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# No lack of options to volunteer in Pueblo



**ERIK SEGALL**  
Guest columnist

The recent closing of Pueblo Suicide Prevention Center could signify a rebirth of local volunteerism.

Twenty years ago, I broke down in Pueblo. My car that is. Luckily leaving me stranded in this town that values one quality: helping others. Talk to anyone here and 30 seconds later you'll find a connection — a familial trait my East Coast roots lacked.

Among my first volunteer experiences was with the Mesa Junction Association helping to organize the annual Kids' Parade with nearly 500 costumed youngsters marching down Abriendo Avenue, past Schusters (don't call it Banquet) and the Pantry.

Months of preparation by MJA board members led by John Carleo and Paulette Stuart result in an annual parade that is wrapped up with street sweepers erasing all signs of the festivities in less than 25 minutes. Hard work, but the kids always love the parade.

Jean Latka, having planted

over 4,000 trees with Jean Eskra and their eco-friendly charity named Trees Please, explains the real obstacle facing many nonprofits. "Getting the money is easy; getting people's time is hard."

Discovering how to donate one's time to the nearly 150 local nonprofit organizations can be daunting. How? Where?

One answer is surveying several local agencies and asking how does this particular nonprofit serve the community and what is the role of their volunteers?

There are two methods for sufficiently answering this query. One is to read the Web page and/or freshly minted pamphlets revealing the mission statement and revenue expenditures. Or you can find the Southern Colorado Community Foundation's nonprofit directory at [sccfcolorado.org](http://sccfcolorado.org) for a listing of local groups with a new volunteer opportunities section, then close your eyes and randomly pick an address, walk in the front door and sign up for duty, which is what I did a year ago with Pueblo Suicide Prevention Center.

After 40 hours of training and talking to nearly 10 callers per night, one thing I learned as a listener at suicide prevention is that the difference between men and women comes

down to tears. With women in crisis, the tears burst in the beginning, words rushing out in between sobbing gasps until the reservoir runs dry with a final sense of relief. Men hold back the pain, handling it as they've been taught, dry gaps in the dialogue until they're utterly overwhelmed — and the dam finally breaks.

A few callers are verbally grateful for a compassionate ear and the "thank you" at the end of the call makes their tears completely worth it.

Allow me to offer a caveat: It's a rough haul to start your volunteering quest with an agency that focuses on victim advocacy, like ACOVA or Pueblo Rape Crisis Services — it takes a dear heart to work there.

Losing Pueblo Suicide Prevention affected not only those in need but damaged our city's dignity. For 40 years, regular Pueblo folks could answer a landline telephone and help someone from anywhere in Colorado who was in crisis. Not just a bad day, but the worst and possibly last day of his or her life.

But there are other opportunities available to start off volunteering — a soup kitchen or the mission on Fourth Street or any of the other health and human services organizations.

As the saying goes, "Volunteers are the first to show up and the last to leave" but in actuality they never leave.

They take it all home: the concern for the homeless, the victim's pain and a child's hope. And they come back the next day, a little bruised perhaps but ready for battle. You see, volunteers are in the trenches and on the front line. We meet you at the front door and hold your hand because we remember being scared the first day we walked in.

A good place to start would be simply to look out the window. There are over 30 Neighborhood Watch groups organized by officer Brandon Beauvais at the Pueblo Police Department.

From there, allow your personal interests to peek around the corner and see what's going on down the street.

Interested in education? The public libraries and Pueblo City Schools (D60) offer opportunities to improve children's literacy.

Religious? Catholic Charities as well as any church or synagogue in town would gladly welcome your service.

Animals? You might be barking up the right tree with PAWS for Life and the Pueblo Zoo. Community Activism?

Many of the 44 Pueblo

County governmental agencies need people to serve on their board of directors such as the Noxious Weed Advisory Board, which is quite different from the Liquor and Marijuana Licensing Board.

Art and entertainment? Pueblo Arts Alliance, Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center, Impossible Players and Okolitzta Tamburitizens work toward fostering the creative spirit necessary for regional economic transformation.

Still not sure? Visit the United Way's new office on Abriendo and ask Andrea Aragon about one of the 45 programs they fund annually. Among them are the Middle School Mentorship program, and discover the good they do for our community — each and every day.

Maybe if we all knew a little more about the good being done for tomorrow instead of just reading about the horrors of yesterday, then we'd be able to get through today.

Maybe if people knew what community services were here in our town, then we wouldn't lose any more of our home-grown causes. Indifference or lack of awareness should not keep us from helping one another.

*Erik Segall is an active volunteer in Pueblo.*