

N.Y.ers embrace volunteerism, put King Day to good use

BY ERIN EINHORN and JOSE MARTINEZ
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

Tuesday, January 20th 2009, 3:09 AM

It was a holiday - but not a day off - for some big-hearted New Yorkers Monday.

Legions of volunteers throughout the five boroughs took up [Barack Obama](#)'s call to use [Martin Luther King](#) Day as a day of service.

Rather than sleeping in and staying out of the cold, New Yorkers turned out at volunteer events throughout the city, mirroring the President-elect, who pitched in at a [Washington](#) shelter.

"Young people are definitely taking note," said [Michael Parker](#), 25, of the organization Youthbuild [USA](#). "They know it's cool to do good things."

Parker and several Youthbuild volunteers from East [Harlem](#) helped out at a soup kitchen on W. 114th St. as part of [New York City](#) Coalition Against Hunger's three-day "Serve-A-Thon."

They were joined by students from [Columbia University](#) and [Barnard College](#) and several politicians serving a hot meal to the hungry under a "Four Star Soup Kitchen" sign.

"There's something proper about using this as a day of service," said [Lenny Fincher](#), the volunteer coordinator for [Broadway Community Inc.](#), an organization that helps the needy of Harlem. "We're going to need more and more volunteers as this economy gets worse."

While the push to turn King Day into a "day on" for community service dates to the 1980s, Obama's election and emphasis on volunteerism has fueled a rise in helping others.

The President-elect quoted the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. after applying a fresh coat of paint at a homeless shelter.

"Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve," Obama said.

More than 12,000 service projects were seeking volunteers on the MLK Day Web site - a number more than double that of last year.

"There's a lot of people who want to help, but they just don't know how to do it," Fincher said. "What I'm noticing now is more people who just want to help."

At a King Day breakfast at the [Schomburg Center](#) in Harlem, speakers celebrated King's legacy.

"There's still an awful lot to do, but it's a day today and tomorrow to have a smile on your face and to realize how far we have come," [Mayor Bloomberg](#) said.

[Sen. Chuck Schumer](#) praised King for holding up "a giant mirror to society."

"He made each of us a better person by holding up that mirror, and he made our country a better place so that we witness at least some of the fruits of his labor today," Schumer said.

eeinhorn@nydailynews.com