The Evolution of RSVP

By Maureen McGarry

With winter upon us, and the return of the Aleutian Geese to Humboldt Bay, we are reminded of their recovery from near extinction and the power of their journey as they noisily cackle above us in chevron flight each morning. Their remarkable comeback provides a hopeful analogy for many of the changes RSVP has seen in the past 3 years.

In 2012, the federally-funded Corporation for National Community Service introduced sweeping changes to RSVP by introducing Performance Measures to more objectively gauge volunteer impact. Also known as the “Retired Senior Volunteer Program”, each RSVP across the country was mandated to serve community needs through new focus areas.

This new mandate resulted in the Humboldt/Del Norte RSVP changing where the majority of volunteers are placed. All volunteer placements are now measured for impact. This eliminated long-standing volunteer positions from the program. Traditional volunteer jobs such as hospital volunteers, community patrol programs and congregate meal programs do not directly fit into the new measurable outcomes. Because of this RSVP has gone from over 400 volunteers on record in 2012, to a current number of around 250.
However, like the small geese that abundantly thrive around us, measurable volunteer activity is on the rise. In Humboldt, growing interests in the environment and healthy outdoor living, as well as awareness of alternative aging possibilities in our community, have sparked new opportunities for volunteers.

The Volunteer Driver Program began as a pilot program in 2010 to provide transportation for older adults and disabled to medical appointments. By 2012, it was a regular RSVP program and grew from 11 volunteers to its current number of 39. The program is expanding to include grocery delivery.

Potawot Community Gardens is looking for more volunteer help to support healthy eating through the United Indian Health Center in Arcata. There are always volunteer openings in food banks and food pantries in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties.

The HICAP Program (Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program) is staffed by several skilled volunteers who help more and more aging boomers understand the complexity of Medicare.

Hospice of Humboldt welcomes more volunteer help, as do the Breast and GYN Health Project, the American Cancer Society, and St. Vincent de Paul Dining Center.

Environmental Stewardship programs include the Humboldt Trail Stewards who have been building and maintaining trails along the coast and in the Arcata Community Forest, and plan to be involved in developing trails in the new McKay Community Forest.

New programs such as SCRAP Humboldt and Zero Waste Humboldt are seeking volunteers to provide measurable service by using creative and innovative ways to prevent waste.

From Redwood National Park to the Arcata Marsh to the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge to Humboldt Redwoods State Park, RSVP volunteers provide information to the public.

In Education, measurable opportunities include tutoring in the Decade of Difference Early Literacy Program and mentoring for CASA of Humboldt.

Like the geese who have adapted to new shores, RSVP volunteers are beginning to strengthen in numbers as we rebound from the changes that have taken place over the past 3 years.

Experts say that geese help each other in flight by a vortex of air that rolls off the wings of each bird, helping the bird behind them. The geese rotate the lead to help keep the whole group going. In our community, volunteerism works best when everyone works together. The changes in RSVP bring new opportunities to work together to serve community’s needs.
For more information about volunteering, contact RSVP at 442-3763 or visit our website at www.a1aa.org.

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