

They call it voluntourism. Philanthropic travel. Volunteer vacationing. No matter the name, the idea is to spend vacation time doing good, giving back, helping make the world a little better. The idea took off, and so did travelers, going to far-flung parts of the world to lend a hand to the less fortunate. Sri Lanka, Thailand, Sierra Leone — all popular hot spots in the world of volunteer travel.



*Volunteers planting dune grass at Island Beach State Park.*

MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Volunteers planting dune grass at Island Beach State Park.

Yet now, in one fell swoop of superstorm Sandy, the Jersey Shore has risen to the top of the hot spot list for humanitarian groups and volunteer vacationers from around the country and abroad. A group is even coming up from New Orleans to help out.

### Opportunities for voluntourists

Voluntourism may have its selfless aspect, but it also offers some special events and perks available only to those who pitch in. Here are a few that are, or will soon be, open to those volunteers at the Shore:

Camp Evans — have you heard of it? Despite all the history and important work done at this 90-acre site in Wall, it's one of those overlooked gems. And soon it will be the home base and site for accommodations for Coastal Habitat for Humanity.

Camp Evans was established in 1914 as the Marconi Belmar Trans-Atlantic Wireless station. It first developed technology for worldwide wireless communications. Later, it played a key role in the development of radar during World War II, when it was also taken over by the Navy as a base of operations. In 1946, it was a pioneer in space communications, was a site for the development of Cold War technology, nuclear weapons research and more. Today the nonprofit InfoAge has developed several small museums and exhibits on the site: among them are ones devoted to vintage computers; radio technology; shipwrecks, etc. The National Broadcasters Hall of Fame is also on the campus.

The property has a beautiful lake and historic buildings, as well as an old barracks structure that, due to lack of funds, was never renovated. Enter Habitat, which needed housing for its volunteers, and had the volunteers to do the renovation. The plan came together pretty quickly, said Maureen Mulligan of Coastal Habitat.

For those volunteers who can't wait to get started on a building project, they can come in early May and get the barracks project going. It will provide dorm style accommodations, with kitchen facilities and shared baths when it's finished. The plan includes running shuttle buses from the camp to the various construction projects every morning.

Habitat is just one group offering volunteer building projects. The Fuller Center for Housing, based in Atlanta, is another. It opened a chapter in Tabernacle (Pine Barrens territory) in 2009 and works in Atlantic City. It's currently working exclusively on Sandy-affected homes

Every year the Fuller Center holds a special Millard Fuller Legacy Build, named in memory of its founder. This weeklong event has drawn attention internationally to the need for simple, decent and affordable housing for all people.

This year's build will be in Atlantic City from April 28 to May 3. In the course of one week, volunteers will be repairing and rebuilding more than 20 homes, most of which suffered major flood damage. Should be amazing...

Housing at the Tabernacle site is full, but area hotels are offering specials (the Chelsea Annex in Atlantic City is a mere \$59 a night, a great deal). [fullercenternewjerseypines.org](http://fullercenternewjerseypines.org)

Clean Ocean Action, a New Jersey-based nonprofit advocating for the environment since 1994, is stepping up its efforts in the wake of Sandy. While acknowledging the overwhelming devastation left by the superstorm, it is also using the cleanup as an opportunity to expand environmental awareness.

COA's 2013 "Waves of Action" program will support some of those "communities who still need help digging out, others [that] need help building for a greener future, and others ... already taking action to bring back coastal economies" COA has a yearlong schedule of events in communities up and down the Shore, and expects they will continue after 2013.

Along with its long-running "Beach Sweeps" program, will be projects that organize fundraising events such as concerts, educational programs in schools, and continuing support for cleanups. Volunteers on cleanups often have access to areas of parks and beaches not generally open to work groups or the public. A special perk. Information: [fortheshore.org](http://fortheshore.org)

### Resources for volunteer opportunities

- Governor's Office of Volunteerism: Lists volunteer centers, community service-based organizations and other volunteer groups. Download the publication, "Volunteerism and National Service — New Jersey Program Directory," which lists everyone and any group involved in good work in the Garden State.
- New Jersey 2-1-1: New Jersey's version of the national dial 211 model gets people to community resources in three pushes of a button (well, a few more). Well organized list of Sandy-related projects on the website.
- United We Serve: President Obama's nationwide service initiative, gives you the national picture as well as getting you to groups involved in Hurricane Sandy recovery projects.
- JerseyCares.org: Organizes its own programs and also serves as a clearinghouse for other groups and projects that work with volunteers.
- Habitat for Humanity: The local chapters working on Sandy projects are: Coastal HFH based in Spring Lake Heights; Northeast Monmouth County HFH, in Long Branch; and Northern Ocean HFH, in Toms River. "A Brush with Kindness" program assists with revitalizing neighborhoods through providing painting services, landscaping and minor repairs on homes of low-income homeowners.
- Surfrider Foundation: Nationwide environmental organization founded in 1984 and works through its 60 chapters located in important coastal areas of the country. The South Jersey chapter is organizing volunteer projects and links to others.
- ShoreHelpers.com: Website run by four dedicated folks who aim to connect South Jersey families and businesses affected by Sandy with volunteers willing to help in small groups or one-on-one. Focus on Cape/Atlantic/Ocean counties.
- : Social media network with the latest projects and activities in the New Jersey-New York area for Sandy victims.
- Speaking of social media: A great way to find timely volunteer opportunities is via Twitter. Narrow your search with hashtags: #SandyHelp #SandyVolunteer #Sandy #SandyRelief #SandyAid.

And volunteering on a Shore vacation this summer has extra appeal for New Jerseyans who have loved and been loyal to the Shore over the years.

"New Jersey is hot now," said Maureen Mulligan, executive director of Coastal Habitat for Humanity, one of 1,800 chapters worldwide. There's so much interest in the Sandy recovery effort now, Mulligan said, the head office put up a special page with resources for those who want to help. "They knew we couldn't handle it all," she added.

There's already a waiting list of hundreds of folks who want to help and will travel when their names come up, according to Mulligan.

Volunteers — thousands of them — have been an invaluable part of the cleanup process. Now the rebuilding and restoration projects are gearing up for what they expect will be a summer surge in volunteering.

So as everyone at the Shore is racing to get their boardwalks, restaurants, rides and attractions back up and running by Memorial Day, volunteer groups have been organizing their schedules and lining up workers. Websites of groups that network with lots of organizations, such as JerseyCares, the Governor's Office of Volunteerism and Volunteer New Jersey, ask

potential volunteers to register and fill out forms indicating any special skills, their availability, what they'd like to do and where they would prefer to help out.

Some groups have organized special events or yearlong efforts. Clean Ocean Action, a longtime New Jersey-based environmental group, just unveiled "Waves of Action," a program to help restore the Shore ecosystem, with monthly one-day cleanups at parks and beaches all along the coastline.

No doubt there's a program that will fit your level of commitment, physical condition, age and interests. You can spend three hours in a single day at a food bank or shelter; a week of early mornings cleaning wreckage from a stretch of shoreline; even commit to an indefinite stretch as a foster parent for a pet whose owners aren't currently able to take care of him.

Several groups match volunteers with individuals who need a little extra help — particularly the elderly, often living alone and overwhelmed by the upside-downing of their worlds post-Sandy. You can even organize a project of your own.

Some programs — the more extensive volunteer vacation types — attempt to provide accommodations for their participants. Ironically, coming up with suitable sites for lodging has been a limiting factor for Habitat and some other groups during the Sandy aftermath (see sidebar).

If you can't handle dormitory-style life and shared bathrooms, book yourself a suite at your favorite inn, and show up to join your group at the appointed meeting place every morning, refreshed and well scrubbed.

That "new normal" thing is still a work in progress down the Shore. So try thinking out of the standard vacation box.

"If people come down now as tourists, they'll have a new experience," Mulligan predicted.

I knew exactly what she meant. I'd driven all around the Shore in February, meeting people, hearing about the litany of obstacles that have come in the way of living daily life, I'd seen how people not only kept going, but did so with a new gratefulness and a new sense of community.

And when I left, I think a part of my heart stayed there with some of the people I met. Like Kim and Jeff Young, innkeepers of the Morning Dove Inn in Belmar, who, despite the damage done to their beautiful inn and the devastation to their town, insisted I come stay at their guest room in nearby Hopewell. By the time I (reluctantly) left the next morning, I realized I had come to think of them and their two boys — and two dogs — as family.

Or perhaps it was that I took them home with me. I thought of them often. Wondered how they were faring. I looked forward to going back in a whole new way ...

And I hadn't even hammered a nail into a board.

"I know that when people get involved a project that is significant for them, they usually take ownership of it," Mulligan said. "People who start volunteering with Habitat under normal circumstances — not even after a disaster — get very tied to it.

"They call it Habitat-itis."

While volunteer vacations do involve work — sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, sometimes both and even more — you can also factor in as much off time as you want. You are, after all, conveniently located at one of your favorite vacation destinations. Sure, the sand may have been moved around some, but you can still wriggle your bare toes in it. You can, in fact, do something even more meaningful with that sand — if you opt to work on a dune restoration project, for instance.

If you're traveling with your family, you may be able to find a project that will sign on your whole gang — depending on the age requirements. Volunteer vacations are great for providing quality time together. They're also a good choice for solo travelers, since your teammates also serve as after-work buddies.

And once you get into the rhythm of the work, and start meeting the people involved, you may find it hard to pull yourself away from the work.

I had only one possible day to volunteer, after a travel writer's conference in New Orleans post-Katrina. Even with short notice, the tourism office found me a spot on a home renovation organized by a local church group. Off I went, and by 8 a.m. was performing one of those even-a-monkey-could-do-this tasks ("scrape here"). By the time I'd joined, the rest of the team had been hard at work for four days: they'd bonded, bronzed and gotten kind of buff. They were altogether welcoming, but the more time I spent listening and scraping, the more I realized what I'd missed by just dropping by.

Lunch on the cement stoop (whose railing was the object of my scraping), I got to hear more about my fellow workers — a well-traveled bunch hailing from all parts of the U.S. For many, this was a second or third volunteer vacation. Some had met on previous trips, and now arranged to travel together.