

Family Volunteering: Nurturing Families, Building Community

Policy Brief No. 17

Family volunteering is an emerging strategy for strengthening low-income families with children. Participating together in community service enables parents and children to develop close relationships, learn together, and improve their neighborhoods.

Overview

The desire to spend more quality time together is common to families of all kinds. Volunteering together offers parents, caregivers, and other caring adults a wonderful way to nurture children and give back to their community. For low-income families with children, volunteering together can provide quality time and opportunities to develop close relationships, learn together, and improve their neighborhoods.^{1,2}

This brief focuses on family volunteering as an approach to strengthening low-income families with children. "Family volunteering" means parent(s) or caregiver(s) engaging in a joint volunteer activity with one or more children.³ Our interest is in programs that intentionally create opportunities for low-income families to volunteer together, especially programs that seek to strengthen relationships between children and parents/caregivers over time. In doing so, this brief builds on the important field of *neighboring* that was identified by and is promoted

by the Points of Light Foundation (POLF) in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It examines a core family-strengthening practice: involving low-income families in community service with the intent of creating strong families and nurturing and supportive neighborhoods. The unique contribution is the exploration of "*neighboring*" in the context of strengthening bonds between parents/caregivers and children.

Quality time is essential to developing caring relationships and consistent emotional bonds between families and children. Such family ties confer significant protective factors. The Search Institute, America's Promise, and Forum for Youth Investment have all identified caring adults and supportive family relationships as key ingredients for the healthy, positive development of children and youth.^{8, 9} Yet, two-thirds of working parents report that they have too little time with their children.¹⁰

Family volunteering is an emerging strategy for strengthening low-income families with children, in which these families are engaged in, not just the recipients of, community service activities. Several case studies in this brief illustrate how some community groups are applying the concept in their programs with the goal of strengthening family ties and improving neighborhoods. Volunteer programs, employers that support family volunteering, and other community groups can benefit, too, when members of low-income families volunteer together.

“Volunteering together as a family provides quality family time, strengthens family communication, and provides opportunities for family members to be role models, while simultaneously allowing families to make significant contributions to their communities.”

– Robert K. Goodwin, President and CEO, with Mei Cobb, Senior Vice President, Points of Light Foundation¹

What Is Family Volunteering?

Many nonprofit and government volunteer programs, volunteer centers, and their national leaders have begun to embrace what POLF describes as “a powerful principle,” namely that “a volunteering family – regardless of how it is configured – benefits itself, the community, and the nation at large.”¹ The defining characteristic of family volunteering is that the family engages in community service as a unit,

usually with two or more generations. The family unit can be as small as one parent and a child or as large as an extended family.⁶ The following examples (adapted from POLF³) illustrate some of the many diverse caregiver/child configurations that this policy brief addresses:

- A nuclear family with parents and children.
- An adult guardian and child(ren).
- A noncustodial parent and child(ren).
- A single parent and child(ren).
- Grandparents and their grandchild(ren).
- Unrelated adults who are living in the child(ren)’s home.
- A mentor with mentee.
- Extended family members such as cousins, aunts, and uncles with a child(ren).
- Stepfamilies with children.
- Caring adults and child(ren).

Typically, family volunteer programs have service projects that are explicitly designed so family members can work together. Many volunteering environments and activities can be altered for families to volunteer together. However, some activities are unlikely to be adaptable, such as crisis services, one-on-one support, and counseling.⁶

What distinguishes family volunteering from group volunteering? Family volunteering occurs when two or more members of a group that considers itself to be “family” are engaged in a joint community service activity. Family volunteering is not the same as a group volunteering, in which groups of employees, students, or other unrelated

individuals not residing in the same household volunteer together.³

The Rich Tradition of Neighboring in Low-Income Communities

With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, POLF has sought to expand the historic tradition of “neighboring” in low-income communities. Neighboring is a new way of looking at age-old volunteering practices of:¹²

- Neighbors informally helping neighbors with items and time.
- Neighbors coming together and engaging other stakeholders to leverage community assets and improve resident wellbeing. Often these efforts

occur through individual leadership or through block clubs, informal networks, churches, and other community-based groups.

Neighboring initiatives are those in which traditional volunteer organizations, the business community, foundations, and human service agencies work as partners with low-income communities to stimulate positive change in neighborhoods and strengthen families. Pilot projects and a focused study have demonstrated that low-income families can be engaged in volunteering and community building.^{12, 13}

This policy brief looks at family volunteering from the context of neighboring, in which low-income families are participants in community service, not just the recipients.

Definitions for Key Terms Used in this Policy Brief

Family – A family is “any group of two or more people who consider themselves a family.” By thinking of other people as being “family,” they have become members of one.³

Family Volunteering – “[F]amily volunteering is about volunteer activities carried out by members of a family as a joint activity.”⁶

Neighboring – As promoted by the Points of Light Foundation, neighboring is “an asset- and empowerment-based approach to volunteering that engages underserved and low-income families and residents to find innovative sustainable solutions that address local challenges.”⁷ In contrast with the traditional “charity” model of volunteering that places low-income families in service-recipient role, the neighboring model places community members in a leadership role in which they design and implement initiatives to address local challenges.⁷

Parent/Caregiver – Parent/Caregiver refers “to a biological or adoptive parent of a child, foster parent, person acting in the place of parent (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives), or any caregiver who has primary responsibility for the care and support of a child.”⁸

Volunteer – “People who contribute time and energy to activities for which they will not receive monetary compensation.”¹¹

Why Is Family Volunteering a Strategy for Strengthening Low-Income Families?

Extensive research indicates children and families in tough neighborhoods do better when their communities have strong institutions and when residents are connected to neighbors and community organizations. For example, a study comparing Chicago neighborhoods found areas with high levels of neighborliness had less violence and crime and their children scored better on first grade reading assessments than areas with less neighborliness.^{14, 15} This evidence is a cornerstone in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's initiative to strengthen low-income families with children.

The next few pages explore the different ways that family volunteering strengthens families. Benefits specific to low-income families are described when data are available.

Parent-Child Relationship and Child Wellbeing

Volunteering together offers parents and children a chance to strengthen their relationship (*see page 6 for a research summary*). This benefit is important because parents are one of the most critical factors influencing child and adolescent development.

- Research shows that respect, support, and supervision from parents can serve as a strong protective factor for children and buffer them from antisocial behavior and delinquency.^{16, 17}
- Adolescents who have a high-quality relationship with one or both parents are much more likely to be mentally healthy, perform well in school, and have positive relationships when they become adults, according to Child Trends.¹⁸

- Strong and supportive ties with parents help protect adolescents against a variety of risky behaviors, including substance abuse, early sexual activity, pregnancy, emotional distress, suicide, and violence, according to a review of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.¹⁹

Family Time, Child Development, and Parenting

Strong parent/caregiver relationships with children occur when time is spent together, as during family volunteering activities. This benefit of family volunteering is important because children gain essential emotional support and develop socially and intellectually by spending time with parents, according to Child Trends and the Search Institute.^{20, 21}

Insufficient Family Time. In the 2002 Building Strong Families national poll of parents, conducted by the Search Institute and YMCA of the USA, nearly all parents (88 percent) said they feel successful as parents almost every day or most days. Yet, they also identified external challenges that can interfere with parenting. Job demands topped the list of reasons that parents said make parenting hard. Among low-income parents (an annual income of less than \$35,000), 62 percent said family finances make raising children more difficult.²²

In the subsequent 2004 Building Strong Families study involving African-American and Latino parents, respondents attributed problems with parenting to challenges such as job loss, negative societal values, and difficulty making connections with others in their community. However, the *foremost* challenge they named was having too little time to spend as a family. Seventy percent of African-American and 84 percent of Latino parents said

spending more time with their kids would help them parent more than anything else.²³

A Child Trends analysis of national data suggests family time may be more difficult to find for single-parent families with children younger than 13 years than for two-parent families. Also, children in families below the poverty line had less time with their fathers in comparison to children in other income groups.²⁰

What Does Research Say about Family Volunteering?

Research supports family volunteering as a promising strategy to strengthen low-income families with children, but additional study is needed.

Families and Volunteering

Compared to families without children, families with children are more likely to volunteer, according to a recent POLF analysis using federal data from the volunteering supplement to the Current Population Survey. A similar pattern is present among African American and Hispanic families.²⁴

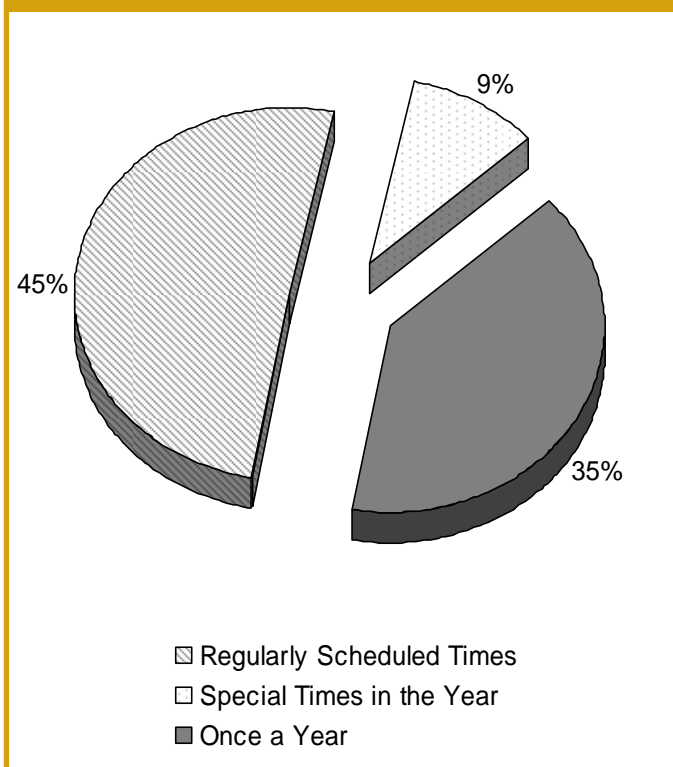
Results from Independent Sector's Giving and Volunteering in the United States survey^a indicate a trend in the 1990s of a growing percentage of volunteers who are participating in a volunteer activity with one of more family members.² In the 1999 survey, almost half of volunteers doing service with family members volunteered on a regular schedule throughout the year (see Figure 1).²

Further, most families are interested in volunteering together. A 1998 survey by the Aid Association for Lutherans found a strong interest in family

volunteering: 66 percent of families with children ages 0-12 years that had never volunteered together described family volunteering as a good idea or indicated they were planning to start doing it.²⁵

Commitment to community is not limited to upper income groups. Although not specific to family volunteering, a more recent survey by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans found that individuals whose incomes are less than \$35,000 per year volunteer the most hours per month (23) than others.^{26, 27}

FIGURE 1. Volunteers Participating with Family Members by Frequency, 1999⁵



^a Survey was of volunteers of all income levels and regardless of having dependent children.

Volunteering rates captured by these studies may not present a full picture. Often surveys about volunteering exclude informal service – such as helping neighbors, friends, and community groups – even though it may be significant. In a 1999 national survey by Independent Sector, about half of respondents indicated that their family-volunteering activities were not organized by a specific group or organization.⁵

Volunteering Together Strengthens Families

Volunteering together can strengthen families, according to research by POLF, Volunteer Canada, and others. Studies capturing volunteers' and practitioners' experiences indicate family volunteering provides activities that can:^{2,4,6, 28-31}

- Create quality time for parents/caregivers and children.
- Enhance families' communications and support skills.
- Improve family members' understanding of and respect for each other.
- Promote emotional connectedness between youth and their families through shared experiences.
- Teach positive values, such as civic responsibility, empathy, and respect.
- Demonstrate the effectiveness of teamwork in family and community life.
- Develop families' pride, sense of purpose, and feeling of being part of the community.
- Increase and/or diversify connections to other residents and community institutions.
- Provide an opportunity to give back to neighbors, service agencies, and the community at large.

“[F]amily volunteering offers new volunteer opportunities to groups of people who may not otherwise be able to incorporate volunteering into their lives. This ability to participate allows families to spend meaningful time with each other and with their community without diminishing other aspects of family life, but instead enriching their collective experiences.”

– Volunteer Canada⁴

- Expand understanding of community and social issues.
- Improve the neighborhood environment where families live, go to school, and work.

Benefits for Children and Parents

Family volunteering can confer important benefits on individual family volunteers, as summarized in Figure 2. In fact, two of the Search Institute's Developmental Assets™ for adolescents relate to volunteering:³²

- “Young people are given useful roles in the community.”
- “Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.”

Based on extensive research, each of these assets has been proven to help youth grow up as healthy, caring, and responsible young people.³² These assets also reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors.²¹

Other Benefits

When families volunteer together, their community, employers, and community-based organizations benefit. POLF, Volunteer Canada, and their partners have documented these benefits, which Figure 3 summarizes. Importantly, family volunteering is more likely to have a positive impact when volunteering programs for families are deliberately and strategically developed.^{2,6}

Evidence is growing that employers' support for volunteering, including family volunteering, can have a positive impact on profitability.^{28,34,35} Specifically, family volunteering is a beneficial economic tool because gains in employee morale and workplace attitudes can increase productivity. Visible family volunteering programs also can contribute to a positive image among existing and potential customers (see Figure 3). Both large and small employers can realize these gains. Employee volunteering is viewed as a business and community investment by Georgia Natural Gas, a small business recipient of a 2005 Award for Excellence in Workplace Volunteer Programs, sponsored by POLF and the Volunteer Center National Network. Michael Braswell, president, framed the opportunity in this way: "In terms of a small company, a lean company,

“Through [family volunteering], children learn how to interact and respond to people in the community who are in need of their help as well as gain a deeper understanding for the scope of community need.”

– Volunteer Canada⁶

why would you put the resources in a community involvement program? For us, it does affect our bottom line positively. We decided [employee volunteering] was critical to our business. It was critical to our brand. It was critical to our employee morale.”³⁵

Involving Low-Income Families

An increasing number of community nonprofit and government agencies have family volunteering programs or events.^{25, 36} Further, many are now striving to involve the service community or clients as a partner in a two-way relationship. To understand how national and community-based nonprofits and volunteer centers are taking steps to

FIGURE 2. Potential and Documented Benefits of Family Volunteering

Children and Youth	Parents and Adult Caregivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop communications skills.⁶ • Empower and increase self-esteem.⁶ • Reduce risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence).^{6, 33} • Build job and college applications.²⁹ • Provide a positive activity that is also fun and social.²⁹ • Help youth in thinking about future careers.²⁹ • Increase the likelihood of volunteering as an adult.^{5,33} 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heighten sense of well-being.⁶ • Reduce social isolation.⁶ • Strengthen connections to community.⁶ • Develop skills and improve ability to land or advance in a job.⁶ • Increase parental efficacy as parents better understand their children and enrich their skills, including as volunteers and community leaders.³¹

apply the neighboring concept of engaging low-income communities and their families, POLF commissioned a survey by the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment. A large majority of respondents at all levels reported activities or plans to engage low-income communities as partners.²⁹

By involving low-income families in community service, agencies can enhance their understanding of community needs and strengthen their ties to the populations they serve.²⁸ Family volunteering initiatives may also enable the agency to mobilize new populations. In a prior POLF initiative called Family Matters, the sites with family volunteering

FIGURE 3. Macro Benefits of Family Volunteering

Community At-Large	Employers	Community Nonprofits and Volunteer Centers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases social capital.¹² • Reduces crime rate.⁶ • Builds and diversifies new generations of residents who volunteer.^{6, 30} • Educates families about community issues and the role of policy.³⁰ • Increases families' sense of connectedness with local institutions.³⁰ • Creates the potential for empowering families as they identify and work together on community goals.^{2, 13, 30} • Engages residents not involved in community service due to child caregiving responsibilities.² • Reinforces the tenet that families are crucial to community.³⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The bottom line. ○ Employee morale. ○ Positive attitudes about the workplace. ○ Relationships among employees. ○ Public and community relations • Enhances skills and knowledge among employees that participate in family volunteering activities. • Creates a sense of community among employees. • Reduces absenteeism by employees taking time off to attend to family responsibilities. <p>Sources: ^{28, 34, 35}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enriches and diversifies volunteer pool.^{2, 4, 28, 30} • Multiplies volunteers because once a single family member has been recruited, family members get on board.^{6, 28} • Sets the stage for lifelong service because child volunteers typically continue to volunteer as teens and adults.²⁸ • Invests in future generations of adult volunteers.²⁸ • Attracts media attention.²⁸ • Increases families' knowledge of community and social issues facing their communities.²⁸ • Orients youth volunteers effectively because parents are involved.³⁰ • Increases agency impact.⁴ • Adds new service capacity to the agency.^{4, 6} • Enhances agency profile in the community.^{4, 6, 30}

opportunities attracted support from ethnic, immigrant, and low-income communities because these groups had strong family orientations.²

Gaps in Research

The research on family volunteering has two critical gaps that merit attention.

- A lack of experimental studies on the impact of family volunteering both on relationships between children and parents/caregivers and on child and adolescent risk factors and outcomes.
- Data on family volunteering in low-income communities, including volunteer rates that account for “neighboring” types of community service as well as data to assess impact on families and their neighborhoods.

Expanding Family Volunteering in Low-Income Communities

As a June 2006 article in the Chronicle of Philanthropy aptly cautions, “not every charity can make family volunteering work.”³⁶ Further, research and practice indicate specific steps are necessary to engage low-income families. Organizations seeking to develop volunteering activities or programs for low-income families must address three primary issues, each of which is discussed in this section.

- Organizational infrastructure that effectively supports parents/caregivers and children volunteering together.
- Program components geared to make volunteering together feasible and attractive to low-income families, regardless of configuration (see page 2).

- Establishing partnerships with communities of faith.

Organizational Infrastructure to Support Successful Family Volunteering Initiatives

The involvement of child volunteers requires attention to a host of issues. These include the appropriateness of activities for a wide range of skill levels, children’s safety in the volunteering environment, training families, supervision of children, preservation of client confidentiality, liability, and more.³⁶ Further, to attract families, programs must be tailored to family needs, wants, and interests.⁸ At the end of the activity, family participants ought to feel their time has been worthwhile.³⁶

Recommended Practices. Nonprofits and volunteer centers that have family volunteering programs highly recommend a deliberate process of assessing organizational commitment and then building an infrastructure to support families.^{4, 6, 8, 30}

- Assess interest in and preferences for family volunteering programs.
- Explicitly design volunteer jobs for families.
- Review and update policies and procedures for recruiting, managing, and recognizing volunteers. For example, will parents/caregivers or staff direct and help the children?
- Ensure staff members have been trained to work with children, youth, and all types of families.
- Adequate staff and funding to manage family volunteer programs is essential.
- Adapt existing best practices for family volunteering (see *Recommendations for Practitioners*).

4-H Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise

Utah State University Extension

<http://extension.usu.edu/yfp/>

Utah 4-H demonstrates the integration of family volunteering opportunities into youth development programs.

Enhancing the developmental assets of at-risk youth ages 10-14 – many of whom are from low-income families – is the core focus of the 4-H Mentoring Youth and Families with Promise (4-H YFP) program in Utah. 4-H YFP data indicate the program significantly improves three areas of youth development: school, social skills, and family relations. All 4-H YFP programs help at-risk youth by offering three coordinated interventions: individual mentoring to develop academic and social skills; 4-H activities in clubs to build social competencies via leadership activities, community service, and group projects; and Family Night Out each month to strengthen family ties by having youth, parents, and mentors participate as a group in experiential learning activities. These interventions are based on the Search Institute’s Development Asset model and scientific reviews of youth development programs.

When planning family nights, county extension coordinators have turned to family volunteering as a strategy for fostering family bonds and promoting positive values.

- Several counties devote their October family night out to trick-or-treating for dry goods for the local food bank. After going door-to-door to seek donations, the family groups weigh, sort, and box the goods. The activity generates excellent turnout each year because families enjoy the event and the opportunity to help their neighbors.
- Family groups in Iron County have planted trees alongside a new walking trail, slipped information into packets for Summer Olympics athletes, and tied fleece quilts that they donated to senior citizens. Combining community service with family nights helped attract many participants.

Engaging Low-Income Families

POLF has called for agencies that work in low-income communities to approach families not just as service recipients, but rather as change agents and equal partners. At its core, neighboring engages and empowers families and their communities so that over time the residents develop the capacity to take on local issues themselves.^{13, 37}

However, at all income levels, families report obstacles that can deter volunteering. Some of the

foremost are time shortages, transportation costs, screening, child care, and meals.^{4, 6, 29} In a United Way of America survey, a demanding work schedule was the most frequently mentioned roadblock to volunteering and other forms of community involvement.³⁸

Low-income families face similar obstacles, but because they have few resources, the barriers *must* be considered during program design.

- Most low-wage working parents do not receive paid leave benefits that could be used for family volunteering.¹⁰
- Low self-esteem or confidence in skills, cultural and/or language barriers, and negative views about volunteer organizations that are external to their community are subtle psychosocial issues to overcome.¹²
- Single, low-income parents especially struggle with lack of time, financial resources, child care, and transportation.¹²
- In rural communities, isolation, a culture emphasizing self-reliance, and problems with reliable transportation and child care can prevent low-income families from participating in community activities.¹³

Recommended Practices. Pilot programs and qualitative research by POLF on neighboring reveal community nonprofit and government volunteer programs can engage low-income families in volunteering by:^{7, 12, 13, 39}

- Holding activities at locations and at times that are easily accessible.
- Making available child care.
- Helping family members recognize their talents.
- Using facilitators and translators.
- Designing programs that reflect the unique conditions of the community served.
- Offering tangible rewards in exchange for the volunteers' time and talents to help overcome barriers to participation. Examples of rewards

“[Residents’] involvement needs to be applicable to their day-to-day life. If it is about their children, they will come. About community improvement, maybe. If the purpose is far-reaching, no.”

– A participant in a neighboring initiative, as quoted by the Points of Light Foundation¹²

include meals, vouchers at local stores, and credits for afterschool programs.

- Engage residents directly in the process of identifying key community issues about which they are passionate.

Another practice that has worked with family volunteering programs is to first involve families in a single event. With proper planning and follow up, a single volunteer event can be leveraged into a longer-term commitment, especially when families have had a positive experience. (This approach also enables the agency to adjust program design if needed.)^{4, 28} Ongoing or periodic events have the best odds for helping build strong relationships between parents/caregivers and children.

Employee participation in workplace volunteering programs can be high.^{35, 40} Consequently, changes in employer policies and practices – such as provision of flexible scheduling or paid leave for volunteering – would increase the numbers of low-wage workers who volunteer with their children.

Multiple Strategies Engage Parents in Girl Scouts' Service Work

Girl Scouts of the Black Hills Council, South Dakota

<http://www.girlscouts-blackhills.org/index.htm>

Girl Scouts of Metro Detroit, Michigan

<http://www.gsofmd.org/> and <http://www.studio2b.org/>

To engage families in service-learning activities, Girl Scouts of the Black Hills Council has created a variety of opportunities for parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults to work alongside girls in making the world a better place. The council serves more than 3,000 girls and 570 adults in three Lakota reservations and western South Dakotan counties.

- In a service-learning program, You and Me Ice Fishing, Brownies (grades 1-3) and a parent, guardian, or trusted adult learned to ice fish and be good stewards of local water resources. The girl/adult pairs conducted water tests as they ice fished and submitted results to the US Forest Service. Girls from *all* backgrounds were able to participate as the Forest Service and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks provided equipment and training.
- Responding to years of severe drought, the council's Fire – Friend or Foe program offered a home-based model for parent engagement. Girl Scouts (grades 4-6) first learned about wildfire policies and prevention practices, including fire-wise landscaping with native plants to help protect homes from approaching wildfires. At home with their families, the girls assembled fire-wise landscaping packets with seeds and educational brochures provided at the session. Neighbors received the packets and were encouraged to plant the seeds.
- The transmission of Lakota values is interwoven into the Rosebud, SD, Brownie troop's activities. Via community service projects, volunteer leaders, parents, and trusted adults worked alongside the girls as they read to elders and conducted a drive for stuffed animals for the local crisis center and ambulance service. In addition to strengthening girls' relationships with parents and other caregivers, the projects offered hands-on lessons about honoring elders; the importance of family; and giving back to the community as its own reward.

Girl Scouts of Metro Detroit (GSMD) is also breaking down barriers to reach low-income youth and their parents. The council's innovative STUDIO 2B engages 1,100 girls ages 11-17 in Girl Scout programming with a twist that appeals to urban teens. Open communication and caring relationships between teens and parents is a key support that STUDIO 2B strives to deliver.

For one STUDIO 2B group, the opportunity to strengthen family ties occurred as youth and parents came together to create a plan for developing safe spaces for play. Concerned that their neighborhood has few recreational resources for adolescents, the STUDIO 2B girls invited parents and school staff to evening meetings. Together they developed an intergenerational initiative that garnered business support and a grant proposal. Teen/parent relationships also strengthened as they got to know each other better and communicate in new ways. These outcomes are just two of many success stories facilitated by GSMD, which serves more than 32,000 girls in Wayne and Oakland Counties in Michigan, including nearly 10,000 girls in Detroit.

Establishing Partnerships with Faith-Based Communities

In addition to providing essential community services, places of worship are also a rich source of potential and current volunteers.⁴¹ Three fourths of US adults (72 percent) who attended religious services volunteer at least once a week – a rate unmatched by other groups. Also, data from a national survey by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans indicate that a plurality of American adults (30 percent) said they volunteered last year through their place of worship.^{26, 27}

Recommended Practices. Secular volunteer programs can partner with faith communities by:⁴¹

- Establishing relationships with the minister or other key staff.
- Making the case for their involvement (such as the potential to attract new members).
- Focusing on a common concern in the community.
- Planning the effort together in ways that will benefit the faith community.

Recommendations – Federal Policy Makers

Federal policy makers have five primary opportunities to support programs to strengthen low-income families through family volunteering.

- **Reauthorize and increase authorized funding for the National Community Service Trust Act of 1993.**⁴² The act created the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and three Corporation-administered programs – AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, and Senior Corps – with the responsibility of mobilizing Americans into service. The

Corporation provides grants to national and local nonprofits, schools, government agencies, faith-based and other community organizations, and other groups committed to strengthening their communities through volunteering. As of 1996, the authorization for this Act expired, subjecting CNCS to annual appropriations.

- **Fund CNCS** at its highest historical levels (FY 2004),⁴² and, as part of the reauthorization of the Corporation, increase those levels to better serve the needs of service and volunteering in the United States. Some of this restored funding could be targeted to community-based organizations for providing outcomes-based family strengthening programs that have a family volunteering component.

Through AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, and Senior Corps, CNCS provides opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to strengthen disadvantaged communities. Grantees leverage CNCS funding to attract private donations and support a broad range of volunteer activities that provide vital supports. For example, Learn and Serve America:³³

- Provides a 4 to 1 return on investment by leveraging private and other non-federal resources.
- Engages students in 40 million combined hours of service each year.
- **Include a set of family-volunteering pilot or demonstration programs as part of appropriate national service programs.**⁴² These pilot programs would engage low-income parents/caregivers and children in community service and have a program component designed to foster positive relationships.

Evaluations ought to establish best practices and family and community impact.

- **Require that all new federal and state subsidized housing construction provide space for family volunteering**, such as a community room, recreation center, or even shared office workspace. Also, **fund volunteer centers and other local intermediary organizations to provide technical assistance to community-based organizations on conducting outreach and creating family-volunteering opportunities for residents of existing subsidized housing**.
- USA Freedom Corps could partner with **employers and schools to encourage US workers to participate in community service projects with their children on Martin Luther King, Jr., Day of Service**. Because King Day is a national holiday, many parents and their children have free time to give back to their communities. Employers' volunteer liaisons ought to highlight family volunteering opportunities when promoting the day of service.

Recommendations – Funders (Public and Private)

Corporations, governments, and nonprofit agencies that direct funding towards low-income families with children can take steps to encourage grantees and contractors to engage the families they serve in community service. These steps include:⁴³

- Permitting grantees and contractors to use a small portion of their funding to:
 - Assess opportunities to involve low-income parents/caregivers and children in joint volunteering activities.
 - Develop the infrastructure for effective family volunteering programs.
 - Conduct and evaluate demonstration programs, including those that establish new or strengthen existing partnerships with faith communities.
- Helping to sustain family-volunteering programs that prove to be effective in strengthening bonds between low-income parents/caregivers and children.
- Ensuring that grantees and contractors that use family volunteering as a family-strengthening strategy:
 - Commit to participation by and with diverse populations and family configurations in lower income communities.
 - Have the flexibility to design place-based programs that reflect the unique assets and needs of the community served.
- Sponsoring research to:
 - Document the impact of family volunteering among low-income families and their communities.
 - Identify best practices for organizations with volunteer programs that engage low-income families.
- Supporting programs to develop the capacity of nonprofit organizations to develop and manage structured opportunities for low-income children to volunteer with their parents/caregivers. Such initiatives would train volunteer managers and coordinators, disseminate best practices, and provide evidence-based tools.

Recommendations – Employers

Business leaders and researchers are building a strong business case for employee volunteer programs, including those with a family volunteering component. (See page 8 for ways that employer-sponsored volunteer programs can boost the bottom line.)

Each year senior executives identify innovations, strategies, and effective practices for promoting volunteering in the annual business leadership forum sponsored by POLF and the Volunteer Center National Network. Specifically, these executives – from companies of all sizes – urge their peers to:^{35, 40}

- Sponsor family volunteering events or activities that appeal to working parents' interests.
- Develop a culture of community service by integrating community involvement into company policies and practices.
- Inform employees about family volunteering opportunities (such as conducting a volunteer fair or working with a volunteer center).
- Recognize employees that volunteer with their children.
- Offer company-sponsored volunteer time or flextime.
- Measure the impact of employee volunteering in both the workplace and the community.

Bob Corcoran, Vice President, GE, offered this key insight: "In the end the simplest thing your company can do is focus on removing the impediments to people volunteering so they can follow their passion. And, if that means providing time during work; if it means providing assistance with a grant; if it means

providing a little bit of management expertise or connections...then do it."⁴⁰

Recommendations – Practitioners

Family volunteering programs are more likely to generate positive outcomes when volunteer organizations strategically and intentionally develop programs for mobilizing low-income families.^{6, 13, 30, 37}

To create an effective program, practitioners ought to tap existing guides for designing, implementing, and assessing family volunteer programs. Some of the best are:

- *Family Volunteering Primer* by POLF (http://www.pointsoflight.org/networks/youthfamily/primers/primer_main.cfm).
- *Family Volunteering: The Ties that Bind* by Volunteer Action Centre of Kitchener-Waterloo and Area (<http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pc-cp/pubs/e/pdfdocs/Family.pdf>).
- *National Family Volunteer Day Guidebook* by POLF (<http://www.pointsoflight.org/downloads/pdf/programs/seasons/nfvd/guidebook.pdf>).
- *Neighboring: Get Into Action!* by POLF (http://www.pointsoflight.org/programs/neighboring/welcome/pdf/action_kit.pdf).
- *Volunteer Connections: Family Volunteering – Making It Official* by Volunteer Canada (<http://www.volunteer.ca/volunteer/pdf/FamVolEng.pdf>).

See also the *Expanding Family Volunteering in Low-Income Communities* section, on page 9.

Whether family volunteering programs are new or well established, periodic review is essential. The

goal ought to be providing family-volunteering experiences that:⁴²

- Are available for a wide set of ages and skills.
- Involve tasks and assignments that are developmentally appropriate to the ages, educational levels, cultural identifications, and experiences of participants.
- Include planning and leadership opportunities for all participants: children, youth, and adults.
- Meet the needs of both the community and the family providing service.
- Articulate clear service and learning goals for everyone involved.
- Establish clear definitions of the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
- Provide volunteers with the training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation necessary to achieve service and learning goals.
- Explicitly commit to participation by and with diverse populations and family combinations.
- Build strong, lasting bonds with the community, providing ongoing opportunities for the family to volunteer.

Resources

Alliance for Families and Children

<http://www.alliance1.org>

The Alliance is a nonprofit membership organization representing more than 3,000 child- and family-serving and economic empowerment organizations in the United States and Canada. Through its programs and services, the Alliance strengthens members' capacity to serve more than 8 million people in nearly 6,700 communities each year. For over 30 years, the Alliance has coordinated and promoted National Family Week throughout the country.

Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), US Dept. of Agriculture <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/ProgView.cfm?prnum=5335>

CSREES promotes leadership and volunteer development through interagency federal government teams related to volunteer programs; funding support for leadership development; and research on volunteer competencies. Information about the 2007 National Extension Conference on Volunteerism is available at: http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/in_focus/leadership_if_conference.html.

Corporation for National and Community Service

<http://www.nationalservice.gov>

The Corporation improves lives, strengthens communities, and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering. Each year, the Corporation provides opportunities for nearly 2 million Americans to serve their communities and country through Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America.

Family Strengthening Policy Center, National Human Services Assembly

<http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html>

With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center seeks to describe practice-based approaches to strengthening families raising children in low-income communities and policy implications. Relevant policy briefs developed by the Center include:

- *Family-Centered Community Building*
- *Family Strengthening in Youth Development*

Faith and Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN)

<http://www.fastennetwork.org>

FASTEN offers informational resources and networking opportunities to faith-based practitioners, private philanthropies, and public administrators.

Idealist.org/Action Without Borders

<http://www.idealists.org/kt/familyvolunteer.html>

Action Without Borders connects people, organizations, and resources to help build a world where all people can live free and dignified lives. Its Idealist website offers a wide variety of volunteering resources.

National Conference on Volunteering and Service

<http://www.volunteeringandservice.org>

Convened by POLF and Corporation for National and Community Service, this conference is the largest gathering of leaders who mobilize people to service.

National Human Services Assembly

<http://www.nassembly.org>

The National Human Services Assembly is an association of the nation's leading national non-profits in the fields of health, human and community development, and human services. The National Assembly is a learning community where leaders with parallel responsibilities at different national nonprofit human service organizations share knowledge and expertise about their work in this sector. The organization is also a vehicle for collaborative action among its members and other interested parties in the public, private and nonprofit sectors. Three relevant National Assembly initiatives are:

- *National Collaboration for Youth (NCY)*, a 30-year old organization, is a coalition of the National Human Services Assembly member organizations. The Collaboration provides a united voice as advocates for youth to improve the conditions of young people and help young people reach their full potential. (<http://www.collab4youth.org/ncy/index.htm>)
- *National Organizations Volunteerism Network (NOVN)* is co-convened by the National Human Services Assembly and AARP. This is a network of volunteer management professionals from leading national and international nonprofits responsible for supporting volunteer engagement. NOVN is also a vehicle for collaborative action among its members. (<http://www.nassembly.org/nassembly/novn.htm>)

- *Volunteer IMPACT Fund* is a collaborative grantmaking initiative to influence positive community change by helping organizations manage volunteers more effectively, thereby unleashing the power of communities. (<http://www.volunteerimpactfund.org>)

Points of Light Foundation

<http://www.pointsoflight.org>

The Foundation seeks to engage more people more effectively in volunteer service to help solve serious social problems. Founded in 1990, this nonpartisan nonprofit organization promotes volunteerism and works in communities across the US. Its primary partner is the Volunteer Center National Network. Some of the Foundation's initiatives that are relevant to this policy brief are:

- *FamilyCares* is a consumer-oriented website that promotes compassion through hands-on family projects that help others in need. (English and Spanish: <http://www.familycares.org>)
- *National Family Volunteer Day* aims to increase the number of families volunteering for the first time; demonstrate how nonprofits, educational institutions, faith communities, families, and corporations can work together; and showcase the benefits of volunteering to mass audiences via media coverage. (<http://disney.go.com/disneyhand/familyvolunteers/>)
- *Neighboring* seeks to build strong families and connected communities by increasing volunteering by, in, and with low-income communities and encouraging organizations to dedicate financial and human resources to support local volunteer efforts. (<http://www.PointsofLight.org/Neighboring>)

SERVEnet.org

<http://www.servenet.org>

SERVEnet offers informational resources for both youth volunteers and nonprofit organizations with youth service programs. The website is maintained by Youth Service America (YSA), a resource center that partners with thousands of organizations committed to increasing the

quality and quantity of volunteer opportunities for young people in America, ages 5-25, to serve locally, nationally, and globally.

ServiceLeader.org

<http://www.serviceleader.org/>

ServiceLeader.org, a project of the University of Texas at Austin, provides information on all aspects of volunteerism.

Volunteer Canada

<http://www.volunteer.ca>

Volunteer Canada has been committed to supporting volunteerism and civic participation through ongoing programs and special projects. Several Volunteer Canada publications offer step-by-step guidance and other tools to help voluntary agencies on developing and managing family volunteer programs.

The Volunteer Family, Inc. (TVF)

<http://www.thevolunteerfamily.org/>

In the greater Boston area, TVF encourages and facilitates family volunteering while simultaneously assisting local agencies with planning and preparing for family volunteers. TVF's aim is to strengthen familial bonds while helping local agencies achieve their goal of serving the community's most pressing needs.

Volunteers of America

<http://www.voa.org/>

Volunteers of America is a national, nonprofit, faith-based organization dedicated to helping those in need rebuild their lives and reach their full potential. Through thousands of human service programs, including housing and healthcare, Volunteers of America helps nearly 2 million people in over 400 communities.

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This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of "family strengthening" in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children *and* their families.

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This brief reflects the findings and views of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, which is solely responsible for its content. For more information or to access other family strengthening policy briefs, visit www.nassembly.org/fspc.

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