

## **Volunteering in Disasters**

### **Who Volunteers**

A 1990 Gallup study found that nearly 100 million people volunteer in the United States every year. Volunteerism is indeed a cultural entity of the United States, and its rate appears to be increasing. On average volunteers offer 4 hours of their time a week, which is more than 20 billion hours of time a year, valued at \$170 billion. The typical volunteer (62% of people who volunteer) is 25 to 34 years of age and has a steady job and a family. In recent years an increasing number of corporations have allowed their employees to provide volunteer services on work time. Volunteers are the best donors, giving on average nearly three times more money than non-volunteers.

### **How People Volunteer**

In disasters volunteers make themselves available either as trained volunteers in established groups or as individuals or groups who emerge spontaneously in disasters to offer their services. These are discussed in the context of caring for animals later in the chapter. Volunteers who have previously enrolled with disaster relief agencies take on predesignated responsibilities after a disaster. Examples are the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and official state and county programs. These too are discussed in more detail later.

### **Advantages of Volunteerism**

Volunteerism has a number of advantages. For most volunteers, offering their time and expertise is a fun and fulfilling activity that is not compromised by pressures of career and promotion. Most volunteers prefer to offer their time and services in the health arena, such as for the elderly, and in specialty groups, such as Alzheimer patient associations. Volunteerism is a rewarding activity, allowing people of different backgrounds to meet and interact. Volunteers who work together in disasters often become friends for life.

A small advantage of being a volunteer with a recognized agency is that certain expenses may be itemized on tax returns, as shown in Table 23-1. Volunteers cannot deduct the value of their time or services. However, programs developed through an EMA can include a mechanism for the reimbursement of services rendered in disasters.

**Table 23-1 Tax deductions for volunteers\***

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Public and taxi transportation expenses
Parking costs and toll fees
Costs and expenses of upkeep of special uniforms
Telephone bills
Supplies purchased to perform volunteer duties
Automobile mileage for gas and oil
Dues, fees, or assessments to a qualified organization
Noncash contributions of property (e.g., clothing, books, household items, equipment)

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\*In principle volunteers can claim unreimbursed out-of-pocket expenses directly related to their volunteer service if they itemize their deductions when filing tax returns.