

# The Capital

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## Recession, Obama's inauguration inspire local volunteering

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Hard times are inspiring many to donate one of the things they still have plenty of - time.

That's what local nonprofit representatives said they are now noticing: an increase in volunteering within the community at levels unprecedented for mid- to late-January, which is typically a slow time because it follows the holiday season's charitable giving.

Until fairly recently, volunteering across the nation was somewhat stagnant. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, volunteering rates among people at least 16 years old increased from 20.4 percent in 1989 to 28.8 percent in 2003, but those numbers declined to 26.2 percent by 2007.

Moreover, of the estimated 61.2 million volunteers nationwide during 2006, the corporation also found about a third of them did not continue their volunteering into 2007.

Those who work in the nonprofit sector said the trend toward volunteering again couldn't come at a more prudent time. They said they're seeing more need today than they have in many years.



Joshua Mckerrow — The Capital

Light House shelter resident Bill Glover types up a cover letter for his resume in the facility's new job resource center with the help of shelter Director Harry Cole. The room used to be full of clutter before an Annapolis woman who recently started volunteering after being laid off, Charlotte Schneider, refurbished it into an office for the shelter's clients.

While some volunteers have cited the inauguration of President Barack Obama as the catalyst for their recent call to action, others said just looking around them and seeing others struggle is enough motivation.

Still, others said simply being laid off has left idle time on their hands that they'd rather use toward positive outlets rather than fritter away.

Annapolis resident Charlotte Schneider lost her job in marketing about a month ago and has recently begun donating her time at the Light House homeless shelter. With her skill set and contacts, she has already helped create a program for the agency.

She enlisted the help of other friends to take an unused back room at the shelter - once full of clutter, damaged and dingy carpeting, and a mammoth-sized hole knocked out of the drywall - and refurbish it into a job-resource center.

"Pretty much the whole idea of it started with my husband and I while we were having dinner one night with another couple," Mrs. Schneider said. "We were just talking about ideas to do something good for the community by the end of the year."

Mrs. Schneider, her husband Tod and their friends Brent Allen and Erin Markish decided to have a contest between the couples of who could find the biggest way to give. Then the couples went off their separate ways, working on community action projects.

Before long, the couples joined forces by focusing their efforts at the Light House. Shortly after, as luck would have it, Ms. Markish wound up losing her job to layoffs, as well.

But that didn't stop them from continuing to volunteer.

"There's a lot of irony in what we're doing, and the timing and impact of the economy on us," Mrs. Schneider said, laughing. "But I have a lot more time to give now than I would if I were working full-time."

They have raised about \$1,500 for the job center, furnishing it with desks, computers, monitors, printers, standard office supplies, books on job hunting and resume writing, and art for the walls. Four complete stations were set up for clients' use.

And businesses are donating and volunteering, too. For example, these businesses pitched in to help with Light House business center:

Crosby Communications provided the center with three used desks.

National Investment Center donated three computers and two printers.

Christopher Linthicum of HiTech Upgrades LLC provided office supplies.

Jack Talley of Eastport Network Support Co. wired the computers and loaded software programs.

Now Mrs. Schneider will be heading up the Light House's new jobs committee, trying to coordinate job counselors and other experts to lead programs at the center.

Though Mrs. Schneider is still actively job hunting, she said giving back to the community has kept her spirits high.

"I'm not getting paid for this, but I feel like it almost," she said. "It feels good, so that's kind of payment enough sometimes."

So many others are in the same boat as Mrs. Schneider today. The nation is suffering from 7.2 percent unemployment, according to the federal labor department's December statistics, and Anne Arundel County faces 4.8 percent without jobs, which rose by almost 1,000 more unemployed people from the month before.

Marilyn Baker, development director at the Light House, said she feels Mrs. Schneider is the example of what highly educated and skilled individuals currently out of the job market can do to stay upbeat while also helping others.

"Go volunteer, because it gives unemployed professionals a chance to stay active, make new contacts, help them keep their skills sharp and even possibly try a new field," she said.

The Volunteer Center for Anne Arundel County, an agency that specializes in matching the right long-term or short-term volunteer with the right organization, is getting a lot more hits on its Web site lately. Executive Director Fay Mauro said by mid-January, the center's Web site had pooled about 30 new volunteers.

"And that was just by the middle of the month," Ms. Mauro said. "We haven't even quantified January's bottom line yet."

January is usually a slow month, but Ms. Mauro said she believes many external factors are causing the swell of volunteers. President Obama's community action challenge for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, for one, garnered about 100 additional volunteers for the center's "a day on" activities.

The Presidential Inaugural Committee launched a Web site, [USAService.org](http://USAService.org), to help people find volunteer opportunities in their areas, and the center was included in the listings.

"I think more people are feeling inspired to do something right now," she said.

That, in tandem with more unemployed professionals looking for volunteer opportunities, is having an impact, Ms. Mauro said. At any time, the most desired volunteer, and also the most difficult to find, is the person with daytime availability, she said. Those without jobs can help fill those needs.

She said volunteers are coming from every age group and demographic.

"Right now, you can really get discouraged and depressed," Ms. Mauro said. "But if you're volunteering, it keeps your spirits up. We all have to work together and not get discouraged."

A big volunteering opportunity is coming up for the center, she said. On March 28, Annapolis Middle School will host the Homeless Resource Day, an event to help the local homeless and also those who might be threatened by homelessness.

This will be the second year for the Department of Social Services' affair, an initiative begun by County Executive John R. Leopold last year, that will include about 60 local, state and federal provider booths. Ms. Mauro said the center is in search of more than 600 volunteers to help staff the one-day event.

One Anne Arundel County man, feeling inspired by President Obama's inauguration speech, has taken the message to heart. Though wishing to remain anonymous, he started a Web site about two weeks ago called [Wewhocanletsdo.org](http://Wewhocanletsdo.org).

He has links to a few local nonprofit groups, and people can donate money and time. "Oftentimes giving is an 'impulse buy,' just like stuff in the commercial realm, so we've gotta make it easy to do," he said in an e-mail. "If someone's moved by a speech or whatever, it's gonna wear off in a day or two, so you've got a limited window to leverage the passion."

So far his Web site has collected \$1,025 in donations from two local residents for the Light House. Ms. Baker confirmed the shelter already received the checks and will put them toward the new job center.

Though he said he doesn't have many resources or advertising dollars, he said he's hoping word of mouth will help launch the grassroots effort.

Bruce Michalec, executive director of the county Food and Resource Bank, said in the past month, he's gotten "five or six brand new volunteers." He said the new president is largely responsible for the wave of philanthropy here and throughout the nation, he said.

He said the sentiment is similar to what he experienced as a young man when President John F. Kennedy took office. Mr. Michalec joined the Peace Corps at the encouragement of the young, charismatic president then, he said.

"I think this is all because of Obama - I'm sure of it," he said. "You get the feeling you want to join his efforts and fight the problems our country is facing."

Mr. Michalec said he's always in need of skilled volunteers, particularly those familiar with computer programs like the Microsoft suite.

As the country gets deeper into the recession, Ms. Mauro said she hopes the volunteering trend will continue to grow. Her worry is that volunteers often lose interest if they don't find immediate placement with an organization.

"We have an unending source of opportunity right now for volunteers, and some of the agencies are so short-handed that it takes them awhile to get back to people," Ms. Mauro said. "So we tell people to be very patient and very persistent, even if they don't get a response, because the need really is so great now."