

Volunteer Center turns 40

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Organization kicks off capital campaign for new home

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The Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County received kudos this week from state and county officials who praised the agency's ongoing response to the needs of a diverse community.

COUNTY

"The Volunteer Center in Santa Cruz is absolutely the best in the state," said Karen Baker, executive director of California Volunteers, a state agency that guides policy development to support nonprofit organization and service needs and oversees groups such as AmeriCorps and Citizen Corps.

Of 28 volunteer center hubs in California, many of which are in major metropolitan areas, Santa Cruz County is home to the most comprehensive, forward-looking services to the community, Baker said.

"There is something beautiful going on here," she said.

Last year, the Santa Cruz-based center, which has offices in Watsonville and Ben Lomond, mobilized 3,121 volunteers to support 535 local institutions. Volunteers aided more than 1,600 seniors and people with disabilities, made 177 home-

safety repairs for seniors and removed 73,647 square feet of graffiti. Youth provided more than 7,300 hours of service, 132 tutors volunteered 9,228 hours in the literacy program and about 400 families received help in the holiday season Adopt-a-Family program.

With an annual budget of \$2 million, volunteers donated time valued at \$4.5 million, according to Karen Delaney, executive director.

The agency, which has outgrown its small county offices at the county's Emeline Avenue office, is gearing up for a capital campaign to build a 6,000-square-foot building in Live Oak.

A lot has changed over the years but one thing hasn't, she said. It's the average person who is making the difference.

The center was founded in 1967 by Marian McBee, a psychiatric social worker and member of the county Economic Opportunities Commission; Kathryn Merriam, a former teacher and president of the Santa Cruz branch of the American Association of University Women; and Margaret Schaeffer, a social worker and researcher for FIND (Friendless, Isolated, Needy, Deserted), a national organization serving the needy. They formed a steering committee of representatives

from seven local organizations — YMCA, AAUW, Red Cross, Welcome Wagon, Soroptomists, FIND and Economic Opportunities Commission — to train volunteers.

"This organization wasn't founded by leaders or by people on the front page of the paper but by three women who were average people. That's the beauty of the Volunteer Center," Delaney said.

They were soon linking volunteers with seniors in need and providing boys with older male mentors. English tutoring, jail visitation, mental health client services followed. By 1970, the program was serving more than 400 residents a month, with just two paid staff, 350 volunteers, and a budget of \$25,000.

In the ensuing four decades, the needs of the community have evolved and the way people give of their time has changed, too. The center is looking now at tapping into the aging Baby Boomer generation as well as ethnically diverse groups.

"Our task is to understand the community enough to know who lives here, what do they care about and to talk to the people who need help and help them create opportunities so the average person can always step up and be the difference," Delaney said.

Although volunteers in the past were people outside the workforce such as retirees and stay-at-home women, volunteers today are a much more diverse group. Young elementary age children are volunteering as are people well into their senior years. There are more opportunities to serve evenings and weekends or with family members. More people are volunteering today but the average amount of time the volunteer has to give has decreased.

Technology helps support flexible service and the center recently revamped its Web site so people can search an interactive online database for issues they're interested in and learn about virtual volunteering opportunities or drop-in one-day projects.

"We are trying to remove barriers," Delaney said. "There is a huge un-met need for volunteers."

Various local governments contribute about 40 percent of the organization's funding. About 10 percent each comes from state and federal entities and the rest is from private donors and fundraising efforts. Every \$1 donation is matched by \$2 in volunteer labor, Delaney said.

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