

Cancer Volunteerism

Cancer is a pervasive disease that effects most people's lives. Volunteering is one of the best ways an individual can have an impact and address this. It is crucial for prompting change and it seems that many people want to get involved in some capacity but finding a way to get involved can be challenging. Initially, this can be a barrier to volunteering and dissuades individuals from acting on a desire to make a difference. There are numerous ways to get involved with cancer in our local community.

Cornell University has a club on campus called Colleges Against Cancer, that is responsible to organizing Relay for Life, and Breast Cancer Awareness Week. The club raises money for the American Cancer Society and spread awareness on campus at numerous university events like slope day. They have reportedly raised over \$300,000 from their Relay for Life events in the past three years (CAC). This would be a convenient way to become involved without having to travel away from campus and meet other students.

The Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes is one of the largest cancer centers in the area and provides vital support to the surrounding community—it would be a very worthwhile place to volunteer. They have numerous volunteer opportunities ranging from ride support and correspondence to clerical duties. They have a substantial impact in the community and always have a need for more volunteers (CRCFL). This would be a great way to directly interact with current cancer patients and survivors and possibly have a very direct and immediate impact in the community.

Another avenue for volunteering in the community is through the Cayuga Medical Center, where volunteers can provide emotional support for patients and families during challenging times, as well as greet patients in radiology. Volunteers occasionally accompany patients to appointments and meet with doctors (CMC). This can also be useful if one needs to volunteer to apply to medical school.

Volunteering comes in many forms and does not need to be one of the few ways that I outlined above. It is about having an impact—helping a friend that has been affected by cancer in other ways like driving them to a doctor's appointment or doing their grocery shopping. Volunteerism has some broader implications.

Volunteerism plays a crucial role in the function of charitable organizations. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Volunteerism rates have been on a steady decline from 28.8% in 2005 to 24.9% of the population in 2015 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). There has been research that states there is a significant correlation between volunteerism and both physical and mental health. The study followed individuals over four years and found those who volunteered over 200 hours annually were less likely to develop hypertension and showed greater increases in psychological well-being (Sneed and Cohen). It is possible these health benefits can be attributed those who volunteer being more physically active but it is also theorized that volunteering has a positive health impacts which might incentivize individuals to become more involved.

Some people argue that volunteering for companies like the American Cancer Society or the Susan G. Komen Foundation are not effective uses of one's time and that these charities do not make proper use of time or money donated. The Komen Foundation especially has been

criticized for its branding and trademark lawsuits. The Komen foundation has sued other charitable organizations and causes for using the phrase “The Cure” and sometimes for using a pink ribbon (Bassett).

I wanted to do some research into how the money common cancer charities is spent determine if they are “good” are use funds efficiently. I went to charitynavigator.org and charitywatch.org, which provide ratings for different charities but more importantly have the financial statements and breakdown of different charities revenues and expenses. I also looked into their annual reports to get the amount spent on research.

Here is a quick breakdown of my findings:

| Organization | Percentage of Revenue Spent on Programs | Percentage of Revenue on Research |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| American Cancer Society | 59.6%(\$500,353,838) | 18%(\$90,063,691) |
| Susan G. Komen Foundation | 81.5%(\$181,766,890) | 14%(\$25,447,365) |
| Livestrong Foundation | 83.9%(\$22,612,280) | N/A |
| Cancer Research Institute | 86.3%(\$33,421,070) | 72%(\$24,063,170) |

While these initial numbers are somewhat revealing showing that for every dollar you donate to the ACS only \$0.18 is spent on cancer research. As someone who has personally worked on organizing a Relay for Life event for the ACS, I was a bit shocked to learn this. I guess I always assumed that they had to pay for a lot of expenses to hold fundraisers, but I did not realize this until I saw the actual numbers.

However, having some limited business knowledge, this is not one-sided. These simple percentages are not entirely reflective of where a charity is considered “good”. Larger companies have higher production costs and companies start to receive a diminish on their return. The ACS might have operating higher costs so it can be perceived that a donation has a lower yield; if you look at the fact that ACS donates significantly more money on scientific research than the other three combined, it therefor can also be perceive as having a higher impact. Also, a lot of these organizations focus on awareness and not research--they might offer services to patients such as transportation or support. They try to lobby and get larger budgets for government funded research institutions. This metric is near impossible to measure, but it is important to consider that the National Cancer Institute is the largest financier of cancer research spending about five billion on it annually (NCI).

The implications of government intervention in cancer can be further seen in the Moonshot initiative. This was an initiative put forward by Joe Biden after losing his son to cancer, that commits millions of dollars to cancer research over the course of several years (NCI). Joe Biden has been an advocate for cancer research and has recently spoken at SXSW, in which he talked about his individual experiences with cancer and how that impacted his outlook

as vice president. He wanted to inspire the future innovators to work together on battling cancer (Engadget).

While it is very difficult to evaluate the true value of donating to charities, one cannot simply be dismissive of charities like the American Cancer Society claiming that they are not effective since it is much more complicated. There are certain actions that these organizations take that are immeasurable. Ultimately, volunteerism is a key dimension of cancer, which can profound and varying impacts. It is up to the individual to determine what they view as a beneficial use of their time and the scope of what they wish to accomplish.

Works Cited

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