- › Visiting elderly who have no family
- › Decorating nursing homes for the holidays
- › Telephone reassurance to the homebound
- › Stocking food pantries
- › Clearing trails at nature centers
- › Stuffing bulk mail for non-profits
- › Participating in walk-a-thons
  
- › Sheltering and caring for homeless animals
- › Starting and running self-help groups
- › Collecting books for children in orphanages
- › Planting a community garden
- › Running errands for persons with physical disabilities
- › Removing litter from neighborhood parks
- › And hundreds of other acts of giving and goodwill !

One might ask what makes so many people give of their own free will, their time, energy, and skills to help someone else in need. From the outside it may appear as if volunteer service benefits only the recipients. However, volunteering has a component of self-help that can be overlooked. If you have ever listened to someone describe their experience of volunteer work, you may end up hearing more about what they get rather than what they give, such as:

- ⇨ Experiencing meaningful work
- ⇨ Increased self-esteem
- ⇨ Increased confidence
- ⇨ Feeling pride
- ⇨ Learning new skills
- ⇨ Being needed
- ⇨ A chance to make new friends
- ⇨ Satisfaction from accomplishment
- ⇨ Establishing a work routine
- ⇨ A sense of personal power
- ⇨ Feeling important
- ⇨ Being a part of the community

## Volunteering By Yourself

People with mental illness sometimes experience isolation, a lack of confidence and motivation, difficulty interacting with others, and frustration with maintaining a daily schedule. Volunteerism could be a means for bringing structure and direction, improving interpersonal skills, and increasing self-worth. Volunteering could also help shift the state of simply struggling with an illness to living with purpose and meaning. As previously reported in The Key Assistance Report (the newsletter of the National Mental Health Consumers Self-Help Clearinghouse), Rosanna Tarsiero, a young woman who was struggling with bipolar disorder, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, served as a volunteer moderator with an online support group. In time, Tarsiero founded Bipolar Dream, an online self-help group staffed by consumer volunteers. “Volunteering was helpful in many ways,” Tarsiero said. “For one, it made me feel like there was indeed still something I could be useful for, and that was a big relief....I began to feel part of a community, albeit an online one, and self-worthy because the service I helped provide was useful to other people.....I stopped sinking in my own misery and started rebuilding my identity around values and worldviews developed while volunteering, in a process that mental health professionals call ‘recovery.’”

For some, there may be a belief that they have to wait until they feel good before considering a volunteer position. Drew Horn, co-founder of the Turn A Frown Around Foundation (T.A.F.A.), has a different view. “When I speak to people with a mental illness about volunteering with our group, so often I hear, ‘I have to get myself better first....I’m not ready yet’.....well, I say if you are waiting for perfection, volunteering will perfect you. There is something magical about it....I have yet to bring volunteers to a nursing home or a psychiatric facility where they have not come back beaming and happy. Yet, when we were driving to the facility they were apprehensive and some didn’t even want to go into the building,” stated Horn.

T.A.F.A., Drew Horn’s Foundation, is a volunteer group that visits youth and adults in hospitals, nursing homes, and psychiatric facilities. It was founded in 2001 to help individuals with physical or mental disabilities learn to accept and manage their illness so they can lead fulfilling lives. Horn, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and survived periods of homelessness as well as several suicide attempts, believes that volunteerism is a win-win experience. “The self-esteem you gain is just beyond what you can imagine. When you see other peoples lives really change by just loving them and spending time with them, it does something to you....you start to find your greatness in the midst of helping other people. The benefit of seeing other people come alive is that it makes you feel alive and everybody wins.”

Volunteerism is one way to use inner resources and life experiences to affect the world around you. Any time we step outside ourselves to help be a part of the solution, work for positive change, or lend a hand to someone else, we are sending a message to ourselves and others that there is more to us than illness, past experiences, or adversity. “One thing I pound away at during visits, whether with children, the elderly, or the disabled is ‘We are not our illness! We are not a wheel chair, we are not a nursing home, we are not a psychiatric facility. We are not our illness!’” Horn added.

Mike, a member of the Donald Mays Jr. Self-Help Center, concurs. “I have learned through volunteering that there is more to me than my diagnosis of mental illness...it makes me feel like I am a part of this community that I live in...I’m not just some guy who is sick. I am a part of this community and I help people.” Mike, who was twice named Knight of the Month, has been a member of the Knights of Columbus, a men’s Catholic charitable organization, for the last twelve years. His previous volunteer experiences include working with a community food bank, and being a friendly visitor to the elderly. When asked what skills he had gained through his volunteer work, without hesitation Mike responded, “Volunteering helped me be a people person. I learned how to talk to people and relate to people, and come out of my shell...when I first became mentally ill I really went into a shell. I didn’t want to deal with anybody at all, but doing charitable work taught me how to deal with the public.”

### **Volunteering As a Group**

Some mental health consumers who are members of a self-help group may be keenly aware of the positive impact that others can have on their lives. Through the volunteer efforts of the facilitator and other group members, consumers can experience a safe place to share innermost feelings and concerns, receive words of encouragement and ideas and suggestions for coping, discuss recovery issues, find solace among peers, and get connected to useful resources and services, along with a myriad of other acts and words of kindness and help.

In turn, a self-help group could harness the collective skills, experiences, wisdom, and compassion of its members to help others who are in need. Many types of groups have been inspired to use the “power of numbers” to help their community. Civic clubs, scout troops, religious groups, and youth groups, among others, have made volunteer service a part of their mission. There are ample opportunities for self-help groups of various kinds to engage in volunteer activities including:

- ★Painting a community building
- ★Decorating a room in a shelter
- ★Stuffing bulk mail for non-profits
- ★Planting and maintaining a flower bed for a group home
- ★Making and delivering baked goods to the homebound
- ★Planning a party at a senior center
- ★Sending greeting cards to residents of a long-term care facility
- ★Participation in a walk-a-thon
- ★Collection projects such as food or toy drives for the holidays

*“It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.”*

- Charles D. Warner

## **Benefits of Group Volunteering**

Self-help groups may experience some unexpected advantages to group volunteering. There are a variety of reasons why self-help groups might consider selecting and committing to group volunteer work aside from the aforementioned benefits to the individual. These include:

**Sense of Community** One of the foundations to building a sense of community is to help members get to know one another. During a group effort, such as a volunteer project, the skills of fellow group members such as problem solving and decision making techniques, resourcefulness, and special characteristics and attributes can be observed. Remember, the more members get to know one another, the more they can support one another in a manner that is helpful. In addition, the more often group members work towards a common goal, the more unity is established within the group.

**Team Building** Active participation in group volunteering can help members to develop a team approach to goal setting, problem solving, and decision making, and deepen an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each member. Each group member taking on at least one responsibility in order to accomplish the volunteer project can be used as a model for shared leadership in a member-run support group. Ideally, in a self-help group members are working together to contribute to the overall success of the group. Each member's understanding of the mission and goals, along with the experience of collaboration and feelings of "ownership" is in part what encourages a team approach.

**Reaching Prospective Members** Volunteering can provide a means for a support group to "get the word out" about its availability. By increasing the group's network of contacts such as staff and other volunteers of the non-profit to which your group is providing service, the opportunity for reaching prospective members via "word of mouth" is increased. As members of the organization you are assisting get to know your group and its purpose, they can help to spread the word to those who may be seeking what your group has to offer. In addition, non-profit organizations often interact and collaborate with social service agencies, other non-profits and local community groups. This can increase the group's chances of hearing about and taking part in special events, fairs and other community projects.

**Revitalize** Spending time and energy on something outside of recovery issues can revitalize a group and bring new insights. Have you ever noticed when you struggle with a problem or issue and step away from it by occupying your time with someone or something outside yourself, you feel refreshed and ready to pursue the problem with "new eyes?" Sometimes, when we transcend our circumstances to help others we gain a new perspective on our situation or condition. Volunteerism can also create an "attitude of gratitude" for what you do have, as well as the support that you receive from others.

**Educate Others** Volunteer work can provide an opportunity to educate the people you meet. During interactions with other volunteers, staff, and board members, you could take a few moments to share the purpose, mission, and goals of the group. There may also be opportunities to share with others the experience of living with a psychiatric illness. This can help to dispel myths and misnomers about psychiatric illness and the

impact it can have on a person's life. In addition, being actively involved in your community is one way to fight stigma. Your group's ability to be an asset to an organization or individuals in need can speak volumes without ever saying a word. Misconceptions and negative beliefs can sometimes be counteracted by using skills, strengths, positive attributes, and compassion for the betterment of others.

**Transition** Volunteer work is real work with real responsibilities and can be one way to start exploring the transition into paid employment. The maintenance of a schedule to keep, interacting with co-workers and supervisors, being open to learning new skills, exploring areas of interest and how you want to apply your time, are all experiences that one can have through volunteerism. In addition, being a volunteer is one way to network with people in the workforce and make connections that could one day lead to paid employment. Keep in mind that some employers seeking to fill positions do take under consideration the volunteer experience of an applicant.

### **How to Find Volunteer Opportunities**

There are a variety of ways to find out about the different types of volunteer opportunities in your community. The following are just a few suggestions for finding out about the needs in your area:

- ☞ Almost every county has a volunteer center (an agency created to help match those seeking volunteer opportunities to the organizations seeking help). Contact your local volunteer center (*see attached listing of volunteer centers*) and invite a representative to speak to your group about the current needs of your community. Or, you could simply call and inform the center of your group's interest in volunteering, specify the area of interest, i.e., gardening, clerical support, working with the elderly, etc., and ask for a list of opportunities.
- ☞ Ask group members to contact nonprofit organizations or service clubs they already have a relationship with, or whose mission appeals to them, and ask about potential group volunteering.
- ☞ Contact the reference librarian at the town library and ask if there is a guide to nonprofit organizations in your county. Read through the listings together and decide on two or three organizations that your group would like to contact based on the groups area of interest. Call and ask to speak to the volunteer coordinator.
- ☞ Look in your local or regional newspaper. Most papers have a section devoted to community news where you can find listings of non-profits seeking assistance. Some newspapers, such as *The Star Ledger*, have devoted a section to community service. "jersey's helping hands," features various volunteers and agencies that help fulfill the needs of their community.
- ☞ Search online. There are websites such as [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org) or [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) that list volunteer opportunities in New Jersey as well as other states. On these websites you will be able to obtain a brief description of the volunteer

job, location, and contact information.

- ☞ Search on your local town, or county, website to find out what is happening in your community. Is there a need that is not being addressed? Could your group “adopt” a street median and plant flowers?
- ☞ Is your group concerned about a cause that no one else seems to be tackling? You do not have to volunteer through a non-profit in order to be of service. Perhaps a member of your support group has a neighbor or a friend who needs help with light chores or needs a friendly visitor to check in on them from time to time.

### **Considerations for Choosing a Group Volunteer Project**

To assist the group in choosing a volunteer assignment, and to ensure that group members have a fulfilling experience, it may be helpful to devote some time to assessing member’s interests in volunteering. Ask group members to think about and discuss the following:

- ✓ Is there a interest in helping a certain group of people such as the elderly or persons with disabilities, etc?
- ✓ What causes or issues are most important to group members?
- ✓ What skills do individuals want to use during their volunteer experience? A group exercise such as Natural Resources from the book Instant Icebreakers, (Sandy Stewart, Christian, MSW, and Nancy Loving Tubesing, EdD, editors) might help members identify personal and group resources that could be helpful in determining which skills they want to use during the experience.
- ✓ Do group members want to volunteer at one-time events, or, make a weekly or monthly commitment to an organization?
- ✓ If the group is willing to make a weekly or monthly commitment, how long of a commitment is your group willing to make?
- ✓ Do group members want to be engaged in the same activities during the group volunteering endeavor, or, split up into smaller groups and pairs and serve in different capacities?
- ✓ Are group members available in the day, evenings, or weekends?
- ✓ What do group members hope to learn during the volunteer experience?
- ✓ What are group member’s expectations? What do they hope to gain from the experience?
- ✓ Usually it is helpful to have one person serve as the primary contact between the group and the organization you are helping. Discuss among group members who is available and interested in being the primary contact.

- ✓ Discuss the possibility of volunteer opportunities that also help group members achieve goals in other areas of their lives. For example, if several members are interested in increasing exercise, consider an outdoor volunteer assignment such as gardening or cleaning and maintaining a neighborhood park.
- ✓ A group exercise such as Multi-Voting from the book Creating Connections (Joan Laurion and Cherie Schmiedicke) is one technique to use when there are multiple choices or multiple solutions to choose from.

### **Tips for Evaluating a Potential Volunteer Opportunity**

After the group has assessed member's interests in volunteering and has selected a few group volunteering possibilities, take the time to evaluate each potential volunteer assignment. Being sure that your group has found the right volunteer activity will help make the experience a positive one. Gathering information can be very useful in finding a good match. A few suggestions include:

- Educate yourselves about the organization. Call the agency or non-profit and ask for brochures and literature. Check out the agency's website.
- In many circumstances you will be invited to come in for an interview and fill out a volunteer application. Prepare a list of any questions or concerns.
- Ask about policies and procedures for group volunteering so that the group understands the expectations of the organization or agency.
- Ask about any training that is provided to new volunteers.
- Ask for examples of the ways in which previous groups have been utilized.
- Be patient! Not every volunteer opportunity is right for every group. Give yourselves time to explore several volunteer assignments within different non-profit organizations.

Once the group has identified and committed to a volunteer assignment be sure that all members have the appropriate information such as the purpose, exact times and dates, location and directions, so that members arrive on time and are prepared.

After the group has served in a volunteer activity, it may be helpful to bring group members together for an informal assessment. Provide an opportunity for group members to express what they like or do not like, what they have learned, what hopes they have for the next time, and any changes that need to be made to help make the experience fulfilling. As indicated previously, volunteering is not a one way street. The benefits to an individual or group will be felt to the extent that commitment and dedication are activated. Above all, a belief that group member's skills, attributes, talents, and compassion can and do make a difference. In the words of Martin Luther King, "Everybody can be great.....because anybody can serve. You do not have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

## New Jersey Volunteer Centers

### ***Atlantic County***

United Way Atlantic County Volunteer Center  
4 East Jimmie Leeds Road, Suite 10  
Galloway, NJ 08205  
Phone: 609-404-4483 Ext. 19  
[www.unitedwayac.org](http://www.unitedwayac.org)

### ***Bergen County***

Volunteer Center of Bergen County  
64 Passaic Street  
Hackensack, NJ 07601  
Phone: 201-489-9454  
[www.bergenvolunteers.org](http://www.bergenvolunteers.org)

### ***Burlington County***

Volunteer Center of Burlington County  
Burlington County College  
Parker Center-Room 135  
601 Pemberton Browns Mills Road  
Pemberton, NJ 08068  
Phone: 609-984-9311  
[www.volunteercenterburlingtoncounty.org](http://www.volunteercenterburlingtoncounty.org)

### ***Cape May County***

United Way of Cape May County  
230 East Maple Street  
Wildwood, NJ 08260  
Phone: 609-729-2002  
[www.uwcmc.org](http://www.uwcmc.org)

### ***Camden County***

Volunteer Center of Camden County  
Union Organization for Social Service  
4212 Beacon Avenue  
Pennsauken, NJ 80109  
Phone: 856-663-9356  
[www.volunteerincamdencounty.org](http://www.volunteerincamdencounty.org)

***Essex & West Hudson County***

The Volunteer Network, NCJW  
513 W. Mt. Pleasant Avenue  
Livingston, NJ 07039  
Phone: 973-740-0588  
[www.volunteernj.org](http://www.volunteernj.org)

**Jersey CARES**

10 Bleeker Street  
Newark, NJ 07102  
Phone: 973-242-0033  
[www.jerseycares.org](http://www.jerseycares.org)

**United Way of Essex & West Hudson Volunteer Center**

303-309 Washington Street  
Newark, NJ 07102  
Phone: 973-624-8300 Ext. 222  
[www.uwewh.org](http://www.uwewh.org)

**United Way of North Essex County**

60 S. Fullerton Avenue  
Montclair, NJ 07042  
Phone: 973-746-4040

***Gloucester County***

Volunteer Center of Gloucester County  
Gloucester County College  
1400 Tanyard Road  
Sewell, NJ 08080  
Phone: 856-415-9084  
[www.gloustercountyvolunteers.org](http://www.gloustercountyvolunteers.org)

***Hunterdon County***

United Way of Hunterdon County Volunteer Center  
4 Walter Foran Blvd., Suite 401  
Flemington, NJ 08822  
Phone: 908-782-3414  
[www.uwhunterdon.org](http://www.uwhunterdon.org)

***Mercer County***

Hands on Helpers  
120 John Street, Suite 5  
Princeton, NJ 08542-3121  
Phone: 609-921-8893  
[www.handsonhelpers.org](http://www.handsonhelpers.org)

***Middlesex County***

Rutgers Citizenship and Service Education Program  
191 College Avenue  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Phone: 732-932-8660  
[www.case.rutgers.edu](http://www.case.rutgers.edu)

United Way of Central Jersey Volunteer Center  
32 Ford Avenue  
Milltown, NJ 08850  
Phone: 732-247-3727  
[www.uwcj.org](http://www.uwcj.org)

***Monmouth County***

Volunteer Center of Monmouth County  
Family and Children Services  
191 Bath Avenue  
Long Branch, NJ 07740  
Phone: 732-728-1927  
[www.volunteermc.org/vmc](http://www.volunteermc.org/vmc)

***Morris County***

Volunteer Management Centers  
280 West Hanover Avenue  
Morristown, NJ 07960  
Phone: 973-538-7200 Ext. 15  
[www.vmcnj.org](http://www.vmcnj.org)

***Ocean County***

United Way of Ocean County Volunteer Center  
1144 Hooper Avenue, Suite 302  
Toms River, NJ 08753  
Phone: 732-240-0311  
[www.unitedwayofocean.com](http://www.unitedwayofocean.com)

***Passaic County***

United Way of Passaic County Volunteer and Community Programs  
20 Mill Street  
Paterson, NJ 07051  
Phone: 973-279-8900 Ext. 14  
[www.unitedwaypassaic.org](http://www.unitedwaypassaic.org)

***Salem County***

United Way of Salem County Volunteer Center  
203 East Broadway  
P.O. Box 127  
Salem, NJ 08079  
Phone: 856-935-2538  
[www.uwsalem.org](http://www.uwsalem.org)

***Somerset County***

Somerset County United Way Volunteer Center  
P.O. Box 6835  
Bridgewater, NJ 08807  
Phone: 908-253-6503  
[www.somersetonline.org](http://www.somersetonline.org)

Somerset County Office of Volunteer Services  
78-92 East Main Street  
Somerville, NJ 08876  
Phone: 908-704-6358  
[www.co.somerset.nj.us](http://www.co.somerset.nj.us)

***Sussex County***

Pass It Along  
221 Woodport Road  
P.O. Box 457  
Sparta, NJ  
973-726-0777  
[www.passitalong.com](http://www.passitalong.com)

***Union County***

Union County Office of Volunteer Service  
33 W. Grand Street  
Elizabeth, NJ 07202  
Phone: 908-353-7171  
[www.uwguc.org](http://www.uwguc.org)

**Additional Resources:**

[www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)  
[www.servenet.org](http://www.servenet.org)  
[www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)  
[www.nationalserviceresources.org](http://www.nationalserviceresources.org)  
[www.nj.gov/state/volunteer/](http://www.nj.gov/state/volunteer/)

For additional copies of this guide, or, for more information on group exercises such as *Natural Resources* or *Multi-Voting* contact Jeanne Rohach at the Clearinghouse (1-800-367-6274 or [jrohach@saintclares.org](mailto:jrohach@saintclares.org))