

Top Ten Tips for “Serving Sensibly”

– adapted from Independent Sector

1. Know the issues that are important to you.

Once you can identify the issues that you feel strongly about, search for an organization that works for that cause. You can start by searching our **network of partnering agencies**. All community-based organizations within our network are placed into categories of populations that you can serve. If you have a more specific area of focus, contact the Community & Volunteer Coordinator for further assistance at shelee.loughmiller@cityofvallejo.net or call 707-648-8616.

2. Identify the skills that you can offer.

Do you have some special skills or interests? Do you enjoy working with the elderly or teaching young school children? You can look for volunteer work that incorporates your hobbies, interests, and special skills. Many agencies ask that their volunteers have experience with certain equipment, such as computers, or for their volunteers to possess specific skills. For one of these volunteer positions, you may decide to do something similar to what you have done for past jobs, or something that you already enjoy as a hobby. If you are able to identify a skill that you have or would like to develop, this is a great way to search for a community involvement opportunity.

3. Do you want to learn something new?

If you are interested in developing a new skill or gaining practical experience in a certain field, consider serving at a community-based organization that will allow you to do just that. If you want to brush up on your writing skills, you can work with an organization to produce their next newsletter or apply for grant funding. If you are interested in marketing, you can assist a community organization with their marketing campaign and upcoming fundraisers. You can also use your involvement as an opportunity to add some flavor to your everyday routine. If you are tired of spending your days in the classroom or working behind a desk, you may decide to serve youth through mentoring out of the classroom. If you are worried that you don't have the skills that an organization is looking for, never fear. Many community-based organizations are happy to train those that are willing to learn. However, such training will often require a time commitment.

4. Combine your career and/or life goals with your community involvement.

We suggest that you search for opportunities that will help you achieve your career and/or life goals. If you hope to begin your own non-profit organization, gain some practical experience by serving a non-profit. By working in such a setting, you can better understand how the non-profit world works. If one of your life goals is to lose some weight, you can pick an opportunity that keeps you active. That way, you can shed the pounds while serving.

5. Balance your schedule – Do not over-commit!

Be sure that the hours that you want to give will fit into your chaotic life. As students, we realize that you have a number of other obligations – your family, school-work, jobs, and personal life. You'll need to assess how much time you can give to an organization. That way, you will not shortchange the organization you are helping or cause yourself undue stress because you cannot handle the added time commitment. If you are not sure about your free time, or if you want to see how the work fits your lifestyle, you can ask the organization to start you on a limited schedule. It is better to begin your community experience slowly than to commit yourself to a schedule that you cannot handle.

6. Community-based organizations have questions, too.

It is true that most of our partnering community-based organizations are eager to find volunteers. However, they must be careful when accepting volunteers. If you contact an organization about your interest in volunteering, you may be asked to come in for an interview, complete an application, describe your interests and qualifications – just as if you were interviewing for a paid position. The organizations want to be sure that you have the skills needed, and that you are truly committed to doing the work. For volunteer work involving children and other at-risk populations, there are legal ramifications for the organization to consider. Background checks are common in these situations.

7. Consider volunteering as a group – your family, friends, or student organization.

There are numerous volunteer opportunities that are suitable for groups, even for parents and children to do together. When a group volunteers to work for an agency, the experience can bring them closer together, teach the value of giving of one's time and effort, introduce group members to skills and experiences they have never encountered, and give the entire group a fabulous shared experience. For more information regarding group volunteer opportunities, contact the Community & Volunteer Coordinator for further assistance at shelee.loughmiller@cityofvallejo.net or call 707-648-8616.

8. Consider serving as a Virtual Volunteer.

If you have reliable computer access and certain required skills, some organizations now offer the opportunity to complete volunteer work over the computer. This might take the form of editing a newsletter, creating a website, or keeping in contact with youth or a home-bound HIV/AIDS patient who has e-mail. If you have limited time, no transportation, or a physical disability that inhibits you from getting around freely, virtual volunteering could be a perfect fit for you. This is also a way for you to give your time if you enjoy computers and want to employ your computer skills in your volunteer work.

9. Think outside the box!

Many community-based organizations are looking for volunteers, and some may not have crossed your mind. Most people know about opportunities to serve at food banks, soup kitchens, and holiday-time “adopt a family” programs. But, there are many more opportunities that you may not have considered. We recommend that you read about the opportunities available with our **partnering community-based organizations**. You'll learn about other exciting volunteer opportunities, such as: joining an advocacy group, tutoring and mentoring, assisting high school students with college applications and GED programs, conducting research, grant writing assistance, data analysis, marketing and fundraising, conducting door-to-door outreach, teaching health education classes, and much more.

10. Listen to your heart by giving and volunteering!

Bring your heart, your sense of humor, your enthusiasm, and your skills to your volunteer work. These priceless gifts of yours will be greatly appreciated by community-based organizations and the populations they serve. What you give of yourself to help others will be returned. The feelings and emotions that one experiences through volunteering are remarkable. They will fill your heart and soul with joy. Millions of people volunteer each year. If we can convince even more people to volunteer, imagine what more we could do.