

Doing good for do-gooders

Hands on central Texas focuses on helping volunteers do good work



By Andrea Ball
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The sun is shining, the volunteers are sweating, and Armando Rayo is in cheerleader mode.

Hello, house painters! Hello, gardening guy!

More than a dozen volunteers have shown up this spring morning to spruce up a shabby house on Gunter Street, and Rayo — director of United Way's Hands On Central Texas — is here to schmooze.

Everyone having fun? How did you hear about this? Rayo works the lawn like a cocktail hour, but this easy banter isn't about socializing. It's about face time with volunteers and promoting the United Way as a hub for community service.

But mostly, it's about finding out what makes do-gooders tick and getting them to volunteer again.

"We're really trying to tap into that energy out there," Rayo said. "In a sense, we're grooming people to be lifelong volunteers for us."

Eleven years after it was created, the United Way's volunteer center is thriving. It's coordinating more community service projects and connecting thousands more people to volunteerism.

Five years ago, Hands On Central Texas helped about 7,000 people a year find volunteer activities. Today, that number hovers around 10,000.

The center's success is a step forward for Austin, which struggled for years to create a centralized place for volunteers.

"Austin had a pretty spotty history with its volunteer center," said Sarah Jane Rehnborg with the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service. "It's always been very hard to support volunteer centers as free-standing entities."

The city's first volunteer center — Capital Area Volunteer Center — was created in 1980 as an independent nonprofit organization. Housed in donated space at a church on the University of Texas campus, the center thrived for many years as it connected people to community service opportunities.

But as the number of Austin nonprofits grew, so did the competition for funding. In 1996, the organization closed its doors.

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That same year, the United Way Capital Area started its own volunteer center. But the work moved along sluggishly, Rayo said.

Then in 2001, a task force of local nonprofit leaders started clamoring for something more. Members of Leadership Austin — a nonprofit group that teaches people how to become community leaders — wrote a report that detailed the city's lack of a strong and centralized volunteer effort.

"I think the United Way got a wakeup call," Rayo said.

Hands On Central Texas has increased the number of volunteer projects it sponsors. Five years ago, the center hosted one "day of service" a year, connecting 500 to 700 people to volunteer projects all over the city on a single day. Now it holds five of them a year, drawing a total of 4,000 volunteers.

The group also has made itself more visible. Rayo meets with neighborhood groups, organizes community events and trains corporate volunteers how to maximize their efforts.

The group also joined the Hands On Network, a national organization that coaches local volunteer centers on how to pump up civic engagement. Although the volunteer center is now called Hands On Central Texas, it is still funded and run by the United Way.

Rayo and his staff also act as intermediaries between charities that need goods and companies that want to donate them.

In January, Hands On Central Texas started a program that teaches people how to initiate their own community service projects. So far, the center has trained 25 people, including Mary McCaskey.

McCaskey — an H-E-B employee whose job involves connecting fellow staffers to volunteer work — has been doing community service since she was a teenager. She's volunteered at hospitals, clinics and schools.

Now, because of her Hands On Central Texas' leadership classes, she's trying to start a scholarship program for high school students who volunteer regularly.

"I love being a volunteer," she said. "It's not because of the pay, because obviously there's no money. But it enriches you more than you could imagine."

That's what Rayo likes to hear. And these days, he says, he's hearing it more often.

"People are hungry to go out there and do something," he said. "We want to help them do that."

aball@statesman.com; 912-2506

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