

7 Tips for Finding Right Volunteer Work

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Volunteering is one of the best ways for seniors to get involved in their local communities, share a lifetime of experiences, develop new relationships, and help make the world a little bit better. Today, there are more tools than ever to help you find the right organization and make sure that the match is a good one for you and for the group you want to help. Here are some things to consider:

You're not alone. More than 60 million Americans volunteered a median of 52 hours in 2007, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This does not include the many millions of people who work as unpaid caregivers for family members or friends. Churches and schools far and away topped the list of places where people donated their time and expertise. Other areas—health, community service, civic and political organizations, sports and environmental groups—had more than 30 million volunteers.

Why are you volunteering? There are many good reasons to volunteer, and it's important to understand that many of them involve meeting your needs. That's not being selfish, says Tema Fishbein, director of external affairs for Experience Corp., a school mentoring nonprofit that places older people in schools in 22 communities around the country. "Most people do altruistic things for personal reasons, and that's not necessarily bad," she says. Among the motives she sees in volunteers are a desire to give back to the community, to improve one's own life and health, to meet new peers and expand one's social network, and to give purpose and meaning to life.

Will you be good at it? People who've functioned well in the home and workplace have picked up the skills needed to be productive volunteers. Life experiences count as much here as book smarts. Most volunteer work is people-intensive, so the ability to work well with others is particularly useful. "Someone who has a good work ethic or commitment to what they want to do" makes for a good volunteer, Fishbein says. "They also need flexibility so they can fit themselves into an organization. And they need empathy and compassion—the ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes."

Make sure your commitment matches the need. Volunteers spend different amounts of time in their work, but the best matches are those where supply and demand are balanced. Do you want to make a commitment to tutor a young student, for example, building a close relationship that may extend over several years?

Or are you more interested in single-shot opportunities that might engage you for a few weeks or months? You can find them all. "We want our volunteers to be renewable and to work with us for a number of years," says Fishbein.

Make sure it's the right fit. Like a job, your voluntary activities require the right matches—between you and the organization you're serving, and between you and the people you are directly helping. Make sure that you meet people with the organization, especially your primary contact person, and that you understand its mission. Ask for contact information for a few current and past volunteers so you can speak with them.

Find an opportunity. Use your existing network of friends and community contacts. Take advantage of the many nonprofit clearing houses set up on the Internet. They can be an invaluable resource for finding great volunteer needs where you live. The federal government operates [Serve.gov](#), which provides an overview and an opportunity finder powered by [All for Good](#). Other places to visit include [VolunteerMatch](#), [idealist.org](#), [Points of Light](#), [AmeriCorps](#), and AARP's [Create the Good](#) program.

Don't forget taxes. Your volunteer efforts can help out at [tax](#) time. You can't deduct anything for the cost of your donated time, but you generally can deduct the out-of-pocket costs for your volunteering efforts, including the cost of gasoline and motor oil (or simply take a flat [deduction](#) of 14 cents a mile) for driving related to your volunteer work. Keep accurate records of what you spend. There are other, more specialized deductions for volunteer work, such as for uniforms, conventions, and other expenses. The rules, like many [Internal Revenue Service](#) regulations, can be complicated. You can find details in [IRS Publication 526 Charitable Contributions](#).

[\[Know the Tax Rules for Charitable Donations.\]](#)

"We're trying to use volunteer services to help build communities like the way we used to live," Fishbein says. "We're seeking smaller-scale and more involved niches of volunteer opportunities, as opposed to being spread out and not knowing the community, and I think this is a growing movement across the country. . . . We all may feel a little isolated, and this is one way that we feel a sense of commonality and universality in our experience."