

Volunteerism surges among down and out

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As a tall, lean Jose Oliver unrolls a sleeping bag to give to a homeless man who has wandered into St. Ann's in New York's South Bronx, he knows exactly how important thickness is for warmth.

Not that many years ago, Mr. Oliver was himself out on the streets in the cold. But in 1994, he too came to St. Ann's for help. He now volunteers here as often as he can. "You give back what you receive, you know? You show appreciation," he says with a sparkle in his deep-set eyes.

Oliver is part of a national resurgence of volunteerism among low-income people in some of the country's most scarred urban communities. The trend can be traced in part to welfare reform, which put pressure on inner cities to become self-reliant - and, say critics, gave them more hunger and homelessness to Inner-city residents help one another - and themselves contend with. But some experts say it's also an outgrowth of an informal tradition long established within minority communities: pitching in to help one another.

"It's called helping out - feeding a neighbor, taking care of their kids when needed - and people have been doing it to survive for generations," says Felicia Brown of the Points of Light Foundation in Washington. "It's new to us, because we're just starting to investigate it, but it's not new to them."

While volunteerism is at record highs nationally, some of the highest rates of increase have been among African-Americans and Hispanics, according to the Independent Sector, a nonprofit research organization in Washington. Of those communities, 47 and 46 percent give of their time, respectively.

At St. Ann's Corner of Harm Reduction (SACHR), volunteerism has grown exponentially over the past few years, along with the type of services it provides. It started out as a needle-exchange program at the height of the AIDS and crack epidemics in the South Bronx; now it provides an array of services from education and training, to food and clothing for the homeless.

The program is manned by only seven full-time staff. Much of the crucial direct-service work, like putting together bleach kits for the IV needle users, is done by volunteers, who put in more than 900 hours a month.

As volunteers like Marvin Lewis will tell you, helping others has also helped him. About a year ago, feeling depressed, isolated, and useless on Social Security, he and a friend walked past SACHR and wondered what was going on. They went in, and he's been volunteering 40 hours a week since.

"They acknowledged that I was a human being and made me feel good about myself," he says.

Executive director Joyce Rivera says the organization has become like a community center where people bring their troubles, but also their highest ideals.

"Instead of people being out there and alone in their houses, or in the streets being hassled by the police, they come here," she says. "These communities have a lot of light and vitality and industriousness that needs to be tapped into."

Ms. Rivera says that while federal investment in inner cities is still important, some of the larger programs, like welfare, inadvertently worked against communities' efforts to be self-reliant. Now, with the economic restructuring brought on by welfare reform, those strengths are resurfacing. And, Rivera says, that's where federal funds should be redirected - at programs that help communities help themselves.

It's an approach that's taking hold in academic communities as well. Sociologists are now looking for ways to tap the so-called "social capital" in communities - their inherent strengths and assets. Theoretically, this empowers communities, and at the same time projects a more positive image to the outside world.

"If you just focus on the negative side of it, politicians are likely to write these places off as hopeless, and that image gets portrayed to the general public," says Carol Devita, a researcher at the Urban Institute in Washington. "But if you look for the more positive leverage points - groups of people that are getting together to do things for their schools and neighborhoods, sometimes informally - you'll change the dynamic and allow politicians and the public to say, 'Maybe we can make a difference here.' "

One problem researchers have encountered is that many people in minority communities don't identify helping out as "volunteer" or philanthropic work.

In fact, the United Way in Philadelphia had trouble recruiting blacks when they called it "volunteer work," according to Nora Peters-Davis, chair of the department of Sociology at Beaver College in Glenside, Pa. But when the recruiters said they were looking for people to contribute to the community, they got a far better response.

A study done at the University of Michigan also found that by including informal as well as formal service, there was no difference in the rates of volunteerism between the white and black communities.

"There's just as much community service, volunteering - whatever you want to call it - that goes on in poorer minority communities. It's just not brokered through an organization," says Ms. Peters-Davis.

That comes as no surprise to Anita Munoz. She's a part-time volunteer coordinator at SACHR who works more than full time, according to Rivera. Ms. Munoz says it's just part of her family's tradition. Her mother always took care of neighbors' kids so their mothers could go to work, cooked meals for the hungry, and volunteered at the local hospitals. Munoz's son now does as well.

"Life's not all about money," she says, smiling. "I feel that you have to give to receive."

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