

# Fit for volunteering



5 ways to use your enthusiasm for exercise to help others

**V**olunteering might sound like something best reserved for retirees, but there's good reason to start the habit now. Simply put, studies have found that volunteering can increase your happiness, not to mention help you live longer.

While you can embark on traditional volunteer activities like serving food at a soup kitchen, you also can turn your passion for fitness into a volunteer opportunity. The possibilities are endless. "We've got thousands of opportunities for people passionate about fitness to give back," says Greg Baldwin, president of VolunteerMatch, which helps connect people with volunteer opportunities around the world through its online database. Here are five ways to flex that volunteer muscle:

**1. Walk dogs at a local shelter or animal rescue organization.** Dogs need their exercise, and those in shelters and rescues are no exception, which is why people willing and able to spend time with these dogs are in high demand. Yet just because you walk your dog at home doesn't mean you're automatically qualified. Shelters often require that you go through training to learn their protocol (for instance, how to enter and exit a dog's kennel) and even submit to a background check. The ultimate payoff, along with bumping up your daily step count? A kiss from your "client."

**2. Go on patrol.** Volunteers are often called on to patrol trails for state and national parks or even local trail systems. Take, for instance, the Midtown Greenway Coalition in Minneapolis, which uses volunteers to bike trails at night for a few hours. Rides usually take place most nights of the week, and volunteers sign up for nights they can ride. They then serve as a friendly presence on the trail, help clean up the trail and report anything suspicious.

**3. Teach fitness classes.** Gyms might be the most common place that offers fitness classes, but they're not the only location. From senior centers to affordable housing organizations, numerous facilities host classes, but unlike gyms, they're often taught by volunteers. VolunteerMatch, for instance, recently linked a fitness instructor to an affordable housing organization where she teaches yoga there for free.

**4. Lend your coaching skills.** You might not be a professional coach, but that doesn't matter to organizations like Girls on the Run, which empowers girls ages 8 to 13 through running (or walking) and looks for volunteers to serve as coaches and running buddies. "The most important qualities coaches and buddies need to possess are excitement to work with the girls, a

willingness to learn more about the girls they're working with and a desire to be a positive role model for young girls," says Kenzie Kramer, communications coordinator for Girls on the Run International, adding that you don't even need to consider yourself a runner. You'll go through a background check, and for coaching opportunities, a training session, too. (Head coaches also have to be CPR and first-aid certified.)

**5. Help staff a race.** If you've ever done any type of fitness race, whether a marathon, triathlon or century, you know that volunteers make these events tick. For instance, the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series, which hosts races in 25 cities in North America and four in Europe, relies on 500 to 2,000 local volunteers at each event. "Each volunteer experience, whether large or small, is vital to the Rock 'n' Roll race weekend, supporting thousands of people who are achieving their goals," says Amber Lopez, senior manager of volunteer services for Rock 'n' Roll. Volunteer opportunities, for instance, might include registering participants, handing out T-shirts and swag bags at the health and fitness expo, directing participants to start corrals, manning water stations during the race, and assisting participants boarding shuttles pre- and post-race.