

region

Building a culture of service

THE STATE OF VOLUNTEERISM IN ULSTER COUNTY

One thing was clear to the nearly 70 Ulster County community service agency, business, religious, educational, governmental and community leaders who gathered at SUNY New Paltz on April 14 to explore the state of volunteerism in Ulster County: volunteers, always important to service organizations, are now more essential than ever.

"The way to maintain our level of service during these difficult economic times is through volunteers," said Michael Berg, executive director, Family of Woodstock, whose hotline responded to 174,000 calls last year "on every imaginable problem."

Despite increasingly strained resources, participants in the Service Summit shared a profound dedication to providing needed services – from food banks and housing to job training – and the half-day meeting provided an opportunity to share their expertise and generate new ideas. UlsterCorps, created in early 2009 with a mission of enhancing a culture of volunteerism in the county, launched the meeting with the results of a survey designed to offer a snapshot of the face of volunteerism. The survey, which was supported by the Nyquist Foundation, revealed that while volunteers range from working adults and retirees to high school and college students, almost half the agencies also engaged youth. It was also clear that a strong work ethic, clear expectations and recognition of individual contributions help strengthen the agency-volunteer relationship. In subsequent panel and roundtable discussions, participants added to those findings with a broad range of ideas including how businesses can support employee volunteerism, the power of collaboration and the importance of instilling a volunteer ethic in younger students.

"The passion all of the different agencies represented was invigorating," said Michelle Donlon, assistant superintendent, Rondout Valley Central School District. "Volunteering is part of our curriculum and I came away more committed to inspiring our students and staff to work in the community in meaningful ways."

With 8.6 percent unemployment in the county, Nancy Schaefer, director, Ulster County Office of Employment and Training, emphasized how tapping the talents of the newly unemployed can be a boon to agencies, as well as to those searching for work.



PHOTO BY NICCI CAGAN, FROM THE GROUND UP

Stiles Najac, Food Security Coordinator for Cornell Cooperative Extension, and Doris Weber, Family of Woodstock, share ideas on fostering volunteerism during the Summit.

"Interning in an industry where you'd like to work is an important step in networking and building your skills and resume," she explained, "and being of service to someone else in need builds your belief in yourself during what can be a wrenchingly painful time."

As the head of an organization that provides meals for local individuals with HIV/AIDS, Reverend Duncan Burns of Angel Food East underscored the importance of agencies supporting the passions of their volunteers.

"Providing meaningful experiences help feed our volunteers' passion for what they do," he said. "This, in turn, creates a culture that others will support and helps build a community."

UlsterCorps, whose website is a clearinghouse for volunteers seeking opportunities and agencies looking for help (www.ulstercorps.org), organized the Service Summit. It was supported by SUNY's Center for Research, Regional Education, and Outreach (CRREO) and RiverTides and featured a keynote speech by Mike Hein, Ulster County Executive, who put into words what every seasoned volunteer knows.

"At the end of the day, you always get more than you give," he said.

– Betty Marton