

Published August 16, 2009

Numbers reveal a caring, committed community

THE OLYMPIAN

This is a special community of residents committed to improving the lives of their neighbors.

Proof of that statement comes in a recently released report from The Corporation for National and Community Service. The "Volunteering in America" report shows that an amazing 43.5 percent of Thurston County residents volunteer — nearly half the population.

This community far outranks state and national averages:

Nationally, 26.4 percent of adults volunteered in 2008. (Their 8 billion hours of service was valued at \$162 billion).

The statewide average was 32.6 percent with Seattle slightly ahead of that average at 33.7 percent.

But this community exceeded the statewide average by a full 10 percent.

That's terrific and speaks volumes about the depth of caring in this community and the number of residents who want to ensure a good quality life for all South Sound residents.

EDUCATED POPULATION

Sara Ballard, executive director of the Volunteer Center of Lewis, Mason and Thurston counties said the national study concluded that there was no single factor that drove volunteer rates.

Generally, however, cities with higher home ownership rates, higher education levels, shorter commute times, a higher number of community organizations and lower levels of poverty and unemployment tend to have higher volunteer rates.

Thurston County matches well against those factors.

Pam Toal, executive director of the United Way of Thurston County, termed the new volunteer statistics "awesome." But she was not surprised by the fact that 94,000 Thurston County residents volunteered in 2008.

"I think its the level of engagement that the nonprofits have in our community. It's very deep," Toal said. "Nonprofit employees and volunteers work hard to engage volunteers. Our shared goal is to recruit volunteer who want to be able to help in their community. Most people recognize there is important work to do and volunteers are getting good results."

Toal also believes the size of the community and the fact that Thurston County hosts three colleges help drive up the number of volunteers. All three colleges stress community involvement and students take those values with them when they graduate, Toal said.

She also believes that income levels influence volunteer rates. "We don't have a lot of wealth in this community," she said. "We don't have a huge corporate base here, but are solidly middle class — better off than some, less well off than others. But people want to do something and while they might not have the finances, they know that giving their time is something positive they can do for their community."

Charles Shelan, executive director of Community Youth Services, believes the stability of the state workforce also provides state employees with an opportunity to volunteer in their time away from work. Ballard said that President Obama's emphasis on community service also has boosted the number of people willing to donate time to a favorite cause. "His push has definitely been a key factor in the increase in the number of volunteers" participating in the Volunteer Center's "Summer of Service" campaign which logged a record number of individuals. That campaign will culminate with a Day of Remembrance on Sept. 11 where the Volunteer Center is asking South Sound residents to commit themselves to a year of service in the community.

DISASTER RELIEF

The December 2007 floods which devastated southern Thurston and Lewis County generated an outpouring of support from area residents. Weekend volunteers are still reaching out to help their flooded-out neighbors.

Ballard said, surprisingly, the economic recession has not cut into the number of volunteers. Many people who are unemployed or underemployed are using volunteer opportunities to network with other community residents in hopes of landing a job when the economy improves.

The role of the Volunteer Center is to serve as a connector between individuals, neighborhoods, nonprofits and businesses. The center staff link potential volunteers with appropriate opportunities.

It's imperative that non-profit organizations match the volunteer's skills with necessary work, ensure that volunteers are well trained and help volunteers understand how their work contributes to the agency's mission and the betterment of the community. Volunteers want to know they are making a difference. The fact that one out of every two Thurston County residents is already engaged in volunteer activity indicates that organizations are doing a good job of showing volunteers that their work makes a positive difference in the community.

Those individuals who aren't yet engaged in bettering their community should step up — now.