

DANE COUNTY TIMEBANK

Adding Value To Time Well Spent

Empowering people to reclaim their neighborhood economy and thus helping to build communities is one of the goals of the Dane County Timebank, a service exchange system with a twist.

by **GEORGE ZENS**

At one point or another, we all have needs for the services of others, whether it's for a small plumbing job, financial advice, child care or moving a piano. Vice versa, most of us also have skills that can be of use to others in our community.

But how do we know whom to call on for the math tutoring? Especially when we don't have a lot of money. And how do we know who might need our knowledge of bike repair?

That is where the Dane County Timebank comes in. As its director, Stephanie Rearick, explains, it is a "service exchange program and information system where people come together, their skills and talents are catalogued, and offers and requests are matched."

As opposed to Madison Hours, which is a local paper currency, the Timebank is paperless, although the exchange unit is called Time Dollar and one Time Dollar equals one hour of donated time. Because no actual money is used, the Time Dollars are tax-exempt.

The Timebank, which was started in October 2005, is actively facilitated and coordinated. Stephanie Rearick interviews every applicant who wants to participate in the program and a background check makes sure they are the right people for the job:

"There is no anonymity and we have safeguards in place to ensure our members' safety," Stephanie Rearick says.

Offers and requests are entered into an online directory, where people can find the help they need. For participants who don't have access to the internet, Stephanie Rearick plays matchmaker. She also enters the Time Dollars (i.e. hours donated helping or received) into the members' Timebank accounts as earned or spent.

The Timebank is based on four "core values" (from the Dane County Timebank information booklet):

Assets: We are all assets; we all have something to give.

Redefining Work: Building community is real work. Time Dollars are a way to recognize and reward that work.

Reciprocity: Helping works better as a two-way street. Those who receive help earn that help by giving in return to another.

Social Capital: Being together means being stronger. People are joined by their helping actions into



Photo by George Zens

Stephanie Rearick coordinates the Dane County Timebank's activities.

a network of support, strength, and trust.

As Stephanie Rearick explains, the Timebank goes far beyond simply exchanging services:

"It is also a community-building tool with neighbors helping neighbors and getting to know each other. We match unmet needs with unused resources."

The most common services people exchange with the help of Time Dollars are (in no particular order) transportation, cooking, car repair, counseling, tutoring, home repair, computer tech support, pet care, exercise buddies, cleaning, financial planning, errands, child

care - to name

these. While Time Dollars are best suited for service exchanges, some businesses and restaurants also accept them as currency to purchase (usually surplus) goods or meals during off-peak hours.

Stephanie Rearick points out that the service exchange system is not barter, but really a bank. Participants can take advantage of somebody's offer without directly giving something in return. They use up their Time Dollars will replenish their Timebank account when they in turn provide a service for someone else. And like a real bank, the Timebank also extends credit to participants, albeit not indefinitely.

They are now working on building up the Spanish-speaking part of the bank, "to make English as a second Language instruction more accessible."

Among the Dane County Timebank's 200 members are also 16 non-profit organizations, like Joining Forces for Families, where the Timebank helps with transportation. A cooperation agreement is currently also being worked out with Community Car.

"The Timebank is a great resource for volunteer coordina-

tors," says Stephanie Rearick. "They find all the skills they need on one website."

Indeed. The services offered and requested are as varied as the people who participate. Whether it's the retired nurse who earns Time Dollars by helping a neighbor recovering from hip surgery and spends them on furnace filter maintenance from a retired HVAC serviceman, or the volunteer who tutors students in math and uses his Time Dollars to acquire a computer - the possibilities are endless.

As an instrument for arranging much needed (and for many people normally unaffordable) services, the Timebank plays a vital role in regenerating the informal grassroots economy that is a cornerstone of a compassionate society. As a community-building tool with neighbors helping neighbors - as they say, priceless.

For more information, call Stephanie Rearick at (608) 443-8229; or visit the website danecountytimebank.org

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