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Neighbors trade services, bond through 'time banking'

Catherine Jun / The Detroit News

The idea is simple: You lend your neighbor a hand -- maybe mow his lawn or drive him to the supermarket -- and in return, another neighbor patches your roof or walks your dog.

This arrangement -- part collective bartering, part pay-it-forward -- is called "time banking," and at least two [Michigan](#) communities have put the idea into action. And more neighborhoods are getting on board as families and seniors find they need to help each other in this tough economy.

At a time when even struggling theater groups and [museums](#) are bartering for free services, volunteerism has become a tradable commodity. Michigan is one of 46 states where neighborhoods have established such neighbor-to-labor networks, according to Time Banks USA.

"I think we're living in a different world and we need to operate in new ways," said Kim Hodge, who founded the Lathrup Village Time Bank a year and a half ago.

From meals to swim lessons

More than 100 neighbors, from ages 8 to 89, have joined the time bank in this small [Oakland](#) County community. To participate, each pays a nominal membership fee and posts their unique skills on a secure Web site. Once they perform a deed, they "bank" the hours, and can later redeem them by selecting services others have posted.

Recently, neighbors helped each other in the following ways:

Maddie Blondin, a 14-year-old high school swimmer, offered private swim lessons.

Afshan Siddiqi, 42, picked up the lessons for her 6-year-old daughter.

Siddiqi posted an offer to make an Indian meal.

Ian Ferguson selected the meal, paying \$5 for the ingredients, to feed his busy family.

"I get a sense of satisfaction that I'm contributing to something larger that makes us closer," said Ferguson, 45.

Ferguson, in turn, spends 15 minutes a week taking out the trash for Margaret Whitehead, 79, who lives down the street and has severe arthritis.

Whitehead, who can drive, said she plans to post rides to the local supermarket.

"I can run errands for people," she said.

A wish to give back

Growing local interest is mirroring a national trend. This year, Time Banks USA has received 120 requests for time bank starter kits, triple the demand compared to the same period last year, said Jen Moore, an associate at Time Banks USA, a Washington-based nonprofit. "We're certainly seeing an

acceleration of interest," Moore said.

Such a program turns traditional volunteerism on its head, changing what is often a one-way service into a two-way street, and transforming recipients into givers, givers into recipients.

Such an arrangement can foster closer communities and help seniors -- who have growing needs as their numbers expand in most communities -- feel more integral in a neighborhood, said Natalie Zappella, program associate with the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan.

That's one reason why the nonprofit has taken up the charge to spread this idea to other communities. "There's a pride issue. People don't want to be needy. They want to give back, too," Zappella said.

With Hodge's help, the foundation has held informational sessions to assist communities that want to establish their own time banks.

The Rev. Barry Randolph, of Church of the Messiah, joined a planning committee of neighbors now investigating ways time banking can work in the near east section of Detroit.

The church runs a food pantry for seniors and a free summer camp for children of low-income families, and has been seeking ways to draw seniors out of isolation. He hopes to launch a time bank that allows seniors to get help they need and permits them to "bank" service hours by walking area children to school or offering to do cooking or gardening. "Some seniors, they don't feel like they have anything to offer, but they do," Randolph said.

A six-year-old time bank in Ann Arbor gives its members, many disabled, countless ways to help one another. More than 200 people are part of the Washtenaw Talent Exchange, a free network run out of the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living. Kay Zajac, 27, has cerebral palsy and uses a walker and electric scooter to get around.

She recently contacted the exchange and enlisted a volunteer who helped her clear her backyard, plant lilies and trim overgrown trees. "Our garden has kind of gone to heck," Zajac said.

She in turn gave back by mentoring a 25-year-old who is cognitively impaired from multiple seizures and hence has difficulty making friends. Zajac took her out to dinners and helped her fill out job applications. "We got to do things she wouldn't normally get to do," Zajac said. "I learned a lot of stuff about myself."

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