

City's volunteer rate still near top of pile

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Portland neighborhoods may rely on too few volunteers, but the city is still ahead of the game on a national level. A study released this month ranks Portland sixth among U.S. metro areas for volunteer rates.

Nearly 36 percent of metro area residents volunteered in some capacity in 2004-06, compared with a national average of 28 percent, according to "Volunteering in America," a study by the Corporation for National & Community Service, which oversees the AmeriCorps and Senior Corps programs.

The city came in behind Minneapolis-St. Paul (40.5 percent); Salt Lake City (38.4 percent); Austin, Texas, (38.1 percent); Omaha, Neb., (37.8 percent); and Seattle (36.3 percent). Portland's exact tally was 35.8 percent. Statewide, the rate was 33.3 percent.

"Portland is a place that is ripe in community service," says Andy Nelson, executive director of Hands On Greater Portland, which connects volunteers and nonprofits. "It's got a reputation where people get involved, and that just attracts people from all over the country."

The study identified four major contributors to high volunteer rates: long-term commitment to the community, measured by homeownership rates; high socioeconomic and education levels; low commuting times; and strong nonprofits.

"Socio-entrepreneurs are just attracted to Portland," Nelson says, "and that means rich, vibrant nonprofit communities." Hands On Greater Portland connects 13,000 people with more than 300 nonprofits every year. Nelson says tens of thousands more would pitch in if they knew where to go.



The study tallied 557,000 volunteers in the Portland metro area, who served 79.4 million hours a year. The main volunteer activities were fundraising (25.7 percent), general labor (23.2 percent), tutoring/teaching (22.1 percent) and food service, such as collecting or delivering (20.7 percent). Women here are more likely to volunteer, with a volunteer rate of 40.5 percent, than men, 30.8 percent.

The study also found, surprisingly, that busy professionals are the most likely to volunteer.

In Portland, they include Catherine Gonzalez-Maddux, who will attend Oregon Health & Science University in the fall for her master's degree in public health. She volunteers as a project coordinator with Love Letters for Children, for which she and others create homemade cards for children with terminal diseases. A Spanish speaker, she also volunteers as a medical interpreter for the American Red Cross.

"I think volunteers are terribly important," she says. "It's fundamental to a well-functioning community. There are resources available that just wouldn't be here if it weren't for volunteers."

U.S. volunteerism remains at historically high levels, but the study noted a recent dip among adults. In Portland, youths are a strong force in volunteering, signaling improvement in adult ranks if they stick with it.

Kaylen Miller has volunteered for nearly two decades -- now with the Trail Blazers Street Jam, the Alphabet Project and as a project coordinator with Love Letters -- and started bringing her son, Andrew Barrango, along when he was 6.

Now 14, Barrango recently headed a teen project at the Portland Children's Museum. Miller says she's seeing more students get involved as they need credit for college and high school.

"Volunteering and community involvement is one of those distinguishers in a city," Nelson says. "To see us in the top 10 validates us. We've known it's true, and here's some research that shows it's more than just a feeling. It's the essence of Portland."

To read the report online, go to www.nationalservice.org and click on "Volunteering in America" and then "2007 City Trends and Rankings." Scroll down to "City Profiles" for more information on Portland.