

Center hopes to spur interest in volunteerism

By Barry Eberling

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FAIRFIELD — Monique Liguori thinks it's grown more difficult over the past couple of decades to find volunteers to help at the Wildlife Center in Suisun City.

The need remains for volunteers to care for baby birds and give classroom presentations. But Liguori, the center's executive director, sees more families with two wage-earners. That means fewer people with extra time.

“I started in 1980 as a volunteer myself,” she said. “I was a stay-at-home wife. I did not work and I was able to pursue a hobby that turned into a career for me. I think that's harder to find these days.”

Meanwhile, Faith in Action needs volunteers willing to do something totally different -- help people who spend most of their time at home because of frailties, illness and disabilities. Again, the search can be difficult.

“It's hit and miss,” said the Rev. Robert Fuentes of the group. “We have to maintain a pool of 125 volunteers. That means we're recruiting at least half that much every year.”

The new Volunteer Center of Solano County is designed to help meet the challenge. It debuted this month.

Potential volunteers using the center don't enter a brick-and-mortar building. Rather, they get on their computer or make a phone call to find out what volunteer opportunities are available and which fit their particular talents and interests.

“We are the conduit between the people who want to make a difference and the nonprofits who need their human energy,” Karla McCormick of the center said during an April presentation to the Solano County Board of Supervisors.

People can go to the Web site <http://www.VolunteerSolano.org>. Then they can do searches for volunteer opportunities by zip codes and topics.

Type in the zip code for central Fairfield -- 94533 -- and more than 100 volunteer opportunities come up. They range from tutoring children for The Leaven to writing grants for the U.C. Cooperative Extension to working on SafeQuest Solano's 24-hour crisis line to coaching moms-to-be for BabyCoach.

Prospective volunteers can tailor the searches to their particular areas of interest and even to the distance from their homes.

The needs of even a single nonprofit can be diverse. Youth and Family Services needs volunteer tutors and mentors to help in its mission of providing mental health and substance abuse treatment programs. But that's not all.

“We also could use a good handyman,” Kay Bosick of the nonprofit told the county Board of Supervisors in April. “When you're in the counseling business, you don't always have someone to fix the washer or the dripping faucet.”

Volunteers are the lifeblood for many nonprofits. A survey done in November 2009 of 65 local nonprofits demonstrates this. More than 90 percent said they use volunteers and most said they experience challenges recruiting volunteers.

The Volunteer Center of Solano County's goal is to refer 1,500 volunteers during its first year and then increase this to 3,500 referrals annually.

Liguori contemplated what life would be like at the Wildlife Center without volunteers. It wasn't a pretty picture.

“We don't function without volunteers, because it's just myself as executive director and Margie Furco as center manager,” Liguori said. “Our entire budget is \$50,000. That tells you nobody around here is pulling in a big salary.”

She's hoping The Volunteer Center of Solano County will make a difference in the volunteer search.

“I think it will give us wider exposure,” Liguori said. “Nowadays, people look for everything on the Internet. We have a Web site, but unless people know about us, they're not necessarily going to go to that Web site. We hope (the center) will expose us to people who might not have found us in other ways.”

Solano County Supervisor Barbara Kondylis at a Board of Supervisors meeting a couple of years ago mentioned the idea of having a local volunteer center. Fuentes said the Solano County Nonprofit Coalition informed county staff that it would be willing to be the lead on the project.

Now the work has come to fruition. Now The Volunteer Center of Solano County has been launched by the Solano County Nonprofit Coalition, the United Way of the Bay Area and The Volunteer Center of the East Bay.

Reach Barry Eberling at 425-4646, ext. 232, or beberling@dailyrepublic.net.

Contact The Volunteer Center of Solano County

Go to the Web site <http://www.VolunteerSolano.org> or call 707-422-2232

<http://search.dailyrepublic.com/display.php?id=30553>