

Volunteers make the difference

By Pamala K. McCarver, MDiv, RN

A VOLUNTEER NURSE was needed so children with special needs could attend summer camp, as I learned through my employer. Local television news and radio also reported that children wouldn't be going to camp if a nurse didn't commit to working at a camp for disabled children for 2 weeks, 24 hours a day.

When I called the organization, I halfway expected that the position would be filled already because the plea for help was sent to a county with a population of over 800,000. To my surprise, the director of the organization told me that nobody else had volunteered yet. I decided to commit to the first week of the camp, and a school nurse later committed to the second week.

Change in trends

Wondering about the dearth of volunteers, I did some research and discovered that the number of volunteers in the United States had been declining in recent years. More than 61.8 million Americans, 26% of the population, donated their time to charity in 2008, according to data from the federal government. This figure represents a drop from the 65.4 million people who said they volunteered in 2005, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2009 the number of volunteers increased slightly from 2008 levels, to 63.4 million or 26.8% of the population.¹ This increase could be attributed to the loss of jobs due to the economic crisis of 2008.

As communities bond together in difficult times, volunteers and especially

nurses can make a critical difference. Nurses are equipped to exercise a ministry of health within their community. Volunteer health counselors in community centers, faith communities, and schools provide a critical health resource and service.

Volunteers are needed to educate about and promote healthy lifestyles. Volunteer nurses can offer hope when demands for care exceed the available resources.

Serving others

I personally learned the importance of volunteering from 25 special needs children and their young adult counselors. Taking on the responsibility



for the healthcare needs of 25 disabled children for a week in a remote setting isn't something that I'd normally agree to do. But the children's immediate need for a camp nurse was more important than my comfort level.

Before committing myself, I allayed my fears about my legal liability. (See *Finding legal protection*.) Then I packed my bags and headed for camp.

Meeting my campers

I met my campers and their counselors early on a Sunday morning in July. Eager children were ready for new adventures; their parents were ready to begin a greatly needed week of rest. Some of these families were new to summer camp while others were old hands.

As a volunteer nurse, I'd be part of the camp team facilitating a medically sound and safe camp experience for children with chronic illness. I'd also participate in daily camper life by providing nursing care and education.

My responsibilities as camp nurse included assessing the health needs of both campers and counselors. On my initial evaluation of each camper, I assumed the responsibility for that camper's medications.

My primary duties were to prepare and administer routine scheduled medications and treatments to campers and staff. I kept medical records for all campers and followed orders from their healthcare providers. I administered oxygen and a healthcare

I discovered that the hardest part of camp wasn't caring for children with disabilities; it was saying good-bye to them.

provider-prescribed P.R.N. inhaler to one child who was experiencing respiratory symptoms from an asthma attack, and acetaminophen to another child with an elevated temperature who had a history of febrile seizures. Also expected to provide first aid, I handled common injuries such as cuts, scrapes, and splinters.

Climbing to the top

Accompanying the campers to their activities was another of my responsibilities. One particularly memorable activity has restored my belief in the character of young people in America. Many of the counselors at this camp were college students on summer break and others were high school students, but all were taking time out of their busy lives to serve these campers.

Planning a nature hike, the campers and counselors had mixed animal feed and bird seed in bags for the birds and squirrels. I expected the nature hike to be a short walk around the camp, but the young counselors wanted their

campers to experience a real nature hike in the mountains.

When we approached the trail, I wondered how the campers would be able to maneuver the steep climb on the narrow trail to the top of the mountain. I was touched when counselors carried children who normally used wheelchairs. Other counselors held onto those children who struggled to walk, as they navigated the narrow and steep trail. My eyes began to tear up as I watched these young adults carry the weight of the campers on this strenuous hike.

Fond farewells

The camp ended with an awards ceremony. As I watched each child proudly accept a camper award, I realized that less than a week ago, these children were merely a news story to me. But by the end of camp, they'd clearly gained my affection and I felt sad as the week ended.

A few days after I returned home, I received an e-mail from a wheelchair-bound 10-year-old camper. His words showed me the importance of volunteering: "I just wanted to say thanks a bunch for being our camp nurse. I don't know what I would've done if camp got canceled."

I've discovered that when I give of myself to others, I always receive much more. This was true at a summer camp in the mountains for children who have special needs. I urge you to use your skills as a nurse to volunteer and discover the rewards for yourself. ■

Finding legal protection

Before I began this volunteer job, I worried that a child's parents might file a lawsuit based on claimed negligence against me. I was grateful to learn that I'd be covered by the nonprofit organization's commercial general liability policy. Experts recommend nurses also carry their own liability protection in case the organization's position is in conflict with the nurse's. Remember that a nurse who's covered at work by an employer's insurance wouldn't be covered in a volunteer position because it's outside the scope of the employment.

I also discovered that in 1997, Congress enacted the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997.² This law provides that no volunteer of a nonprofit organization shall be liable for harm caused by an act or omission of the volunteer on behalf of the organization or entity if the volunteer meets four requirements.

- The nurse volunteer must have been acting within the scope of the volunteer's responsibilities in the nonprofit organization.
- The nurse volunteer must be properly licensed in the state in which the harm occurred within the scope of the volunteer's responsibilities in the nonprofit organization.
- The harm wasn't caused by willful or gross negligence to the rights or safety of the individual harmed by the volunteer.
- The harm may not have been caused by the volunteer operating a motor vehicle.³

REFERENCES

1. United States Department of Labor. Economic News Release. Volunteering in the United States, 2009. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>.
2. Public Law 105-19—JUNE 18, 1997. 111 STAT. 221. Volunteer Protection Act of 1997. http://www.doi.ne.gov/shiip/volunteer/pl_105.19.pdf.
3. 42 USC 14503 - US Code - Title 42: The Public Health and Welfare (January 2003). 42 USC 14503 - Sec. 14503. U.S. Code—Title 42. The Public Health and Welfare. Limitation on liability for volunteers. <http://vlex.com/vid/limitation-liability-for-volunteers-19243743>.

Pamala K. McCarver is a nurse at San Joaquin Community Hospital in Bakersfield, Calif., and a parish nurse in her community, Tehachapi, Calif. Visit her website at pamalakmccarver.com.