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Civic service falling short

Survey: Volunteer activity just average

BY ROBERT STERN
STAFF WRITER

When Dr. Holly Holcombe moved to Princeton Township with her husband and their two children seven years ago, she made a point to volunteer in her new community.

"It comes from the desire to do good, the desire to give back, to get out of the house, to work with other people who are like-minded," said Holcombe, who devoted the bulk of her donated time to school-related functions.

"If we have fewer constraints . . ., how is it that we score only average in our rates of civic engagement and volunteerism?"

MARC WEINER,
Rutgers researcher

residents could step up as volunteers in greater numbers and with more frequency than they do now.

They point to newly released results of a Rutgers University survey, which show that people in central New Jersey are no more likely to volunteer or be civically engaged than Americans in general.

That's disappointing, said Nancy Kieling, president of the nonprofit Princeton Area Community Foundation.

Her organization partnered with the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation to co-sponsor and fund the \$75,000 survey.

Kieling noted the same survey found, in part, that people in central New Jersey are better educated and have higher incomes than national averages, two key factors that research has linked to strong community involvement.

"Our numbers were strong, but they could be stronger," Kieling said. "We believe that in an area that scores so high in so many areas, our levels of social capital should be similarly high."

Social capital refers to the collective [See **VOLUNTEER**, Page A7]

VOLUNTEER

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Civic service falling short

value of all connections or "social networks" among people and organizations in a given geographic region and the inclinations among those individuals and groups to do things for each other, according to Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America.

In an effort to gauge the strength and extent of those connections in the greater Mercer County area for the first time, Rutgers University's Bloustein Center for Survey Research in 2007 randomly surveyed almost 2,500 people in central New Jersey on a wide variety of topics.

The spectrum of issues covered included demographic information, ties with neighbors, community involvement and levels of trust among residents of Mercer County and six nearby municipalities in Somerset and Middlesex counties.

The results of that survey — the "2007 Central New Jersey Regional Social Capital Benchmark Survey" — were released this month, based on the 870 completed responses.

The survey, which had a 3 percent margin of error, found that 51 percent of residents in central New Jersey report to have at least a bachelor's degree — compared with just 28 percent nationally based on a nationwide social capital survey by Harvard's Saguaro Seminar.

A similar disparity existed for reported household income.

In central New Jersey, 54 percent of respondents said their annual household income topped \$75,000. The previous year's Saguaro survey found that just 27 percent of respondents across the country claimed household income above \$75,000.

But in terms of volunteering in the previous 12 months, central New Jerseyans reported having done so an average of 9.6 times, almost identical to the national average of 9.7 times.

That's despite the survey's findings that the mean number of weekly work hours in central New Jersey was 41.8 — almost three less than the national average in the 2006 Saguaro survey.

"If we have fewer constraints because our education, income and

Comparing National and Central NJ Volunteering

	National	Central New Jersey
Number of times a person said they volunteered in the previous 12 months:	9.7	9.6
■ Education level:		
Bachelor's degree or higher:	28%	51%
High school diploma or below:	47%	21%
■ Annual household income:		
more than \$100,000:	15%	36%
more than \$75,000:	27%	54%
between \$30,000 and \$75,000:	40%	30%
less than \$30,000:	28%	16%
■ Number of work hours per week:	44.5	41.8
■ Number of commuting minutes per day:	25.8	31.4

Source: 2007 Central New Jersey Regional Social Capital Benchmark Survey by Marc D. Weiner of Rutgers University's Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy.

Survey results based on 870 completed telephone interviews from May 1-June 8, 2007, of a proportionate sampling of residents in Mercer County's 13 municipalities plus Montgomery, Plainsboro, South Brunswick, Cranbury, Kingston and Rocky Hill. Margin of error +/- 3 percent.

trust levels exceed the national average, and we are no busier than others, how is it that we score only average in our rates of civic engagement and volunteerism?" asks Marc Weiner, the Rutgers researcher who was the principal investigator for the central New Jersey social capital survey.

Leaders of the survey's two sponsoring organizations want people and businesses around here to ask themselves that question and opt to become more involved in their communities and expand links within the region.

"We want the survey results to stimulate thought and shape discussions about planning for our common health and well-being for years to come," said Karen Colimore, president and CEO of the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

That foundation will use the survey results to promote public-private partnerships that spur economic advantages for the area and to help boost the region's social capital.

The Princeton Area Community Foundation will award \$2.5 million in grants over the next five years to organizations that encourage greater social interaction and bridge-building among people and towns.

The gloom surrounding the nation's economy makes the timing of this initiative, which the two foundations are calling "Better Together," both more important and challenging, said Michael Hierl, chairman of the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

"There is something important about social capital and its (positive) effect on regional economic strength," Hierl said.

"It's really important in this challenging economy for the business community to support the work of our nonprofits and also the work of civic organizations and community boards," he said. "We want to encourage businesses to (get their people) involved in that full span of community service, not just nonprofits."

For Holcombe, volunteering has been a good way to establish roots and get to know people in a place 460 miles from the Chapel Hill, N.C., home she and her family left in 2001 to move to Princeton.

Volunteering, she said, is "fun and you learn a lot and you realize there are a lot of talented people out there."

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