

Working for free

Volunteers spend countless hours pitching in to give back to the community and to stay busy. Some say they should be paid for their labor.

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Like the full-time staff at Jenkinson's Aquarium in Point Pleasant Beach, Joyce Pinkava spends her time feeding animals, testing water quality and explaining to visitors the nuances of hissing cockroaches, penguins and sharks.

Unlike the full-time staff, she doesn't get paid.

As a volunteer at Jenkinson's for the past three years, Pinkava, 69, of Brick, doesn't mind. "I can't wait to see what they have for me to do here," she said.

But some labor experts say Pinkava and thousands of other volunteers provide labor that helps employers generate money, and they should be compensated like all workers by getting paid at least the minimum wage, or \$7.15 an hour in New Jersey.

The issue goes largely unnoticed; after all, volunteers know from the start they are providing free labor and are unlikely to make waves. But some experts say there is little to stop employers from enriching themselves at the expense of well-meaning volunteers.

"There's a very fine line between, is this person a volunteer or should they be a paid employee?" said Thomas B. Lewis, an employment lawyer with Stark & Stark in Princeton. "If someone is providing a service that is providing a benefit (for the employer), that person should be paid the minimum wage."

Volunteers are celebrated for their generosity, and they contribute a wide array of services, from spending a summer morning cleaning up beaches to working three days a week at a hospital information desk.

But their economic impact is large. Nearly 84 million adults nationwide volunteer, which amounts to 9 million full-time employees, according to a 2001 study by Independent Sector, a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of charities and foundations.

In New Jersey, the group said, volunteer time is valued at \$21.88 an hour. That figure is a combination of average wages and fringe benefits for nonsupervisory workers.

Employers say volunteers help them offer programs they otherwise would need to scale back or eliminate. The Monmouth County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, a nonprofit organization in Eatontown that finds homes for dogs and cats, has more than 150 volunteers working alongside a work force of 50, said Rich Devlin, development specialist.

The volunteers search for pet owners, do administrative work, help with fund raising — "just about anything that is required here," Devlin said.

As a nonprofit that doesn't receive government funding, Devlin said the organization has little choice but to rely on volunteers. If it had to pay them? "We would have to cut back programming dramatically," he said.

The same could be said for Jenkinson's, although it is a for-profit company. The aquarium uses about 20 volunteers year-round and 20 more during the summer, which amounts to about half of its staff, curator Laura Graziano said.

The company asks volunteers to work 12 hours a month. They have many of the same duties of its paid staff, Graziano said.

"It helps us keep the floor well-staffed and answer questions for visitors," she said. "They really are a nice extra help."

Yet the use of volunteers for labor raises legal questions. For example, what would prevent a company from having an all-volunteer work force? Or should a volunteer who works at a museum gift shop — a money-making enterprise — be paid for his or her labor?

And what happens if a volunteer gets hurt on the job? Jenkinson's said the volunteers are covered by workers' compensation insurance; Monmouth SPCA said volunteers sign waivers releasing the organization from liability.

"Business derives a great benefit with very little risk," Lewis at Stark & Stark said.

New Jersey law is murky on the topic. It defines a volunteer as a person who donates his or her service to the protection of the public's health and safety — a clause that seemingly is meant to address only volunteer firefighters and paramedics.

Officials with the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development said they recognized the role of volunteers in nonprofit operations. But they are uneasy about the use of volunteers by for-profit companies.

"If you are working for a for-profit employer, you're probably doing work that somebody should be getting paid for," said Kevin Smith, a spokesman for labor department. "We really haven't come across complaints about that."



Certainly not from Pinkava. A former biology teacher, she has spent much of her life volunteering. She has helped a Rutgers University sorority, pitched in at the state Division of Fish and Wildlife and kept score at New Egypt High School softball games.

She said she volunteers to stay busy — and the prospect of getting paid hasn't crossed her mind.

"I wouldn't want to get paid," Pinkava said. "That's not the object. I'm doing it to give back, not for any material gain."

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STORYCHAT 

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I use to volunteer at St. Mary's Hospital for 3 years and loved every moment of it. Spending time with the patients and helping them out was worth every free time I had.

They are using her, plain and simple. I'm sure they are paying young people to work there. Why not the elderly volunteers as well? Be fair!

Posted by: Saianara on Mon Apr 30, 2007 7:43 pm

Ms. Pinkava clearly enjoys volunteering at Jenkinson's. I am appalled, however, to read that volunteers should, in general, be paid. I have been a volunteer in Toms River for 50 years and I don't regret one day of service. Our hospitals would have to close their doors if not for volunteers. Young people should have a semester of

volunteering as a requisite for graduation. It provides a sense of self-worth and enlightens them as to the plight of other, less fortunate people in their communities.

Posted by: baker08732 on Mon Apr 30, 2007 1:44 pm

JENKINSONS IS "FREE ENTERPRISE"...AND SHOULD PAY THESE "VOLUNTEERS". THEY ARE BIG BUSINESS, MULTI MILLIONS IN ANNUAL SALES, AND PRIVATELY OWNED. WHAT A HOAX ! VOLUNTEERING IS A WONDERFUL THING, NOT MEANT TO "REPLACE" PAID EMPLOYEES. WHAT IF GENERAL MOTORS STARTS "USING" "VOLUNTEERS" ?

Posted by: RJ5 on Mon Apr 30, 2007 1:12 pm

Ms. Pinkava means well, but she is being used. Jenkinson's is a business that rakes in tons of cash all year round. Why not just hire her as a part-time employee? She's probably a nice lady, but is a sucker.

A place like the Monmouth SPCA is a different story; it is a non-profit organization that is not rich by any means.

I volunteer for another animal shelter and enjoy it and wouldn't expect a dime; I am doing it to help the animals because the shelter is cash-strapped & truly cannot afford to pay anyone outside its small paid staff.

But to volunteer for a company that rolls in the dough 365 days a year? Hell no!

Posted by: TwistedTransistor on Mon Apr 30, 2007 10:18 am

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