

Find Purpose and Inspiration in Retirement as an AmeriCorps Seniors Volunteer

By Jason Holland

After 45 years as a nurse, with much of her career spent in high-pressure environments like the ICU and emergency room, Pat DeNeal, 74, was ready for a change. But her instinct to help people was still strong.

So in December 2013, she began volunteering at the Sojourner Truth House in Gary, Indiana, a shelter for homeless and at-risk women and their children. Pat works in the food pantry and boutique, which provide food, personal items, and clothing for the shelter residents, as well as others in need in the community.

“The shelter helps women get back into the world after getting counseling and other help,” explains Pat, who volunteers Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., collecting data on clients and setting up food orders.

A certified CPR instructor, Pat also gives classes to the shelter staff, as well as residents. “I remember one young lady with two children. She was in my CPR class and because she was certified she was able to get a job,” she says. “She came back and told me they hired her ahead of others because she had the training. This was two years ago, and now she has her own apartment.”

Pat is part of a nationwide network of volunteers in [AmeriCorps Seniors](#) (formerly Senior Corps). Funding comes from the federal government, with local organizations utilizing the volunteers and organizing efforts where they're needed most in the area.

There are more than 200,000 AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers aged 55 and older across the country, working as Senior Companions (supporting older adults who need help with daily tasks), Foster Grandparents (serving as mentors and role models to children), and other positions. In RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program), volunteers work in activities as diverse

as organizing neighborhood watch programs, tutoring disadvantaged youths, renovating homes, teaching English as a second language, helping natural disaster victims, assisting veterans in finding jobs, and more.

Pat was assigned to Sojourner Truth House after signing up as an AmeriCorps Senior volunteer through [United Way of Porter County](#), in Valparaiso, Indiana, whose RSVP is coordinated by Evelyn Harris.

“We have a government grant focused on three things: food support, transportation, and companionship, which are all basic resources needed to assist older adults who desire to continue living in their homes,” says Evelyn. “We partner with over 30 different organizations like senior centers, resale shops and Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, and libraries that provide tutoring for children. The most popular are Meals on Wheels and the food pantries.”

Evelyn notes that for many of their clients in those programs, the Meals on Wheels delivery person is the only visitor or phone call they get each day, referring to the Phone Pals program, in which volunteers call after delivering a meal. And with the program, it's not simply dropping off food. Volunteers act as a wellness check too. Unfortunately, with the pandemic, meals are now left outside, which means those phone calls are doubly important.

“It's a wonderful feeling to see the impact the volunteers are having,” says Evelyn. “For those who are homebound, who are aging in place, it changes their lives tremendously. For some, these are the only people they talk to. One volunteer changed her route to make sure that the lady that she had become friends with was the last person she sees, so she could spend as much time as she wanted with her.”

Mark, 69, and Gloria Zimmerman, 68, also volunteer through United Way

of Porter County. Gloria, former director of the guidance department at the local high school, assists with administrative duties in the office and often works with Mark on serving luncheons at the local senior home. Mark, a retired HR coordinator, is active in Meals on Wheels, delivering food directly to clients but also transporting meals from their prep location to nearby towns for distribution by other volunteers.

“At this stage in our lives it's nice to give back to the community,” says Mark. “It also gives us a shared sense of purpose. That's what's very nice about it. It also keeps us active.”

Evelyn says that volunteers like Pat, Mark, and Gloria are the foundation of everything her organization does. They are permitted to serve up to 40 hours a week. But most serve twice a week on average, two to five hours each day. She notes that they've had Meals on Wheels drivers working up to 30 hours.

“Some of our volunteers couldn't make it through their first month of retirement. They call and tell me that they need something to do. I tell them, ‘We have plenty to do!’ There are some senior volunteers who are not sure what their purpose is. But when you get up early in the morning to give your neighbors a meal, that work is purposeful. They've done well in life and want to give back to those in need. They have huge hearts.”

Evelyn notes there is an application and interview process. “They tell us about themselves, their skills, their career, their interests. What they do and don't want to do. Then we interview them because it's not just about what we hear them say or what they put on paper, it's a feeling I get. Based on personality and our current needs I might recommend an activity for them. I enjoy pairing organizations and individuals,” she explains.

You can find AmeriCorps Seniors volunteer opportunities near you [here](#).