

## Linking Thousands of Human Service Agencies

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# Take It to the Bank

## One Small Solution to the Coming Funding Crisis

by Fred Scaglione

This is a happy story. Let me be up front about that.

I know that with a state deficit climbing past \$9 billion and major funding cuts looming everywhere, you were probably expecting a little good, old fashioned, *NYNP* doom and gloom. Well, there will be plenty of time for that down the road as Governor Andrew Cuomo settles in to start dealing with New York's near catastrophic fiscal problems.

In the meantime, we thought you could use a bit of a break.

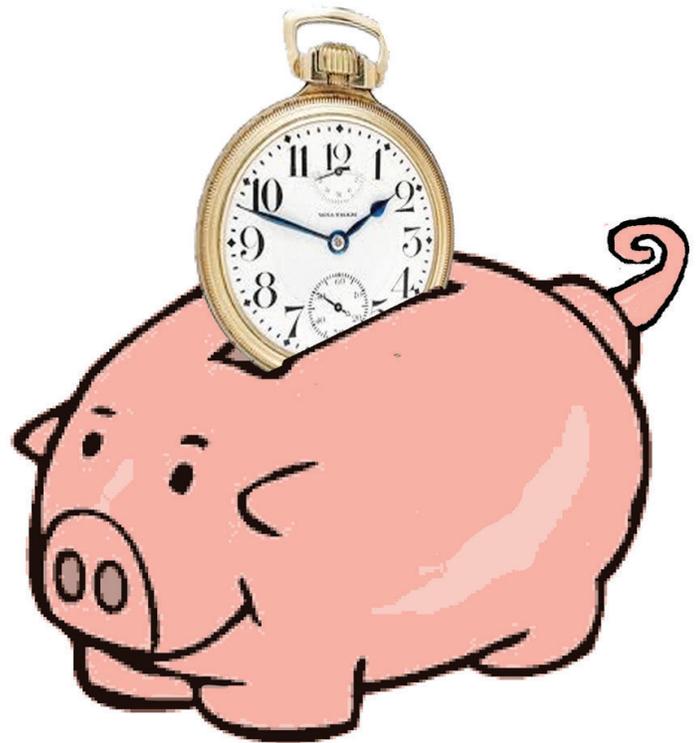
So, here is one of the nicest – and potentially one of the more useful – stories we've come across in quite some time: TimeBanks.

What's a TimeBank? Don't be embarrassed. I didn't know either until I saw a piece on TV a few weeks ago about one operating someplace in New England. I certainly didn't know that we had a few right here in New York, including one being run by Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) with more than 100 community-based partners, and another, TimeBanksNYC, launched last year by the City itself (See box on page 15).

A TimeBank is a network that individuals can join to use their time doing a service for someone else in exchange for another TimeBank member doing something for them. People register and indicate both the kinds of services they would like to get and the kinds of services they can offer. Spend an hour; earn an hour. Get a service; give a service. It's pretty simple.

Bankable services can be anything from cooking, cleaning and driving someone on errands to language lessons, clothing alterations, computer repair or light carpentry.

TimeBanksNYC lists over 175 different types of services available for exchange in a dozen major categories. The area of "Help for Home/Office", for example, includes 27 services such as snow removal, pet care, moving/packing, gardening and even Feng Shui. "Education Workshops/Services" includes teaching a foreign language, helping someone practice a language, translation services, tutoring, career/admissions counseling, mentoring, test preparation and more. "Repairs and Maintenance" can be things like car care, painting, wallpapering, tile work, roof repair and up-



holstery. "Computer/Internet Technology" covers email set-up, computer training, web design, internet research, etc. There are a host of arts and crafts classes and a range of companionship and health services. The list goes on and on.

Different TimeBanks have different rules. The VNSNY Community Connections TimeBank, for example, does not offer exchanges of licensed services. Sorry, no dental work or legal services.

"Our members exchange a wide variety of services, those that neighbors can safely and reasonably do for each other," says Mashi Blech, Director of VNSNY's TimeBank and a 23-year veteran of the TimeBanking movement.

Sometimes two TimeBank members may directly exchange hours of service. "I can do this for you; you can do that for me." In many others, an hour of service provided to one TimeBank member is exchanged for an hour's time from someone else in the network. The TimeBank does the matching based on information members provide when they register.

Now, this all sounds great – in a New Age, hippy commune, "let's save the world through twitter" kind of way. But what does it have to do with New

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York nonprofits struggling to provide vital services to clients in need.

The answer, says Mashi Blech, is pretty much everything.

First of all, community based agencies, just like individuals, can join the TimeBank and get hours of free services provided by TimeBank members. Volunteers that you desperately need can be recruited in partnership with the TimeBank. Those new volunteers earn TimeBank credits for use in future exchanges. Even your current volunteers can enroll and get TimeBank credits for the volunteer work they are already doing.

"At our Family Support Center, a TimeBank member runs our technology training center," says Kathleen Hopkins, Vice President of Community Services at Lutheran Family Health Centers which has been a partner in the VNSNY's Sunset Park TimeBank "hub" since 2009 and is now expanding its relationship by establishing Satellite Sites in Sunset Park and Bay Ridge. "TimeBank volunteers have run a number of different types of activities at our senior centers. They do exercise classes, jewelry making, arts classes and computer training. None of this would be happening without the TimeBank."

When the Confucius Plaza housing complex in Chinatown wanted to begin providing activities for seniors, it turned to VNSNY. "We wanted to have a senior program, but we had no money to do it," says Justin Yu. "They have the connections through all their members. What did we need? An arts and crafts instructor, they provided one; an English instructor, they provided one." VNSNY has even helped Confucius Plaza identify volunteers who now teach Mandarin to Cantonese-speaking residents. In all, Yu estimates that VNSNY Community Connections TimeBank members provide over 20 hours of service a week to his senior programs. "They teach art and jewelry, they play ping pong with the seniors. TimeBank has helped the community a lot."

"We have three volunteers who work in the dining room of our senior center preparing and serving meals during the week and on Sundays," says Deborah Katznelson, Chief Social Service Officer at YM-YWHA of Washington Heights and Inwood. "I don't think they would have ever connected with us if it wasn't for TimeBank." The agency has been a partner with VNSNY since 2006 when they launched their first Community TimeBank "hub" in Northern Manhattan.

What do agency partners do to earn their own TimeBank credits? "They become champions for the TimeBank promoting it among their staff and clients," says Blech. "They invite us to come on-site and give presentations and enrollment sessions at their programs."

Nonprofits can also trade with each other. "An organization that is rich in space can partner with an organization that is rich in volunteers," says Blech. "All partner organizations can make request for assistance with events or projects."

"We have space and we also provide the people who are willing to learn and willing to join in activities taught by TimeBank members," says Yu.

## Community Building

Equally important, however, is the value that TimeBanks bring directly to their members and

## TimeBanksNYC

In August, New York City formally launched its own TimeBanksNYC as part of its NYC Service initiative.

"Our TimeBanking program is an easy way for any New Yorker to find a way to help another, and to find someone that can lend a hand during what have been difficult times for so many," said Mayor Bloomberg in announcing the effort.

TimeBanksNYC is citywide in scope, with neighborhood host sites at Mosholu Montefiore Community Center and Riverdale Neighborhood House in the Bronx; Harewood Senior Citizen Center and Millennium Development Midwood Senior Center in Brooklyn; Hudson Guild - Elliot Center, Project Find - Hamilton Senior Center, Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center in Manhattan; Queens Community House Pomonok Center, Selfhelp Benjamin Rosenthal Senior Center, Selfhelp Austin Street Senior Center, Queens Public Library (Jamaica Branch) in Queens and JCC of Staten Island.

"We already have 600 members and have had about 3,600 hours of service exchanged," says Diahann Billings-Burford, NYC's Chief Service Officer.

Like the VNSNY model, TimeBanksNYC also offers organizations an opportunity to become members and earn TimeBank credits which can be exchanged for volunteer hours. More than 50 community organizations have joined. For individuals, TimeBanksNYC offers both "supported" and "online nonsupported" memberships. Supported Members receive assistance through customer service representatives to initiate the registration process, enter exchanges and access information. Online members use the database independently and rely on customer service representatives for troubleshooting as needed.

"We are so excited about this," says Billings-Burford. "We're all feeling the crunch and this is just a great mechanism for New Yorkers to help New Yorkers."

For information about TimeBanksNYC visit [www.nyc.gov/timebanksnyc](http://www.nyc.gov/timebanksnyc).

the communities in which they live.

"People – and especially low income people – need help that they can't always afford," says Deborah Katznelson. "This is a perfect way for people in the community to assist one another."

"You join TimeBank and you instantly have 1,700 people on your team," says Blech.

## The TimeBank Lens

Many human service agencies pride themselves on taking a "strength-based" approach to service delivery. For TimeBanks, however, this represents the very essence of the program. "We are all assets; everyone has something to offer," states the first of five "core values" for TimeBanks USA, the organization established by Dr. Edgar Cahn, founder of the TimeBank Model.

"People often have hidden resources," says Blech. "Many of our members are living on limited incomes, do not speak English, or have medical conditions that are challenging. They may be used to having their own needs assessed but don't often hear that they themselves are needed. That's the message we are sending. We are saying that we need you; you can help. It can be life changing."

Blech describes this as looking through the "TimeBank Lens". Where many social service programs may only see a client in need of assistance, TimeBanks will see an individual who also can help others.

"We received a referral once from a social worker asking if the TimeBank could provide assistance to a homebound, double amputee," says Blech. "When I interviewed him, I found someone who was upbeat, positive, funny and engaging. Was having someone visit once a week really what he needed?"

Blech put on her TimeBank Lens. "No one usually thinks of being homebound as an asset. But, we spend a lot of time trying to reach people by phone to confirm service exchanges. This man was always home, reachable and happy to both make and receive calls. Instead of saying 'you need help', we flipped the whole situation

on its head and asked 'would you consider helping us with this important project'. Now, he was soon in a leadership role in charge of 20 other members. He was engaging with all of them on the phone regularly and some of them even came to visit."

In a similar case, TimeBank once received a request for volunteers to make telephone re-arrangement calls to homebound, Chinese-speaking seniors. The initial TimeBank response? "You've got a group of homebound seniors who all speak the same language. Why not have them call each other? There was dead silence on the other end of the line," says Blech. "They had never thought of that as a possibility."

Many programs for the aging struggle to find young people who will spend time visiting seniors. The TimeBank Lens offers a different viewpoint. "We have seniors who are beautiful knitters," says Kathy Hopkins of Lutheran Family Health Centers. "They can teach kids how to knit. It creates an intergenerational program." Similarly LFHC uses young TimeBank members to read correspondence in English for seniors who, in exchange, teach them to speak Spanish or Chinese.

Blech believes that the VNSNY TimeBank has been particularly successful in helping people cross some of the ethnic, racial, religious and economic barriers that society has built up.

The VNSNY Community TimeBank hosts monthly Pot Luck dinners in each of its "hubs" at which members gather to meet other members with whom they can exchange services. "The more they meet, the more they trust; the more they trust, the more they trade," says Blech. "We're making connections across groups that may not have always felt comfortable with each other."

One example, she cites, is an orthodox Jewish young woman who is taking tai chi lessons from a Chinese man who has been studying it for 40 years. "He has met her family; she has met his family. These two would never ever have met otherwise," says Blech.

Guillermo Martiza Martinez, who lives in Manhattan, is learning Chinese Calligraphy – as well as getting Excel lessons and resumé help – in exchange for doing volunteer work at VN-

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SNY Community TimeBank itself. As a result, she has an entirely new relationship with her Chinese neighbors. "We are friends," she says. "They are from another country like me." Martinez was recently honored for having contributed 300 hours to TimeBank over the past year.

"We have members with six-figure incomes exchanging with people who make less than \$10,000 a year," says Blech, who emphasizes that this information is never shared with the individuals themselves.

## Positive Outcomes

The TimeBank model – and particularly its asset-based approach – has a powerful positive effect on members. A 2009 survey funded by the Fan Fox & Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Inc. of older TimeBank members found the following:

- 100% of members reported having benefited from becoming a TimeBank member;
- 98% reported that they are able to use their skills to help others;
- 48% reported improvements in self-rated physical health;
- 72% reported improvements in self-rated mental health;
- 67% reported increased access to health and other community services;
- 93% saw the TimeBank as a place to obtain information about services in the community;
- 92% reported that it is easier for them to ask for help;
- 51% of all members surveyed reported that they saved money through the TimeBank;
- 73% of those with an annual income of less than \$9,800 reported that membership in the TimeBank helped them save money.

Another project, funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, used the VNSNY TimeBank to match students in need with a one-on-one Study Coach. Coaches worked privately and consistently with the student and the parents/guardians. Follow up research found that students saw significant improvements in school grades following the engagement.

## Why VNSNY?

It is all these community building aspects of TimeBanks that explain why VNSNY has taken up the project.

"VNSNY has a commitment to building healthy communities and has a long history of innovation. They recognize the tremendous value that the TimeBank brings to the communities it serves," says Blech.

Lutheran Family Health Centers takes a similar view. "As a health care organization, our vision of health is really broad," says Kathy Hopkins. "This is about building community capacity. If you are building a community's ability to care for itself, you are building the community's capacity for health."

VNSNY is taking a community-based approach to rolling out the TimeBank. Its first hub in Northern Manhattan was launched in 2006 and now has more than 700 members and 40 community partners. A second hub in downtown Manhattan opened in 2008 and now has 566 members. In 2009, VNSNY TimeBank expanded again, this time to Sunset Park, Brooklyn. "Sunset Park now has almost 500 members," says Blech.



VNSNY TimeBank member Juan providing minor home repair.



TimeBank member Eridania providing alterations for Juan.

In total, the VNSNY TimeBank already has a total of 1,700 members and reports 4,100 hours of service exchanges monthly. "This is the fastest growing TimeBank in the 23-year history of the international movement," says Blech.

## The LFHC Satellite

Last month, VNSNY and Lutheran Family Health Centers announced creation of the first TimeBank Satellite Site that would serve the Sunset Park and Bay Ridge communities.

Under this new model, VNSNY is training Lutheran staff who will take on responsibility for recruiting, enrolling and screening new members, facilitating service matches and organizing group activities. Lutheran's staff will utilize the VNSNY TimeBank database to enroll members, search for matches and record exchanges. "We don't use three-by-five cards anymore," says Blech. "We have a computerized system that we have developed that is quite sophisticated. You can search for members according to zip codes, bus lines, languages and the services they want and offer. You can easily track individual and group exchanges."

Lutheran is dedicating a portion of its AmeriCorps staff – eight volunteers and two supervisors -- to start the TimeBank Satellite Site. "One of the tenets of AmeriCorps is to build volunteer capacity in the community. So, this makes sense to us," says Hopkins.

Liz Berger, a former Lutheran AmeriCorps volunteer who is helping to supervise the initiative, has her own personal experiences with TimeBank. "I signed up with another AmeriCorps member and ran an English conversation group at the local senior center," she explains. In return, she received Mandarin lessons from a tutor who herself was taking Belly Dancing lessons as an exchange.

## Looking Forward and Outward

"We are contacted all the time by organizations that want to know when we will be coming

to Queens or the Bronx," says Blech. "Our vision is to expand throughout the entire VNSNY service area – New York City, Westchester and Long Island. But, we have to do it strategically and in a cost effective way. We always need to ensure that the quality of the program remains high."

TimeBank currently receives funding from VNSNY, some foundation support and has an allocation of three AmeriCorps volunteers through New York City's CivicCorps. Nevertheless, resources for operation and expansion are an issue.

TimeBank requires new members to submit two personal references. "We do check them," emphasizes Blech. "We do a sex offender check on every member and a Department of Motor Vehicles check on anyone who is going to provide driving. Everyone has to participate in a face to face enrollment orientation and a one-on-one interview."

And, matching and recording service exchanges also requires staff time. In addition to the monthly Pot Luck Dinners, members can submit requests, offers of service, and exchanges by telephone, email and even the U.S. postal service.

The Satellite Site model, in which a lead community partner such as Lutheran Family Health Centers takes on responsibility for recruiting, screening and enrolling members, as well as putting together service exchange matches, is one way to facilitate expansion.

What is VNSNY looking for in a Satellite Site partner? "To be successful, you typically need at least a half-time person dedicated to the project. A core of volunteers and support at all levels of the organization are also critical," says Blech. VNSNY TimeBank is looking for Satellite Site partners that have strong relationships with other community organizations in their area.

For the moment, however, VNSNY is focused on making sure its first Satellite Site model with Lutheran in Bay Ridge is successful. "We want to learn from this experience

and fine tune the model," says Blech. "Then, we definitely plan to add additional Satellite Sites. When, where and with whom remains to be seen."

There are a lot of good reasons why organizations may want to step up to be part of a successful, well-run TimeBank – whether simply as a Community Partner or as a full-fledged Satellite Site sponsor.

"It always makes sense to partner and this is a particularly good group," says Deborah Katznelson of YM-YWHA of Washington Heights and Inwood. "Becoming a member opens doors and introduces the organization to people who otherwise never would have known about them."

"These are difficult times," says Kathleen Hopkins. "This is not an answer to all the budget cuts coming down the pike but it will help the community better support itself. It is a way to build on the human capital in your own community."

For more information about the VNSNY Community Connections TimeBank email [timebank@vnsny.org](mailto:timebank@vnsny.org) or call (212) 609-7811.

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