

Twin Cities lead nation in rate of volunteerism

WASHINGTON – Minneapolis-St. Paul led the nation in a new federal study that ranked volunteer rates among the populations of the nation's major metropolitan areas.

The study, by the Washington-based Corporation for National and Community Service, found that Minneapolis-St. Paul and the rest of middle America had the highest percentages of individuals donating their time and services. The study surveyed the nation's top 50 metropolitan areas.

The corporation is a federal agency that oversees Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America, and AmeriCorps, which now includes Volunteers in Service to America and the National Civilian Community Corps. Its mission is to promote civic engagement through service and volunteering.

The Twin Cities' top ranking in the study came as no surprise to a representative at Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. About 41 percent of the population there gives time to community service.

"I think some of it's just the spirit of giving in this community," Dawn Lindblom, Catholic Charities' director of volunteer services, said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service. "We're fortunate that we have a number of great leaders in our community."

Last year, nearly 6 million Americans donated 8.2 billion hours in volunteer work, said Bob Grim, director of research at the Corporation for National and Community Service. That translated into \$152 billion in services and labor.

The study, released July 9, was the first of its kind, and Grim told CNS that researchers wanted to localize the findings to promote volunteering in cities throughout the country.

"Volunteering is an incredible force in America," he said.

That it's a force is true. The study found that communities with high numbers of volunteers will come closer to solving key challenges society is facing today. Communities with more volunteers also have lower crime rates, according to the study.

But why the Midwest? Six of the top 10 cities in the study were right in the middle of

the country. And why Minneapolis-St. Paul?

"It's hard to say" why, Grim said. "It may be a cultural ethos that encourages higher rates of volunteerism."

Among the Midwestern cities with a high percentage of volunteers were Omaha, Neb., 38 percent; Kansas City, Mo., and Kansas City, Kan., 35 percent; and Milwaukee, 34 percent. Seattle and Portland, Ore., had a volunteer rate of 36 percent and Salt Lake City, 38 percent. Cities with the lowest rates included Las Vegas, 14 percent; Miami, 16 percent; Virginia Beach, Va., and New York, 19 percent; and Riverside, Calif., 21 percent.

The study found that home ownership has an effect on volunteering, Minneapolis-St. Paul also had the highest rate of home ownership among the cities surveyed in the study.

Catholic Charities in the Twin Cities has more than 11,000 active volunteers and 400 staff members. Lindblom said it was the strong leadership in volunteering and the city's professional core that have given the region its edge.

"We have some volunteers who work 40 hours a week," she said.

But the study wasn't all roses. It found that overall volunteers in metro areas lagged behind their suburban and rural counterparts and that volunteers were more likely to leave if their skills weren't being utilized. According to Grim, organizations that integrate their volunteers into their structure were more likely to retain workers.

"There is a leaky bucket in volunteering," Grim said. "Unfortunately, many organizations don't recognize their volunteers."

Still, the Corporation for National and Community Service expects volunteer rates to increase in the coming years as baby boomers move into retirement.

"We're likely to see an explosion in volunteers," Grim said.

Among other interesting points in the study was that young people tend to volunteer to learn skills, while older people want to apply their skills.

"Citizens engaged in our community are a vital force in our society," Grim said.

The corporation based its data on annual information on volunteering that supplements the Current Population Survey, conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It is a monthly survey of about 100,000 individuals. For its study, the corporation used the 2004, 2005 and 2006 annual volunteer supplements.