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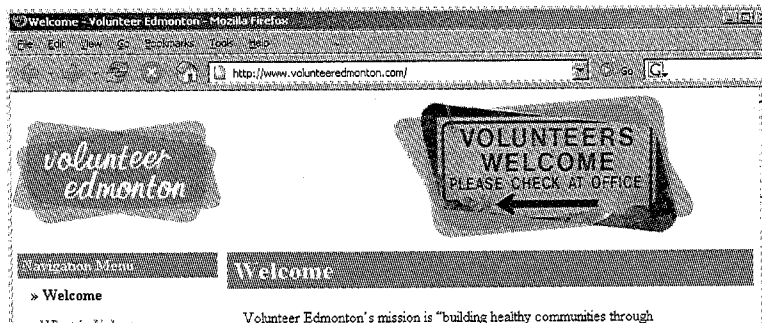
Finding the right volunteer opportunity is win-win

By Evelyn Pham

With summer on its way, warmer weather and sunshine means it's time to get out of the house. Whether your post-winter activities include walks around the river valley or a trip to the lake, why not also celebrate the end of winter by volunteering?

Volunteering provides the opportunity to give back to the community and enhance the lives of others. Helping elementary students with their homework, using your sewing skills to help make baby clothes for low-income families, visiting hospital patients — these are just a few examples of how you might be able to help your community.

The benefits don't stop there. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, volunteering promotes personal growth and



Visit www.VolunteerEdmonton.com to search for volunteering opportunities and access links to other websites on volunteering.

self-esteem. Helping others and learning new things allows you to feel good about yourself and keep you connected to others, which is important when you consider that many seniors suffer from social isolation.

Health Canada states that people who remain actively engaged in life and socially connected are happier, physically and mentally healthier, and better able to cope with transitions.

Where to start? There are about 8,000 nonprofit groups in Edmonton that rely on volunteers to help them carry out their services. Finding a volunteer opportunity may seem daunting and time-consuming, but there are a few ways you can find a volunteer opportunity easily and fast.

Janice Bell, director of Volunteer Edmonton, suggests giving some thought to what you would like to do and how much time you can commit before embarking on a search.

"I always recommend people begin with a visit to our website at www.volunteeredmonton.com," she said. "Click on 'I want to volunteer'

and you will find an excellent series of questions to ask yourself to help you narrow your search and find the perfect volunteer opportunity for you.

"Making a few decisions ahead of time about what you want can help you narrow down your search and give you a better idea of which volunteer opportunity suits you best," explains Bell.

You can start your search by dialing 211. This is a free-of-charge, 24-hour phone number that can be called within the Edmonton city limits (482-INFO if calling from outside of Edmonton). Operators can provide you with information and referrals to organizations that offer the kind of volunteer positions you're seeking.

If you're looking for something close to home, a quick browse through the local community league newsletter or newspaper might provide you with a variety of volunteer positions that are right in your neighbourhood. They're often nestled in the back pages, so be sure to check out the classified section.

The *Edmonton Journal* has a

weekly section called *Engage* that updates current volunteer listings every week on Sunday. You can also find *Engage* online at www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/engage/index.html.

If you have access to a computer and are looking for instant results, the internet is another great option. Volunteer Edmonton's own website, volunteeredmonton.com, provides access to a number of different websites that list opportunities. Govolunteer.ca is just one example of the websites that are listed that offer a comprehensive database where visitors can search for volunteer opportunities by location, type and organization.

And if none of the above suggestions yield a promising volunteer opportunity, the next best step is to ask around. As about 48 per cent of Albertans are volunteers, chances are that a neighbour, family member or friend is a volunteer. Find out how they started, what organization they volunteer at and what kind of work they do.

"It's never too late to volunteer," Bell says. "Seniors have a wealth of skills, knowledge and experience that would be helpful to any organization. Not only does volunteering allow people to use their skills and contribute to a worthy cause, it's also a fun experience."

Evelyn Pham is a communications coordinator for Volunteer Edmonton. For more information or suggestions for story idea, please contact her at epham@volunteeredmonton.com or by calling 732-6655. Volunteer Edmonton is a program of The Support Network.