

Can neighborliness go viral?

Local social network has an old-timey feel that pays real benefits

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St. Albans → Residents of northwestern Vermont now have an online Time Bank that enables them to seek help from and offer help to their neighbors. It's called Hour Power of Franklin/Grand Isle.

Simply put, Hour Power (www.hourpowerfgi.org), which went online in March and is still in its infancy, allows members to exchange goods and services, similar to sharing one's baking supplies or carpooling.

Participants earn TimeDollars by offering help and spend them to receive assistance. This can include anything from cooking and cleaning, to guitar lessons, massages, computer assistance, pet care, or whatever.

Donation of one hour of time earns the participant one TimeDollar or community credit (CC). Members accumulate CCs by providing a good or service to another member. Members can donate their CCs to others.

All Time Banking transactions are done online. When a good or service is received from a member, the appropriate accounts are debited or credited the number of hours or Community Credits spent providing the good or service.

Hour Power, and Similar Time Banks elsewhere in the state, operates von a mission statement, which recognizes that "all community members have valuable skills that can benefit others and strengthen community"

The goal is to build a network where members can assist each other in a time honored tradition that has always been part of the local landscape.

Sam de Wahl, a local Hour Power member, said, "the whole concept of neighbors helping one another

really appeals to me, because its an extension of the values I learned growing up I rural Vermont."

I can't count how many times our neighbors in Enosburg have helped out my family, or how many times we've lent a hand to them, and in my mind, this Time Bank is an extension of that sense of community. It really allows the same kind of sharing over a much broader geographic area."

De Wahl is also an AmeriCorps member who is working with the Franklin Watershed Committee this summer. When he joined Hour Power, he helped someone study for math section of a standardized test.

A month of twice-weekly tutoring sessions helped another member to do well on a test. De Wahl intends to use his CC hours to have another Time Bank member help him with some graphic design work.

Chrissy Birong, Hour Power's AmeriCorps Coordinator, said "It's growing organically and steadily. I would like to see it go the route of Onion River Exchange. It is well known in the community and has grown nearly 400 members. Hopefully Hour Power will develop in the same manner over time to have that type of capacity."

Onion River Exchange is a Time Bank servicing Central Vermont, which started in March 2008.

Loli Berard is a school and Community Coordinator for the Franklin Central Supervisory Union and met Birong at Franklin Grand Isle Community Partnership meeting. The pair realized common interests.

" While Chrissy developed the platform for web site, the idea grew on me and started to realize the value of service learning projects for our area students," said Berard who is also a member of Hour Power. "Imagine a day when middle and high school students are offering computer technology skills to our area senior citizens so that they may enjoy the access to broadband Internet and ultimately the Hour Power Time Bank."

"I have utilized the services with a couple hours of sewing and am looking for more opportunities to sew through Time Bank," she added. Berard had previously been sewing for a friend and getting paid. However, after meeting Birong and discussing the Time Bank idea, she now swaps her sewing skill for piano lessons.

The potential for Hour Power locally is something that's inescapable for members such as de Wahl.

"It thrills me that I'm able to share my skills, and receive help from people I probably wouldn't have met otherwise, even though they are relatively close to me," he said. "I really hope that this idea takes off and becomes more mainstream, because social networks like this, as opposed to Facebook and others, are something that can really bring communities together in real life, instead of being focused online."

Computer donation assists Hour Power:

*Hour power of Franklin/
Grand Isle received a
Boost in February when
It received a computer
Thanks to a partnership
Between the Franklin-
Grand Isle United Way
And IBM.*

*Chrissy Birong, an
AmeriCorps Vista worker
Who is helping set up the
Time Bank, said that the
Donation of a laptop com-
puter would strengthen
The projects ties with the
Franklin County Senior
Center "to make goods*

*And services accessible
And affordable to our
Community elders."
Hour Power, however,
Invites people of all ages
To participate by logging in
Online to:
www.hourpowerfgi.org*