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6 Ways To Volunteer Abroad And Be Really Useful



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Next Avenue, Contributor

By Rick Walleigh, Next Avenue Contributor

From the title of her controversial new book, *Hoping to Help: The Promise and Pitfalls of Global Health Volunteering*, you can tell that Lehigh University sociology professor Judith Lasker is something of a skeptic. Although she scrutinizes short-term health volunteering programs in particular, many of Lasker's insights and critiques can be applied across the universe of international volunteer projects.



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I was keenly interested in Lasker's views since I'm a former Silicon Valley high tech exec who has spent 18 months of my encore career [volunteering with the nonprofit TechnoServe](#) in Africa and had three short-term volunteering experiences abroad, in Nepal, Chile and Peru.

Based on my experience and Lasker's book, below I'll offer some suggestions below on how to truly be useful if you want to volunteer abroad.

In *Hoping to Help*, Lasker cites research showing that most of the hundreds of thousands of people in international health volunteer projects each year provide at least *some* positive returns to their host communities.

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A Lack of Monitoring and Evaluation

However, she quotes Dr. Edward O’Neil Jr., founder and president of [Omni Med](#) (which provides volunteer opportunities for medical professionals) saying: “While some service programs are models of efficiency, efficacy, and intelligent construction,...others base their program designs on what seems right, with little to no evidence for proceeding and even less monitoring and evaluation.”

Lasker studied a variety of programs lasting from one week to many years and whose volunteers ranged from high school students to specialized surgeons. She interviewed 119 staffers, organizers, volunteers and global health expert and conducted an Internet survey of 177 U.S.-based organizations that send volunteers overseas for short-term health programs.



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She discovered that very few programs measure their long-term outcomes and that the positive returns to host countries varied widely. What’s more, Lasker writes, “I have learned that a major portion of programs do very

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cursor screening of volunteers and barely prepare them for the country they will be visiting and the work they will be doing.”

Short-Term Vs. Long-Term Trips

She came away not being a big fan of one- or two-week volunteer trips, which are the vast majority of ones from U.S. organizers. What she prefers: “longer trips, much better volunteer preparation and programs that are coordinated with and support local communities and officials on an ongoing basis, focus on underlying causes of ill health, and are embedded in continuous community-based assessment, partnership and follow-up evaluation.” Lasker asks: “In pursuit of a more just world, can we accept anything less?”

I personally observed the shortcomings of short volunteer projects several years ago when talking to a friend who’d just returned with his wife from a church-run medical mission to help “untouchables” in India. Knowing that neither of them had any medical training, I asked him what they’d done there. He said: “We basically gave them an aspirin and a hug.”

(More: Adventure Volunteerism: Taking Voluntourism Up a Notch)

As Lasker points out, local benefits vary widely among volunteer programs, which I’ve seen from my own experiences participating in three short programs before working in Africa for 18 months.



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In Nepal, I provided valuable technical and management advice based on my expertise that eventually brought electricity to a remote village. In Chile, where I was basically an observer helping an organization evaluate and coach entrepreneurs, I felt I'd wasted my time and money. In Peru, where I played with orphans, visited development projects and studied Spanish, the results were in the middle; I benefited from learning about the culture and projects, but the value of my learnings greatly outweighed the minimal assistance I provided by playing with children, who couldn't understand me, for a few hours per day.

In Africa, however, I had a significant impact. That's because I was working for 18 months in an area where I had experience and expertise, and I can point to specific results.

6 Tips for a Worthwhile International Volunteer Experience

Condensing some of the themes in Lasker's book with my experience as an international volunteer, here is a list of six recommendations for older adults who want to pursue an international volunteer experience. Follow them and I think you can have a very worthwhile experience and know that your efforts will real, tangible benefits:

1. Before embarking on an international volunteer assignment, research the sponsoring organization. If you



have questions, ask. If you don't get answers or don't trust the ones you hear, move on.

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2. Understand both your motivation and the objective of the organization where you'd volunteer. If you think the obvious purpose of an international volunteer assignment should be to help poor and oppressed people and that the motivation of the volunteers should be altruism, you'd be naïve.

Thinking about two of my short-term projects, I've realized that the primary objectives were to promote cross-cultural awareness and to educate me on the broader work of the sponsoring organization. From a host country benefits perspective, neither of the projects was justified.

Lasker's investigation revealed that "three goal categories emerged as primary for the sponsors: providing health services and capacity building, enhancing the organization's reputation and promoting volunteers' personal growth." For a number of religious organizations, she noted, the primary focus was to evangelize, with the provision of medical services as one strategy in their overall plan.

If your primary objective is to have an interesting international experience or spread the gospel, that's fine; find an organization that aligns with your goal. But if your objective is to better the physical, mental or economic well-being of people in less-developed countries,

make sure that's also the primary objective of the organization you will work for.

The Forbes logo, consisting of the word "Forbes" in a serif font with a small icon of three horizontal bars to its left.



3. Participate in an extended assignment. Unless you are a skilled surgeon or other medical professional supplying acute care, one week is not enough! In one week's time, most other professional volunteers will just be developing an understanding of their role, responsibilities and objectives. A one-week volunteer in a non-professional role, such as pounding nails or carrying bricks, is a tremendous waste of resources given the cost of things like travel and lodging.

While there may be other beneficial motives for one-week trips for non-professionals, I believe the host countries would be much better off if the volunteers just donated a fraction of the money they'd spend.

In general, the more specialized and focused the resources and skills being used in a volunteer assignment, the shorter it can be and still have benefit — for instance, surgeons fixing cleft palates. My two-week trip to Nepal was very productive because I went there using my professional skills, the project was very focused and it was thoroughly planned in advance.

4. Find a program that can use your expertise and experience. If you're contemplating an international volunteer assignment toward the end of your primary career or in retirement, you have a lot of knowledge and

experience that can be useful. Look for groups with people like you, such as [Engineers Without Borders](#), [Plumbers Without Borders](#) and [Farmers to Farmers](#).

I chose [TechnoServe](#) (whose tagline is “Business Solutions to Poverty”) because I could use my management consulting background to consult with small businesses in Swaziland. Leaning on her four years of working with Junior Achievement of Silicon Valley, my wife Wendy started a Swazi youth program, which became [Junior Achievement of Swaziland](#).

Anyone who has had a career and knows how to organize people, manage projects and get things done has valuable skills. Leave the concrete mixing and nail pounding to the high school students (unless your experience is in construction and can *manage* the high school students).

5. Choose a program where you can promote local self-sufficiency.

Without proper attention, volunteer programs can create and perpetuate a culture of dependency. At some point, local residents should be able to take on the roles previously filled by the volunteers.

6. Find an organization that is well-connected with the locals where you will be working.

In some cases, the group will have a local office. In others, the sponsoring organization will be tightly connected with a local partner.

Local presence will help you personally and better ensure the success and value of your work. On the personal side, working with locals will help you become better prepared; locate lodging and transportation and get you oriented. Professionally, a good local presence will prepare the situation for your arrival and see that there is continuity and follow-up after you leave.

Lasker wrote that some medical organizations just dropped into a community, opened a short-term clinic and left with no one to follow up. While this may have provided some benefit to locals with acute conditions, the value could have been greatly increased with planning and follow-up.

I agree and hope that if you choose to volunteer abroad, you — and the organization you select — will make the project meaningful for all concerned.

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