

Volunteer opportunities abound for senior citizens

WASHINGTON - Once people retire they soon realize that there is no shortage of volunteer possibilities.

The chances to use one's time or talent range from family baby-sitting requests to parish needs, neighborhood school opportunities and charity work - both large scale and local.

Before seniors say yes to every request that comes their way, they might want to take stock of just how they want to spend their newly found free time. But seniors shouldn't let the vast array of options and needs make them shy away from volunteering.

The experience is not only a great way to give back to the community, parishes, families or those in need, but it also turns out to be good for the volunteer's health.

Retired volunteers aged 65 and older were healthier than their nonvolunteering peers, according to a 2009 study presented at the American Geriatrics Society annual meeting in Chicago. And similar results were published in a 2007 study by the Corporation for National and Community Service showing that volunteers have greater longevity, higher functional ability, lower rates of depression and less incidence of heart disease.

For those ready to take a big plunge and even leave their home for a year or more, there are dozens of volunteer opportunities for retirees such as:

- Maryknoll Lay Missioners offers volunteer assignments for three and a half years

in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia. Seniors with specific skills can also teach overseas for at least a month and the Maryknoll China Volunteer Teacher Program accepts seniors up to age 65 to teach English in China for one year.

- Mercy Volunteer Corps puts volunteers in one-year placements in U.S. locations and two-year assignments in Guyana and Honduras. Seniors with expertise in the health care field, education and social services are especially needed. Volunteers work in urban and rural settings, serving those with HIV and AIDS or physical and mental challenges, children, adolescents, young mothers, the elderly and the homeless.

- Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps places volunteers age 50 and older in service opportunities such as soup kitchens, literacy centers, schools, hospices and prisons in U.S. cities for two to three days a week for 10 months. Volunteers live in their own homes but get together as a community once a month to discuss their experiences and pray in the Ignatian tradition. They also attend three retreats during the year and meet with a spiritual guide monthly.

- Christian Appalachian Project, which provides volunteer opportunities in eastern Kentucky, does not require a specific time commitment from senior volunteers. Short-term opportunities are usually three weeks and long-term commitments of nine months or more are available. Depending on the volunteers' skills and interests, there are opportunities to work with children, repair roofs or build handicapped ramps at elderly people's homes.

A comprehensive list of U.S. and foreign volunteer placements is available from Catholic Network of Volunteer Service: www.cnvs.org.

Plenty of local volunteer opportunities also abound. One place to find out about local needs is the Web site <http://getinvolved.volunteermatch.org> sponsored by the

Corporation for National and Community Service. On the site, potential volunteers simply enter their zip code or state, and click the “Find Opportunities Now” button to learn about volunteer opportunities tailored to the skills and experience of those 55 and older.

Of course, volunteers are always welcome at the parish level and are often the key source of energy to parish programs and ministries. Retired volunteers help in almost every area of parish life, including: child care, hospitality, maintenance and repair, hospital and prison ministries. They also get involved in the jobs that aren’t the most exciting – such as folding, labeling and placing inserts in parish newsletters and bulletins.

Those involved in senior ministries say retired volunteers should not just be given the jobs that no one else wants to do, but should really get the chance to use their talents to help others.

Edward Neteland, former executive director of the Christian Association of Senior Adult Ministries in Laguna Niguel, Calif., said church groups should survey their members to tap into the talents and time availability of senior members.

For example, he said some churches pair up older women with young single mothers, giving the older women a chance to share from her years of experience or even provide some practical help.

Kathy Bingham, director of the aging ministry for the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, said many older volunteers give a lot more than just their time.

“They have a lot to offer in terms of wisdom,” she said.