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Volunteers swarm in to help

Article by: JEAN HOPFENSBERGER, Star Tribune Updated: May 27, 2011 - 8:41 AM

With chainsaws and rakes, volunteers show up by the hundreds



Tom Carlson, with the City of Lakes Nordic Ski Foundation, takes his chainsaw to a downed tree on Colfax Avenue North.

Photo: Brian Peterson

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The Nordic Ski Foundation and Surly Brewing Co. don't typically drum up volunteers to help tornado victims. But armed with chainsaws and rakes, their troops headed to Minneapolis' North Side Thursday to help clear the destruction.

They're among thousands of volunteers -- some organized, some solo -- lugging away fallen tree limbs, serving food and even searching for missing pets.

Minnesota's philanthropic spirit kicked into high gear this week, with both individuals and corporations pitching in. The Minneapolis Foundation and United Way Twin Cities, for example, have created a North Minneapolis Fund to coordinate public giving, pledging \$200,000 in matching grants.

The Salvation Army has been so overwhelmed with clothing

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donations and volunteers that it is no longer accepting either.

"We expected the community would respond; we've been overwhelmed with the number of volunteers though," said Ben Post, associate director of Urban Homeworks, a community development nonprofit in north Minneapolis that has coordinated the bulk of this week's volunteer efforts.

The small Minneapolis nonprofit will have trained and deployed nearly 3,000 volunteers by Friday afternoon. "We scheduled 250 people for each [orientation] session, but about 350 to 400 show up," said Ryan Peterson, development director for the agency.

About 600 people volunteered Thursday alone, he said.

Tom Carlson, an actuary from Bloomington, was among them. He knew the wife of one of the men killed in the tornado, Rob MacIntyre, and wanted to do more than watch the destruction on TV.

"We wanted to pitch in, but you can't just show up," said Carlson, who wound up cutting trees with his chainsaw Thursday afternoon. "So when we got the e-mail [from the Twin Cities Nordic Ski Foundation], it turned into a perfect opportunity."

Orange safety vests

About 300 people wielding rakes, chainsaws and other tools lined up Thursday outside a nonprofit called Cross Connections, the first stop for volunteers wanting to help clean up the neighborhoods.

They were handed orange safety vests, plastic goggles, gloves and then sent to a quick orientation session before boarding a bus to the neighborhood where they would work.

"There's a lot of dangers still around," the trainer told the group. "There's broken glass, construction debris with nails sticking up. If you come across power lines laying down, assume it's live."

Phil Borer of Fridley was among the volunteers. An independent construction worker, he said he wanted to help rebuild the neighborhood where he grew up.

"A lot of the houses of people I knew growing up were crunched," said Borer. "This is my old stomping grounds."

Jim Porath and his wife, Karen, also were in the group. Porath, like Borer, grew up not far from the streets now littered with shattered houses and uprooted trees. The couple spent the afternoon lugging big tree branches that lay across the front yards of homes onto the boulevards. "You really feel like you can accomplish something," said Porath. "It's so well organized."

In fact, it was so well organized that the mass volunteer crews will end after Friday, said Post. However other volunteer opportunities will be available, just on a smaller scale.

"We've been able to accomplish an incredible amount of work," Post said. "Now we need the heavy equipment to come in and move the piles of brush we've left."

Green check, red check or yellow check

The Salvation Army had a similar response when it issued a call for 50 volunteers Tuesday night, according to spokeswoman Annette Bauer. By 8 the next morning, 120 had signed on.

Meanwhile students at Summit Academy OIC have been both volunteering with the clean-up and going door-to-door to help determine the condition of homes and the unmet needs of residents.

"They put a green check if the home was safe and cleared, red check if it was condemned, and yellow if something needed to be repaired, like siding torn down," said Callie Olson, a marketing associate at Summit OIC.

Corporate volunteers and donations continue to roll in. Medtronic Corp. is offering its 8,000 Minnesota employees five days of paid leave to volunteer, as well as donating \$50,000 to the American Red Cross.

Meanwhile Target Corp. donated \$50,000 in cash and merchandise

for tornado relief

Last update: Friday May 27, 2011 - 8:38 AM

Salvation Army red kettles will be placed at the gates of Target Field before the Twins' game Friday night on behalf of north Minneapolis tornado victims.

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to the American Red Cross and Salvation Army this week, and the Mosaic Co. donated \$25,000 for tornado relief efforts.

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