April is volunteer appreciation month. Let’s take a look at the value of volunteering to you, to organizations and to the public.

First, volunteering is good for you. Current research shows that helping others can help you reduce your blood pressure. Hypertension affects 65 million Americans and is a leading cause of death in the U.S. Anything we can do to reduce these numbers is a win for everyone involved.

A 20-year study by Carnegie Mellon University showed that those who have volunteered for at least 200 hours a year reduced their risk of high blood pressure by at least 40 percent.

It’s important to remember that this study covered the time that many people retired. As people retire, the chances of social interaction go down. Researchers theorize that the reduction in blood pressure may be caused by increasing social interaction.

What do volunteers mean to an organization? I called our local food bank to ask what volunteers mean to its operation. The food bank told me that volunteers put in 22,000 hours on site to keep people fed during 2014. That doesn’t include the time that volunteers donate at distribution sites (churches, Fairbanks Native Association and other organizations). According to the Independent Sector, the average value of an hour donated by volunteers in Alaska figures to be $26.50. That means that the value of that time to the food bank is $583,000. Now think if we have to pay folks for that time. More dollars would have to be raised to support the distribution of this donated food.

Take that number and multiply it by the hundreds of organizations that are functioning in the Tanana Valley. Volunteers keep the wheels turning in our nonprofits and other organizations.

Let’s take one more step back and see what volunteers do for the public good. This one requires a little more imagination, so go back to our food bank example. Because we feed
people by distributing food boxes, we improve peoples’ diets. A recent study said poor diet and physical inactivity cause over 300,000 deaths in the US each year. These two factors are major contributors to disabilities that result from diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity and stroke. Volunteering to provide people with nutritious food means more people living, working and contributing to our economy.

It’s easy to see how important volunteering is to our health and to local organizations. I did a quick scan of the newspaper this past week and found “Friends in Need” for everything from tutors at the Literacy Council to construction workers for Habitat for Humanity. One of my favorite volunteer opportunities is coming up with the Spring Health Fair. There is a need for far more volunteers than we have. Check out this section in the News-Miner each Sunday.

If you are a whiz with numbers, volunteer for the Tax-Aide program and help people complete their tax returns. The IRS will help train you. Is working with youth your passion? There’s a 4-H member or a scout that needs a leader. Maybe you don’t want to work with lots of people. There are some carpentry skills needed to build raised beds at the Georgeson Botanical Gardens at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. No matter what your skill set is, there is a need for you in the Tanana Valley. If you want to volunteer for any of the opportunities listed here, give me a call at 474-7201 and I’ll be glad to point you the right direction.

Also, there is a brand new website that lists where volunteers are needed. Go to justserve.org and check out the opportunities. Currently the listings include the Fairbanks Food Bank, CASA, Meals on Wheels, an after school project, and working with seniors. There is something for everyone regardless of your interests.

If you aren’t volunteering now, find a place to spend your time. You’ll be healthier for it and our community will thrive.

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