

Raise your hand to get connected

Our community has been discussing how to make newcomers and current residents feel connected to our area. United Way of Northwest Georgia's Volunteer Center has been working for many years to connect volunteers to meaningful service in our community. Volunteering allows us to use our talents and time to build a better future for our community and to connect to our neighbors, co-workers, and friends. We are always looking for the hand-raisers — the ones who want to change our community.

Our Corporate Volunteer Council leads the United Way Volunteer Center. The center began in 2012 as way for coordinators of employee volunteer programs to share best practices, network and explore opportunities for employee service. In 2014, United Way of Northwest Georgia's Corporate Volunteer Council received the Points of Light Fast Start Award in recognition of the Council's ability to mobilize volunteers and measure success.

The center promotes

the United Way Volunteer Center as a vehicle for corporate service. Members of the center include: chair, Jim Hawkins, Dalton Public Schools; Tim Ausmus, Shaw Industries; Howard Elder, community volunteer; Scott Grafe, Dorsett Industries; John Forrester, Hamilton Health Care System; Denise Wood, Mohawk Industries; Robert Varner, BB&T; Jared Warnack, Phenix Flooring; Stuart Nelson, Brown

Industries; Micah Riggle, Mohawk Industries; Marianne Murry, Engineered Floors; Tracie Dodson, Shaw Industries; and Kim Thames, community volunteer.

The volunteer center offers many opportunities for engagement year round. Programs include:

■ Adopt-A-Class Volunteer Readers:

In 2016, 20 volunteers committed to read once a month to a class for the school year.

■ **Corporate volunteerism/custom group projects:** The center's services provide streamlined event management to corporate

partners and first-hand knowledge of community needs to make sure that employee volunteer time is used effectively and efficiently. Last year, 114 corporate projects were completed last year.

■ **Get connected:** VolunteerNWGA.org. More than 2,300 volunteers use this online volunteer matching program to view some 50 local volunteer opportunities in our community.

■ **Little Free Libraries:** There are 27 Little Free Libraries in public parks in Whitfield and Murray counties. These "take a book, leave a book" structures hold 20 to 30 books, creating access to reading material across the community. More than 1,600 books were distributed last year.

■ **Service events:** Longest Day of the Year in June (around solstice); Make a Difference Day, the fourth Friday and Saturday of October; and monthly projects posted at volunteerNWGA.org

The center also offers leadership development for youth and adults.

Boardwalk nonprofit board service training is a one-day workshop connecting community leaders to nonprofit board of directors.

GoLEAD Institute is a

two week-long leadership and service day camp for high school students held during the summer. Sixteen students completed the institute last year. Volunteer Project Leaders Training is held in April and September each year to train project leaders in volunteer management. Volunteer Vacation is a service day camp for teens held during the following school breaks: fall break, winter break, mid-winter break and spring break. More than 80 students participated last year.

Each year, United Way awards Presidential Volunteer Service Awards, the Connie Woodward Award, the Elaine Butler Award, Youth Volunteer Awards and the Elbert Shaw Memorial Scholarship to promote the Spirit of Volunteerism.

Last year the United Way Volunteer Center coordinated 152 projects, connecting 3,287 volunteers to the community with 33,511 hours of service. April is National Volunteer Month. As we look for ways to get connected to our community, let's start by raising our hands and volunteering.

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