

Practitioners Tout the Many Rewards of Community Involvement

by Communications and Corporate Relations & Business Strategy Staff

February 1, 2005 -- Jana N. Martin, PhD, joined Soroptimist International of Long Beach, CA, a local community service organization, because she wanted to get involved with her community and connect with other professionals. Martin, a psychologist in private practice, soon found that the benefits of membership extended beyond the opportunity to serve her community and make new professional contacts. Through her volunteer activities, from giving stress management workshops to helping out at fundraisers, Martin tapped into significant new practice opportunities that helped to grow her practice.

In today's competitive health care marketplace, making community connections is a vital activity for practitioners. While Martin and others report that the primary benefit of local volunteer work is the chance to give back to the community, they also cite additional benefits, including the opportunity to learn about unmet needs and market trends in their community, diversify their practices and increase their referrals.

"So many partnerships and collaborative relationships are facilitated by participation in community events," says Martin. "My private practice has been dramatically impacted in a positive way by my community involvement."

Rosalind S. Dorlen, PsyD, ABPP, a clinical psychologist in independent practice in New Jersey and an active volunteer, also touts the benefits of making community connections. "Community involvement helps our community and our practices," says Dorlen. "It raises both the visibility of psychology as a profession and the visibility of the psychologists who do community work. Although our main goal is reaching out to the community and offering help, there are side benefits that can help our practices."

GETTING STARTED

Look inward. An important step for psychologists who want to reap the benefits of community involvement is to think about your interests and the kinds of work you'd like to engage in. "Don't just pick an activity that you think will benefit you," says Martin. "Volunteering is hard work, and it's time consuming. Make sure you're passionate about what you're doing."

Research. To learn about community organizations and volunteer opportunities in your geographic area, talk to colleagues about their volunteer activities, consult your local chamber of commerce or your local newspaper, and conduct an Internet search. Look at an organization's website to learn about its mission and goals and the population it serves.

Think big. Although it's a good idea to focus your community efforts according to your interests, don't narrow your focus too much. Remember that there are many roles and settings where psychologists can contribute to the community -- for example, serving on a committee, volunteering at an event, or speaking to a group.

Get out of the office. For psychologists who work in an office, getting involved in the community can reduce feelings of isolation. "Psychologists have to get out of the office," says Dorlen. "We have to reach out to the people who need our services."

JOIN A MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION

Joining a local membership organization offers practitioners an opportunity to network with other professionals. Such organizations include:

Civic organizations, such as Rotary, Kiwanis, and Soroptimist (for membership information, see "Links to Helpful Websites" below).

Local professional organizations, including state, provincial or territorial psychological associations. Dorlen, past president of the New Jersey Psychological Association (NJPA) and chair of NJPA's public education campaign, and Martin, past president of the California Psychological Association, an active member of the Los Angeles County Psychological Association and a public education coordinator, have both made important community connections through memberships in professional organizations.

Other organizations related to your areas of interest. Martin, who works with children and families, joined her local PTA, where she presented free workshops, and the American Medical Women's Association, where she met and developed collaborative relationships with several physicians. As chair of a committee on psychological health in her community, Dorlen has helped to develop a dozen pro bono intervention projects in collaboration with local hospitals, schools and organizations.

Get Involved. To get the most out of your involvement in an organization, it's important to be an active participant. Attend local events, serve on committees and take on leadership roles. Seize opportunities to connect with a variety of professionals related to your areas of interest.

EDUCATE OTHERS

Public education is an important component of community involvement.

Speak to local groups. One highly visible way for psychologists to get involved with their community is to speak to local groups. Whether you speak to your local hospital or your local rotary club, addressing the public about important mental health issues is a way to educate others, share your expertise and address important social issues. Volunteer to give lectures, workshops and presentations on subjects about which you are knowledgeable in a variety of settings, such as local schools, businesses, nursing homes, places of worship, and community organizations. Join a speaker's bureau through your local psychological or civic organization to connect with speaking opportunities. As a side benefit, public speaking can also help to raise the profile of psychology and the work that you do.

For Martin, public speaking opened the door to a wealth of community service and practice opportunities. After she presented a stress management workshop to the members of Soroptimist, she was invited to join the board of a local dental clinic, where she met a variety of professionals who became important referral sources. Other volunteer and paid practice opportunities followed, including the opportunity to join with dentists to present parenting and dental hygiene tips to low-income parents, and the opportunity to train 200 dentistry professionals in how to deal with difficult patients. Each of these opportunities fostered additional professional connections and referrals.

Presenting APA public education campaign materials is another avenue for community involvement. Both Martin and Dorlen are active in the APA campaign, including the recent "Resilience for Kids and Teens" initiative. Martin, an APA public education coordinator in California, and Dorlen, chair of NJPA's public education campaign, both have made community connections and helped to spread psychology-related messages through their work with various public education campaigns.

Put It In Writing. Another powerful way to reach members of a community, especially for those who aren't comfortable speaking in front of groups, is to get published. Write articles for your state, provincial or territorial psychological association's newsletter or submit op/eds and letters to the editor to your local newspaper. These activities not only educate the public about important issues, they are a source of free publicity for your services.

BE PATIENT

Remember that community involvement may take time to bear fruit. You may not feel that your activities are making a difference in your community right away, and you may not make connections that help to grow your practice immediately. Taking a long-range view can help to allay those concerns.

Martin says that getting involved with the community enriched her professional life in a number of ways. "A lot of the community activities I started out doing for free are now paid," says Martin. More importantly, she says, "I get to do work that I love and I'm giving back to the community."

LINKS TO HELPFUL WEB SITES

APA State, Provincial, and Territorial Psychological Associations - APA's 60 affiliated State, Provincial, and Territorial Psychological Associations.
[<http://www.apapractice.org/apo/insider/sppas/state0.html#>]

Chamber of Commerce - Not-for-profit business federation representing businesses of all sizes and sectors. [www.uschamber.com]

Kiwanis - Service organization focused on supporting children and young adults. [www.kiwanis.org]

Optimist International - Community service organization dedicated to empowering young people to be the best they can. [www.optimist.org]

PTA - Child advocacy organization of parents, educators, students, and other citizens active in their schools and communities. Site includes links to more than 23,000 local PTAs. [www.pta.org]

Rotary International - Organization of business and professional leaders focused on community service needs. [www.rotary.org]

Soroptimist - Volunteer service organization for business and professional women working to improve the lives of women and girls. [www.soroptimist.org]

United Way - Community organization offering volunteer opportunities for education, awareness, and more. [www.unitedway.org]

WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Have you made successful community connections? If so, we're interested in hearing your story. Please send an email to pracupdate@apa.org with a brief description of your experience getting involved with your community and how it was beneficial.