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**VOLUNTEER TODAY, GONE TOMORROW:  
If volunteers are needed now more than ever, why do so few keep  
showing up?**

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By Sarah Pratt

She wants to help. She knows how hard things are. Filling up her car costs a little more every week; the grocery bill is slowly climbing. Her neighbor lost her job and is having a tough time finding another one. A co-worker of hers tells her that he visited a food pantry this week so he could feed his kids.

But she realizes how lucky she is, and she wants to make a difference. So she contacts a local nonprofit and starts volunteering a few hours every weekend. The employees are stressed, under staffed and have little resources. After the first couple of times, she stops enjoying the experience. Her friends volunteer at a different nonprofit; they say the management there is organized and friendly, and that she should volunteer there instead. But she stays where she is. She believes in the organization's mission, and she knows how much they and their clients need her, but she wonders if they are using her skills effectively.

Then one day, she's not feeling so well. She calls and says she just can't volunteer this week, but she'll be back the next week. The voice on the other end of the phone sounds more disappointed than understanding. The next week rolls around, and the car's tank is nearly empty with the next paycheck still days away. She calls to cancel again, calling after hours this time to avoid the irritated voice.

By the third week, she stops calling because she thinks showing up will be more trouble than it's worth. She doubts her work is making a difference, none of the friends she made are volunteering there anymore and the nonprofit employees may question her commitment to the organization rather than make her feel needed. So, like many before and after her, she just stops going.

Does this sound familiar?

### **The Domino Effect**

Attracting and retaining dedicated volunteers is a challenge for nonprofits of all sizes, regardless of the economic climate. But strained management, inflexible scheduling and a less-than-meaningful experience can drive away volunteers in droves, even when their help is most needed.

Today, many nonprofits find themselves scrambling for volunteers while the demand for them is dramatically increasing. More Americans are seeking assistance just as donations for social service programs are falling. Additional economic factors have a domino effect on the problem: food delivery programs, for example, are impacted by increasing food prices and rising gas costs while fewer people may be willing to absorb driving costs for charity.

“Maintaining an equal or improved level of service is a continuous challenge for all nonprofits, and tough economic times increase the challenges” says Susan Weddington, President and CEO of OneStar: Texas Center for Social Impact. “They need to maximize their human resources by improving their volunteer management skills in order to continue having a positive impact on people’s lives. It may seem counterintuitive to offer more meaningful volunteer experiences under tighter budgets, but it’s more than possible—it’s crucial.”

### **The Perils of Dropping Out**

In July 2008, the Corporation for National and Community Service released “Volunteering in America,” a landmark report about the state of volunteering in the United States today. The report’s conclusions were both optimistic and concerning. In Texas, approximately 4.7 million people volunteer an average of 598.2 million hours yearly, creating an economic impact of \$11.7 billion. While this is impressive, Texas ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> among 50 states and Washington D.C., proving that there’s room for improvement.

Despite the need, roughly 1/3 of volunteers nationwide “dropped out” from volunteering in 2007. The loss of those 22 million volunteers affects both nonprofits and the clients who desperately need their services.

But dropout volunteers may feel a negative impact as well. Research in “Volunteering in America” indicates that “people who stop volunteering also appear to stop participating in other social and civic activities...such as voting and participating in public meetings.” Effectively engaging volunteers does more than just help nonprofits—it offers volunteers meaningful experiences, and ultimately may encourage them to continue their positive impact past their volunteer work and into their own communities.

### **Too Busy To Help?**

Though many people say they do not have time for volunteering, people who do volunteer are more likely to have schedules that are very full. Working mothers, for example, make up a significant portion of America’s volunteer force.

In addition, “Volunteering in America” indicates that one of the main differences between people who volunteer and those who don’t is television watching. Volunteers watch about 35% less TV each week than non-volunteers—15 hours per week compared to 23 hours (or nearly one full day) per week, respectively.

“In times of stress and duress, we all need some relaxation time,” acknowledges Weddington. “That’s why it is so important for nonprofits to show volunteers the importance and positive impact of their work while effectively utilizing their skills and interests in service to their fellow Texans.”

### **OneStar’s Unique Position**

Weddington understands the battle nonprofits face in volunteer retention and a challenging economy. As president and CEO of OneStar—a Texas 503(c)1 nonprofit that engages nonprofits, government and businesses to create a stronger, more positive impact on social problems—she oversees an organization that offers leading edge training for nonprofits on managing their human capital and resources more effectively.

“Simply recruiting more volunteers will not increase an organization’s effectiveness, especially if they keep losing them,” notes Weddington. “Nonprofits need to invest adequate time and resources on operational efficiency and developing and maintaining rewarding volunteer opportunities. Improving efficiency and volunteer retention will lead to

better services for an increased number of clients being better served—and happier, more dedicated volunteers—despite the size of the budget.”

OneStar partners with the State of Texas to solve challenges that nonprofits face, such as volunteer utilization, staffing and resources. OneStar is creating programs, connecting organizations, conducting trainings, researching the social sector and developing best practices that will strengthen Texas’ nonprofits, thus improving the lives and communities of Texas.

Nonprofits’ success is being targeted through four focus areas at OneStar. Service and Volunteerism manages Texas’ national service programs and engages volunteers in creating community-wide approaches to address social issues. Nonprofit Organizational Excellence develops and teaches strategies on operational capabilities, performance and impact. Reports created and provided by Research, Evaluation and Learning provide invaluable information about nonprofit best practices and policies. Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship is a new venture that will be launched later this year.

Says Weddington, “We want to change the way people see nonprofits and volunteering. They are more than just ‘nice to have’—they bring massive social and financial benefits to their communities. Volunteering has a tremendously positive economic impact in our state, but the personal impact that people receive from volunteering or being helped by a volunteer is immeasurable.”

OneStar site information: <http://www.onestarfoundation.org>.

Source: Corporation for National and Community Service report on “Volunteering in America”

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