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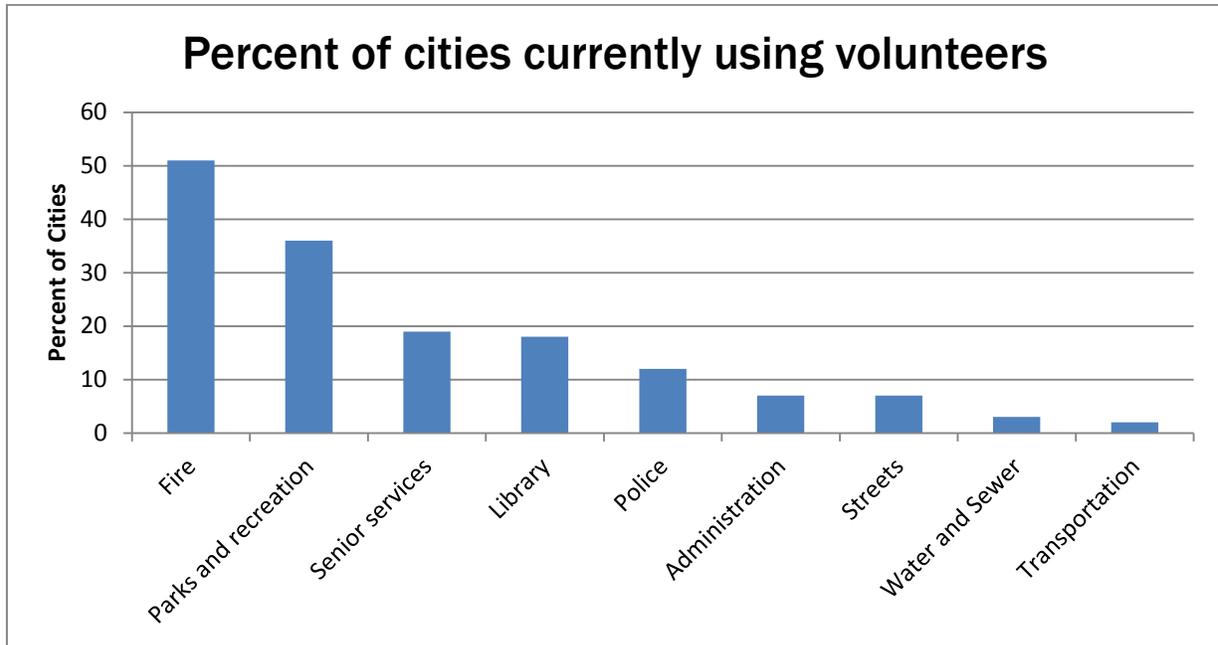
Cities Using Volunteers

Analysis and Case Studies

As part of the [2013 State of the Cities](#) project, the League's annual fiscal conditions survey asked cities about a topic that has received increasing attention over the last several years: the use of volunteers. Budget stress and pressure to find new and creative ways to do things has led city officials to explore several different strategies for serving their communities, including volunteers. Now the idea is certainly not a new one—cities have been using volunteers for a long time, and city residents have long offered their talents and time to their communities. The extent to which cities are considering using volunteers for the first time or significantly expanding their use of volunteers, however, seems to be increasing. Over the last few years, the League has answered more and more questions about the role of volunteers and what, if any, issues cities need to be aware of. Many of these questions have centered on liability concerns. But, increasingly, cities are looking to the League for advice on how to use volunteers and for examples of what other cities are doing with volunteer help from their communities.

The League's 2013 fiscal conditions survey asked cities about their current use of volunteers and about their future plans for engaging volunteers in their communities. Almost 400 cities shared their information. Several cities also offered to be the subject of a more detailed case study of using volunteers. They represent a diverse mix of cities by population size and also by how extensively they use volunteers. This report includes four case studies of the role of volunteers in the cities of White Bear Lake, Plymouth, Vergas, and Madison. A main goal of putting together these case studies is to inspire cities by the wide range of ways volunteers are active in these four communities. The case studies follow the summary of survey responses below.

The chart below shows the service areas where Minnesota cities are currently using volunteers.



Almost a third of cities report volunteers in one service area. Another 20 percent have volunteers working in two different areas. Clearly, fire services, parks and recreation, senior services, and libraries are the areas where volunteers are most prevalent. About half of the cities responding to the survey report using volunteers in fire services—in other words, volunteer fire departments. White Bear Lake and Madison both rely on volunteer fire departments. Volunteers for parks and recreation services and projects are reported in roughly a third of cities. Both Plymouth and Vergas have volunteer opportunities in a wide variety of park and recreation programs and services. In nearly 20 percent of cities, volunteers are active in senior services and the library. The areas least likely to include volunteers are water and sewer and transportation. It is likely that the specialized training and licensure for water and sewer work prevent cities from utilizing volunteers in that area. And, outside the metro, cities are much less likely to provide any kind of transportation services.

Overall, volunteers in cities are supplementing the work and efforts of city employees. At least 70 percent of all cities where volunteers are active report that those volunteers supplement city staff. Areas where volunteers are most likely to be doing work that city staff used to do are administration and parks and recreation. In the former, 27 percent of cities report that tasks carried out by city staff in the past are now done by volunteers. In the latter, that share is 24 percent.

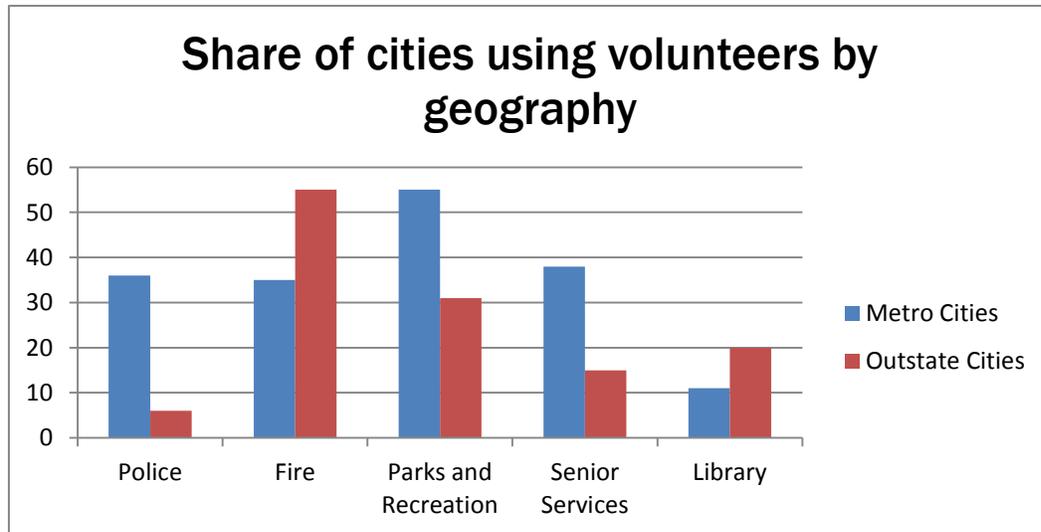
Looking at cities by size

Examining the responses by city size highlights some interesting patterns. Overall, half of cities use volunteers for fire services. Cities under 2,500 in population are more likely to do so—about 60 percent of them report volunteer fire services. Correspondingly, only 38 percent of larger cities (over 2,500 in population) say that they use volunteers for fire services. Another area where population size seems to make a difference is with parks and recreation services. Among smaller cities, 30 percent use volunteers for parks and recreation services and projects while half of larger

cities do so. Looking at all cities, the share was 36 percent. Larger cities are much more likely to report using volunteers in the following areas: police, senior services, and the library.

Looking at cities by location

Where a city is located in the state also seems to influence where it is using volunteers. There are some significant differences in volunteer use between cities in the seven-county metro area and those in outstate Minnesota. The largest gaps are in the police, fire, parks and recreation, senior services, and library areas. The chart below shows the share of metro and rural cities using volunteers in these areas. With the exception of fire services and the library, cities within the metro are more likely to be using volunteers.



What's next: areas where cities are considering using volunteers

Overall, the share of cities considering future roles for volunteers in different service areas is fairly small. The City of Plymouth, with its extensive history of using volunteers, is open to thinking about volunteers in all aspects of city services. In Madison, city staff are actively building relationships with local service groups to foster more volunteerism. Parks and recreation and administration are the only two service areas where more than 5 percent of cities are looking to expand use of volunteers or start using volunteers.

City of Vergas

Volunteers in the small City of Vergas contribute in a variety of ways. Julie Lammers, city clerk-treasurer, says that members of the community of 331 routinely call and ask what they can do to help. Residents of Vergas help with flower gardens, clean the parks and trails, and paint. They also help with hazardous waste clean-up days. For the flower gardens, volunteers do all of the work. When there is painting and trail cleaning work, volunteers work along with one city employee.

Assistance from volunteers means that the city avoids the additional cost of another part-time summer employee. Community members love feeling needed, and continually ask for more ways that they can contribute. Lammers reports that when people in the city hear about a project underway, more people want to volunteer. “A volunteer group held a “tables du jour” fundraiser to purchase new chairs at the event center. When the chairs arrived they were all wrapped in plastic,” Lammers said. “I emailed out a request for volunteers to remove the plastic off 250 chairs, and promised rolls and coffee. Eight women came in for about four hours and removed the plastic and said they had a great time.”

Some of the challenges that Vergas has faced include coordinating and supervising projects. For a time, a volunteer was filling that role, but it created some tension among members of the community. Now, it is a responsibility of city staff to coordinate volunteers and manage the projects they are involved with. Another challenge has been the schedule preferences of many of the volunteers. Since a lot of the volunteers are over age 50, they frequently are able to do only about two hours of work on any given day. That means projects sometimes are left incomplete.

Looking to the future, the city is hoping for volunteers to paint the event center, and get the city parks and trails ready for spring. For cities that are considering using volunteers for the first time, Lammers suggests starting with small projects and ensuring that volunteers feel useful. One of our first successful volunteer programs began with six people helping with hazardous waste. I began by looking to two volunteers for a shift of 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. After putting the word out, I had four women come in saying they could work one to two hours, but were unable to help longer than that. I then scheduled one-hour time slots and they were filled quickly. When your volunteers are over 65, they love to volunteer, but are only able to do so for short periods of time.

City of Plymouth

Volunteers are an integral part of the City of Plymouth organization, as well as the community. The City of Plymouth, with a population of just over 70,000, utilizes volunteer support in every department. According to Jackie Maas, volunteer coordinator for the city, the volunteers are talented and committed community members who generously share their skills and time. They provide a multitude of services from professional and technical support to coaching, construction, and everything in between.

Volunteer coordinator

In 1993 Plymouth formalized its volunteer program by hiring a part-time volunteer coordinator to look for new ways to engage volunteers in all departments. As the program continued to grow, the volunteer coordinator position expanded to full-time in 2005. The City Council felt that by investing in a staff position to coordinate volunteer efforts and work with staff on new and

innovative uses of volunteers, the city could better capitalize on the diverse talent of its residents and their willingness to contribute to their city government. This year the city is celebrating the 20th anniversary of that program.

Working with volunteers

According to city staff, the easiest thing about working with volunteers has been the positive relationships that naturally develop between staff and volunteers. Both parties feel the benefits of a mutually respectful working relationship. The Plymouth volunteers arrive to work eager and excited to participate. They feel valued for their contributions and, in many cases, get a chance to keep their skills sharp. Meanwhile, staff members are impressed with the skills that the volunteers are willing to share. They feel fortunate to receive assistance from high-caliber, talented individuals who want to give back.

Some of the challenges the city faced in implementing the volunteer program and in using volunteers have been establishing guidelines and policies to ensure appropriate use of volunteers, ensuring positive and valued experiences for volunteers, and gaining staff acceptance for working with and training volunteers to assist. Further, city staff members often face situations in which residents want to volunteer their specific skills, but the city does not have a meaningful opportunity or current position that is a good fit.

Supporting volunteers

The city supports volunteers in a wide variety of ways. The volunteer coordinator works closely with city staff to develop volunteer positions that offer meaningful opportunities that support the needs of both the volunteer and the city. Once the position is developed, the focus is on finding a good match between the potential volunteer and the position. The volunteer coordinator works with city staff to ensure that sufficient and appropriate supervision and support is available. The coordinator also makes certain that volunteers have appropriate work space and supplies to complete their responsibilities. Celebrating and recognizing the hard work, commitment, and value of volunteers is a top priority—and remains so throughout the person's time with the city.

Recruiting volunteers

Plymouth promotes volunteerism through a variety of media outlets, including city newsletters, the city website, cable television, and community newspapers. Additionally, it recruits from within the current pool of volunteers. "We believe that the best way to retain volunteers is to give them more work—identify areas in which they shine and ask them to take on additional responsibilities. By doing this, it shows that we value the contribution and skills of our volunteers," Maas says. According to city staff, with such a diverse and well-educated community to draw from, the sky's the limit as far as where volunteers may contribute in the future. The Plymouth volunteer program is fluid and flexible enough to meet whatever needs or initiatives city staff and the City Council places before it.

Contributions of volunteers

There are costs associated with running a successful volunteer program, but the benefits to the city and the community far outweigh the operational costs. In 2012, more than 2,330 volunteers contributed over 28,000 hours of service for contributions in kind greater than \$616,000. In addition, 298 senior volunteers contributed 14,019 hours. One of the most evident efficiencies is

the use of event captain volunteers during major special events. Volunteers identified with strong leadership and problem-solving skills take on significant responsibility, allowing paid staff to focus on overall event coordination.

In another example, volunteers adopt parks and trails in the city's system of more than 50 parks and more than 120 miles of trail. They help the city keep them clean and act as the eyes and ears to inform city officials of vandalism, graffiti, and needed repairs or maintenance. The volunteers feel great pride and take ownership of "their" parks and trails. The program is a great success with waiting lists for certain parks. The city has also been using volunteer LEAN management professionals. One of the most successful projects from this group was a review of absentee voting procedures, which resulted in improved processes and fewer rejected ballots.

City officials say that it is almost impossible to enumerate the number of activities that would not have been possible without volunteers. Examples include: planting 12,000+ flowers in one morning; having nearly 1,200 children participate in soccer, t-ball, and hockey each year; booking and transporting prisoners to Hennepin County jail; providing Chinese translation for a police issue and Russian translation for a drowning prevention poster; and producing a bimonthly Police Department cable television program.

Advice to others

Maas stresses that cities should identify just a few positions in which to begin—and to be careful to develop positions that are appropriate for volunteers. Starting small is important, as is planning and developing your program properly, along with celebrating your success.

City of White Bear Lake

A strong tradition

The City of White Bear Lake (population 23,797) has a long history of using volunteers in several areas within the community. That volunteer tradition is highlighted in the volunteer Fire Department, which is currently celebrating 125 years of service. It is not uncommon to see multiple generations of the same family serving in the White Bear Lake Fire Department.

These volunteer firefighters serve not only White Bear Lake, but they respond to calls from the surrounding areas and serve about 45,000 people in total. The 55 members include some who are paramedics and can provide a full spectrum of life-saving services. The paramedics and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) provide roughly 3,000 ambulance runs every year.

Although members earn a monthly pension or lump sum payment and a per-call stipend, the financial impact of having a volunteer department reaches far beyond city hall. City Manager Mark Sather reports a dramatic example: the cost for response by a private ambulance service in nearby communities can be as high as \$1,900 while the cost of the same service from the city department paramedics is about \$725. "The willingness of our members to undertake the necessary training and serve in an on-call capacity is a tremendous personal contribution to our community, and helps make excellent emergency medical care available to all in need," Sather says.

Another area in the city with a strong tradition of volunteer involvement is the Police Department. The White Bear Lake police reserves assist with patrolling parks at night and managing traffic during special events, and logged over 5,000 hours doing so in 2012. They also transport non-threatening individuals from the city to the jail in St. Paul. Reserve volunteers make that trip roughly 15 times a month and save officers from having to spend a couple of hours in traffic and away from their other duties in White Bear Lake. A group of seniors participate in the Triad program and help at the police department with crime prevention, records work, and materials sorting. They also take responsibility for a public awareness campaign that encourages citizens not to leave valuables in parked vehicles. Volunteers patrol parking lots and pass out brochures about decreasing the chances of theft.

In addition to assisting the Fire and Police departments, volunteers provide a variety of other services in White Bear Lake. The city has an assortment of highly active athletic associations, including hockey, softball, football, and baseball that make it possible for young people in the city to participate in sports programs that the city would likely not be able to provide on its own. The associations manage and staff the teams. The city provides the facilities and maintenance services. Things like ball field structures and billboards are often financed through association fundraising efforts.

Volunteers also contribute to park maintenance and several recreational events throughout the year in White Bear Lake. The Lions and Rotary clubs have undertaken various fundraising efforts to do things like build boardwalks and park buildings, and restore a historic caboose. The groups coordinated with the city's master plan to do historic restoration work and used their fundraising campaigns to reimburse the city for the upfront costs it incurred to get all of the projects done at once. Sather says that these projects are more examples of things that the community would not have but for the efforts of volunteers. Community residents help with the annual Market Fest and Manitou Days, two summer festivals. Both events are self-supporting and staffed entirely by volunteers. Finally, the annual fireworks display, a \$20,000 endeavor, has been volunteer-financed for over 30 years.

Building relationships

When asked what the challenges of working with volunteers has been, Sather points out that it is helpful to have staff available to assist and oversee volunteers to ensure meeting safety regulations and maintaining a high quality. Volunteers work closely with the city staff to confirm calendars and keep everyone informed. It is important to have a good system of supporting volunteers and coordinating their work and activities.

Sather says that the city has had no problems getting volunteers to be involved. City staff work to build relationships with leaders in the community and to identify key people to volunteer. This helps maintain a steady stream of volunteers coming to the city to offer their talents and time. The staff also maintains a good working relationship with the local media so that volunteers can get recognition in local news stories, and that calls for volunteers are put out when needed. The city also hosts a special recognition dinner each fall to celebrate the contributions of its many volunteers.

Beyond working directly with volunteers and building relationships, Sather says that the community fosters a culture of doing things for yourself. The city takes opportunities to educate the public about the cost of the city doing something like picking up litter compared to a resident taking care of it. When citizens understand the cost and tax implications of some of those choices, it helps to encourage the public to pitch in. Finally, leading by example is key. Many of the White Bear Lake city staff actively volunteer their own time in programs and events in the city.

City of Madison

The City of Madison has long turned to volunteers to boost the quality of life for residents of the community. In addition to its volunteer Fire Department of 25, the city of 1,551 relies on volunteers for projects focused on the parks, streets, the library, and senior services. As Jon Radermacher, city manager, explained, the residents of Madison are willing to step up to do things that the community finds important. While the things that volunteers do are not direct services, they are all things that help make the community a good place to live.

Building quality of life

Each year, volunteers help with a citywide cleanup event and rummage sale. Madison residents move things like large appliances to designated pickup areas for seniors and others who are unable to get their appliances out of their homes. In the past, volunteers took responsibility for painting the city's system of curbs.

Community groups, including the local Eagle Scouts chapter and the Kiwanis, have been active in helping with local parks. During 2012 alone, Eagle Scouts replaced and repaired the boards at the city's skating rink. They also constructed a new shelter to house the filter equipment for the wading pool. The shelter will help increase the life of that equipment as it will no longer be subject to Minnesota weather. The Eagle Scouts cleaned and painted playground equipment, keeping it safe and attractive for young families. Members of the Kiwanis installed a playground many years ago and continue to maintain it. They regularly check the equipment and paint it.

Volunteers also maintain the city's ball field. The city manager stresses that the community would certainly not have as nice a field if it weren't for volunteers. The expense of maintaining the field and the concessions would not be a justifiable expense for the city, which has had to reduce its staff in recent years. Community residents organized a fundraising effort to support a new grandstand, and residents also take care of the grass and fields.

Providing meals to those in need is another volunteer activity. Senior residents, who rely on the community kitchen for some of their nutrition needs, are greeted by volunteers who cook and serve 25 meals each day. Volunteers in Madison also deliver meals through the local Meals-on-Wheels program. Roughly 300 meals a week are delivered by volunteer drivers.

Radermacher points out that the city is looking to further engage youth organizations like the Boy Scouts, 4-H and the National Honor Society to work on special projects around the community. One project already underway with the Scouts and the local chapter of the Honor Society is a tree planting effort. The trees replace those lost in a severe storm several years ago.

Reflecting on the city's experience

For Madison, using volunteers has been a fairly smooth process, Radermacher says. Groups and individuals that regularly volunteer in the community don't create additional work on the city's part, although more coordination and oversight by staff has been necessary for stand-alone projects involving volunteers such as the skating rink repairs. Even with the coordination effort, though, the volunteer program is definitely worthwhile, and the city is considering expanding its use of volunteers. For example, the city's public works staff of nine is often unable to prioritize some maintenance projects, so the city is looking into using volunteers for some of that work, knowing that residents will take community pride in keeping buildings and facilities in good repair.

And, of course, the city understands the importance of thanking its citizen volunteers. City hall hosts a display of the Outstanding Citizen Award each year. A committee of Madison residents selects the award recipient, and his or her photo is displayed at city hall.

To other cities considering starting or expanding a volunteer program, Radermacher suggests building on relationships with existing groups like the Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis, and youth groups. Members of those groups are likely open to being asked and are probably able to do more than city officials are aware. Furthermore, members of those kinds of service groups can often leverage their own connections and networks to get things done. Creativity is also key as well as looking to other cities for ideas. Radermacher sums it up by saying, "We don't know the financial value of all the things volunteers do, but things are getting done and it is about quality of life."