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UIS students respond to volunteer fair

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Darrin Burnett, area director of Special Olympics Illinois, along with representatives of more than 20 other area not-for-profit groups, sat behind tables at the University of Illinois Springfield Tuesday, trying to reach a market of fresh, new volunteers.

"At our bowling event in August, we had 40 or 50 student volunteer lane monitors," Burnett said. "We really hope UIS turns into owning the whole event and just takes it over."

Representatives of two dozen non-profit groups and organizations set up on the concourse of the Public Affairs center as part of UIS' first-ever "Fall into Volunteering Fair."

"It was an idea developed by students who wanted a volunteer fair," said Kelly Thompson, director of the UIS Volunteer & Civic Engagement Center. The center and UIS Housing got together to sponsor the fair.

A little more than halfway through the four-hour event, more than 100 students had come through.

"We're really looking to increase the opportunities for students to be aware of the surrounding community and how they can become involved," Thompson said, adding that this is the time of year students come to the Volunteer Center to offer help.

Last year, the center took groups of students to more than 60 organized volunteer events. Many of those students will volunteer their time again in 2009-2010.

Rashonda Williams, a UIS junior from Chicago, volunteered last year with Big Brother/Big Sister and the AmeriCorps community service program.

She volunteered more than 300 hours last year, but said she probably will cut down on that this school year.

"I'm planning on being a mentor at both Big Brother/Big Sister and with the Springfield public schools," she said.

Jackson Kern, a sophomore from Kansas, said he did a lot of volunteer work last year in a Halloween canned goods drive for the Central Illinois Food bank. This year, he will be a mentor in the AmeriCorps program and with Big Brother/Big Sister. Plus he's a tutor at Washington Middle School.

"There has been a lack of involvement of students with Springfield," he said. The volunteering fair is designed to fix that, he said.

Burnett said he had already made connections with "a couple of key folks who are really interested" in helping with Special Olympics. He also hoping more UIS students take part in the Special Olympics' Polar Plunge, the organization's big fundraiser, in March.

"We, like all the other non-profits, want to tap into this market," he said.

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