

Just say YES!

Island
Groups Need
Volunteers
Now More
Than Ever



BY CONNIE BYE

PHOTOS COURTESY BIMA, HELPLINE HOUSE,
BI HISTORICAL MUSEUM, ISLAND VOLUNTEER CAREGIVERS

Step up, Bainbridge. Nonprofit organizations across the island need you to volunteer.

COVID ripped apart the traditional model of volunteering, causing some people to step aside for a while—or permanently. Now, as the island’s population continues to grow and age, nonprofits need help more than ever.

“We went from hundreds of volunteers down to just a handful during COVID,” said Maria Metzler, executive director at Helpline House. “When we started reaching out to (volunteers) again, at least half were unwilling to return.”

It’s a story that’s been repeated all over the island: Some people felt they had aged out of volunteering. Others had pursued new interests. Still others worried about resuming in-person contact.

The scope of the problem can be seen in the Bainbridge Community Foundation’s State of the Sector 2023 Community Report: 57 percent of the nonprofit groups said they do not have enough volunteers, 34 percent said they have just enough while only 9 percent said they have more than enough. When asked about their greatest needs for assistance, 58 percent picked help with volunteer recruitment.

Even as the number of volunteers declined in recent years, the need for their help grew—and continues to expand, Metzler said.

That challenged Helpline and other organizations to find fresh solutions, including rethinking how volunteers could best be used.

The Bainbridge Island Historical Museum’s volunteer force is half as big as before the pandemic, said Executive Director Amber Buell. To address the challenge, the museum tried new ideas.



One strategy: Adopting a more flexible model. "Recognizing that many of our volunteers have varying levels of comfort with in-person interactions, we offered volunteers the option to inventory our research library, allowing them to fulfill a need but not be public-facing," Buell said via email. This adjustment also ensured that the museum continued to benefit from veteran volunteers' expertise.

Another successful change involved recreating the way volunteers interact with visitors, Buell said. Instead of serving as gallery docents, volunteers can opt to greet visitors from behind a desk, providing a measure of social distancing.

Kim Seigel, gallery and volunteer manager at Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, has stepped up efforts to match volunteers with jobs that tap into their skills. Some work as gallery docents, others serve on the installation crew as exhibitions change, some are specially trained to work in the book arts room, still others lead field trips, help with administrative tasks or work at special events.

"We're all about promoting curiosity," Seigel said. "You are bound to find something you enjoy—just try it."

At its peak before COVID, BIMA's field trip program relied on a dozen or so docents to lead school tours. Now, the art museum is working to rebuild its trained volunteer base and reinvigorate

the program with area schools, said Kristin Tollefson, education director. After kids visit with their classes, some bring their parents back to BIMA, she noted, "and that creates a potential volunteer pipeline, too."

At Island Volunteer Caregivers, the volunteer pool is healthy, growing to 317 people in 2023 from 293 in 2022, said Joanne Maher, executive director. She credits the staff's ongoing hard work and creativity.

IVC provides transportation and other services to 378 care receivers, Maher said. One goal is combating loneliness. "We want to ensure that no one is sitting home, isolated and sad," she said. "Even if it's only for 15 minutes, sharing time together builds opportunities."

Transportation is key to IVC's mission, but some volunteers do far more, such as inviting their care receiver to a movie, said Jackie Fabbri, volunteer program manager. "When we create companionship, that's when this becomes interesting."

The pandemic forced IVC to slow down and rethink how to meet needs, said Lynn Murphy, life enrichment program manager. One result: To maintain a personal connection, IVC matched care receivers with care givers in a phone buddy program.

One particular appeal for IVC volunteers, Maher said, is the ability to work an hour, a day or even once a year. "As long





as you want to volunteer and have gone through the background check, you're free to give what you can."

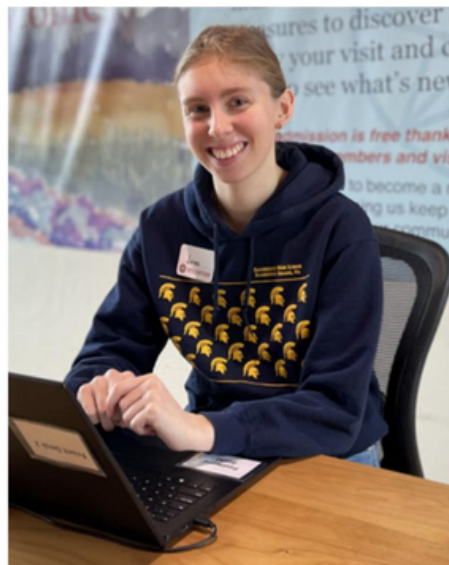
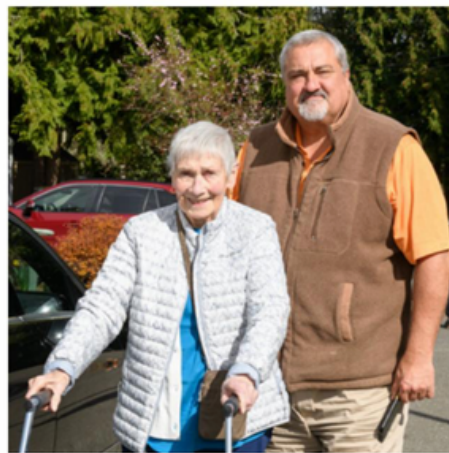
Still, IVC continues to be stymied by some of pandemic effects, Maher said. "We used to take people to Seattle for doctor appointments, but (volunteer drivers) are reluctant to do that now," she said. "It's the ferry system."

Expanding the Volunteer Pool

To attract new people, the history museum organized virtual programs, where potential volunteers could learn about the museum's mission, history and volunteer opportunities, Buell said. The museum also reestablished partnerships with local schools and universities, offering internships and volunteer positions. "These initiatives not only brought in fresh faces but also helped the museum connect with younger generations who could contribute new perspectives and skills," Buell said.

Today, Helpline has 85 to 95 people who volunteer in some capacity each week, said Kerry Lavigne, volunteer services manager. "We have people who do grocery rescue, handle operations, work in the foodbank."

A few high school students donate an hour or two a week after school in behind-the-scenes jobs, such as breaking down cardboard boxes, repackaging food into smaller quantities or restocking the front-porch pantry, where people can pick up food they need after hours, Lavigne said.



Routinely, Helpline receives two or three volunteer applications a week, Lavigne said. "But they don't always turn into volunteers, because situations change. We reach out to them on a regular basis for up to a year" to see if they are ready to start volunteering.

Helpline also is looking for ways to accommodate volunteers with specific requirements while still filling its needs, she said. That could range from working on a spot basis as a substitute in the foodbank to handling a job that can be done seated.

Some people even volunteer before they head to work, Lavigne said, including early morning pick-up of food donations from Safeway and Town & Country. "They are trained about procedures and get the items that are needed that day. We even have a couple who work on the weekends."



Creating a Sense of Community

Volunteers are the lifeblood of nonprofit organizations, and island groups aim to make their unpaid workers feel cherished. Many of them use appreciation events and parties to boost camaraderie and loyalty.

"By creating a supportive and inclusive environment, we hope to encourage volunteers to stay on board and become ambassadors for the (history) museum in the community," Buell said.

Helpline volunteers, for example, enjoyed getting together at an event at Fletcher Bay Winery. Lavigne said it was a chance for them to meet new people and to catch up with old friends. Some of them already knew each other from volunteering at more than one place on Bainbridge, she noted. "They were delighted they got to see each other."

Volunteering is a two-way street. People want to give back to their community, but they also are seeking a sense of personal connection, said Tollefson, BIMA's education director. For island newcomers, it's especially appealing to have an instant peer group, she said.

"Volunteering is not academic," Tollefson said. At BIMA, "you don't have to learn facts about art. It's a chance to learn together."