

Filling the Gap

Volunteers Provide Support and “Extras” for Homeless Families

by Carol Ward

Anne Moniz’s arrival at her day job as a state regulator for child care centers is rarely anticipated eagerly, nor is she joyfully welcomed as she walks through the door. But one evening a week, she gets the kind of greeting that makes her heart soar.

Moniz is a volunteer for Horizons for Homeless Children, a Roxbury, Massachusetts-based group devoted to providing play opportunities to homeless preschool children. She derives much satisfaction from knowing that she is making a difference.

“I visit child care centers for licensing,” she says. “I have an okay reputation and I have lovely people that I deal with, but I’m not their favorite person to see walk in the door. But when we walk in the door at Harbor House,” she says, referring to the shelter in which she volunteers for the Horizons program, “we hear bellowing throughout the hallways: ‘It’s playgroup!’ or ‘They’re here.’ It’s like we have a fan club there. It’s just wonderful!”

Monica Aguirre, a volunteer at Center for the Homeless in South Bend, Indiana, has found a sense of community in her three years at the facility. Her role ranges from helping with toddlers to

teaching adult-education classes, and everything in between. “It’s one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve ever had,” she says. “I love the community here, not only the guests but the staff and all that they’re doing.”

Aguirre and Moniz, and thousands of others nationwide, are part of a huge network of volunteers who help provide the myriad services needed to assist homeless families in finding permanent housing, from child care help to adult educational services.

Offering the Extras

Most groups that serve homeless families say much of what they are able to provide just would not be possible without the help of volunteers. Christine Achre, CEO of Chicago’s Primo Center for Women and Children, says her group is “able to offer far more” because of the work of volunteers.

“We have volunteers do everything from working with families to serving holiday meals to



A volunteer for Horizons for Homeless Children interacts with a toddler at a family homeless shelter Playspace program. Horizons recruits, trains, and assigns volunteers to Playspaces to supervise and encourage the children in educational play.



A youth volunteer at Thirteen Salmon Family Center, a day shelter run by Portland Homeless Family Solutions, reads a story to the children before naptime. The day center offers families staying in nearby shelters with daytime services and activities like enrichment programs for children, adult education classes, and meetings with housing specialists.

Menghini says her group takes advantage of the trend toward increased volunteerism among youth. “We see a lot of volunteers, usually starting at around age 10 or 11, through middle school, high school, and college,” she says. These are usually one-off or short-term commitments, many times performed in conjunction with a school project or service-learning requirement.

Volunteers, both temporary and permanent, are crucial to “keeping the mission alive” at Center for the Homeless, says Executive Director Steve Camilleri. In the month of March, the Center had 788 volunteers sign in, with “probably 250 distinct people” volunteering throughout the month. Some are there for just an hour or two, others commit to weekly or more often. Then there are some, such as “alternative spring break” groups, that arrive en masse and stay for a long weekend or a week to take on a major project.

Transition House in Santa Barbara, California, gets a mix of temporary and long-term volunteers, Executive Director Kathleen

Baushke says. About 40 churches provide food and other support seven nights a week on a rotating basis. Longer term volunteers help with everything ranging from office work to infant care, while temporary or new volunteers typically take on cleaning or organizing efforts.

And sometimes a volunteer’s most crucial role is to simply let those in crisis know that somebody cares. Brandi Tuck, executive director of Portland Homeless Family Solutions, which relies on a network of about 500 volunteers, says that the newly homeless in particular need that support.

“The number of homeless families has increased dramatically,” Tuck says. “We’ve been seeing a lot of journeymen, carpenters and painters, union workers—people who were making good money before. It’s so hard for them and their families, but we have regular volunteers who talk to them, really get to know them, and that helps.”

Marilyn Chrzan has experienced that firsthand. A formerly homeless “guest” at South Bend’s Center for the Homeless and a recovering alcoholic, Chrzan says volunteers offer a crucial connection. “When I was a guest, dealing with volunteers was always a positive experience even if it was only as a connection to the outside world,” and with someone who could talk about simple pleasures like movies or restaurants, she says.

organizing book drives,” Achre adds. “Despite being a small organization we have between 100 and 150 volunteers who support us in one way or another.”

Margaret Menghini, program associate for New York’s Homes for the Homeless, has a variety of opportunities for volunteers, ranging from one-day commitments for students to long-term partnerships with specialists in individual fields. For example, volunteers have offered dental-hygiene workshops and HIV-awareness programs, a “coffee club” for mothers of small children, and many child-centric activities.

“As part of our services to our residents we always have day-care,” Menghini says. “But to do special activities—a special arts-and-crafts activity, for example—we wouldn’t be able to do that without volunteers.”

Many service organizations ask for a commitment—usually several months—for their core group of volunteers. Those individuals can offer support in certain areas like day care or literacy, or they might be specialists who can provide expertise. They are expected to show up consistently and often form relationships with the shelter residents. There are also numerous opportunities available on a more flexible schedule. Those include volunteer opportunities during the holidays or on field trips, or perhaps individuals or groups focused on specific one-off projects.

Chrzan adds that given the overwhelming plight of being homeless, “sometimes you just want to talk to somebody. There’s not always a staff person available so it’s good to have a volunteer who can at least listen to what you have to say.” Chrzan, who lives in transitional housing, is now a volunteer for the group. She admits that she was “initially dragged into” that position. “Now I look forward to coming because I feel I’m giving back,” she adds.

Motivations and Boundaries

There is no typical volunteer; they are a diverse group who are motivated by a broad range of reasons. Mary Solomita, another Horizons for Homeless Children volunteer, responded to a radio ad from the group about 15 years ago, and she has given a couple of hours a week since then.

“I’d never really heard about homeless children,” she says of her response to the ad. “It tugged at my heart. I signed up for the training and agreed to a six-month commitment, and now, 15 years later, I’m still there.” Solomita, an educational psychologist in public schools, has recruited family and friends to help, either through volunteering or raising funds to help Horizons and individual shelters.

Megana Ballal is newer to the world of volunteering. She has been an AmeriCorps volunteer for the New York Children’s Health Project since September. A month or two into her commitment, she decided she wanted more. Ballal began volunteering at Prospect Family Inn, a shelter in the Bronx run by Homes for the Homeless.

Ballal plans to enter medical school in the fall, and says the AmeriCorps position has boosted her interest in family health, while the Prospect Family Inn has awakened an interest in pediatrics. “I’ve learned a lot about just how much kids living in this type of setting have to deal with,” she says.

“I feel like I’ll definitely use that in my profession going forward.”

Particularly for the long-term volunteers, dealing with a vulnerable population—especially a population that includes children—can challenge their emotional equanimity. Because the shelter system requires that families and children transition quickly and often without warning, volunteers have to be compassionate and somewhat detached at the same time.

“I’ve definitely seen people come and go,” says Aguirre. “It can be heart-wrenching at times.”

Moniz says that after getting attached to children in her early months of volunteering, she now is able to view departures in a positive light. “I try to keep it in perspective but it’s hard because we don’t get to say goodbye most of the time,” she says. “These are kids who we really get to know, and who know us. But I just know there’s going to be another child waiting there who needs the support.”

Sarah Fujiwara, chief Playspace Programs officer for Horizons for Homeless Children, says she advises volunteers to view departures positively, because families are moving on to more

Seven Tips for Creating Powerful Volunteer Programs

Volunteers are crucial to the success of any service program, but attracting, managing, and keeping those volunteers can be a daunting task. Here, service providers offer tips on creating and sustaining a flourishing volunteer program.

1 Use current volunteers as assets in attracting new volunteers. Volunteers who feel needed or appreciated will tell others, laying the groundwork for future volunteer contacts.

—Jett Black,
coordinator of volunteer services
and children’s programs,
Transition House

2 Seize every opportunity to tell your organization’s story in your community. Those opportunities often translate into new volunteers.

—Peter Lombardo,
director of
community involvement,
Center for the Homeless

3 Ensure volunteers are well trained before they interact with residents. Relay specific expectations and reinforce them.

—Brandi Tuck,
executive director,
Portland Homeless
Family Solutions

4 Make sure each volunteer has a defined job description. This helps volunteers to be more effective and confident in their service as well as prevent confusion and redundancy.

—J. Black,
Transition House

5 Have activity ideas on hand. Volunteers can sometimes be at a loss for

how to contribute or interact. Having some activities on hand for the various age groups you serve helps spark ideas.

—Margaret Menghini,
program associate,
Homes for the Homeless

6 Thank your volunteers. Constantly. Make a point to say “thank you” at the time of their service.

—J. Black,
Transition House

7 Use an online volunteer scheduling tool like Volgistics. The benefits reaped make the program worth its cost.

—B. Tuck, Portland Homeless
Family Solutions

— Carol Ward

permanent housing. “We try to prepare the volunteers that there will be turnover among the shelter families, and explain the important role they are doing by being consistent and telling the kids, ‘See you next time,’ without making any elaborate promises,” she says. “We’re there to help the child and the family start to build some new memories.”

Recruitment and Retention

There are thousands of volunteers working with homeless children and families across the country. While service organizations are always searching for new ways to attract volunteers, on a national scale that may be a bit easier these days. The recession caused the number of homeless families to rise, but it also spurred an increase in volunteering, according to Washington, D.C.-based Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

Monica Aguirre, a volunteer at the Center for the Homeless, attends a volunteer training to better meet the needs of the homeless children and families she interacts with each week.



In a report entitled “Volunteering In America 2010,” CNCS found that approximately 1.6 million more volunteers served in 2009 than in 2008. The volunteering rate increased in 2009 to 26.8 percent, up from 26.4 percent in 2008. “Americans have responded to tough economic times by volunteering in big numbers,” Patrick Corvington, CEO of CNCS said at the release of the study last summer. Previous research would suggest that volunteering should drop during an economic downturn, because volunteer rates are higher among jobholders and homeowners, he said. Instead, volunteering increased at the fastest rate in six years, and the volunteer rate went up among all races and ethnic groups.

Tuck says she is seeing that trend firsthand. “We seem to be increasing our number of volunteers every year,” she says. Many are spurred by compassion for the growing needs of the community, others simply have more time and motivation than before. “A lot of people may be out of work and turning to volunteering to improve their resumes,” Tuck adds. “They also realize that by volunteering first, it could be a great way to get hired.” Tuck herself was a volunteer before working her way up to director, and she has hired several volunteers over the years as well.

Camilleri started as a volunteer at Center for the Homeless, and says many of his staff did as well. Competition for jobs in all fields is fierce, he notes, and people see volunteering as a way to enhance their resumes.

Still, service providers exert quite a bit of effort to drum up community support. Dr. Peter Lombardo, director of community involvement at Center for the Homeless, says outreach is constant. “We grab every opportunity we can to speak to people—rotary clubs, churches, high schools and colleges, and even Sunday-school classes,” he says. “Those opportunities lead to a lot of volunteers in addition to the regular ones who seek us out.”

After attracting a volunteer, many service providers say they spend considerable time training the individual and making sure they effectively match a volunteer to a role. Jett Black, coordinator of volunteer services and children’s programs at Transition House, says time spent on the front end can create a happy and committed roster of volunteers, while at the same time maximizing a program’s potential. “We try to match volunteers with their talents—discovered through interviews and training—as much as by their availability,” she says. “For example, they might come in thinking they want to help with children, but we find they’d be more effective on data management. Time on the front end more than pays off on the back end.” ■