

2011 to be the European Year of Volunteering

The European Commission has decided today to propose that 2011 be designated as the "European Year of Volunteering". The Council and the European Parliament are expected to endorse this proposal by the beginning of next year.

In the European Union, millions of citizens are volunteering. People of all ages make a positive contribution to their community by investing some of their free time in civil society organisations, in youth clubs, in hospitals, in schools, in sport clubs, etc. For the Commission, volunteering is an active expression of civic participation which strengthens common European values such as solidarity and social cohesion. Volunteering also provides important learning opportunities, because involvement in voluntary activities can provide people with new skills and competences and can even improve their employability. This is particularly important in this time of economic crisis. Volunteering plays an important role in sectors as varied and diverse as education, youth, culture, sport, environment, health, social care, consumer protection, humanitarian aid, development policy, research, equal opportunities and external relations.

Volunteering has a great, but so far under-exploited, potential for the social and economic development of Europe. Dedicating 2011 to the topic of volunteering will help Member States, regional and local communities and civil society achieve the following objectives:

1. Work towards an enabling and facilitating environment for volunteering in the EU;
2. Empower volunteer organisations and improve the quality of volunteering;
3. Reward and recognise volunteering activities; and
4. Raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering.

The Commission expects that the European Year of Volunteering will lead to an increase in volunteering and to greater awareness of its added value, and that it will highlight the link between voluntary engagement at local level and its significance in the wider European context.

The European Year of Volunteering should help volunteers and volunteering organisations from everywhere in Europe to meet and to learn what is done best in other countries. The public authorities will be able to learn more about volunteers and making volunteering easier. Citizens who do not know much about volunteering should find out more about it, and maybe become volunteers one day themselves. And finally, the European Year should give recognition to the volunteers.

The Commission proposes to allocate a budget of 6 million Euros for the European Year and an additional amount of 2 million Euros for the preparatory actions starting in 2010.

The proposed activities should focus on communication and awareness-raising measures, such as conferences, seminars, exchange of experience and publications. Similar activities shall be run in the Member States through national coordination structures. The emphasis will be placed on funding projects with a volunteering dimension in the EU's action programmes, such as the 'Youth in Action Programme', for example. The aim is to involve all levels – European, national, regional and local. The ownership of the European Year shall remain with the volunteers and the volunteer organisations, and many activities and celebrations will be organised from the bottom-up.