

New Yorkers Making a Difference

An Interview with Gary Bagley,
Executive Director, New York Cares

EDITORS' NOTE Before being appointed to his current post, Gary Bagley served as Associate Executive Director since July 2008. Bagley joined New York Cares in 2004 as Senior Director of Programs. Prior to New York Cares, Bagley was the Program Director for Young Audiences New York. From 1992 to 2000, he was a teaching artist and then the Director of Education for TADA! Youth Theater. He has a B.S. in music composition and acting

from Ithaca College and an M.P.A. from Baruch College of The City University of New York, where he is now an Adjunct Lecturer.



Gary Bagley

ORGANIZATION BRIEF New York Cares (www.nycares.org) was founded in 1987 to take action against the serious social issues facing the city. Its mission is to meet pressing community needs by mobilizing New Yorkers in volunteer service. Signature programs include creating year-round volunteer opportunities, creating citywide days of service, fostering corporate social responsibility, helping New York prepare for disasters, engaging in youth service, and organizing holiday gift and coat drives. New York Cares is a member of the Points of Light Institute and HandsOn Network and has partnerships with the New York City Office of Emergency Management, the American Red Cross in Greater New York, and the New York State Commission on National & Community Service.

Can you give a brief overview of the broad range of work that New York Cares is focused on and how the organization has evolved?

New York Cares, now a 22-year-old organization, was founded by a group of individuals, primarily from the corporate sector, who wanted to volunteer in the community and weren't able to for a few reasons. Many existing volunteer opportunities at the time wanted these individuals to make a level of commitment they couldn't make or to volunteer during times that their jobs didn't permit. Most of the places where they wanted to volunteer, like the shelter system, didn't offer volunteer programs, so even if they could find their way to a homeless shelter and offer their services, the staff was not resourced to understand how volunteers could help and appropriately plan and manage work

for them. So they created New York Cares, and these obstacles are what we take care of every month. Our program managers work with about 1,000 social services agencies every year, diagnose their need for volunteers, and then plan and manage projects that take place weekly to monthly, while also making it as easy as possible for volunteers to access that high-quality programming.

All areas today are being affected by economic challenges.

Has there been an impact on New York Cares' operations, and how important is it to reemphasize the critical nature of this work?

In the face of shortages in staffing, from the school level to other nonprofits and social services agencies, volunteers are a wonderful way to continue to provide a level of service to clients. We're seeing more than a 20 percent increase in the number of volunteers coming through our doors, so individuals understand there is tremendous need in the community, and they want to pitch in and help out. The greatest areas of need right now are adult education and literacy programming, as well as children's education. With the adults, this is primarily because many of the folks who lose their jobs in this kind of environment may not have the skills to get another type of job. Those are people who may have to choose between paying their rent or putting food on the table, and they don't have back-up money to speak of. They may not have the language skills or résumé to find another position. Volunteers can help them learn to create a résumé, practice for an interview, or get a GED. The single best thing you can do to prevent poverty is help someone get a high school diploma. We have agencies that do computer tutorials with adults. For example, there are 40 people registered in a program, and there's a waiting list of more than 40 clients waiting to get in. There's a great need out there in the community right now.

How broad are the opportunities for volunteers, and is there a strong awareness in the community about New York Cares and the opportunities it provides?

I'm seeing a greater awareness of New York Cares and how we can serve the community. We're living in a very interesting period

right now, because our President, our Governor, and our Mayor have all placed public service as one of their main priorities at this time. We've done some research in this area, which we'll be releasing in the spring, that suggests that the more people volunteer and the more leadership roles they assume, the more involved they are in their communities as a whole. So the person who volunteers for New York Cares is also more likely than the average resident to go back to his or her own neighborhood and get involved. Folks who volunteer contribute significantly to the quality of life for everybody around them.

Is it possible to maintain contact and see how things develop in many of the programs, or is it challenging to track that?

Sometimes it's challenging to track that, primarily because we're helping the clients of other agencies. So very often our limitation is how well they keep track. We're currently designing programs where we can follow clients over a greater period of time and watch the effects of what's happening as a result of the work our volunteers do. We already invest a huge amount of effort evaluating the effectiveness of our volunteer management, which is one of the reasons we know that our volunteers who do more are giving more back in the community. Like any practices, we continually work to improve them but, in terms of engaging volunteers, our practices are strong, and we're working to see how that translates and affects client improvement.

You've been in social services for some 15 years. Was this interest instilled in you early on? What attracted you to this type of work?

I have spent a lot of time pondering what actually brought me to social services. When I was young, I was always volunteering. I was a Boy Scout and helped run the local paper drive and the food drives and various other similar activities in school. In the first stages of my career, I found that what I missed in my work was a sense that my work mattered beyond the fact that I was doing it. It's important to me that my work should have meaning. Some folks are able to work and enjoy the weekend; I want to enjoy my work and the evening and the weekend – I want it all. So social services is a way that I can feel like I am making a dent in the problems that I see around me. ●

A New York Cares volunteer works on a community project.

