

Making a Difference

Caring for New York

An Interview with Ariel Zwang,
Executive Director, New York Cares

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming her current role, Ariel Zwang served as a White House Fellow at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Before this, she served as Vice President for Operations at the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation in the South Bronx, a position she accepted after serving as Special Assistant to the Chancellor of the New York City Board of Education. Zwang began her career in finance, spending three years at Morgan Stanley and two years as a management consultant with the Boston Consulting Group. She holds an MBA from Harvard Business School and an AB from Harvard College.



Ariel Zwang

ORGANIZATION BRIEF New York Cares (www.nycares.org) was founded in 1987 in order to take action against the serious social issues facing the city. Its mission is to meet pressing community needs by mobilizing New Yorkers in volunteer service. Signature programs include creating year-round volunteer opportunities; creating citywide days of service; fostering corporate social responsibility; helping New York prepare for disasters; engaging in youth service; and organizing holiday gift and coat drives. New York Cares is a member of the The Points of Light and Hands On Network, and maintains several partnerships including those with AmeriCorps and the New York City Office of Emergency Management.

Will you provide a brief overview of the role that New York Cares plays?

New York Cares works with hundreds of agencies that include homeless shelters, public schools, senior centers, community centers, after-school programs, and so forth that don't have the ability to have a volunteer program – they just don't have the resources. So we put together volunteer projects that enable people who have so much to offer to give back to those who need an extra hand.

What is the profile of your typical volunteer?

Our volunteer ranks include average New Yorkers, but they are mostly at the younger end, in their 20s and 30s, and primarily with jobs during the day. However, we are actively seeking to grow beyond that. For example, we



are an excellent place for retired New Yorkers who have so much life experience to give, and yet want the flexibility of being able to spend time with grandchildren, or go to Florida in the winter, or have control over their own schedules.

What kind of focus do you have in terms of getting the corporate market involved in your programs?

That is a major part of our work at New York Cares. Last year, approximately 600 companies volunteered with New York Cares. Companies volunteer with us, and I use the word "companies" and not "corporations" because it can be a small office of 20 people all the way up to the largest employers in the city, like Citigroup or Time Warner. The time that corporate employees spend outside their offices still needs to be very meaningful and well-used time, and that's what we provide at New York Cares: volunteer projects that are structured in such a way that everyone has an excellent experience because they have made a difference.

To be successful today in this type of endeavor, do you need to work through partnerships and affiliations, and how important is that to the impact and success of the projects?

All of our programming depends on partnerships. What we do is create projects together with social service agencies. A New York Cares project might involve sending 10 volunteers to take 10 kids from the homeless shelter to get their first library card at the local library. You know how you have to show some proof of address to get a library card? A homeless kid doesn't have that. So we have a special partnership with the library that allows kids who are homeless to get a library card. The kids who are being taken to the library are the clients of that homeless shelter – they're not New York Cares clients. So we have partnerships with about 850 nonprofit organizations that we provide services to through our volunteers. We also have corporate partners with whom we help put together world-class employee volunteering programs that often last over a long period of time.

Improving education is a key issue. Why is it so challenging to fix the system, and are we on the right track to reform education?

Those are massive societal questions that have to do with the overall value that our society places on teachers, and on education. With Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein, we're seeing actual structural change for the first time in decades because the way that the school system is organized has changed. That said, it still takes decades to make societal changes. There are thousands of kids who don't read at grade-level, and could benefit from one-on-one practice with an adult sitting and reading with them, and those are the types of services we provide at New York Cares that augment the larger systemic changes.

Do you find there is a growing interest in this type of work, especially among young people?

We've continued to grow our programming at a yearly rate of about 15 to 20 percent. So in terms of the interest of volunteers, we're seeing that continue. Societal studies about people in this millennial generation – meaning those who are graduating from college and high school in this century – show that they are among the most community-minded people who have lived for decades. Organizations like New York Cares have the ability to keep that alive and help young people to not become disillusioned but, instead, to engage in their communities.

When you look at statistics for issues like poverty and homelessness in a city like New York, do they still surprise you?

Many of us have a view of New York and America that is a little bit dissonant with what some of the realities are. I still get surprised, and I've been doing this work for 15 years. We see and yet we don't see. I think many of us who have been fortunate to reap the blessings of the American dream think of the American dream as something that almost everybody has a piece of. The reality is that millions of New Yorkers have lived in poverty for generations, and without our help, will continue to do so.

Before this, you worked in the financial sector. What made you feel this was the career you wanted?

I wanted, at the end of my career, to look back and say, I made a difference in the world. I feel very fortunate that I am likely to be able to do that. ●

New York Cares volunteers help clean up their neighborhood by painting fences