Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. Being a volunteer is usually considered an altruistic activity. In general volunteers promote something that's good or improves quality of life but volunteering can also be self-serving for instance some people volunteer for their own skill development or to have fun or to meet other people. Regardless of your motivation, volunteerism is the act of giving yourself to something you believe and free of pay. As you might've guessed we're focusing on volunteerism this afternoon as part of National Volunteer Week. Amy Carmola and Ruthann Hackett are both with the United Way of Chittenden County. Amy is the United Way Director of Community Impact and Engagement and Ruthann serves as the Program Coordinator; thanks so much for being with us. Amy let's start off by talking a little bit about what the United Way has to do with volunteerism.

Amy.: The United Way is really committed to volunteerism and to promoting and supporting volunteers across Chittenden County because we really see volunteerism as one of the most effective strategies for achieving community change and for helping improve people's lives. Our mission as an organization is to mobilize the community to improve people's lives and a lot of people think about United Way as having a community campaign and as raising dollars in the community to invest in other programs and initiatives within the community. But that's one of the major ways that we mobilize the community. Volunteerism is another hugely powerful strategy for saying how do we mobilize resources the caring power and the people power to invest in achieving community priorities. We don't see volunteerism just as something people enjoy or as a way to give back but as a means to an end to really achieve what we want to see.

Judy.: Ruthann let's talk a little bit about who are today's volunteers?

Ruth Ann.: Thanks Judy. Today's volunteers cover a wide range; we like to say from 10 years up to 110 years so lots of volunteers in the community start out as youth and then volunteer with their families. They carry that tradition on into the high school and college years and then work into their adult age and later on into retirement. They start out and carry through as building new skills they come in to a volunteer opportunity looking for new skills and sharing the skills they have. In college age it helps build a resume or something that's going to get you into the workforce that's going to be helpful. Then we carry through when we see lots of volunteers that want to give back and make a difference. It is a two-way street so you're doing something for the community which are also feeling good and doing something for yourself and gaining a skill and the process. The skills are in a wide range and also we have a lot of people that want to volunteer with health services, technology and
computers, public relations and marketing, and some of them started doing short term volunteer opportunities so it might be once or twice a year or do something that's on a specific date some people look at it and the longer range and want to make a commitment to one nonprofit and carry through a whole year and build a relationship with that and maybe do once a month or twice a month. Really the age range and the range of skills and commitment can vary.

Judy.: It really sounds like there can be an opportunity for anybody depending on what your skill set is or what your time commitment could be?

Ruth Ann.: Yes it varies in that we have lots of opportunities through the Volunteer Connection that can help people match up with their skills and their interests and their time availability.

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about that because what does the United Way of Chittenden County Volunteer Connection do to help mobilize volunteers?

Amy.: We do a lot of work to recruit volunteers and to advertise the opportunities that are available. One of the biggest ways we do that is through our website. At the United Way of Chittenden County we have a website it's: unitedwaycc.org . If you go to the website you can click on “volunteer” and through that website people can see over 400 opportunities that are available. There is a picture of our main web site for the United Way of Chittenden County. There's a lot that are listed there. There are opportunities for individuals and for groups, over 200 nonprofits locally and it’s really easy to use and search the web site that anyone can log on at any time whenever it's convenient for them and they can search by an interest area search by availability search by particular organization and find an opportunity that seems interesting to them that works with the amount of time that they want to give right now and what they really care about.

Judy.: What are some of the myths about volunteering? Do people think you have to come of the office and fill out forms?

Ruth Ann.: As Amy just said it is very flexible. With our website up and running its 24/7 so it's comfortable for people to access that at their home and they don't have to come into the office. One of the other ways that we put information out this through our Ways of Caring which is a publication that comes out four times a year for mostly short term and event opportunities. We mail that out to people that are on a mailing list and we also have access to that on our website and it gives a snapshot of different short term opportunities at certain times of year. It will give the description and all the contact information so people can browse through it and contact with the nonprofit directly and sign up for volunteer opportunities. It no longer is you have to sit down and do a full-fledged interview through us but you need to make that connection through the agency and you can do that on your own availability time.

Amy.: I think that is one of the common myths that people don't have to make a commitment and by expressing interest there somehow going to be signed up for something more than what they have time for. I really want to stress that especially the Ways of Caring publication anyone can get on our mailing list for that or access that publication on our website again you can see all those short term opportunities listed there. People can sign up to do any amount of time that they want to do and that's really important to understand that they're not making a commitment that they might feel like they can do right now. A couple other ways that we are trying to advertise those opportunities are through the Burlington Free Press and other local community papers. We agree to partnerships with them or they publish on a weekly basis current opportunities that people can find out about. We are also out and about in the
community always wanting to talk to people and find out what is it that they're interested in what is it that would work for them and can we help them find that.

Judy.: Are there any trends that you see for people who volunteer as far as volunteering for one event and then they come back every year for that event or a specific agency request?

Ruth Ann.: We do have a number of people who will find a favored agency and develop a relationship with them. We work a lot with groups whether it's a school group or business group and find that they tend to stick with one agency year after year and follow through with a project and build a relationship with an agency or maybe the client of that agency. That happens a lot. I recognize people year after year that will come back and ask if that still occurring and then we pass along the information so they can get connected.

Amy.: That trend of people volunteering with their coworkers as a workplace experience or as a group. There's a lot a group opportunities that are always listed on the website as well and that's a really popular way for people to get involved. But a great way to spend time with coworkers or with your family or group of friends doing something different and having a good time together.

Judy.: Kind of a team building.

Amy.: Absolutely yes.

Judy.: What are some of the ways that Volunteer Connection makes volunteering work well? Do you get constant feedback from agencies involved in volunteers?

Amy.: That's a really good question because we really think it's important to make sure not only that people know about what the opportunities are and people get connected or are volunteering but to make sure that the volunteering goes well because if it goes well and is a particularly good experience for both the organization and volunteer then something like that will continue. We work closely with people if they want to help finding the right match for them. If they're not sure what kind of volunteer opportunity would work best so we're happy to work with people on that. We also work with the agency.

Ruth Ann.: The nonprofits we work with them helping them set up management of their volunteers. We help give tips on recruiting and recognizing their volunteers all the way through. It makes a nice commitment with them with their volunteers and they know how things are going and everything works out well on both sides. They meet the volunteer needs and the needs of the organization.

Judy.: It sounds like you support both the folks who are volunteering and the organizations who have the volunteers and to make sure things run smoothly and it's done well.

Amy.: That combination really should lead to a meaningful opportunity for a volunteer and it makes a real difference for the organization and for the community. Volunteer management is something that's important to have done really well.

Judy.: Can you do individual requests as far as if somebody was a retired schoolteacher and they say I really miss helping kids learn how to read. Can you help those folks out?
Amy.: Yes and that's a great example that you mention. That's something that we have a lot of opportunities for. If someone calls and says this is what I have to offer this is what I really enjoy doing then we can absolutely help them find just the right match for that. People getting involved with schools whether they're retired schoolteachers whether they are a parent whether they are a community member of any kind we have a lot of opportunities around that that's an example of how we have multiple strategies and volunteers and it's a really great way to help make sure that kids are succeeding in school. We have Foster Grandparents we have volunteers that are age 55 and older that are reading to kids in early child care settings that are going in and tutoring one and one with kids in schools and they find that extremely rewarding and it’s very effective for kids is well.

Judy.: We mentioned earlier that this is National Volunteer Week. Does this week play an important role in volunteer management?

Amy.: It does in a sense that it's an opportunity; a real firm time each year that we can talk about volunteerism and express our gratitude for all the people out there that are volunteering and to talk about volunteer recognition which is an important part of making sure that volunteerism works well. We have information on our website again at: unitedwaycc.org if you click on the volunteer tab there's information that people can use and materials ar

Judy.: Have you noticed that people are more willing to volunteer? Have you noticed any trends in that as far as tropical storm Irene and some of the other things that have happened. People want to help?

Ruth Ann.: I think with tropical storm Irene there was a real surge to get out in the communities and be able to help those to put the pieces back together. I think it's a fairly constant need in the community to get out there and give back and make a difference. But tropical storm Irene was certainly a spike that we had and it continues now as they do efforts to clean up. And Green Up Day is coming up so that continues. I think overall people are very aware of the community needs and wanting to give back.

Judy.: Do you find that once somebody volunteers they become a volunteer for life?

Amy.: Yes. We know that people get involved with volunteering for a lot of different reasons whether it's something their family does whether it's something that's going to help them build their resume whether they're leaving the work force and they want to stay engaged to their community there’s all sorts of great reasons for getting involved in volunteerism but we know that people stay involved because they can see the difference that they're making and because they're having a really great time. People are really enjoying themselves meeting new people and getting out and about.

Judy.: I was going to ask you too you’re touching on that but what does the person involved who volunteers get out of the experience? There's some tangible things you can see that you're successful in helping volunteering that then there's some things that maybe you can't see.

Ruth Ann.: I think overall volunteering and I've talked to a lot of youth in volunteering and trust the fact that you are giving back to the community and making a difference but also you'll find you really enjoying it and it makes you feel better about what you're doing. It gives you a really positive outlook in that way. I think it's a very well rounded thing and we talk about sharing the skills that you have and also learning a new skill is a good proponent of volunteerism.

Judy.: So people who think if I volunteer 1 hour a week does it make that big of a difference?
Amy: Absolutely! The example we were using before about someone volunteering in the schools or even after school program or mentoring a child 1 hour a week and 1 hour a month to make a huge difference in that way. People who are volunteering by delivering meals to homebound seniors. People who are volunteering by helping with blood drives. We've had volunteers this past year with a huge response of volunteers coming in to help with filing tax returns. This is a very timely issue right now to help people access the earned income tax credit. People with all sorts of skills that are may be doing volunteering once a week once a month or once in a while all of those are pulling together to make a great difference.

Judy.: Let's talk about how people can get involved and get connected to volunteering.

Amy.: I think the first thing people find easiest is to go on to the website and see the listing of opportunities. Again here's an image of that website you can click on searching for volunteer opportunities you can browse through different opportunities or search by specific criteria.

Ruth Ann.: You can also get connected just give us a call and we can help you walk through the pages of getting into the website and also get on our mailing list for the Ways of Caring we talked about earlier or connecting through the website again.

Judy.: By doing that does that obligate you?

Amy.: Absolutely not, and the publication comes out a few times a year it highlights different opportunities and talks about issues around volunteers. It's a great publication to get through the mail and again with no commitment a lot of people find it something they browse through with their family or with their spouse and just say this looks like something that would be really fun to do and that gets them going.

Judy.: Once again the website is: unitedwaycc.org you can also call the United Way at (802) 860-1677 that's 860-1677. I want to thank you both for joining me today. That's our program for today. I'm Judy Simpson we'll see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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