

Washington County nonprofits find new ways to stretch volunteers and dollars

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BENJAMIN BRINK/The

Oregonian Ted Forgeron, 56, checks his list of deliveries for the new Meals on Two Wheels program run by Beaverton Loaves & Fishes.

If your passion is to ensure impoverished, homebound grandmothers eat at least one hot meal a day, you might seek help from a food bank, a health clinic or a senior center.

But the [Cat Adoption Team](#)? The [Oregon Bicycle Racing Association](#)? Both groups recently heard from the local [Loaves & Fishes](#) seeking help with Meals on Wheels.

That's how 56-year-old Ted Forgeron of Beaverton found himself chugging up a 9 percent grade on his bike, lugging a trailer with a hot meal behind him.

Creative connections among nonprofits often solve several problems at once, including the challenge of how to match a willing spirit like Forgeron with a program that fits his personality. Collaborations also can bring greater efficiency and "wins" for each partner.

That's particularly important now, as the recession leads to shrinking donations and swelling cries for help.

It is especially needed in Washington County, which has relied more than some other populous counties on nonprofit partners. Instead of running its own health clinics, for example, it contracts with the [Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center](#).

"I believe that's a more cost-effective technique," said Washington County Commissioner Dick Schouten.

Sixty nonprofits recently attended a networking forum in Hillsboro sponsored by [Vision Action Network](#), a nonprofit funded largely by the county that promotes collaborative problem-solving.

At the forum, the cat people found themselves talking to the elders people, the wetlands people talked to the food people, the theater people to the housing people and the library people to the health people.

One thing they all discovered: "We don't always know what each other does," said Lisa Brown of [Community Action](#), which helps low-income people with energy bills, housing, shelter, preschool, pregnancy services and more. "We need to tell each other our stories."

That theme, raised nine years ago in the focus groups that helped the county launch Vision Action, apparently still holds true. And it goes for both organizations and people.

"Volunteers are multi-dimensional," said Sia Lindstrom, former director of Vision Action. "An Intel volunteer might be in a church group or on a soccer team or on another nonprofit."

It's key to creative connections: Look further and look deeper. Don't stop at the name of an organization or the job title of a volunteer or employee. Look for hidden hookups.

Take Julie Webber, an employee of [Washington County's Disability, Aging and Veteran Services](#). Webber, a public health and nutrition specialist, oversees the county's nonprofit Loaves and Fishes program.

Webber is also an animal lover who regularly visits and donates to the [Oregon Humane Society](#), where many pets have been given up by owners who can't afford to care for them.

Webber knows pets are particularly important to homebound, isolated seniors, such as those served by Meals on Wheels. Last fall, she met a cash-strapped woman mourning the cats she had to give up. She knows others are sharing their hot meals with their pets.

Webber suggested Loaves and Fishes add a pet food component to Meals on Wheels after noticing a similar program in Clark County.

She also called the Sherwood-based Cat Adoption Team, a no-kill shelter known for its aggressive and successful adoption efforts.

Last June, the shelter started a cat food bank, handing out free pet food to needy owners the first Sunday of every month. The proffered poundage has grown from 375 a year ago to 1,840 this month. People come from all over and start lining up at 9 a.m., said public relations manager Kathy Covey, even though the shelter doesn't open until noon.

Covey took Webber's call and is excited about setting up a partnership. Loaves and Fishes regional manager Rebekah Albert said they are discussing the possibility of adding dog food to the program and hopes a pilot can start this year.

Nonprofits have long welcomed one-shot community help, such as people who collect donations instead of birthday presents or restaurants that contribute a percentage of proceeds on a certain night.



ABBY METTY, The Oregonian Sheldon Beck waters strawberries accompanied by Edwards Center employee Heather Self. Behind them, clients gather on a patio Nike volunteers made using a grant from the Aloha Garden Club so wheelchair users can enjoy the flowers. The Aloha-based Edwards Center serves adults with developmental disabilities.

Washington County's [Domestic Violence Resource Center](#) recently raised more than \$1,200 from [McCormick and Schmick's](#) in Beaverton and five other local spots -- enough for a mom and several children to spend six weeks at its shelter for abuse victims on the run.

[Hands On Greater Portland](#) offers a menu of volunteer opportunities so people can find tasks and times that suit them.

But many nonprofits are reaching out to each other and to business or government partners for longer-term help.

In a state thick with 501(c)(3) organizations (1,495 in Washington County as of 2007), some overlap is inevitable, said Howard Klink, vice president of community investment for [United Way of the Columbia-Willamette](#). "How many agencies do we need delivering the same type of service?" he asks.

In 2006, hoping to spark greater efficiency, United Way began requiring grant applicants to feature collaborations.

Klink remembers some people arguing that the money needed to collaborate would be better spent on clients. But many came back and said, "I'm glad you asked us to do this. Putting together this collaboration has opened up doors and improved quality."

One of the first successful applications provided [A Child's Place](#) in Hillsboro with consultants from [Morrison Child and Family Services](#) in Portland.

The bilingual Child's Place, serving children from low-income, single-parent families, got crucial mental-health care for troubled students, while Morrison developed cultural competency with Latinos.

Some partnerships are natural fits. Outdoor retailer [REI](#), for instance, is supporting a new overnight camping opportunity this summer for educational programs at [Jackson Bottom Wetlands](#).

But nonprofits are also getting help from unconventional quarters. [Kaiser Permanente](#), for example, is supporting trails projects because trails encourage physical activity that could reduce obesity and its health risks. Kaiser pediatrician Philip Wu just joined the board of the [Westside Transportation Alliance](#), which supports biking, walking, transit and carpools.

[Elders in Action](#), which helps seniors with problems in housing, health care, crime or abuse, is developing partnerships with arts organizations. The impetus was a [photo contest](#) that started as a fundraiser then turned into a celebration of how creative the post-60 years can be.

And Loaves and Fishes is seeking volunteers among local bicyclists, including Forgeron, who saw the request for help on the Oregon Bicycle Racing Association Web site.

Forgeron is one of two cyclists delivering meals out of the Beaverton Loaves & Fishes site through a new "[Meals on Two Wheels](#)" program.

"I have some older friends that do Meals on Wheels," Forgeron said. "I just didn't like the idea of burning a bunch of gas and driving my car."

Each Tuesday, he loads up the hot meals at the [Elsie Stuhr Senior Center](#) while the other --driving -- volunteers hover around, offering advice.

"People are just cheering him on in the dining room when he rides out," said Vicki Adams, the Beaverton program director.

"I'm kind of a folk hero," Forgeron said.

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