

Sonoma County tops in volunteering

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Sonoma County, give yourself a pat on the back.

People living in the county volunteered in greater numbers and donated more of their time than in any other California area surveyed in a recent government report.

The county ranked first of the 16 California communities polled, many of them larger than Sonoma County. Nearly two out of every five adults volunteered in the county.

"They sure are generous folks," said Jim Roessler, volunteer coordinator at the Redwood Empire Food Bank in Santa Rosa. "We couldn't run all these food programs without them."

The food bank distributed nearly 12.6 million pounds of food last year to struggling families. That was only possible because 5,000 people volunteered and worked a combined 70,000 hours, Roessler said.

All that time donated to the food bank accounted for a sliver of the work donated by county residents, just 0.4 percent.

In total, people volunteered a combined 19.9 million hours on average during each of the past three years, according to survey results. Researchers put the value of that time at \$414.8 million year.

Residents say volunteering is part of the Sonoma County lifestyle. It benefits the disadvantaged and builds a tighter community.

"It's like a family here," said Jeanne Huffman, 81, who volunteers at Sacks thrift store in Railroad Square on Fridays.

Huffman has become friends with the other volunteers, and to her surprise she likes running the cash register and talking with customers about their thrift store discoveries.

She started volunteering at Sacks 10 years ago and liked it so much she began donating her time elsewhere. She now volunteers at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul on Mondays and she provides communion on Wednesdays for senior citizens who are home-bound or in nursing homes.

"I've never gotten tired of it," she said. "And I know a lot of my friends who volunteer haven't either."

Volunteering doesn't really feel like work, said Tim Hudson, a retired Windsor school teacher. He and his wife began volunteering at Redwood Gospel Mission near Railroad Square about 13 years ago. They've been coming ever since.

"If it is something you enjoy doing, it is not really work," he said. "Lives are being changed here."

Sonoma County's generosity outshone other California communities. The 39 percent of Sonoma County residents who donated time last year bested the volunteerism rates in all other Northern California communities surveyed, including San Francisco (30 percent), San Jose (29 percent) and Sacramento (26 percent).

Plus, Sonoma County absolutely blew the doors off the volunteerism rates in Southern California cities such as Los Angeles (22 percent) and Riverside (18.2 percent.)

The national average was 27 percent, according to the survey published by the Corporation for National & Community Service, a government agency that promotes and coordinates volunteerism.

"We're so community oriented here," said Eunice Valentine, executive director of the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County. "Santa Rosa and Sonoma County are such caring places."

She also credits local companies that make time for their employees to volunteer at local organizations.

The Volunteer Center helps businesses and people find volunteer work they might have fun doing, Valentine said. On October 23, they are hosting a day of volunteering at six different schools across the county. About 500 people are expected to join forces to paint school buildings, clean up playgrounds, and help with other maintenance and repair, Valentine said.

"Pretty much anything schools can't afford to do," she said. "Those are great days. People always seem to have a good time."

For a list of local volunteer opportunities go to www.volunteernow.org.