

# 'Volunteer Columbia' nears launch

*Program aims to connect volunteers with need*

BY DARRYL SWAN □

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When Sally Norbom takes a well-deserved break to reflect on the passage of her 67-year-old life, it doesn't take long before several themes begin to emerge: hard work, compassion, a dash of the romantic's thirst for adventure and an unwavering support for her three children.

Though the latter of those themes did not by itself land her the role as the face of volunteerism in Columbia County, it certainly steered her in a roundabout fashion to that end.

"Whatever they got involved in, I got involved in. Not to interfere, but to show them I care," Norbom said of her involvement with her children. "I felt it was important to stay attached."

A sampling of her resume includes work as a den mother, Little League team mom and, on a different scale, playing a support role to her husband's services in the U.S. Navy by hosting coffee gatherings with other military wives stationed overseas.

In time, as her children grew up and she and her husband transitioned into retirement, Norbom discovered that her desire to help out wasn't restricted to the family, and that while the love she has for her husband, Lowell, remains strong – they first met when they were both 7 years old – she worked best in a group atmosphere.

"I found out that I'm a people person," she said.

Norbom's enthusiasm for volunteering hit a wall when she moved to Columbia County 12 years ago, however. Though she wanted to offer her services, there was little information available about how to do that.

The phone book was a dead end, and several inquiries fell flat. She also discovered that some agencies simply didn't know what to do with her once they got her, and she found her time being idled away.

"I had no idea how to volunteer. I didn't know what to do," she said.

She eventually stumbled upon a newspaper ad that opened the door to volunteerism in the county, and has since taken on roles as a community and small claims mediator, math tutor for high school students, and as a volunteer with domestic violence prevention programs, estimating a volunteer schedule of five hours per day.

Sally's experiences and difficulty with navigating the volunteer network illustrate the

wide gap between a desire to help and the ability of local groups and organizations to tap that desire.

But if a program spearheaded by the Oregon Department of Human Services gets up and running, that gap could soon narrow.

### **Building the 'Volunteer Columbia' network**

Greg Russo, a community development coordinator for DHS District 1, which includes Columbia, Clatsop and Tillamook counties, said there are many stories similar to Sally's.

"We generally have a lot of people looking for volunteer opportunities, but I think the one problem that I can speak to and what we're trying to address, is that they don't necessarily know how to go about it," Russo said.

In 2001, amid DHS reorganization, the state agency canceled many of its county-based volunteer programs, instead leaving it up to each of the 16 districts whether to continue on their own.

Most didn't.

"We've had basically six years to look and ask ourselves, are we missing something in DHS in volunteering?" Russo said. "The basic answer to that is, yeah, we think there is."

Last July, Russo submitted a proposal to DHS to have Columbia County join five other districts as part of a volunteer pilot program to build a match-making network where volunteers and local agencies can link together.

In Columbia County, the program will be called "Volunteer Columbia."

Though Russo said he wants to draw a distinct line between DHS and Volunteer Columbia, fearing that people or agencies could shy away from the service because of the connection, it's hard to separate the two.

In July, the program received \$8,000 in DHS grant dollars, the least of the six programs, to get off the ground. Because DHS was already implementing software compatible to what to Volunteer Columbia's objectives, a huge cost savings was felt at the beginning, and the program remains well under budget.

The network will work like this: Anyone interested in donating volunteer time can visit the central database on the Internet, leaf through the posted opportunities, and contact suitable matches. Similarly, prospective volunteers can post their interests, and needy agencies can call them directly when positions open.

The service could be a real windfall for the county as it faces the possibility of severe budget restraints and increasing reliance on volunteers to provide services.

Testimonials from both volunteers and agencies will also be posted to provide first-

hand experiences, and it will be possible to link to various agencies for more inside information.

“We want a no-wrong-door approach to volunteering,” Russo said of the virtual program, expected to be up and running in January. A steering group is now attempting to iron out the fine details.

A counterpart to the online network is the opening of a volunteer center at the DHS office located at 500 N. Hwy. 30, Suite 210, in St. Helens, which is expected to occur in June.

#### **Resonant effect**

Information gleaned from the virtual program will be presented to the Oregon Legislature also in June with the intention of recapturing support for statewide volunteer funding. Several circumstances at the onset of the pilot program caused delays, and now the backers of Volunteer Columbia are feeling the pinch to put everything in place.

“Every time I look at that June 08 date, I kind of shudder,” Russo said.

Getting the program is right the first time around is important for several reasons, perhaps most of all so that would-be volunteers don't grow discouraged with early bugs in the system.

And for people like Sally, who said she never had a lot of money to spare, the one thing she could afford to give was time, though she added that even that has costs.

One of those costs is to ensure it is not wasted.

“I feel that my time is very important...what better way to donate?” Sally said.

To contribute to the Volunteer Columbia program, or to learn more, call 503-366-8388