

Staten Island community groups help boost volunteerism

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ADVANCE STAFF REPORT
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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Mayor Michael Bloomberg is ready to turn New York into a city of volunteers

He was joined by 50 community groups -- including Staten Island's Where-To-Turn and Silver Lake Head Start -- at a rally in Washington Heights yesterday as he launched NYC Service to boost volunteerism among city residents.

Among the initiatives, it will seek volunteers to work with the NYPD, cultural groups and on neighborhood watches, to help beautify their neighborhoods, to offer free legal advice, to promote the benefits of exercise and to give CPR training.

Key to NYC Service is a plan for all public school students to become involved in their communities: Starting this fall, the city will require all principals to have a plan for public service for the system's 1.1 million students, and the 1,000 teens selected to work in the Summer Youth Employment Program will be engaged in large-scale service projects.

Dennis McKeon, executive director of Where-To-Turn, committed to increasing efforts to combat graffiti on the Island by cleaning 1,000 locations, and Edito and Rita Taytayon of Silver Lake Head Start, committed to recruiting three more foster grandparents to adopt classrooms.

McKeon, who was the first person to speak right after the mayor took the microphone, said he is now one of 16 people tapped from various groups around the city to offer to bring something to the table to help assist in the effort.

For his part, McKeon said he will be working with New York Cares, Children for Children and the Big Brothers and Sisters of New York.

"We will work with them to help their outreach on Staten Island," said McKeon. "Because of the bad economy, we are trying to do a lot of joint efforts to get kids more involved."

McKeon applauded the mayor's efforts to do more volunteerism outreach, especially at schools. "It's been optional [overall], but most schools on Staten Island do require it," he said of the community youth efforts.

In addition to the 1,000 cleanup sites (the group did 800 last year and 135 this year so far) McKeon pledged 50 flag murals; so far 31 have already been done.

NYC Service is the result of a pledge Bloomberg made in his State of the City address three months ago in response to President Barack Obama's nationwide call to service.

Today, Obama is to sign the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act -- a national service bill in the name of the cancer-stricken senator -- to create more than 175,000 new volunteer opportunities around the country and to give volunteers more money toward their education.

In the months since Bloomberg's address, his administration has met with hundreds of organizations and hosted focus groups to understand the challenges in recruiting volunteers.

It also conducted a survey of 1,500 New Yorkers which revealed 17 percent who wanted to volunteer didn't know where to go. To answer those questions, 311 operators will be to provide callers with the names of organizations in their areas of interest.