

The New York Times

September 20, 2011

The Health Payoffs of Time Banks

By TINA ROSENBERG

Time banks are local organizations that allow people to use their skills to help others by exchanging hours instead of money. You earn time dollars by, say, taking a neighbor to the doctor, and spend those time dollars on the same number of hours' worth of other services, such as computer repair or singing lessons.

Although many time banks are run by neighborhood volunteer organizations, people interested in setting up a time bank might want to make their case to a local health care organization. *Friday's Fixes* reported on the time bank run by the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. Elderplan, a New York health insurance company, also runs a time bank for members. Hospitals such as the Lehigh Valley Health Network, based in Allentown, Pa., run time banks. In Britain, even private medical practices have established time banks. At Rushey Green Group Practice in London, Dr. Richard Byng was convinced that what many of his patients needed wasn't medication, but friends, social connections and a way to feel useful and valued. Now doctors there routinely prescribe that patients join the Rushey Green Time Bank.

Health organizations like time banks because they believe that time banks make people feel better — and cut the cost of health care. In Richmond, Va., for example, a time bank program to provide social support to people with asthma cut emergency admissions to hospitals and the cost of treating asthma by more than 70 percent.

One way time banks help is with simple practical aid. Imagine an elderly woman who has just left the hospital, where she received expensive high-tech care for her heart condition. But once discharged, she is too frail to go out to buy groceries. There is no one to fill her prescriptions, fix her leaky roof, make sure she takes her medicines correctly. She cannot take the bus herself and doesn't have the money to hire a taxi to get to a follow-up doctor's appointment.

Medicaid and Medicare do not pay for what is not directly medical, but non-medical challenges such as these can land her back in the hospital — and this time, the hospital will likely not be reimbursed for the cost of her stay, which should give that hospital considerable incentive to help her solve these problems. In the long run, the availability of help with these tasks can mean the difference between staying in her home and going to a nursing home. When the Visiting Nurse Service TimeBank surveyed its older members, a whopping 79 percent felt the TimeBank would give them resources they would need to be able to stay in their homes as they aged.

Millions of people in America don't have transportation to get to medical appointments. A study published by the Transportation Research Board, an organization funded largely by state and

federal transportation agencies, found that providing rides to non-emergency medical appointments was cost effective for every condition studied — especially for asthma, pre-natal care, heart disease and diabetes.

Regular visits from neighbors can also catch early signs of serious problems. One time bank, for example, asked people who worked with diabetics to pay special attention to early signs of glaucoma.

The value of time banks, however, goes beyond practical assistance. The mental and physical health benefits of social connection have been proven in voluminous research. In his book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," Robert Putnam writes that joining a group cuts a person's odds of dying next year by half. It's as good for you as quitting smoking.

Lehigh Valley Health Network began its Community Exchange time bank as a way for senior citizens to feel more connected to the community. "If you're lonely, or looking for someone to come play bridge, this is not covered by social services," said Laura Gutierrez, who manages Community Exchange. That companionship, she said, "makes people feel more empowered to recover at home." A survey of 160 of its members last year found that the time bank improved members' health mainly by creating a sense of belonging, and was particularly helpful for low-income people and those living alone.

Three years ago, the Paxton Green Group Practice in the Lambeth neighborhood of south London decided to set up a time bank. One of the reasons was patients' alarming rate of diabetes. Doctors saw a very direct connection between patients' self-esteem and their ability to make needed behavior changes. "It is very hard to change the way you look at food and exercise," said Tyrell Evans, one of the doctors. "Working with time banks, where everyone is valued and everyone has assets, helps people to revalue themselves. Only when you start to feel that positivity about yourself you feel more able to take on these challenges."

Time banks promote a broader vision of health, one less focused on high-tech medicine and doctors' expertise and more attuned to people's social and human needs. "It's not walking out of a doctor's office with a list of 20 things and feeling overwhelmed," said Kathryn Haslanger, Senior Vice President for Community Benefit at the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. "It's a walking group, a cooking group. It takes it out of the medical dynamic."

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This article is excerpted from the New York Times.