

# Give a Christmas gift of your time

By Doug Funk  
staff writer

We often open our pocketbooks along with our hearts during the holiday season.

It feels good to drop some change into a Salvation Army kettle, write checks to favorite charities, donate toys to less fortunate children.

And social service agencies appreciate being remembered, make no mistake about it.

But if you want to extend your involvement beyond money and give an even more valuable gift — your time — during the holidays and beyond, your volunteer services will be welcomed with open arms.

The experience can provide some perspective for high school grads and professionals starting up the corporate ladder. All too often young people are perceived as having a primary concern with their own comfort and the almighty dollar.

Agencies need all kinds of help — volunteer drivers to direct care supplementers, clerical help, crisis line monitors, workers in pantries and resale shops.

If you have the time, several organizations can provide the opportunity.

First Step operates a shelter at a secret location for abused spouses and child victims of domestic violence. The organization also runs non-residential counseling centers in Westland and Romulus.

**VOLUNTEERS** are needed to work at the shelter — after a background check and training due to the sensitive nature of the work.

Volunteers also staff the 24-hour crisis line, work at data entry/clerical tasks, fund raising and transportation.

Judy Ellis, executive director, started as a volunteer seven years ago.

"Never do they (volunteers) fail to say they've been changed," she said. "We end up getting more than we give."

Volunteers receive at least 40 hours of instruction in such areas as communications skills, empathy training and crisis management.

"We're given skills it would cost thousands of dollars to get," Ellis said. "You do feel good about helping. It's a sense of belonging."

Maxine Baughman, volunteer coordinator, can be reached at 459-4300.

Volunteers must be at least 18 years of age.

"We ask usually for a six-month commitment, four hours a week," Ellis said.

And, please, leave your hangups at home.

"We can't be effective, if we're in the midst of our own crises," Ellis added.

The St. Vincent-Sarah Fisher Center in Farmington Hills provides a variety of services from day care to a residential environment for abused, neglected and abandoned children and unwed mothers.

The center's goal is to break the cycle of abuse and dependency on the state, said Connie Kucinas, volunteer coordinator.

Men especially are needed to volunteer to work with a child, most 10 to 13 years of age, on a one-to-one basis.

"WE USUALLY have a minimum age limit of 21 years and they go through a very intense screening... depending on how closely they work with the child," Kucinas said. "We do ask for at least a one-year commitment."

Flexible hours are available.

"We always have a use for drivers, women, to get teen moms and girls in maternity residence to doctors and hospitals for medical appointments," she added. "That's during the day and for the most part it's not long distances."

Volunteers also can help out in programming, fund raising and just about any area they have a talent or interest.

"Basically, I'd say we're very open," Kucinas said. "I think people have to come in with a realistic expectation. They are not dealing with children who are normal in every way. They're lovable, cute... but they're here for a reason."

What do volunteers get out of the experience?

"It's a very meaningful thing to have an impact on a child's life that's for the better," she said.

Kucinas can be reached at 626-

7527, Ext. 300.

Open Door of Union Lake, an inter-denominational help organization, provides food, clothing and emergency financial assistance to people down on their luck in West Bloomfield, Waterford, Commerce and White Lake townships.

Grace Thibert, director of Open Door, said volunteers can staff the resale and craft shop, verify needs of clients, accept food and clothing donations, prepare goods for distribution and actually make deliveries. Volunteers are needed to keep the facility running 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday in that only three people, including Thibert, receive payment for their efforts.

"IT'S JUST a good feeling, I think, people helping people," Thibert said of volunteers. "We have younger people, seniors. Some are widows. All ages."

The typical client is a divorced mother with two or three kids who "just can't make it," Thibert said.

Volunteering at Open Door, like other places, "can be depressing at times, too," Thibert conceded. Happy endings aren't guaranteed.

Thibert may be contacted at 380-2930.

Other volunteer avenues to explore — probation departments of district courts, churches, nursing homes, hospitals. See if your neighborhood school can use a hand.

If you have the time, someone else usually has a need.



If you want to give more of yourself this Christmas, consider giving your time during the holidays and beyond to shelters for abused families, homes for neglected children or food banks.

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