

A little thought before volunteering benefits everyone

You want to make a difference, give back, and, yes, get out of the house.

Volunteering is the obvious solution. But before you sign up at the first place that asks, or the one nearest to your house, consider what will fulfill you and how that commitment will fit with the rest of your life.

“One of the most important things to consider is the time commitment,” said Michelle Slafkosky, manager of volunteer services for St. Agnes Hospital, Baltimore. “People say, ‘I’d like to come in for one hour a month.’ It’s kind of a tease – the department thinks they have a volunteer and then they don’t see them for another month.”

Volunteers should also consider their passions, said Bruce Clopein, volunteer resource manager for Sarah’s House, an emergency shelter and transitional housing program for families with children that depends on more than 100 volunteers. Does a volunteer care about the environment? Children? Poverty issues? “How do they best want to utilize their time,” he said.

“If you’re not in love with animals, don’t go to the SPCA, even though it’s close to your house,” said Ms. Slafkosky.

She added with a laugh, “Think through the location and type of business. We’re a hospital and we have sick people. People come in and volunteer and say, ‘I don’t want to be near sick people.’ We can accommodate them with clerical work, but we are a hospital.”

Another question to consider, said Mr. Clopein, is whether you want to serve directly on site or take a more indirect role. For example, he said, some volunteers for Sarah’s House work off site compiling a wish list or acquiring paper products. Others prefer to serve in a more direct capacity.

People also need to have an idea of what role they like; some prefer humble tasks

while others enjoy leadership roles.

If you have young children and want to bring them with you, make sure that's acceptable; some organizations simply can't accommodate small children underfoot.

Mr. Clopein recalled one mom with a young child who wanted to help, so she baked cookies at home with her daughter for the children in the shelter.

Older volunteers need to consider their physical limitations. "We're a big building," said Ms. Slafkosky. "To get to the department from the parking lot is a lot of walking."

Volunteers usually are required to undergo some training, and, especially for those working with children, background checks might be required.

After the orientation, volunteers, especially ones who made an impulsive choice, might realize it's not the right fit, and that's OK, too.

"We have orientations on a weekly basis, but I treat that as educational," said Mr. Clopein. "Whether that translates into future volunteers, it spreads the word."