

Volunteers as essential to hospitals as paid employees

By **Gaye Bunderson**
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Becoming a hospital volunteer is not easy. Volunteer workers frequently undergo the same stringent application process that potential employees submit to, and in many ways they are perceived by the hospital in the same manner as paid staff.

At least, that is the case at Saint Luke's Treasure Valley, where Director of Volunteers Renee Zerwas is happy to clear up any and all misperceptions about the work – and value – of St. Luke's unpaid helpers.

One mistaken notion would be that volunteers, because they work for free, cost the hospital nothing. But according to Zerwas, the hospital spends approximately \$300 to \$500 per volunteer “to get them up and ready to go.”

Potential volunteers submit an application and are interviewed. If they are accepted, they undergo an orientation, training, background checks, a tuberculosis test and immunizations. They are instructed in patient safety and must adhere to confidentiality guidelines.

“We spend a lot of time qualifying volunteers; we want a long-term commitment,” Zerwas said. “We are looking for somebody who fits our culture.”

Darryl-lynn Oakes, director of communication at the Idaho Hospital

Association, said, “Hospitals want to welcome volunteers like employees, but without pay. They're looking at it through generosity of spirit. But there has to be a fit.”

Oakes also stressed, “The hospital is legally and ethically responsible and has to take it (volunteerism) seriously.”

There are descriptions for volunteer-service positions just as there are job descriptions for paid employees. “It's very structured,” Zerwas said. “The training programs are pretty mapped out,” Oakes stated.

Volunteers do more than deliver balloons and teddy bears to bedsides and other cheery but simple tasks. While that is part of the package of goodwill duties, there are also more specialized places where volunteers serve, such as in a clerical capacity – “a broad spectrum of services” is how Zerwas put it.

“There are some really interesting and dynamic roles for volunteers,” she said.

“Some people have desirable skills. ... The majority of hospitals are seeking highly qualified volunteers,” said Oakes. “They can be anywhere. You can put

them anywhere you put staff.”

The one exception would be the surgery suite, though they may be right outside. Therein lies another aspect of volunteerism: comfort. They bring support and solace to patients, and to families in waiting rooms.

Zerwas stated they are being used in a novel way to provide music and pet therapy for patients as well.

St. Luke's, which maintains 520 volunteers at any given time, is also working to establish and train a patient safety volunteer to help with fall risks.

“Volunteers help and enhance the patient and visitor experience, and sup-

port hospital staff toward providing safe and quality patient care,” Zerwas said.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no shortage of people wanting to volunteer at the hospital, despite the proximity to sickness and, occasionally, grief. “We turn down way more than we take in,” Zerwas said. “We have a backlog.”

She explained there are no typical volunteers, no average profiles. They range in age from 14 to 96 and include college students, the unemployed, the retired,

and empty nesters.

Just as relevant as what volunteers are is what they are not. They're not employment interns, and volunteering is not about job shadowing, said Zerwas.

Across the board, the commonality in volunteers is their desire to contribute to their communities. Volunteers at St. Luke's give roughly four hours of their time per week to the hospital and, according to Zerwas, would give more if their time wasn't taken up by other activities – often other philanthropic pursuits.

Oakes said statewide, there are over 5,000 volunteers donating their time and energy. Collectively, they contribute half a million hours annually. They're also revenue producing. Monies gained through their work in gift shops and hospital- and auxiliary-sponsored events netted in the past year nearly a million dollars statewide. The funds were used to pay for specialized medical equipment, baby bassinets and building renovations.

The need for volunteers continues to grow.

“We'll be using increasing numbers of volunteers in the future,” said Zerwas, who explained the network of charity-focused individuals affords a “give and take of enrichment” for both the hospital and the unpaid laborers.

“I'm working with the most incredible, giving people in our community,” she said.

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- Renee Zerwas, St. Luke's

Ask Joan Myrick her age and she replies, "I'm 79. Closer to 80." For the past 17 years, Myrick has given freely of her time to help patients, their families, and staff at West Valley Medical Center in Caldwell. She is, in many ways, the quintessential volunteer: committed and willing to serve.

"I've done a number of things throughout the years, mostly at the information desk, greeting people as they come into the hospital, escorting them to the different departments where they need to go," Myrick said. "I have been auxiliary president, I have been scholarship chairman, fundraiser and just kind of a general volunteer where it's needed."

She contributes roughly eight hours per week, but those collective 60-minute segments added up over the years to almost 5,000 hours of service to West Valley.

For nearly 10 years, Myrick and her husband served as volunteer coordinators for the Lifeline program, installing phones that allowed people in emergency situations to get help with the press of a button.

"That's where a lot of the hours came in," she said.

Myrick formerly worked as head cashier in the financial office at the College of Idaho. After retiring, she said she felt a need to give something back to the community. Volunteering filled that need.

"What I like about it is being able to work with the public, being able to help them and provide some comfort in a hospital atmosphere," said Myrick. "So many people come in and they're not well and they just need to have some comfort shown to them."

Myrick has no immediate plans to retire from her unpaid work. "I'll keep



PHOTO BY JACOB ALGER, WEST VALLEY

Joan Myrick, left, a longtime volunteer at West Valley Medical Center, talks to volunteer coordinator Jo Anne Perez about giving a bright new pillow to a patient. Volunteers regularly make and help distribute these colorful pillows to guests at the Caldwell hospital.

volunteering as long as my age and health hold up, I'm doing fine," she said.

She's also continuing to broaden her experiences. West Valley has instituted a new program called "patient advocate."

"That's where I'm working right now," Myrick said. "You go in and visit with patients themselves and their fam-

ilies to make sure that their stay here at the hospital is comfortable for them - anything they need that we might do other than medical so that when they leave, they can say, 'We had a good experience at West Valley Medical Center.'"

When Myrick first signed up to volunteer, all she had to do was fill out a form. Now, she stated, the hospital per-

forms background checks, gives volunteers a TB test and provides them with an orientation.

Myrick recommends hospital volunteer work to anyone seeking an area of service. "Volunteering is just a good, good feeling," she said.

"We are told quite often how much we are appreciated."

Joan Myrick put in her
5,000 hours - for free