



THE WHO-WHAT-WHERE-WHEN-WHY OF VOLUNTEERISM IN ULSTER COUNTY

Sue Books · kt Tobin



FOR PUBLIC POLICY INITIATIVES

COVER IMAGE

SUNY New Paltz students gleaning apples at Liberty View Farm for local food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters for *Make a Difference Day*. For the last two years over 400 SUNY New Paltz students have volunteered with agencies around the region for *Make a Difference Day* thanks to the leadership of Service Learning Coordinator Erica Wagner.

Photo: David Serman

Images at right: *Portrait d'Alexis de Tocqueville*, Théodore Chassériau. 1850; *Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King*, Herman Hiller, staff photographer *New York World-Telegram & Sun*. 1964

VOLUNTEERISM IN ULSTER COUNTY

Ulster County residents rely substantially on volunteers for essential public services, most notably fire protection and emergency medical response. In other areas, volunteers help meet basic needs by supplementing or collaborating with governmental efforts. For example, many impoverished people in our communities count on volunteer-reliant organizations to provide their families with food and shelter. The degree to which we will be able to continue to do this work with volunteers, and the cost of providing these services if we need to start fully paying for them with tax dollars, is a growing concern.

Government is often described as a means of providing collectively for social needs that cannot otherwise be met by individuals or families. The missions of volunteer organizations may also be described this way. A fundamental question taken up here, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, is the optimal division of responsibilities for paying for and meeting our shared needs.

Toward this end, the discussion that follows explores the who-what-when-where-why of volunteerism in Ulster County. It then takes up the question of how much is achievable—and even desirable—through volunteerism. We conclude with a call for more thoughtfulness at a broad community level about what we need and want to do together so as to create clear expectations and planning about how this will be done.

We undertook this study at the request of UlsterCorps, a coalition of volunteers working to foster a culture of volunteerism, collaboration, and community service in Ulster County. We compiled and report here all the data we could find. However, because nonprofit and public-service organizations do not systematically track volunteerism in any standard way, this study supplements scarce quantitative data with detailed qualitative information from interviews with nineteen leaders in volunteer-reliant organizations who generously shared their insights, experiences, and, in many cases, concerns. Also, because the landscape of volunteerism is so

vast —encompassing basic human needs for food, shelter, and safety as well as education, recreation, the arts, environmentalism, and so on—we limited our interviews to human service and public safety organizations, albeit with no suggestion that volunteerism in these particular arenas somehow matters more.

VOLUNTEERISM: THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Rooted in its religious and communal traditions, the United States is a nation of volunteers: people who give freely of their time and energies to help other people and places in need. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted nearly two centuries ago,

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small.”



More recently, the Rev. Martin Luther King (1968) invoked an inclination to serve with this call:

“If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That’s a new definition of greatness... by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato



and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."

And yet, in recent years, there is evidence of disengagement from voluntary endeavors. National statistics show that fewer and fewer Americans are choosing to serve in this way. Although not conventionally deemed volunteerism, voting is perhaps the easiest and most common way to participate civically, yet more and more Americans are opting out. A century and a half ago, about three in every four people eligible to vote showed up at the polls for presidential elections; in contrast, 59 percent nationwide did so in November 2016. In our own state, New York, voter turnout was 56 percent, a sad 40th in the nation. (*U.S. Election Project*, 2017)

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), volunteerism has been declining: from a high of nearly three in ten persons volunteering in the early years of this century to about one in four in the past few years. In 2015, volunteerism hit a thirteen-year low (24.9 percent) for the period since BLS started tracking volunteerism in 2002 (*Figure 1*). The BLS survey asks, "Since September 1st of last year, have you done any volunteer activities through or for an organization?" The follow-up to a "no" response was: "Sometimes people don't think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for children's schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since September 1st of last year, have you done any of these types of volunteer activities?"

More specifically, the BLS trend data show that while volunteering is declining across all groups, rates vary based on a variety of factors (*Figure 2*):

Figure 1. U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) National Volunteerism Rates 2002–2015

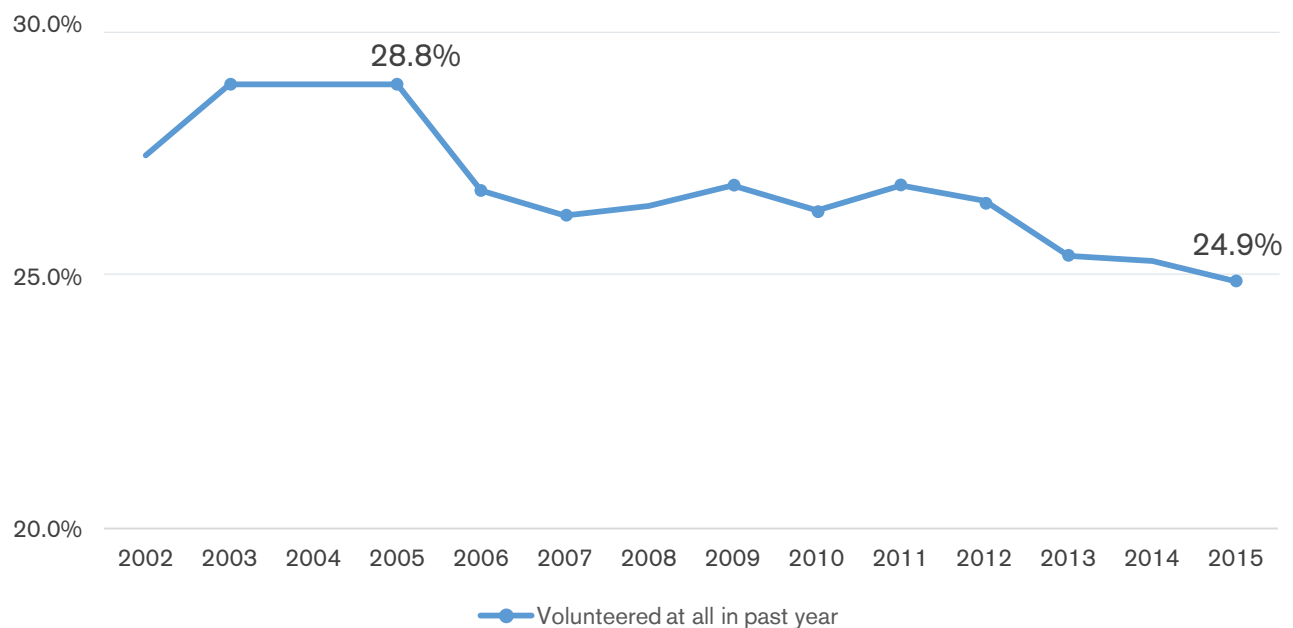
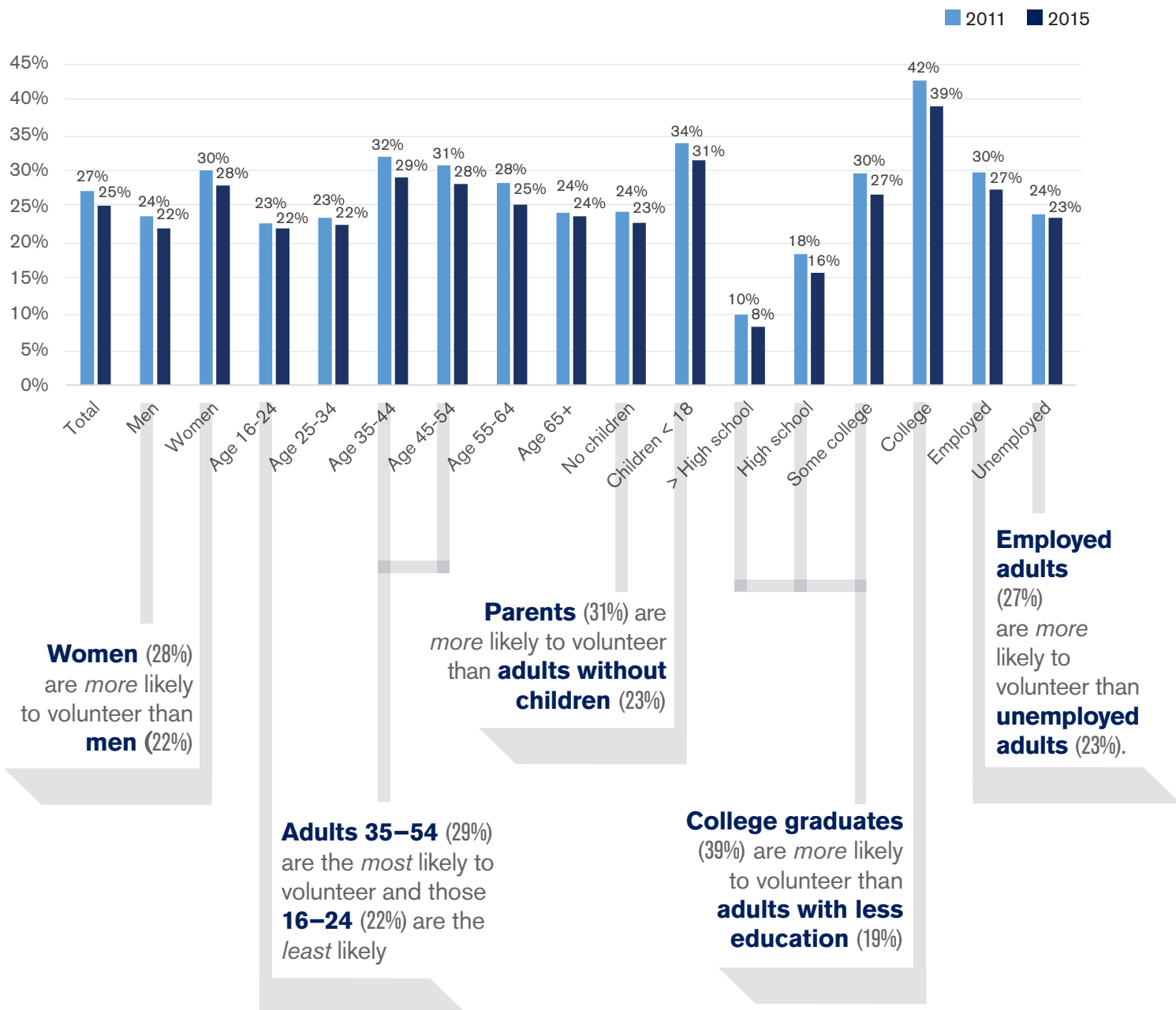


Figure 2. U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) National Volunteerism by Select Characteristics 2010–2015



Volunteerism can also be quantified by the amount of time devoted to unpaid work, and this measure has been stable over time: in 2002, the median number of hours was 52; in 2011 it was 51, and most recently in 2015, 52 hours.

measurement challenges

This study relies on the national BLS survey but a quick note on another survey illustrates the measurement difficulty in any quantification of volunteerism. A 2013 Gallup poll found a much larger 65 percent of Americans volunteering their time when combining answers to two questions about volunteering to: “a religious group or organization” (46 percent) or “another charitable cause” (49 percent), up from 60 percent net in 2002. The publication of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert Putnam in 2000 provoked not just a national dialogue about the decline of civic engagement generally but also an academic debate about how we define and measure it. Exploring this dilemma is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that there are varying measures (with varying results) and their critics.

The BLS national survey shows that volunteers devoted the most hours to religious organizations (33 percent) and the second most to educational or youth-services organizations (25 percent), followed by social or community service (15 percent). In terms of specific tasks, the most common response related to food provision: for more than one in ten volunteers the main activity was collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food. Other common activities were tutoring or teaching, fundraising, or general labor.

These findings invite a range of speculations about why volunteerism seemingly has declined, including that some contemporary volunteer activities don’t fit traditional conceptions of “volunteering,” for example, “virtual volunteering” and community organizing. Tanisha Smith, national director of volunteer services for the Alexandria, VA-based Volunteers of America, told *The Nonprofit*

Times that, with respect to the younger cohort, many of whom are in college, the decline might reflect an increased need to work to cover rising college costs.¹ And this in turn raises the question of how unpaid internships, which are increasingly common, are affecting measured volunteerism among college and university students.

The financial stress many nonprofits are experiencing likely also contributes to the decline in volunteerism. As Shari Tishman at VolunteerMatch told *The Nonprofit Times*, “There’s this huge fallacy that volunteering is free (for an organization). It’s not. It takes time, resources, staff, money. When nonprofits are not getting as much funding, they’re not able to engage volunteers.” When funding drops, volunteer recruitment and retention programs are sometimes the first to go.

Globally, the United States ranked 5th in volunteerism behind Turkmenistan, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka in 2015. Turkmenistan experienced a large uptick in the percent of citizens volunteering after they instituted a national day of volunteering. A strong culture of Theravada Buddhism likely impels volunteerism in Myanmar (CAF World Giving Index 2016). Within the United States, according to the BLS, Utah ranks first with 43 percent of the state’s residents self-reporting volunteerism. New York State, at 19 percent, ranks 49th among the 50 states and Washington, D.C. However, in terms of annual hours dedicated to volunteering, New York rises to 15th with 35.3 median hours (Corporation for National and Community Service 2015).

¹According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 69.2 percent of 2015 high school graduates were enrolled in college in the fall of 2015, and among these students, the labor force participation rate was 36 percent.

VOLUNTEERISM IN ULSTER COUNTY

The factors which have taken a toll on volunteerism rates across the U.S. include (but are not limited to): the requirements of the work, competing priorities (i.e., more demanding jobs, increased responsibilities at home, longer commutes), less time with neighbors, and fewer nudges from friends, family, and employers. Has this pattern of disengagement affected volunteerism in Ulster County? Available statistics indicate that, contrary to national and statewide trends, volunteerism is thriving in Ulster County, at least in some areas.

In a 2010 Benjamin Center survey that utilized the BLS question wording, 45 percent of county residents said they had volunteered at least once in the past year. This is nearly twenty points higher than the national rate and more than double the statewide rate. In terms of hours, volunteers in the county provided an annual median of 133 hours. This is well over double the national median and nearly four times the statewide median. In total, an

estimated 66,000 residents of Ulster County volunteer their time, contributing the equivalent of about \$400 million in wages.

Table 1. Ulster County Volunteering: Time and Dollar Value 2010 by Area of Focus

2010	
# of Volunteers	66,003
Median Annual Hours	133
Average Annual Hours	214
\$ Value of Hours	\$400,421,236

Note: These numbers are extrapolated from the 2010 Benjamin Center *Regional Well-Being* surveys. The dollar value of volunteering was calculated at the rate of \$28.32/hour for 2010, the New York State rates according to The Independent Sector, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy coalition for nonprofits.

volunteers hiding in plain sight

When someone tweets a call for help with rounding up and delivering supplies during a hurricane or creates a Facebook event to organize a food drive or to get tutors for a local middle school, would the recruited participants consider their contributions “unpaid work,” that is, volunteering? “There has been a real explosion in people activating in new and different ways, like online — ways that allow them to use their skills in new ways that aren’t captured in the (BLS) report,” Tracy Hoover, president of the Atlanta-based Points of Light, told *The Nonprofit Times*,

“If I care about education, I might fund a classroom project through DonorsChoose.org. I might volunteer for a pro bono project, or volunteer through my company... I think [nonprofits] might not have evolved as quickly as the population has demanded. We know millennials are one of the most active generations and they have an inclination to volunteer. Yet, in the BLS survey they seem to be under-represented. I think equipping nonprofits to more effectively engage millennials particularly... is really important.”

volunteerism in nys: the siena report

A 2011–2012 survey of nonprofit organizations across New York State, undertaken by the Siena College Research Institute for the New York State Commission on National and Community Service, sought to learn more about how nonprofit organizations recruit, train, use, and reward volunteers. Among the survey findings are these:

ACTIVITIES. The most common volunteer activity was serving on a board of directors followed by serving on a committee, participating in an event, providing program support, and fundraising. Overall, 27 percent of the volunteers were “one-shot helpers”; 43 percent were “continuing contributors”; and 28 percent were “deeply committed leaders.” Three-quarters of nonprofits said they would like to have more volunteers; 24 percent said they had the right amount; and only 1 percent believed they had too many. The greatest needs were for more help with fundraising, program support, and organizing events.

RECRUITMENT. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of the survey respondents said their organizations enable volunteers to contact them or to sign up to volunteer on a web site. About 90 percent said they stay in touch with volunteers by telephone, email, and face-to-face communication. Very few said they use either a smartphone app (software application) or social media. Only 12 percent described their volunteer recruitment as excellent; 42 percent said they were doing a good job; 4 percent, a fair job; and 8 percent said their organization was not doing very well with recruitment. Sixty-two percent of the organizations had a staff person to coordinate volunteers, and 58 percent maintained an electronic database of current volunteers. The nonprofits said word of mouth is the most effective way to recruit volunteers, followed by referrals from staff and other volunteers. Although most of the respondents said that recruiting at local schools, colleges, religious or civic organizations and their web site is also

effective, approximately one in four said they didn't use these methods; a little more than half said they use volunteer centers, social media, corporate volunteer programs, or newspapers. When the public was asked, in a related public opinion survey, if they had been invited to volunteer by any organization, a friend, or another volunteer in the past year, nearly six in ten said no.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERS.

About two-thirds of the nonprofits said they would be unable to provide their current services without volunteers. Three-quarters said volunteers improve both the quality and the quantity of the services they offer, save the organization money, improve public relations, provide needed one-time help, provide organizational leadership and enable paid staff to accomplish more. Nevertheless, the nonprofits expressed some concerns with respect to volunteers. Just over one-quarter said they were unable to recruit volunteers with the skills they needed or were financially unable to support volunteers. More than one-third said they felt constrained by regulatory, legal, or liability concerns.

TRAINING. Only 18 percent of nonprofits said they were doing an excellent job in training volunteers. Forty-five percent said they were doing a good job; 30 percent, a fair job; and 7 percent, not very well.

Reflecting on the survey findings, the Siena research team concluded: **THE PIECES ARE IN PLACE.** Organizations need and value volunteers. Citizens are inclined to volunteer or at least contribute, see it as important, but do not, despite knowing that it helps, feel as though they are doing as much as they could. Many are simply not asked and organizations acknowledge that they must do a better job of recruiting.

Although the Benjamin Center survey was just one snapshot in time, some similarities between Ulster County and national results are evident:

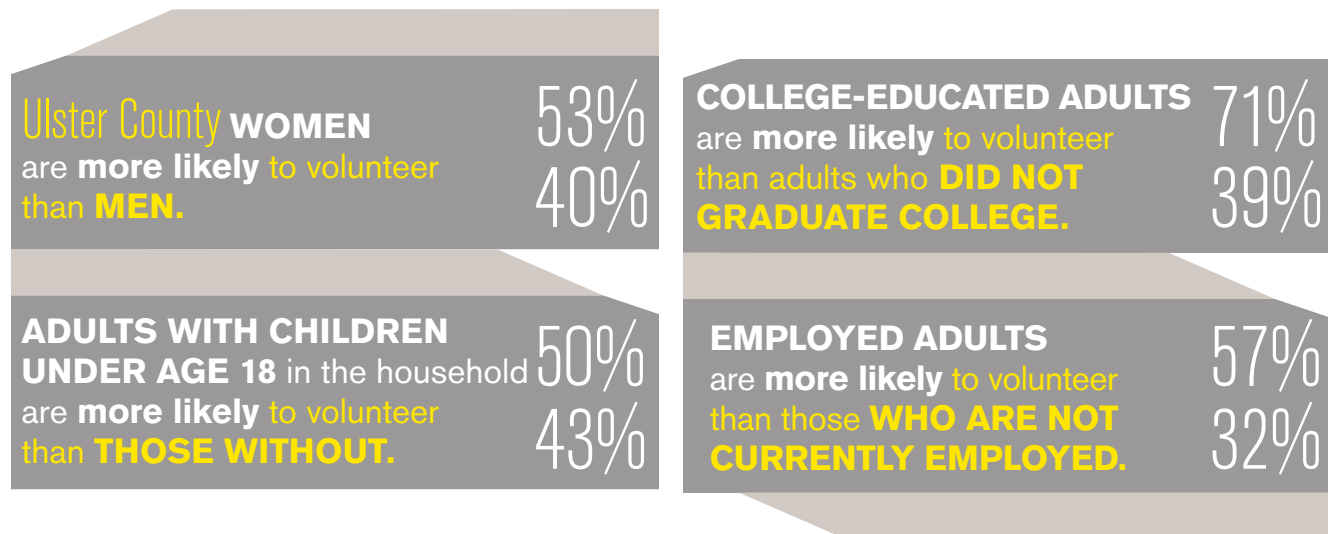
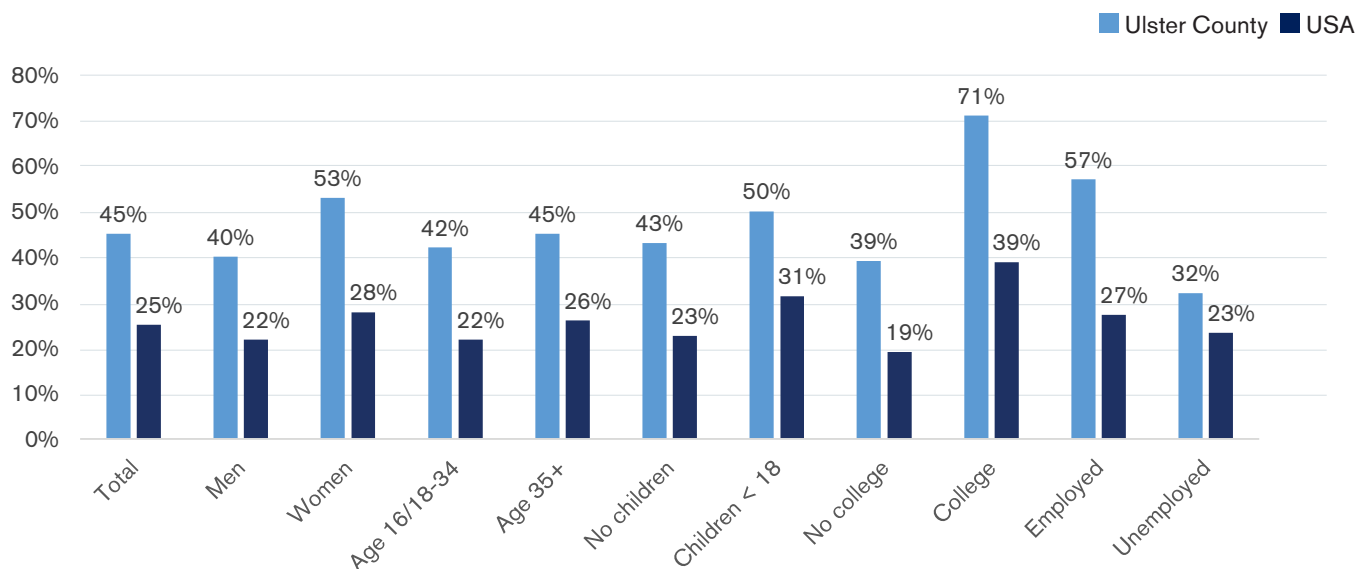


Figure 3. Volunteerism by Select Characteristics: Benjamin Center, Ulster County 2010; BLS National 2015

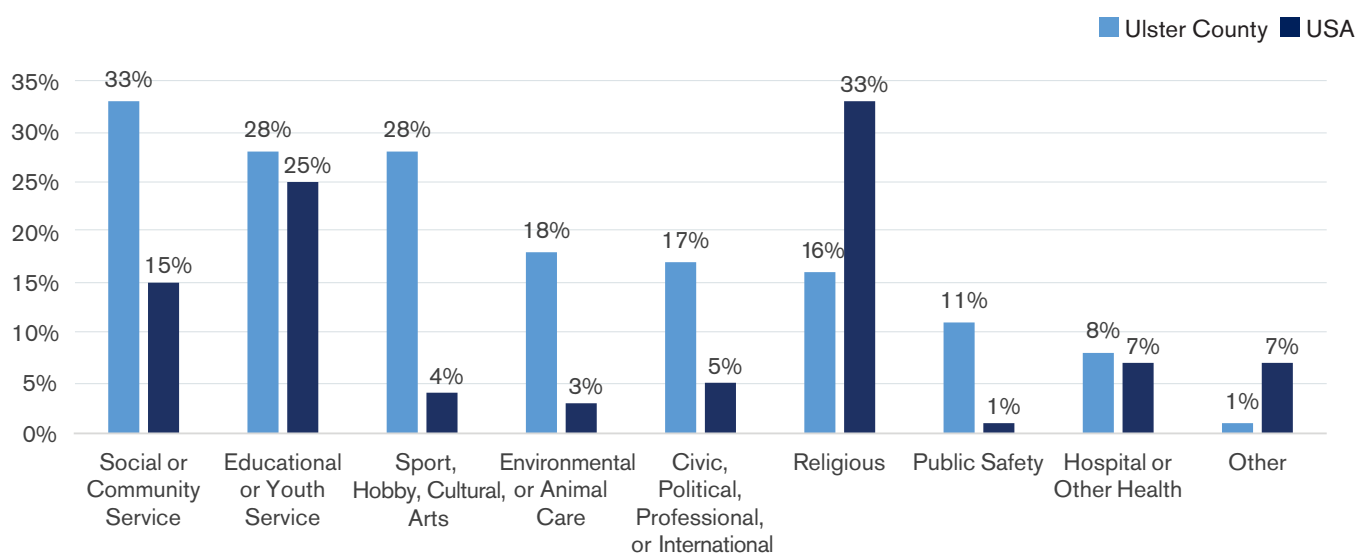


Note: BLS younger age group is 16-34; for Ulster the data is ages 18-34.

Nationally, 72 percent of volunteers said they volunteered with only one organization, but in Ulster County 97 percent of volunteers cited more than one area of focus and comparisons reveal some insights to local variation from national norms. In Ulster County, the main activities mentioned were social or community service (33 percent compared with 15 percent nationally);

educational or youth service (28 percent compared with 25 percent nationally); and sport, hobby, cultural, or arts (28 percent compared with 4 percent nationally). Nationally, one percent are engaged in public safety; in Ulster County, about one in ten (11 percent) cite public safety as a form of volunteerism.

Figure 4. Volunteerism by Organizational Area of Focus: Benjamin Center, Ulster County 2010 and BLS National 2015



Note: The BLS study only allowed one response to the question about primary organizational types and our Ulster County study permitted more than one response. Hence, numbers do not add to 100 for Ulster County.

To expand on this survey data, we talked to leaders in the nonprofit and public service communities to try to better understand this seemingly robust volunteerism in our county as well as the complexities that underlie it. Certainly, many people have worked diligently to cultivate a spirit of volunteerism throughout the Hudson Valley, especially UlsterCorps, which has adopted this as its core mission. However, assessing the strength and breadth of volunteerism in the county more precisely is difficult as few organizations have longitudinal data. “Nobody has kept accurate records. A lot of the data we have is circumstantial,” said John D’Alessandro, deputy volunteer program coordinator of the Firemen’s Association of the State of New York. Although D’Alessandro was speaking about data kept by the

state’s 1,800 volunteer fire departments (with no central reporting), his comments likely pertain to much of the nonprofit and public-service sectors, at least with respect to volunteers.

Nevertheless, some agencies did share or gather quantitative data for this report, and, with some exceptions, the numbers suggest that volunteerism is indeed alive and well in Ulster County. At Family of Woodstock, for example, total volunteer hours are up 8.6 percent since 2011.



Tamara Cooper, Team Leader of training for Family of Woodstock, Inc, conducts a hotline training for new volunteers. Tamara and Assistant Program Director Sue Carroll met as volunteers when they took the hotline training together in 1994, and have been serving the community together as both volunteers and Family employees ever since.

Table 2. Volunteering at Family of Woodstock: Time and Dollar Value 2011–2015

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Volunteer Hours	29,824	29,443	28,123	31,219	32,395
\$ Value of Hours	\$608,936	\$659,336	\$609,727	\$640,739	\$717,525

Note: The dollar value of volunteering was calculated at a rate of \$15/hour to \$30/hour, depending on the nature of the task, with an average rate of \$22/hour.

United Way of Ulster County is “keeping very close to the number of volunteer hours as in years past... however, with more effort, which is also the case with our fundraising,” said Stacey Rein, the executive director. For 2016 volunteer hours at United Way of Ulster totaled 6,152, just down from 6,178 volunteer hours in 2013. SUNY New Paltz is one of the largest employers in Ulster County. A 2013 SUNY New Paltz survey of faculty and staff detailed the ways that 86 percent of those employed at the college said they volunteered, up from 79 percent in a 2010 survey. SUNY New Paltz employees most commonly volunteer in the arenas of arts and culture (24 percent) or social welfare (24 percent). If their 144,100 volunteer hours had been paid, the value would equate to almost \$4 million.

Table 3. Volunteering by SUNY New Paltz Faculty and Staff: Time and Dollar Value 2010, 2013

	2010	2013
# of Volunteers	1,032	1,087
Average Annual Hours	102,994	144,100
\$ Value of Hours	\$2,813,796	\$3,936,812

Note: These numbers are extrapolated from the 2010 and 2013 SUNY New Paltz faculty and staff community engagement surveys. The dollar value of volunteering was calculated at the rate of \$26.45/hour for 2013 and \$28.32/hour for 2010, the New York State rates according to The Independent Sector, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy coalition for nonprofits.

Table 4. Volunteering by SUNY New Paltz Students: Time and Dollar Value 2008–2015

	2008 2009	2009 2010	2010 2011	2011 2012	2012 2013	2013 2014	2014 2015	2015 2016
# of Volunteers	180	305	342	326	344	577	613	648
Volunteer Hours	825	1,430	1,939	2,250	2,409	4,241	5,629	6,126
\$ Value of	\$17,977	\$31,160	\$42,251	\$49,028	\$52,492	\$92,401	\$122,656	\$141,315

Note: These numbers reflect volunteering through the programs coordinated by the SUNY New Paltz Career Resource Center, not volunteering that students undertake on their own. The dollar value of volunteering was calculated at the rate of \$21.79/hour for 2008–2015, and at the rate of \$23.07/hour for 2015–2016. This is the rate suggested by The Independent Sector. The Career Resource Center uses the national volunteer-hour value rather than the higher New York State value.

Big jumps in volunteerism sometimes follow organizational change that brings in new leadership. For example, volunteerism among SUNY New Paltz students has increased significantly since Erica Wagner, service learning coordinator in the Career Resource Center and vice president of UlsterCorps, began creating and coordinating programs.

Similarly, after the Ulster County Office for the Aging began coordinating the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program, which matches volunteers with elderly people who need rides to medical appointments or shopping venues, the rides per month increased from 42 before the change in July 2015 to an average of 72 over the first five months of 2016.

New rules and regulations can also affect volunteerism, as has been the case for Hudson Valley Hospice, where volunteers provide support and companionship to patients and families coping with terminal illness or help out in the office or in other ways. The number of volunteers dropped from 168 in 2008 to 124 in 2015, said Volunteer Coordinator Peggy Kuras, likely as the result of stricter regulations pertaining to training, reporting, and background and driving-record checks. (Hudson Valley Hospice operates under the auspices of the National Hospice and in accord with U.S. Department of Health

and Medicare regulations.) Nevertheless, the local hospice “never has trouble funding volunteers” as “there is a steady flow of people,” Kuras said.

Volunteerism nationally among “the sandwich generation” (young adults caring both for elderly parents and for children living at home) has been dropping for about ten years, said Casandra Beam, chief executive officer of the Ulster Literacy Association. However, she believes a counter-movement is under way, in part due to recent political events. “The millennials are galvanized—the Sanders awakening,” she said. “There is keen awareness of the immigrant population and of the need to take a position of receptivity and welcoming, and that means getting involved.” Volunteerism at Ulster Literacy is up, especially since 2008—perhaps because central motivations have changed. During the economic downturn, Beam recalled, some people volunteered out of desperation or even boredom, then moved on when they found work. “Lately, volunteers have been volunteering to truly serve—from a more stable personal place,” Beam said. “There is an emerging core of volunteers who are in it for the long haul.”

national volunteer fire council overview of volunteer fire, ems, & rescue services

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), a nonprofit association of volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue service members, volunteers comprised more than two-thirds (69 percent) of the 1.1 million firefighters in the U.S. as of 2014. Of the 29,980 fire departments, 66 percent were all volunteer and another 19 percent, mostly volunteer. However, despite the heavy reliance on volunteers, the number of volunteer firefighters declined by more than 10 percent between 1984 and 2014 while the age of these volunteers increased: whereas just under 14 percent of firefighters were 50 or older in 1987, by 2014, almost 22 percent were in that age group.

However, not every sector has seen such a resurgence. The most urgent cries of distress are coming from fire departments and rescue squads. Some departments and squads have been more successful than others in recruiting volunteers. Charles Mutz, chief fire coordinator for Ulster County and a volunteer firefighter for more than 50 years, is cautiously optimistic: his training budget has increased, which has enabled him to hire more instructors and offer more classes.

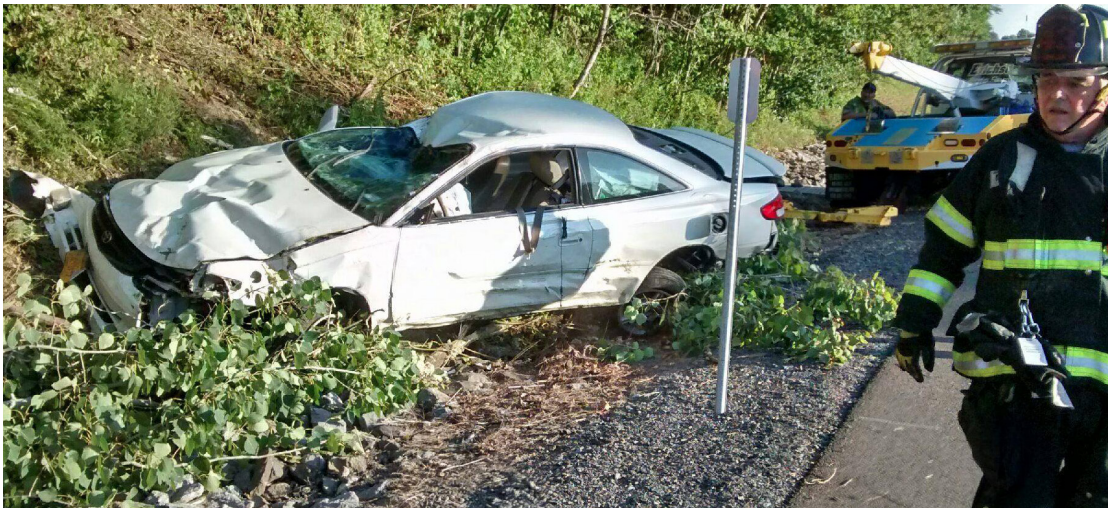
Nevertheless, statewide, the trend is down. In the late 1990s about 110,000 firefighters volunteered in New York State; ten years later, the number had dropped to about 84,500. “This is not a problem you can isolate. It’s not just this or that company or just rural departments,” said D’Alessandro of the Firemen’s Association of the State of New York. “It can vary from department to department in the same area. But we know that, statewide, the trends are going the wrong way.” In Ulster County, the pool of prospective volunteers is dwindling in part because the region is increasingly

attracting seasonal residents who may not have deep roots in the community, suggested Scott Schulte, a fire investigator in Ulster County, associate director of fire safety at SUNY New Paltz, and retired volunteer firefighter (after 20 years).

The New York State Firemen’s Association annual survey of the state’s 1,800 departments has documented this trend. Whereas about 25,000 new firefighters have volunteered in New York over the last five years, many also have left because they retired, they became disillusioned, or their lives became too complicated, D’Alessandro said. “It’s a zero sum game,” he said. “If six people come in the front door but nine leave out the back...” (The departures have not been tracked.) Similar data is unavailable for volunteer Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and paramedics. However, emergency calls have been rising steadily, at least in Ulster County, where they are up 20.5% since 2006.

Table 5. Ulster County EMS Calls (excluding fire) 2006–2015.

Year	# of Calls
2006	18,977
2007	20,311
2008	21,021
2009	20,605
2010	21,613
2011	22,183
2012	22,313
2013	22,674
2014	22,562
2015	22,872



Such an increase in calls, without a corresponding increase in staff and funding, poses a public risk, said Richard Muellerleile, EMS coordinator for Ulster County. “The problem will continue to get worse, until individuals perish because of it,” he predicted.

A Benjamin Center study completed in 2010, in part to assess the level of municipal shared services in the county, found that emergency medical response in Ulster County was evolving from a largely volunteer to a largely paid service, with local governments assuming a significant role for covering costs. These volunteer services are often paid for, in part, by billing costs back to insurance companies whenever this is legally possible. Town governments may make payments or provide in-kind services (e.g., gasoline and vehicle maintenance) to cover such costs.

The volunteer service in Marlborough was decertified, requiring the town to enter into a contract with a private provider. The town’s obligation is for uninsured persons or charges beyond those covered by insurance, up to the limit of its agreement with the company. Highland now contracts with a private provider. In the City of Kingston and the Town of Ulster, emergency response has long been provided by private companies only. Hardenburgh and Denning have always been too thinly populated to provide the service via volunteers.

Payment has been used to augment volunteer service to elevate the level of care available from emergency responders. In 2010, of the sixteen community-

linked ambulance corps in the county, just five—in Ellenville, New Paltz, Shandaken, Woodstock and Saugerties—offered paramedic services. In the Saugerties area, the Diaz Ambulance Service, a not-for-profit organized in 1978 and named for its original benefactor, employs paid staff. The ambulance services in New Paltz and Woodstock, staffed primarily by volunteers, pay paramedics to supplement and maintain a higher level of service. Shandaken provides ambulance response as a municipal service, paying part-time personnel on a per call basis. Ellenville First Aid and Rescue is another example of a volunteer staff supplemented by a paid paramedic.

More recent evidence of these trends is the shutdown of the Port Jervis Ambulance Corps in neighboring Orange County in November 2016. Squeezed by insufficient insurance reimbursements and the rising costs of medications and supplies, the ambulance corps could no longer fund its operations and so was put under contract with the City of Port Jervis and the Town of Deerpark through 2017 as an emergency stopgap.

Photo at right: Volunteers from Rondout Valley High School, UlsterCorps, Rochester Food Pantry and RCAL made over 100 quarts of apple sauce on October 26, 2016 for the Farm to Food Pantry Collaborative led by Rondout Valley Growers Association and Family of Woodstock Inc. The apples were harvested by SUNY New Paltz student volunteers a few days earlier at Hurds Family Farm for *Make a Difference Day*. Kitchen space was donated by Rondout Valley Central School District.

WHO VOLUNTEERS AND WHY?

“Sometimes, those who you think would need your services are the first to stand up,” said Colleen Mountford, past president of the Kingston Sunrise Rotary Club. At Ulster Literacy, perhaps not surprisingly, newly retired women, and especially former educators, volunteer in disproportionate numbers, although some younger people, men, and former students volunteer as well. Eighty percent of Ulster Literacy’s volunteers are over 50, and 59 percent are retired. Similarly, at Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) of Ulster most of the volunteers are retired professionals with a range of experience—in education and healthcare, but also international relations, policing, dance, and journalism—said Amy Drayer, the executive director of the organization which advocates for abused or neglected children’s best interests in court-adjudicated cases.

Although firefighters and emergency medical personnel are still primarily men, that’s changing. “I’ll tell you, the training is hard, mentally and physically, and the women step up,” Chief Fire Coordinator Mutz said. “We need that: women stepping up.” In Mutz’s department in Kerhonkson about 70 percent are younger volunteers, and about 30 percent are older volunteers who serve as mentors.



Photo: Beth McLendon

“I see some things in common among the student volunteers,” said Erica Wagner of SUNY New Paltz and UlsterCorps,

They typically are really good students, hard-working. Most also have jobs, and they are mostly female—but the campus student body is 62 percent female. They are not the students who go to class and then take a nap! People say, ‘Students these days are just into themselves and their phones.’ That’s not my experience.

Several organizations are trying to recruit a more racially and ethnically diverse pool of volunteers, and especially Spanish-speaking volunteers. “Someone who speaks Spanish—that’s a missing piece,” said Peggy Kuras of Hudson Valley Hospice. “As an agency, we’re serving more Spanish speakers, and are trying to recruit Spanish-speaking volunteers for the hotline,” concurred Michael Berg of Family. Noting an age gap among his volunteers, Richard Muellerleile of Ulster EMS is trying to recruit some younger people:

We have retirees who want to give back to the community and young people who will leave in three years for college—and often no one in between. There’s a generational gap. We want young, active people as well as seasoned veterans, but especially younger, motivated people, preferably with few competing responsibilities!

Like many unpaid interns, some volunteers see the work as a foot in the door to a job or as a way to make connections that might lead to employment. Some human service organizations, such as Family of Woodstock, do hire from within. This is true in firefighting as well: 90 percent of the career firefighters in Kingston started in the volunteer ranks, said Chief Fire Coordinator Mutz. (Of the 51 fire companies in Ulster County, only three in Kingston are staffed with career paid firefighters.) Some



As part of SUNY New Paltz's 2016 *Make a Difference Day*, students participated in the RVGA Farm to Food Pantry Program, both gleaning apples at Hurds Family Farm in Modena and processing apples donated by Hurds and Maynards at the Rondout Municipal Center, Cottekill. The apple sauce they made was frozen for winter distribution at local food pantries and feeding programs.

volunteers say yes to a friend's invitation or follow in the footsteps of their mother or father. Fifty-three years ago Chief Fire Coordinator Mutz's brother-in-law and another friend, both firefighters, submitted a volunteer application for him because they needed another bowler on the firefighter team — and one thing led to another.

For many, volunteering satisfies a personal need. It offers an opportunity for human connection and community, and therefore a sense of efficacy, empowerment, or belonging. "After the recession, I wonder if people are beginning to feel they must cope with these problems at the local level — here, with my neighbor," speculated Casandra Beam of Ulster Literacy. "You see a tangible product — for example, you make applesauce that will go to someone who wouldn't have it otherwise," said Beth McLendon, a long-term volunteer at Family as well as co-founder and director of UlsterCorps. "People see what they're doing will really help." Some "volunteerism" mandated as part of a court adjudication becomes a long-lasting commitment for just this reason. McLendon and Michael Berg of Family of Woodstock recalled how some young people assigned to help the elderly get on and off public buses grumbled at first, but then felt so good about

the help they were able to offer that they continued well past their required hours.

"It's satisfying," said volunteer Paul Edlund, who coordinates a United Way of Ulster program that helps low-income taxpayers complete their state and federal returns. "It's technically challenging and I'm doing something worthwhile. You meet individuals who benefit very directly, and are grateful for the help. Plus, there's a high rate of return. People come back year after year." "You see who you are," said Philipp Gomm, a SUNY New Paltz student and volunteer firefighter. "You get to see the natural instincts of yourself and everyone around you. I have rappelled a five-story building. How many people have done that?"

Volunteerism, as Martin Luther King expressed so eloquently, can also be the outward expression of deep religious or spiritual commitment. "We cultivate servants' hearts," said Pastor Pete Shults of Cross Point Fellowship in Hurley. "There is a role for everyone." "We get both those who've always been comfortable around death and dying and those who aren't, but are trying to become more comfortable," said Peggy Kuras of Hudson Valley Hospice,

Some volunteers have a spiritual calling. The end of life is such a difficult time — to think, 'I can help in some small way.' This helps people feel that connection with other human beings. There's no differentiation with respect to economics or class or spiritual beliefs. It's hard to find such rich experiences.

For EMS Coordinator Richard Muellerleile there was never a decision to make. He explained:

For me, it was almost a mystical thing. I always wanted to be a firefighter and paramedic. Growing up, my room was always filled with fire engines and ambulances — like a fire museum! There was only one iota of doubt when I graduated high school and enrolled in a music program. I had been a

band geek and thought about becoming a music teacher. But one day, sitting in a small practice room, I thought, “What am I doing here?” So I dropped out and enrolled in an EMT program. Ever since, I’ve not “worked” a day in my life—it’s the greatest freaking job in the world.

Casandra Beam of Ulster Literacy had an epiphany while managing 500 employees for a family that owned a collection of parking lots in New York City. “I realized I wanted to advocate for these men, not make more money for the owners,” she said. “These parking lot attendants are denizens. The workers, from all over the world, earned minimum wage and lived in difficult conditions. They were sometimes robbed, but if they came up 10 cents short, fired.”

Nearly forty years ago, long-term EMS volunteer and instructor Ron Fields took up the New Paltz Rescue Squad on an offer of a free first-aid course, thinking, “Why not?” At the end, he decided to volunteer for a few months as a way to pay back the squad for a good course, then never stopped. “I just never had a good reason not to do it,” he said. “The feeling you get when you help someone when they have an emergency—real or imagined—is

tremendous. You couldn’t pay me enough to do what I do for nothing. Money would never compensate.”

Amy Drayer of CASA credits a former student with pushing her into volunteer work. She was teaching pre-school and developed a fondness for a boy who had been removed from his home after a drug bust. Drayer recalled:

He would bring his little bag of plastic toys to school every day, and was there from the time the building opened until it closed. I would tell him, “I’ll be with my family over the weekend, but I’ll be here on Monday.” But one day, he never came back to school. He was moved back with his mom, and I never saw him again. No one spoke to me, and I was with him all day. That’s when I started as a CASA volunteer; that’s what gave me the push. That little boy. Someone should have at least asked my opinion. For all the people working on the case, I was with the child all day every day, and no one asked my opinion. Teachers are invaluable as a resource, and are highly overlooked... That’s how I segued into human services.

Most volunteers simply want to give back and help. “It’s human nature to give,” said Stacey Rein of Ulster United Way. “We’ll never be at a loss for volunteers... Most of our volunteers are people who’ve done most of the things they want to do and now want to give back.” Tears welled in Chief Fire Coordinator Mutz’s eyes as he spoke about his colleagues: “Volunteers are there because they are committed to the community. Whether EMS or fire, these are proud people. They want to give back to their community as best they can. The whole idea behind this is helping your fellow man.”



Photo: Dan Torres

New Paltz Fire Department volunteer firefighter.

WHY DON'T MORE PEOPLE VOLUNTEER?

More than anything else, it seems, the time commitment dissuades prospective volunteers—the time to complete any required training and then to do the work. “Due to competing priorities, such as professional and family responsibilities, many young people are simply not in a position to volunteer their time, especially considering that more is being demanded of them in the workplace,” noted Stacey Rein of United Way. Moreover, if both spouses are working, as is now the norm, and especially if one or both have a long commute, people tend to want to spend non-work hours with their families. Also as shown in *Table 6*, the initial training for volunteer work can be time-consuming.

Table 6. Required Training Hours for Select Activities

Training	Required # of Training Hours
Basic EMT	150–190
Advanced EMT	160–200*
Paramedic	1,000–1,200*
Firefighters	116 (2 basic level courses)
CASA	30–60; plus 15–18 in-service**
Family of Woodstock Hotline	34 in first year, 3 each year after
Ulster Literacy	20

* NYS Department of Health estimates

** CASA of Ulster training follows a national curriculum, tailored for local circumstances and individual needs

Although perhaps a disincentive to volunteering, the training is essential, all of the human service and public safety leaders we interviewed agreed. “Other New York State agencies have reduced the training—in one case, to only three hours,” said Casandra Beam of Ulster Literacy. “There’s also online training. To me, that is really a disservice.” “Firefighting is a dangerous business,” Mutz pointed out. “We give volunteers the best education we can to make them safe.”

Even though the training requirements might dissuade some prospective volunteers, the requirements, at least for volunteer firefighters, are insufficient, some public safety leaders believe. Although a new volunteer would not enter a burning building, someone theoretically could “fill out an application in the morning, be voted in that afternoon, and get on a fire truck that night,” said fire investigator and safety officer Scott Schulte. Schulte believes lives have been lost due to insufficient training. “I see this all the time,” he said and wondered:

Although the public generally feels good when they hear a fire truck leave the station, that truck may well be staffed with a single retiree or a retiree and a couple of students. If people really knew the situation, would they still be OK with it?

Along with developing volunteers’ skills, training programs enable agency leaders or volunteer coordinators to get to know volunteers and so to make good matches, for example, between tutors and students or between Hospice caregivers and patients. “Part of the reason we do the 20-hour training is to get to know the volunteers better,” said Peggy Kuras of Hudson Valley Hospice. “We note the behavior of volunteers from the first phone call,” said Casandra Beam of Ulster Literacy. “I’m a wholehearted believer in deep, adequate training, especially for this very intimate experience” of tutoring.

Conceptions—and sometimes misconceptions—of what the work entails also dissuades some would-be volunteers. In truth, some volunteer work takes a toll. “We are in the business of responding to people’s worst day of their life,” said EMS Coordinator Richard Muellerleile. “We see some pretty horrific stuff—things people should never see.” Recruitment and retention of EMS volunteers consequently is particularly challenging. “The ghosts become too prevalent,” Muellerleile said,

What screws you up is the 75-year-old woman who has fallen with a hip injury. And it’s 95 degrees in the home and she’s living in squalor. That really hits you. Those are the calls that bother the hell out of you—the people you know are suffering every day. And kids.

“With EMS, the work is stressful, so you need to do something to deal with the stress,” said long-term instructor and volunteer Ron Fields. “Nobody calls you with good news, so you need some way to balance it.” “This work can be sad and can weigh you down,” agreed Amy Drayer of CASA. “We have great outcomes, and we have outcomes we don’t agree with... It’s a burden to bear. As a volunteer, you’re learning a lot and carrying a lot.”

Service clubs such as Kiwanis, Lions, or Rotary, charge members an annual fee and/or suggest donations. This could dissuade some prospective volunteers, although Collen Mountford of Kingston Sunrise Rotary and Steve Klein, who just completed a term as president of Kiwanis of Kingston, doubt cost is a significant barrier. For students, especially in locales like New Paltz, transportation is the ongoing challenge, said Erica Wagner of SUNY New Paltz and UlsterCorps. Few students have cars and few volunteer sites are walkable from the campus.

With some important exceptions, corporate commitment to community service, has waned, said Stacy Rein of Ulster United Way. Community involvement, once encouraged and expected, is no longer regarded as part and parcel of being a good employee. If not a direct impediment, this shift in expectations nevertheless affects volunteerism negatively.

Finally, volunteer work can entail significant opportunity costs, particularly for young families and especially in Ulster County, given the high cost of housing. “We need people to be able to afford to live where they live so they can volunteer—and to have more hours in the day!” summed up EMS Coordinator Richard Muellerleile. “It becomes hard to rationalize volunteering [as an EMT] when you could be making \$20 an hour as a paramedic. People can’t do this—or they stipulate that they are only available certain hours, such as 11 pm to 5 am.” With a spouse, two children, and three jobs himself, Muellerleile empathizes with other volunteers. “When you come home, it’s difficult to justify going back out on an EMS call,” he said. “Family comes first.”



CHALLENGES & REWARDS OF WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Interviewees shared a few horror stories of working with volunteers—the occasional parent who drops off a son or daughter for volunteer days with free childcare in mind, the college student who shows up at a juvenile detention center dressed for a night out, the service club member seeking to boost his or her resume, the “straggler” volunteer who refuses to track hours or stay in touch, the firefighter primarily interested in being a hero, the would-be hotline volunteer who cannot set aside his or her own judgments, or the CASA volunteer who wants to jump up in court and save the day. However, problems like these are rare and generally become evident during initial training—at which point, volunteers often can be redirected. At Family, for example, “If we feel the person can’t be non-judgmental, they can’t be on the hotline,” Michael Berg said. “But they can do other things.”

Although much volunteer work entails little risk, nothing is completely risk-free. “We do our best to be wise, but we don’t let liability fears paralyze us,” said Pastor Shults about the extensive disaster-relief and home repair work he coordinates. “We don’t let fear of liability keep us from caring for others.” “We have insurance, but try to avoid harping on worst-case scenarios,” said Michael Berg of Family.

The rewards of working with volunteers seemingly far outweigh any challenges. “Although we’re not here to serve the volunteers, seeing them transformed is a

very rewarding part of the work: when you see how they helped a patient and family to feel cared about and not afraid,” said Peggy Kuras of Hudson Valley Hospice. “People get so much out of volunteering, they don’t want to be paid. When you’re doing something just because you want to, there’s a freedom to it.”

“The reward is the life change that people experience—those served and those serving,” said Pastor Shults. “Volunteers come from a human place, a place of giving, a place of love,” said Amy Drayer of CASA of Ulster. They’ve made a choice to come to you. They’re coming out of a place within them.”

RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Because they are unpaid, volunteers obviously enable agencies and organizations to do more with less. Many of those consulted for this report noted that they also bring invaluable human qualities to their work. “Survival is an increasing issue for the program,” said Michael Berg of Family. “Carrying the agency is a huge burden. My desire is always to do more, and with volunteers we can do more.” “Consumers tend to feel more comfortable with volunteers than with staff,” said Stacey Rein of United Way. “It’s a more equal relationship. A volunteer seems more like them, and it seems like they are doing it because they care. It’s from the heart.”

Asked to imagine an Ulster County without volunteers, everyone consulted recoiled. “That would be devastating,” said Stacey Rein. “We depend so heavily on volunteers for fundraising and to be part of our programming.” “Human service agencies cannot possibly do without volunteers,” said Casandra Beam of Ulster Literacy.

“One-on-one tutoring is the most successful pathway for reading. And in our case, volunteers are the only pathway.” “Children [in foster care] would not be represented,” said Amy Drayer of CASA. “There wouldn’t be a voice for them [in court], and that’s our job. We’re not fireworks in the sky, but do we make small incremental differences? Yes.”

“Horrendous,” said Michael Berg. “People would have no way to get to a doctor’s appointment, for example. They have no other resources. There are costs associated with trying to hire more people. It’s probably impossible.” Several of the Family offices are staffed almost entirely with volunteers. Richard Muellerleile, County EMS coordinator said,

People would die. There would be a public health crisis. Logistically, fiscally, we could not sustain without volunteers.

The alternative would be taxpayer support of career departments across the county or of a single countywide department, with staff allocated to areas of greatest need.

Given Ulster County’s broad reliance on volunteers, recruitment and retention is critical. For many of those consulted, that means drawing thoughtfully on prospective volunteers’ skills and interests. “You have to seize the moment and find ways for them to give what they have to give,” said Casandra Beam of Ulster Literacy. “What will turn them on and make them want to offer what they can?”

“We try to match people with cases, and put a lot of thought into the matching,” said Amy Drayer of Ulster CASA. “People, like cases, are a kind of puzzle. You have to be matched with the right case and be prepared for ups and downs—or surprises.” “What you ask a volunteer to do has to be really valuable,” concurred Michael Berg of Family. “You look at the person and tailor the request to their interests. There is a lot of skill in matching volunteers with the right work.”

Incentives sometimes help. Some fire departments, for example, enable volunteer firefighters to earn points based on the hours worked, which translates into a retirement benefit. New York State offers volunteer firefighters property tax abatements, income tax credits, and \$50,000 in death benefits if they die in the line of duty. A bill under consideration in the New York State Senate would increase the maximum income tax credit to \$1,200. The Village of New Paltz’s new affordable housing law factors in extra eligibility points for its fire service and rescue squad volunteers. The Ulster County Regional Chamber of Commerce, through its Volunteer Incentive Program, encourages local businesses to offer discounts to emergency workers. Under federal law, volunteer firefighters receive cash payments as well as medical care during periods of disability resulting from injury in the line of duty. In the case of death, there are cash payments to surviving dependents.

Perhaps most important, however, is simply reaching out. “Recruiting volunteers requires being out in public,” said Patrick McDonough of the Ulster County Office for the Aging. “You get volunteers one to one, face to face.” Long-term EMS volunteer and instructor Ron Fields had good success recruiting volunteers “just by asking them—and allaying their fears” about the nature of EMS work and the time required, he said. “I found that when I got people to put aside their misconceptions, they were at least less likely to say no.” Chief Fire Coordinator Charles Mutz made much the same point: “People fear they’ll have to give 110%, but this is more fallacy than truth,” he said. “There’s an understanding that family, and maybe work, comes first—the departments understand this.”

CONCLUSION: WHAT'S THE RIGHT QUESTION?

One clear-cut need emerged from these conversations about volunteerism: a need for more Spanish-speaking volunteers. Twelve percent of Ulster County residents speak primarily a language other than English, with Spanish by far the most common other language. In addition, several consultants mentioned the need for more public visibility for nonprofits, which would create more awareness of volunteer opportunities. As Erica Wagner of SUNY Paltz and UlsterCorps put it, “Nonprofits have a hard time saying, ‘We need help.’ They don’t always tell their story very well.” With this in mind, local photographer Steve Jordan approached Wagner after he heard about the “Alternative Spring Break” she arranges every year and offered to make a film to better tell this particular story.

Beyond identification of these specific needs, the conversations raise some broader questions. Volunteerism simply defined is the giving of one’s time, but it is difficult to assess in part because it is difficult to track in practice. For example, if paid employees at a nonprofit organization work overtime to ensure that others’ needs are met (as many do), is that volunteering? Is completing a school-related internship or service-learning requirement volunteering? What about political activism? Is contributing time, energy, and skills informally rather than through a formal organizations volunteering? The lack of systematic data collection, which has not been a priority for organizations that rely on volunteers, further complicates assessment. It would be hard for any agency leader with a bare-bones staff to justify devoting more time to record-keeping if this comes at the expense of responding to immediate calls for help.

However, perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps what is needed is not more data but more thoughtfulness on the part of the whole community about the role that volunteerism is now playing and should be playing in meeting core human needs. This study affirms the value of volunteerism in helping address needs for food, shelter, comfort, transport, safety, disaster relief, and so on. At the same time, stepping back to survey the scope of volunteerism countywide raises some questions, including whether we are relying too heavily on volunteers. Through the investment of their time, energy, and often personal dollars, volunteers show what they care about. They vote with their feet, and almost always in favor of trying to make the lives of others a little better or easier. These efforts enrich the whole community. However, does this heavy reliance on volunteers indirectly show us what the community at large is willing to leave to chance?

In upstate New York, human services, funded with a combination of federal, state, and local tax dollars, are delivered almost entirely through county government. More than half of Ulster County’s \$330.4 million budget was spent on such programs in 2016. In New York, state government mandates a local share to pay for these services that is among the highest in the nation. Counties rely heavily on the real property tax. Property taxes in New York are also among the highest in the nation. Controlling them is a very significant priority for the state and all local governments, counties included. Thus a persistent question, when seeking to meet human needs in our communities, is the degree to which we can and should do the job with volunteer effort instead of tax-based funding.

Transitioning from “free” to tax-based service delivery would be costly. For example, as documented above, we rely heavily upon volunteer firefighters in our state: only about one in ten of our fire departments have paid firefighters. A 2015 study conducted by the Firemen’s

are we relying too much on volunteers?

Association of New York State estimates that converting from volunteer to paid career firefighting staff would cost \$3.87 billion statewide, representing a 26.5 percent tax bill increase for property owners. This same study estimates that in Ulster County a transition to all paid firefighters would require 720 paid firefighters at a total annual cost of approximately \$71 million as well as an additional investment in structures, vehicles, and equipment with an estimated price tag of \$142 million.

The job creation would be a positive economic benefit to individual firefighters and to the region as a whole, but the costs would be borne by taxpayers. The result: a 40.1 percent increase in property taxes for Ulster County property owners.

Currently, in New Paltz all firefighters are volunteers. We asked New Paltz Town Supervisor Neil Bettez and Village Mayor Tim Rogers to estimate the fiscal impacts of a transition to a paid fire service. They estimated that costs would increase by about \$4 million and the average town tax bill for New Paltz property owners would increase by about 30 percent.

Ulster County benefits from a vibrant culture of volunteerism, which is now built into the fabric of our institutions. Yet, notwithstanding our communities' exceptional commitment to volunteerism, we see fissures in our infrastructure for sustaining essential services through volunteer efforts. We must ask: Are these canary-in-a-coal-mine warnings with broader relevance?

Pursuant to this concern, we asked many of Ulster County's human service and public safety leaders: Are we relying too heavily on volunteers? Perhaps not surprisingly, their views differ, as the following representative comments suggest.

"No," said Pastor Shults of Cross Point Fellowship. We have a healthy volunteer fabric — and an over-reliance on paid work. The perception that government will take care of things leads to the belief that 'This is not my job.' When we depend on others to do for us, we are heading down an unhealthy path.

"No," Peggy Kuras of Hudson Valley Hospice concurred. There's a feeling in volunteering: we're all chipping in and not asking someone else to take care of it. I would not want to get rid of volunteerism and have all this be jobs. Volunteering is not something you have to do. Every single time, you do it because you want to. However, when the technical demands and risk reach a certain point, you do have to start paying people.

"Yes," said fire investigator and long-term volunteer Scott Schulte.

In the fire service, absolutely! Have you ever heard of a volunteer sanitation worker? No, because no one would do the job. Why would we expect people to go into a burning building for free? For some, because they want to serve the community. But not every volunteer has that mentality.

Perhaps, but what's the alternative? Michael Berg of Family asked in so many words:

I believe government on every level is going to contract. Some things done by paid employees will have to be done by volunteers. That's not good, but it's the way it is. We're patching together a dysfunctional society. Yes, we as committed individuals are trying to fix something that society hasn't gotten right. However, until somebody does something about that, I'm going to do what I can to make sure people can eat.

Within the scholarly literature, there are those who celebrate the power of volunteerism to transform a community. For example, John McKnight and Peter Block argue in their book *The Abundant Community* that "when we join together with our neighbors, we are the architects of the future that we want to live within." There also are those who caution that volunteerism, viewed as a form of charity, has its limits. For example, Joel Berg, author of *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America* cautions:

Charities should fill the gaps when government safety nets aren't enough, and we should do everything possible to make sure these charities receive the public and private support they need to fill those gaps. But, the only way to really solve this problem is for government to bolster economic advancement and fill the holes in its safety net programs.

Benjamin Center Director Jerry Benjamin offered this guideline with respect to how volunteerism and tax-supported social supports might be balanced: Volunteerism harnesses the best instincts of people... At the same time, there is a certain abdication of social responsibility. Volunteers should be called upon to provide a margin of excellence in service delivery, but not for meeting essentials.

Laraine Mai, a founding member of UlsterCorps, points out the less tangible benefits of volunteerism which are at least as important as the quantifiable dollars and cents: The benefit of volunteering to a sense of community is so important. Volunteering can expose people to the lives and conditions of others who are often invisible or who are different in lifestyle, ethnicity, religious orientation, etc. This often can lead to greater understanding and compassion. Given the times we are in, finding ways to reach across our comfort zones and being more inclusive in our orientation and actions is more critical than ever.

A question Scott Schulte raised with respect to fire protection pertains broadly to the volunteer work upon which we now rely for a great range of purposes: "At what point does it become too risky to have only volunteers, and at what point too expensive to have all paid firefighters?" We might ask: How should risk and expense be balanced with respect to child advocacy, to emergency disaster relief, to trauma-related crises, to help with "the worst day" or the end of your life, or to the fundamental needs for nutritious food, a safe place to live, and basic literacy? Surely this is neither a simple question nor one for which one size fits all. Surely, too, it is a question that will become more pressing in the months ahead. Financially strapped governments must seek to answer it with systematic study, but also with communal commitment and compassion. We must find a way to agree on what we need and want to do together and then to collaboratively attend to the costs.

Bios

Sue Books, a professor in the SUNY New Paltz School of Education, teaches comparative and international education as well as a seminar on education and poverty. She is editor of *Invisible Children in the Society and its Schools* (Erlbaum, 1998/2003/2007) and author of *Poverty and Schooling in the U.S.: Contexts and Consequences* (Erlbaum, 2004). In recent years Prof. Books has taught and conducted research in South Africa and Russia as a visiting scholar, and in Iceland and Brazil as a Fulbright Scholar.

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Research Assistance

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Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to the development of this report. The authors wish to thank the 19 people who were interviewed for this study: Casandra Beam, *chief executive officer* of the Ulster Literacy Association; Michael Berg, *executive director*, Family of Woodstock; John D'Allessandro, *deputy volunteer program coordinator*, Firemen's Association of the State of New York; Amy Drayer, *executive director* of CASA of Ulster; Paul Edlund, VITA *co-coordinator*, United Way of Ulster County; Ron Fields, *long-term EMS instructor and volunteer*; SUNY New Paltz student Philip Gomm; Steve Klein, *president*, Kiwanis of Kingston; Peggy Kuras, *volunteer coordinator* for Hudson Valley Hospice; Beth McLendon, *Family volunteer and co-founder and director* of UlsterCorps; Patrick McDonough, *volunteer program coordinator*, Ulster County Office for the Aging; Colleen Mountford, *past president*, Kingston Sunrise Rotary Club; Richard Muellerleile, *EMS Coordinator* at Ulster County; Charles Mutz, *Chief Fire Coordinator*, Ulster County; Stacey Rein, *president*, United Way of Ulster County; Scott Schulte, Ulster County *fire investigator and fire marshall*, SUNY New Paltz; Pastor Pete Shults of Cross Point Fellowship; and Erica Wagner, *service learning coordinator*, SUNY New Paltz, and *vice president*, Board of Directors, UlsterCorps.

We would also like to thank Meghann Crawford and Dan Levy at the Siena College Research Institute, as well as New Paltz Village *Mayor* Tim Rogers, New Paltz *Town Supervisor* Neil Bettez, and Laraine Mai, *adviser* to UlsterCorps.



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