

## **Serve your country by serving your community**

**By Maureen McGarry**

What does it mean to be a committed citizen? Much of our community depends on the many non-profits that provide services not provided directly by the government or the private sector. Driving seniors to medical appointments, tutoring in local schools, trail building in the forests and parks, gardening at local farms for food distribution for those in need, being a disaster preparedness volunteer in your neighborhood- all these things and more are ways to serve your community and, at the same time, your country.

Being an RSVP volunteer means that you are a National Service Volunteer. The history of national service in this country goes beyond military service alone. In the early 1960's, President Kennedy started the Peace Corps looking at ways Americans could assist other developing nations. VISTA, the National Teachers Corps, and Job Corps followed with President Johnson helping to address poverty in America. In 1965, the Older Americans Act was the beginning of the Foster Grandparent Program and Senior Companions. RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) soon followed.

The idea of community service has expanded over the years. Programs like Habitat for Humanity got started after President Carter's term as president. The first President Bush started the Points of Light Initiative. Then, in 1992, Congress created the Corporation for National Community Service. President Clinton's era restructured volunteerism in this country with AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, VISTA and Learn and Serve America.

So, how do you as a citizen connect with your immediate community and national service? From the basic concepts of traditional patriotism to grassroots movements in education, environmentalism, and urban and rural planning in the past 50 years, national service has taken on many forms. RSVP began because of a growing awareness of the value and effectiveness of focused community service and volunteerism as a national resource.

The Community Service Society of New York launched a pilot project on Staten Island with a small group of older adults in volunteer service to their communities. The success of this program led to an amendment to the Older Americans Act, creating the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program in 1969. RSVP was launched in the spring of 1971 with an appropriation of \$500,000 under the Administration of Aging (AoA). In the same year, it was transferred to the federal agency, ACTION, which had oversight of federal domestic volunteer programs. Eleven projects were started in the summer of 1971. The current name for the federal agency is the Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS). Today, CNCS engages more than five million Americans in service through its programs.

Why should Humboldt and Del Norte 55+ citizens sign up with RSVP? While people do good things all the time, signing up and tracking hours of service and types of services helps measure the impact of these efforts and shows that volunteers make a difference in their community. Humboldt and Del Norte receive over \$90,000 in federal support which not only serves volunteers, but helps employ local citizens. Other benefits include modest mileage reimbursement and liability insurance for volunteers. RSVP volunteers are also annually recognized and thanked at a celebration of their efforts during National Volunteer Month in April.

Keeping track of what volunteers do locally helps send a message to Washington and to our legislators about what this community thinks is most important. This can be seen in the many hours and numbers of volunteers that step up and are counted.

A community is only as good as its citizens. Fortunately, thousands of volunteers have served the North Coast as RSVP volunteers over the past 40 years and many good things happen because of their valuable work. So when you wake up in the morning and ask yourself, "What am I doing to make the world a better place?"-consider joining RSVP. For more information about national service and RSVP, contact Maureen McGarry at 442-3763 or go to the Area 1 Agency on Aging website at [a1aa.org](http://a1aa.org).

RSVP Volunteer Trail Stewards at the Arcata Marsh.

