

Volunteering on the upswing at Salvation Army locations across the West

Giving back bounces back post pandemic

One sign life is returning to “normal” post-pandemic? Volunteering.

[Research from the U.S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps](#) found nearly 30 percent of the U.S. population over 16 formally volunteered through an organization from September 2022-September 2023—a figure similar to that from pre-pandemic life.



Those volunteers served an estimated 4.99 billion hours, resulting in over \$167.2 billion in economic value during that time frame—the current estimated national value of an hour of volunteer time is \$33.49, according to [Independent Sector](#).

In The Salvation Army Western Territory, statistics confirm this trend. From 2021-2024, the number of volunteers registered throughout the western U.S. grew nearly 16 percent, approaching figures from 2020, when The Salvation Army increased efforts to address the [increased levels of need spurred on by the pandemic](#).

“I believe people are seeking meaningful ways to connect with their communities after the prolonged isolation of COVID,” said [Territorial Director of Volunteer Engagement Stacy Dertien](#). “They are making a conscious effort to collaborate with others and rebuild connections.”

Dertien added that social distancing led to the rise of [virtual and hybrid volunteer opportunities](#), which made volunteering more accessible to a broader range of people, something reflected in the report from the U.S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps.

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According to the report, which first measured virtual volunteering in 2023, nearly 20 percent of formal volunteers served either partially or completely online, amounting to some 13 million individuals, 10

percent of whom reported having a disability. Sixty percent were under 55.

Researchers have dubbed the post-COVID volunteer increase, the “volunteer rebound.” So where is it happening in the West?

At The Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in Phoenix, volunteer numbers have grown by 162 percent from 2021-2024, something Administrative Assistant and Volunteer Coordinator Sarah Cowan attributes to the sheer number of opportunities available at the center, which features both a community fitness center and church congregation.

Across the Kroc’s community center side, a number of volunteer opportunities exist through dedicated programs for [sports](#), tutoring and job coaching, among others. On the Kroc Church side, teams for hospitality, Kroc Cafe, welcoming guests, prayer and children’s ministry, are among the opportunities to get involved. Then there are the big events, when companies bring 50-100 volunteers, and high school service programs, which add to the community impact.

“Volunteers help us as the Army, but it’s also helping our community and the members of our community get skills so they can then get a job and support themselves and set themselves up for success,” Cowan said.

Corps Officer [Captain Caroline Rowe](#) said having a dedicated volunteer coordinator in Cowan has helped the Phoenix Kroc Center in a number of ways, including streamlining the volunteer onboarding process and tracking volunteer statistics, which makes the experience better for those serving, too.

“We’re in a really [high needs, low-income neighborhood](#), and so when we have volunteers that step in...we’re saving money where we would have had to pay somebody, so it helps us create more margin. And without margin, there is no mission,” said Rowe. “We’ve tried to really integrate mission into everything we do...So we have volunteers that come on, they can’t help but hear the name of Jesus.”

Additionally, Rowe said Associate Corps Officer Captain Jessica Pearce developed a QR code leading to a landing page full of opportunities for church attendees to get involved. It’s featured in the bulletin and corps calendar for easy access.

“It helps people have more buy-in with the church,” Cowan said. “Like, ‘This is my church. I serve here. I’m a part of this. I’m valuable.’”

Several of the Kroc Center’s community programs have served as pipelines for volunteers’ personal growth. Cowan said during the summer day camp program, the center has a Junior Leader program for 14-17 year old volunteers, who work alongside counselors. One junior leader came back the next year on staff, and realized he wants to pursue a future in social work.

Through collaboration with other nonprofits, the Kroc Center has three to four volunteers at a time

who are participants in job readiness programs. The volunteers serve four 40-hour weeks.

“Sometimes it really gives us a good opportunity to hire good people,” Rowe said, estimating four work experience volunteers have been hired on staff at the Kroc Center.

The Salvation Army Aurora (Colorado) Corps has also found staff members through volunteering. Shortly after Corps Officers Lts. Carl and Melissa Esquivel were appointed to the post, team members had left for other positions and the corps staff consisted of the food pantry manager and the Esquivels.



One woman, who visited the food pantry for assistance, began volunteering out of gratitude. Carl Esquivel said she'd clean the windows, the chapel, the floors, the restrooms—anything—and help organize as needed.

“At one point, she was volunteering for 40 hours, and we saw some of her skills,” he said. “A position opened, which was the office and volunteer coordinator position, and we saw some of her giftings...She came in as a guest, became a volunteer and now she's our office and volunteer coordinator...She's also now a Salvation Army soldier in our church.”

The Aurora Corps' volunteer numbers have steadily grown to more than 150 a month since the Esquivels arrived at the corps in 2021. They attribute this to multiple factors, including cultivating a people-first culture and assessing the need—in four years, the corps has gone from serving 12,000 people a year to 36,000.

“It's not that we sought volunteers to just get volunteers, it's because we actually needed what we're looking for,” Carl Esquivel said.

They've worked to build networks within the city, which include the local Space Force base, police departments, [school districts](#), churches and more. When volunteer opportunities arise, the corps notifies the networks in a blast through the Volunteer Management System (VMS). They also keep their own church community involved.

“We're very much plugged in and have a pulse of what our city needs,” Carl Esquivel said. “We activate resources within minutes if we are called upon. So because we're needed, it creates the fact that we desperately need help. We can't do this just by the officers or the church or the staff. We are at beyond capacity, so therefore it really forces us to reach out and not work in silos, but work as a united front.”

One group of volunteers Melissa Esquivel is particularly passionate about are volunteers coming through the court system who are minors. The Salvation Army is one of a small number of organizations in the area who accept minor volunteers, so the corps receives a steady stream of youth required to perform community service.

“They pretty much all get sent to us, which is awesome, because we get to mentor them, and we can show them what The Salvation Army does, and just encourage them,” she said.

And it all goes back—and contributes—to the corps culture.

“We view people with dignity,” Carl Esquivel said. “We believe that everybody has some sort of leadership, no matter what their background is. Everybody has potential.”

Do Good:

- Whether it's through opportunities with The Salvation Army or elsewhere, your gifts are needed. *You are needed.* If you choose to cultivate these nine habits of impactful volunteers, you will make a difference in the lives of others. When you strive to do good, you help build a safer world for all *and* give others a lasting display of the love behind your beliefs. [Get the guide on How To Be An Impactful Volunteer](#) and join us in Doing Good today.