

Citizens' Web link spurs local volunteerism efforts

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By: Ryan McBride**

Citizens Bank has attracted customers to a new feature on its Web site: volunteer opportunities. Since adding a Web link to a national database of volunteer openings on June 6, the recorded more than 660, 000 visits to the connection, the company said.

"It's another way for us to touch a broad range of community agencies," said Jeanne Cola, vice president and manager of community relations at Citizens.

Though many Rhode Island banks commit resources to volunteerism, Citizens is the first bank in the state to provide a direct Web link to Volunteer Solutions, United Way's national database of volunteer opportunities.

Visitors of www.citizensbank.com can find hundreds of volunteer listings in their community by entering their state and zip code into data fields. An inquiry last week using a Providence zip code returned 142 opportunities in the area.

The Volunteer Center of Rhode Island reported that the number of Internet inquiries to volunteer listings in the state increased by 9 percent from May to June, making it possible that the Citizens link has already impacted local volunteer efforts,

"Usually there is a decrease (in inquiries) during the summer because people are on vacation and have other things planned," said Lynne Harper, marketing and communications coordinator at the volunteer center. Also increasing was the number of new organizations that registered with the volunteer center, which recorded an 11 percent hike from May to June.

Indeed, the volunteer center was encouraged that Citizens decided to provide the Web link to volunteer opportunities in Rhode Island.

"We rely heavily on the Internet to connect people to (volunteer) opportunities," said Harper, whose agency stores local volunteer listings on Volunteer Solutions national database.

Last month, Citizens launched a TV commercial to promote its "Champions in Action" campaign, which connects people to about 20,000 volunteer vacancies nationwide via its link to the Volunteer Solutions database. Citizens also mailed invitations to nonprofits and community groups to post their volunteer needs on the bank's Web site.

"Just think of the power behind the connection, when you think about the smaller, grassroots agencies that can now post their opportunities on our site," Cola said.

Contributing to volunteer efforts can often boost a bank's public profile, "but it also fosters team building," Harper said.

"(Companies) spend thousands of dollars on corporate retreats and outward bound programs," she added, "but companies are finding that volunteerism is a far more cost-effective way to accomplish the same goal."