

## Invest in the Future: Become a Volunteer in Your Professional Nursing Organization

Linda L. Pierce, PhD CNS RN CRRN FAHA FAAN



### KEY WORDS

nursing  
professional organizations  
rehabilitation nurses  
volunteerism

*In this article, volunteer activity in professional organizations is explored. Volunteerism is defined as the giving of a person's time, energy, and talent to organizations without monetary compensation. A combination of other-serving or altruistic and self-serving or instrumental factors motivates people to volunteer. Examples of these motivations include wanting to help others, contributing to an important cause, encouraging an action, belonging to a community that promotes a positive sense of self, believing in a professional commitment to serve others, and being passionate about the things an organization brings to a profession. Challenges surrounding volunteerism are discussed in this article, and activities and opportunities for volunteer involvement in professional organizations are illustrated. Personal examples related to the Association of Rehabilitation Nurses (ARN) that detail the ways in which members can get involved also are highlighted.*

Volunteerism in the United States has roots going back to the days when Americans fought for independence and community barn raising was part of everyday life. Volunteers, in a classic definition of volunteerism (The Free Dictionary, 2010), serve others and give of their time, energy, and talent without compensation. In return these volunteers may gain a number of desired and never-dreamed of benefits, such as being energized to help others and personal satisfaction.

As a long-time volunteer in a number of organizations that range from community (e.g., church, school, local board of elections, and a free health clinic) to nursing professional organizations such as ARN, Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI), and the American Stroke Association (ASA), I understand that volunteerism is critical. The core purpose of ARN is "to advance rehabilitation nursing practice" (ARN, 2010, paragraph 6); the mission of STTI is "to support the learning, knowledge, and professional development of nurses committed to making a difference in health worldwide" (STTI, 2010, paragraph 2); and ASA's mission is "to build healthier lives, free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke" (ASA, 2010, paragraph 1). Volunteers help organizations achieve their core purpose or meet their mission.

### The Volunteer Dilemma

Volunteer energy has become an indispensable resource for every organization and has the potential to make a difference in the targeted field of practice. Organizations must deal with fiscal, operational, personnel, and service demands and depend on a volunteer workforce to move their strategic plan or agenda forward. However, with a limited number of available volunteers, organizations must aggressively

compete for their services. From the perspective of the volunteer, difficult choices exist when considering whether to serve an organization in an unpaid position. Evolving age-related interests, differences in generational attitudes, changes in family structure and lifestyle, and increased employment demands influence a potential volunteer's choices. Volunteering is a two-way street. When the choice is made to become a volunteer, the giver (volunteer) and receiver (the organization) both can walk away with something positive.

### Motivation to Volunteer

The things that motivate people to volunteer are described by Welch (2009) as a combination of other-serving or altruistic and self-serving or instrumental factors. Examples of other-serving or altruistic reasons include wanting to help others, contributing to an important cause, encouraging an action, belonging to a community that promotes a positive sense of self, believing in a professional commitment to serve others, and being passionate about the things an organization brings to a profession. Instrumental reasons for motivation may be connected to rewards relating to others' accomplishments and power. For example, many people are unfulfilled at their workplace and may pursue volunteer activities (Welch). Volunteering can help build a career or business and satisfy a person's desire to gain stature or recognition or help others (Ellis, 2002). In today's world of layoffs and downsizing, volunteer activities may lead to a paid position with another organization or agency. Ultimately, the motivation that leads to a commitment does not matter; the fact that a volunteer makes an inward (personal) and outward (organizational) difference is what matters.

## Key Practice Points

1. *Volunteerism* is defined as giving of a person's time, energy, and talent to organizations without monetary compensation.
2. Individuals are motivated to volunteer because of a combination of other-serving or altruistic reasons and self-serving or instrumental incentives, and because they are passionate about what the organization brings to the profession.
3. As rehabilitation nurses, we need to determine our strengths, talents, areas of interest, and skills and volunteer as leaders and workers in our professional organizations.
4. Rehabilitation nurses need to come together as volunteers to advance and invest in the future of the specialty and find a connection to healthcare professionals from across the country and a support system from those who understand the particular challenges of that field.

I have been a rehabilitation nurse since the mid-1980s. My colleagues often ask how I got involved in volunteering and why I participate in volunteer activities when they involve using vacation time, evenings, and weekends and entail being away from family members. As immediate past-president of ARN, I would like to answer these questions and cite my work with ARN as an example.

### Getting Involved as a Volunteer

Attending an ARN educational conference can get you started on a path to volunteering. My first ARN educational conference was in Philadelphia in 1986. I had worked about 2 years in rehabilitation nursing at that time and the nurse manager and I attended the conference together. It was like "wow"; light bulbs popped and fireworks went off! This conference was a "crazy" good experience.

I attended the main conference sessions and learned about stroke, spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, and more. I socialized in the exhibit hall and learned from the vendors and their exhibits. I went to poster and oral presentations and continued to expand my knowledge about rehabilitation nursing. With these ideas in hand, I went back to my hospital and developed an orientation course for the staff.

One path often leads to another. The nurse manager and I were so excited to have the conference information that we decided to submit an abstract for consideration for an oral presentation at the next ARN conference. We had launched a stroke support group at our hospital and wanted to share information about how to develop and run a support group for people with stroke and their caregivers. We were invited to

present an oral paper at the 1987 ARN Annual Educational Conference in California. The following year we volunteered to review abstracts submitted for consideration for oral paper and poster presentations. The nurse manager and I later were asked to chair the Paper and Poster Abstract Committee for an upcoming conference.

I met nurse colleagues from all over the country at the ARN conference. I learned what rehabilitation nursing was like on the East and West coasts, where it was somewhat different than in Ohio where I live. I rode the elevators and escalators and talked with friendly and approachable ARN leaders. The ARN directors were enthusiastic and eager to help me learn more about rehabilitation nursing. These leaders encouraged me to investigate an ARN chapter located in my area.

I decided to join my local Cleveland Chapter, North Coast, and get more involved. I was elected secretary for this chapter, served on its workshop planning committees, and helped design and present its certification review course. When I moved to Toledo, I attended that chapter, Maumee Bay, served on its board of directors, and helped edit its newsletter. Going to chapter meetings was not always easy given work and family commitments, but the meetings offered a wealth of information and a way to connect with other rehabilitation nurses. We invited an ARN director to the Maumee Bay Chapter's workshop, and she talked about ARN and how members can get more involved at local and national levels. She emphasized that ARN members who participate in their local chapters are involved in volunteerism and that this work can expand to a national level of involvement.

Another route I took to becoming an ARN volunteer at the national level came about in an unexpected way. In the late 1980s I took the Certified Rehabilitation Registered Nurse (CRRN®) test. The questions were tough. I believed some questions were better than others; I thought "Don't be part of the problem and complain; be part of the solution and get involved." I wrote a letter to the Rehabilitation Nursing Certification Board (RNCB) to voice my concerns about the test items, including several items or questions I wrote for their consideration. That year I was asked to attend an item-writing session; this opportunity was followed by serving on a RNCB item-review session for the certification examination.

All these experiences helped me continue to learn about rehabilitation nursing and allowed me to build a network of colleagues from across the country. Later I had the opportunity to serve as a member and chair of the RNCB, was elected as a member of the ARN Board of Directors, was selected to chair the Rehabilitation

Nursing Foundation, and was elected to serve as ARN president in 2009–2010.

Volunteering in ARN can take many roads that range from attending conferences to joining a chapter to serving on local and national committees and boards. Activities and interest areas vary in time commitment to fit all schedules. Some people may be ready to volunteer for a temporary role on a task force, while others may be ready for a longer commitment such as a chapter officer position. Because members often do not know where to begin, they need to perform specific tasks to help them become team players and get involved. One of the easiest ways to get involved is to talk to local and national ARN leaders about contributing your time and talents. I offer three suggestions for those who want to get involved in ARN volunteer work: look into the Volunteer Identification Program (VIP), special interest groups (SIGs), and the ARN Health Policy and Legislative Agenda.

You can volunteer online using the VIP at [www.rehabnurse.org](http://www.rehabnurse.org) (click on Membership and Volunteer Opportunities). Here you can view the ARN committee lists (including abstract reviewers; awards, chapter support, and health policy committees; and RNF research fund review panel) and the needed expertise areas (educational program development, research, legislative/regulatory issues, case management) and choose areas of interest. You will be asked to identify current or previous volunteer experience and to submit your curriculum vitae. Upon submission of the online form, ARN will respond to you and, as positions become available, you may be contacted to determine your level of interest. Your information is kept on file for 1 year, so you will need to annually complete this online form.

ARN's SIGs include administrative/management, admissions liaison, educators, gerontology, home health care, pediatrics, and researchers; you can get involved as a group member or SIG chair. These groups meet in person at the annual ARN educational conference, during which the chair is chosen each year. Most SIGs also offer e-mail discussion groups to help promote information sharing. Visit the ARN website's Members Only section to register for these Listserv discussion groups. Please note that ARN membership and SIG membership are required to participate.

ARN members also can get involved from the comfort of their homes or offices by responding to action alerts in support of the ARN Health Policy and Legislative Agenda ([www.rehabnurse.org/advocacy/content/activities.html](http://www.rehabnurse.org/advocacy/content/activities.html)). They can urge Congressional members to support the 2011 funding for the Nurse Reinvestment Act at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), nursing research at the

National Institute of Nursing Research, rehabilitation research at the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, and traumatic brain injury programs at HRSA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Powered by Voter Voice, a software system, responding to action alerts is as easy as following the instructions on your screen. By doing this, you become an ARN volunteer.

### Why Volunteer?

Incentives for volunteering with professional organizations are numerous (Table 1). Volunteer work can result in a win-win situation for all involved and bonds form that promote friendship and feelings of support and belonging. Although it takes time and effort, much volunteer activity is spread out across months and can be done using electronic communication or telephone. Family time does not have to suffer because this work often can be done at home. Face-to-face meetings and conferences convened to accomplish an organization's strategic plan or goals may involve travel, but family members can travel with the volunteer when personal resources allow.

I realized that rehabilitation was a good fit for me on a variety of levels. My mother had a stroke and I was one of her caregivers. Later I finished a master's degree in family health nursing and a research doctorate in which I focused my dissertation on the experience and meaning of caring for caregivers of people with stroke. For me, a large part of rehabilitation nursing is about families and caring, and I am passionate about helping people be the very best that they can be. A give-back attitude and volunteering with ARN are part and parcel of the altruistic reasons for volunteering described by Welch (2009): (a) wanting to help others and believing in a professional commitment to serve others, (b) aiding an important cause to bring about change and feeling a sense of belonging to a community that promotes a positive sense of self that can include feelings of achievement and recognition with feedback, and (c) being passionate about the benefits ARN brings to the nursing profession. Volunteering helps move the organization forward and provides for personal growth in so many ways (e.g., learning more about communication and groups, managing budgets and financial resources, understanding government relations).

Volunteering with ARN also demonstrates instrumental reasons for motivation that are connected with rewards relating to others' accomplishments and power (Welch, 2009). These reasons represent leadership and demonstrate a give-back attitude to my colleagues and the profession. So, what is a leader? The answer is deceptively simple. Is it a person who runs things? No, that's a boss (manager or administrator).

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**Table 1. Incentives and Deterrents Related to Volunteering with Professional Organizations**

<b>Incentives</b>
Friendship, support, bonding, and a feeling of belonging
Giving something back
Bringing about social change
<b>Achievement</b>
Recognition and feedback
Personal growth
<b>Deterrents</b>
Lack of management support from employer/organization; withdrawn perks
Limited training and orientation
<b>Staff indifference</b>
Lack of contact and support
Wrong assignment
Disorganized management

Although every leader may in some sense be a boss, not every boss is a leader. However, both roles are needed for success. I learned a long time ago that as leaders we manage the environment no matter what title is held. Leaders do not push, they pull. They do not enforce, they inspire. Leaders lead; this implies a destination that is someplace to be that is not here. They attract followers by flashing a light ahead. This is what separates leaders from bosses. Leaders start things; bosses keep things going. Leaders trigger and shape change. Bosses keep disorder and change at bay. As a volunteer leader and change agent, it is our responsibility to intentionally or indirectly cause or accelerate all types of change and move ARN ahead.

Table 1 also depicts the other side of volunteering; in other words, the reasons nurses do not volunteer. Deterrents to volunteering can be effectively managed, however. For example, one obstacle is related to lack of management support from an employer such as a hospital, home care agency, or university. I found early on that one way to gain support from my hospital employer for my volunteer activities in professional organizations and turn volunteerism into a perk was to write my annual work-related goals to include involvement in organizations such as ARN and connect volunteer work to my employer's long-range objectives. As hospitals seek to obtain American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Pathway to Excellence Program recognition (for healthcare organizations that provide nursing excellence) or Magnet Recognition Program status (recognition for healthcare organizations that provide nursing excellence), many institutions will support nurse volunteer work.

Another way to overcome limited orientation to volunteer work or to combat staff indifference is to use good communication skills to speak up and find

guidance. Through effective communication, staff can come to understand that volunteering is a good way to support the goals of the organization and advance the nursing profession. ARN has designated support staff and links to other volunteers to assist members in their quest to become comfortable in a volunteer role. Staff and volunteers from the Chapter Support Committee help ARN chapter officers manage the chapter's activities. For example, ARN furnishes a roster of active and prospective members to chapters on a quarterly basis to help maintain an accurate chapter membership database, recruit and retain chapter members, and welcome members who are new to the chapter. On a national level, during my time as ARN president we established an orientation program for members of the ARN Board of Directors. This program featured online slides that described roles and functions for the board member using open dialog in a conference call setting.

There can be a perceived lack of contact or support by volunteers. Some people may complain that once they received their training and assignments, they had to function pretty well on their own. Others may believe they have taken on an assignment that is outside their skill range or that management is disorganized. There is always the potential for limited contact either with other volunteers or with staff members, resulting in little opportunity to exchange ideas to solve problems or feel part of the group. By the same token, others mention positive efforts their organization has made to bring them into the fold. Establishing open lines of communication to discuss these concerns is a must and is representative of ARN's positive strategy. *ARN Chapter Communiqué*, a newsletter prepared for chapter leaders, is sent electronically and features news from the national organization and the Chapter Support Committee. This newsletter offers tips on managing effective chapters. Chapter leaders are invited to share this information with members by including it in their chapter's newsletter or copying and distributing it at chapter meetings. ARN officers and staff (contact information may be found at [www.rehabnurse.org](http://www.rehabnurse.org)) are easily accessible via e-mail, telephone, and facebook and are ready to hear suggestions or receive praise.

## Conclusion

I invite you to become involved in ARN or the professional organization of your choice as little or as much as you are able. Rehabilitation nurses need to work together to advance the specialty. When you are involved in a professional organization you will establish a connection to healthcare professionals from across the country and a support system that includes people who understand the challenges of a field.

As rehabilitation nurses we need to determine our strengths, talents, areas of interest, and skills. Some people work well independently and others enjoy working in groups. Some want to be leaders. Others are more comfortable as workers. Collectively, we need to invest in the future and become volunteers in our professional nursing organizations.

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### About the Author

Linda L. Pierce, PhD CNS RN CRRN FAHA FAAN, is a professor at the University of Toledo in Toledo, OH. Address correspondence to her at [l.pierce@utoledo.edu](mailto:l.pierce@utoledo.edu).

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To earn contact hours, go to [www.rehabnurse.org](http://www.rehabnurse.org) and select the "Education" page. There you can read the article again, or go directly to the posttest assessment by selecting "RNJ online CE." The cost for credit is \$10 per article. You will be asked for a credit card or online payment service number.

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