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## Service clubs losing members, but still fulfilling for many

**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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Too busy.

That is the modern-day mantra when it comes to reasons why people don't join Sertoma, Optimists, Lions or any of the other service organizations that have for decades been the lifeblood of many communities. Many service clubs are losing members. Some have even had to shut down.

Jonathan Isler, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Illinois Springfield, says he believes people are as committed as ever, but community service has taken different forms.

"People are still doing social things and are engaged and community-oriented," Isler says. "They're not more selfish or more narcissistic, but there's this kind of rallying-around-the-wagons mentality in which people want to take care of family and friends first."

David Parsons of Springfield is busy, too, but he still finds benefits from his involvement in Rotary International.

As CEO of the Central Illinois Community Blood Center, Parsons oversees getting blood supplies to 19 hospitals in central and southwestern Illinois. There are blood collection drives, volunteers, donors, employees, budgeting and education programs to coordinate. He doesn't do it all by himself, but the buck stops with him.

As of July 1, Parsons will be even busier. On that date, Parsons becomes governor of Rotary District 6460. During his one-year term, he will oversee Rotary clubs in a district that runs from Madison County to Sangamon County and from Kewanee to the Missouri border.

One of his goals will be to convince more people they aren't really too busy. The district wants to increase its membership by 10 percent this year.

Part of the personal satisfaction Parson finds in his Rotary membership is "knowing that, no matter how small, you had a hand in helping someone."

Parsons became involved in Rotary in the 1980s, when he lived in North Carolina.

"Frankly, I didn't know that much about it then," he said. "I started learning about it and became intrigued with what Rotary could do."

That includes everything from helping to eradicate polio in the 1950s to promoting world peace today. In Springfield, Rotary sponsored the "Hats Off To Mr. Lincoln" project, in which artists created replicas of Lincoln's stovepipe hat. The replicas were scattered throughout downtown Springfield last summer. Rotarians' charitable work supports a huge variety of projects both here and internationally.

"Rotary is just a phenomenal organization," he says. "It has big, hairy goals. One of them is actually world peace. There are six universities across the world, one in the United States, where we train scholars in what are called world peace centers."

After Parsons moved to Springfield five years ago, he transferred his membership to the local Rotary. Actually, there are five clubs in Springfield — Rotary Club of Springfield (the original, organized in 1913), Midtown Rotary Club of Springfield, Springfield South, Springfield Sunrise and Springfield Westside.

Having five clubs is a good indicator that interest remains high in Springfield.

"It's a hotbed there," says current district governor Larry Thompson.

Parsons is the third district governor from Springfield — Bob Stuart and Rod Buffington both served in that capacity. In addition, Stuart was an international director for Rotary.

Parsons sympathizes with people who just don't think they can fit one more thing into their lives — especially parents who are involved with their children's school and athletic activities.

"The lack of time, that's legitimate for some people," Parsons says. "They just can't do anything extra. For me, I think you can always

find the time do one more thing and to do it well.

"With something like Rotary, you are doing more than one thing. By doing it well, the impact can be phenomenal."

Dave Bakke can be reached at 788-1541 or dave.bakke@sj-r.com.

#### **Technology creates new ways to help, sociologist says**

One factor in the decline of some community clubs is that modern technology has created different ways for people to help others, says Jonathan Isler, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Illinois Springfield.

For instance, he said, Internet pages like Caring Bridge allow people to support others who have serious illnesses or are otherwise hurting.

Those forms of involvement are not as visible as community service clubs, Isler concedes.

"I do think there has been a slight fall of, maybe, the more public support," he said. "That might explain why different groups have problems.

"For a lot of the older generation, (new forms of community support) are not as real, maybe because it's not something you can touch or hear or feel," he said. "But I'm an optimist. People are still willing to help their neighbors and friends."

-- Dave Bakke

#### **Loss of Auburn Rotary still affects ex-member**

AUBURN -- Just about 10 years ago, Tom Walker had to perform a distasteful task.

He stood up at a meeting of the Auburn Rotary and made a motion to disband the club. The motion passed. After 63 years, the Auburn Rotary Club was no more.

At 63 years old himself, Walker was one of the youngest members at that meeting. That was one problem. The other was that only 10 people ever came to meetings. They had tried to boost membership, including putting an ad in the local newspaper soliciting new members. Nothing worked.

"Disbanding was a terribly hard thing to do," Walker told The State Journal-Register then. "I almost had some tears when I made the motion. The sadness is because of the older fellas who started the club in 1937. I heard a catch in one voice when we talked about it."

Tom, who is now 73, still lives in Auburn, and he misses that Rotary Club. It never came back.

"Oh yeah. I enjoyed Rotary," Walker says. "I especially enjoyed the one international convention I got to go to in Indianapolis."

After Auburn's club disbanded, Walker attended a couple of meetings at the Virden Rotary, but didn't join. It wasn't the same. The Auburn members had known each other for so long that those friendships had become part of the experience for him.

Strangely, three of the Auburn Rotary club's charter members died within a year after the club folded. Walker thinks those men lost a lot of life's enjoyment when they couldn't go to Rotary anymore.

"They weren't able to do anything, like go to the dinners and all our activities that we did," he says.

Tom stays active as a substitute teacher for the Auburn School District.

The school district found another sponsor for the dinners the Rotary used to sponsor for Auburn High School athletes, cheerleaders and scholars, and life went on.

-- Dave Bakke

#### **Lincoln VFW post struggles to stay financially solvent**

LINCOLN -- When Vince Long joined the Lincoln Veterans of Foreign Wars post in the late 1960s, the group held meetings twice a month, had fish fries every Friday and bingo every Monday.

Four decades later, the fish fries and bingo are a thing of the past, and the group meets only once a month.

A couple of months ago, it even looked like Cronin Brothers VFW Post 1756 wouldn't be able to meet its mortgage and would have to close. A fundraiser saved the post in the short term, but its long-term future remains a challenge.

"We use to have something going on every Friday and Saturday night," Long said. "Then, it got to where people started passing away. Things slowly went downhill."

Last year, Post 1756 had about 215 dues-paying members. This year, the number is down to 188. Some of the former members quit paying dues, others moved away, and some died.

Long, who served on the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal during the Vietnam War, is the quartermaster of the post. He said membership is down, but the post is trying to recruit new people.

Most of the leaders in the Lincoln post are from the Vietnam era and are in their 60s. Long wants to make sure there will be a new group of leader to take over in the future.

Post 1756 has managed to sign up about 15 people who served during Desert Storm and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the new members don't always have a lot of spare time to give to the VFW.

"They are busy raising families, working, and some of them have been re-deployed," Long said. "...A lot of the (members' kids) are active in sports. So, the post isn't quite the community focal point it use to be."

Earlier this year, the post announced that it might have to close its doors if it didn't raise \$20,000. Post 1756 had taken out a \$190,000 second mortgage to buy a parking lot and improve their building. But after the economy nose-dived, the post ran out of money to pay the bills.

The post held a fundraiser that, as of mid-February, had raised \$29,000, and additional funds were still coming in.

Post 1756 is out of the woods for now, Long said, but members need to keep having activities to maintain the cash flow.

One idea is a summer fish fry that would also include carnival rides. Among other things, that might attract interest younger VFW members, he said.

Post 1756 also needs to stress its role in the community, he said.

The post is a meeting place for veterans, but it is also involved in fundraisers for other organizations and people.

"We just don't blow our own horn loud enough. That's the way it seems to be with all service organizations," Long said.

Mayor Keith Snyder said the post is an important part of the Lincoln community.

Over the years, members have allowed their facility to be used for community programs, including a concert that raised money for an anti-drug initiative, the mayor said.

"The have big hearts," Snyder said of the VFW members. "They make their facility available for good programs. The VFW is an important piece in the fabric of our community."

Snyder said he is proud of the way the community rallied behind the post when its money problems were made public in January.

"It was a sense of, let's pull together and help them out," Snyder said. "They've helped us over the years – "us" meaning the broader community – so there was a sense that it was time for us to rally around them. They answered the call in their day, in their particular day, and it was time for the community to answer the call for them."

-- John Reynolds

### **Social clubs trying several strategies to stay relevant**

While conventional wisdom holds that fraternal, veteran and social organizations are declining in membership, Springfield's Elks Lodge 138 is bucking the trend.

Nationally, Elks membership is declining slightly. In Springfield, membership is up.

Not only that, it has gotten younger.

"That's where we found ourselves three or four years ago," lodge secretary Gary Whitson of Springfield says of the "aging/dying" perception. "We realized we needed to get younger people and get them active, not just for the social aspect. We have a bunch of younger officers in the lodge now."

Membership in the local Elks lodge has risen the past two years, a record other service organizations would love to have.

It was done, Whitson says, partly by refocusing the mission to issues more relevant to young people. The days when these groups could keep members interested with a meal and a guest speaker could be gone.

This winter, for example, a large billboard on South Ninth Street promoted the Elks' efforts to keep young people away from drugs. Whitson's son, Blake, who is also a member of the lodge, helps coordinate that program, part of an Elks International initiative.

The other secret, Whitson says, is hustle. Current members work to convince prospective members that the image they may have of the Elks is outdated.

"We're not really doing membership drives," he says. "But we're working hard to find people who are interested in what the Elks bring to the table."

Aside from its anti-drug program, that includes scholarship programs, charitable activities and working with schools on issues the Elks care about.

### **New approaches**

These programs are getting a big push from organizations such as the Lions, Elks, Optimists and Kiwanis.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars is changing as well.

"We grew up in VFW with bingo and fish fries," says Terry Vance, state adjutant for the organizations. "Now we're in the computer age. The interest of vets today is somewhat different because of technology."

Last year, Springfield's Downtown Rotary club awarded \$33,780 to 30 local charities in addition to \$7,000 in scholarships and humanitarian funding through Rotary International.

And yet if the club wants to keep that level of giving, it has to work hard to retain members. Nationally, Rotary's membership has dropped from its peak, which came in 1996.

Larry Thompson is head of Rotary District 6460. It's a large district that includes much of central, western and southern Illinois. Thompson says the district's membership is stable but not where he would like it to be.

"It's a struggle this year with the economy," he says. "Memberships sometimes get paid by the businesses of the members. With the economy the way it is, some of those businesses have stopped paying their employees' dues and, consequently, the employees opt not to be members."

David Parsons of Springfield, who will succeed Thompson as district governor, says that attracting the younger generation is going to mean two things – getting longtime members to embrace new ways of doing things and refocusing the traditional approach.

"Today's up-and-coming generation," he says, "is interested in service, not just sitting at a meal and chit-chatting socially. They want to be actually doing something, getting involved."

"Still, you've got to keep the meetings for your older folks. I like to go to dinner meetings, get there early, chat with people. You have to do both."

Worldwide, Rotary International is doing fine. Growth is particularly strong in Asia, and there will soon be Chinese clubs joining the group. But Americans are not joining as they once did.

"It grew until about 2000," Thompson says, "and has leveled off since that time. We're holding our own, but we have to work extra hard."

#### **Membership vacuum**

Social and fraternal organizations have tried a number of initiatives to entice new members. They offer incentives to current members who sign up new people. Regular informational meetings are held for nonmembers, including an audio-visual presentation on the group and the benefits of joining.

Prospective members are invited to be guest speakers. Some organizations require each member to invite at least one potential new member to a meeting. The American Legion recently instituted a Lucky 7 program. Legionnaires who bring in two members and secure five renewals from current members receive a special Lucky 7 pin.

Two groups that should be seeing an infusion of younger members are the Legion and the VFW. Wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, which have been going on most of the last decade, have created a crowd of potential members.

Vance, VFW state adjutant, says Illinois membership peaked just before Desert Storm in 1990-91. World War II veterans were in their 60s and 70s then and still active. In the ensuing 20 years, many of them have died or have become physically unable to remain active. Korean War veterans, another strong group of VFW members, have also aged.

It all created a vacuum in membership that has been only partially filled by veterans returning from Middle Eastern wars. Part of the problem is that the new veterans have trickled back to civilian life over a number of years.

"Vets are coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq and joining," he says, "but they are not as active as those World War II veterans were when they all came home at once. In the 1940s and '50s, they came home to Springfield and their neighbors were veterans, and they all were together after winning the war."

#### **Smoking ban hurt**

At the Eagles Club on East Ash Street in Springfield, president Ed Charles says membership declined after Illinois' smoking ban went into effect, but things are looking better these days.

"We're starting to come back," he says. "It's up considerably from what we lost. I'm hoping that it will keep going in the same direction."

Charles says better than half of the Eagles membership in Springfield is active. "We're turning that around, too," he says.

Though the Eagles building at Ash is a social center for members, that isn't enough. Charles says the group has adopted a variety of causes — most of them related to health, such as cancer research.

Last year, the Eagles tried NASCAR. This is the second year the group will be sponsoring cars in the Busch Series of races.

The battle to retain members, raise visibility and attract younger members is never over for any of these organizations, but they are all trying new things in the battle to stay relevant.

Dave Bakke can be reached at 788-1541.

#### **Rotary**

Rotary International is the world's first service club organization, with more than 1.2 million members in 33,000 clubs worldwide. There are 368,000 members in the United States.

Find a local club online at [www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org). Use the contact information for that club or fill out a form on the Web site and the club will get in touch with you

#### **Kiwanis**

Organized in Detroit on Jan. 21, 1915. There are 600,000 men, women and youth members in nearly 16,000 clubs in more than 70 countries and geographic areas.

Kiwanis and its service leadership programs volunteer more than 21 million hours and invest more than \$113 million in their communities around the world. Find a local club online at [www.kiwanis.org](http://www.kiwanis.org), and contact a club officer.

#### **Optimist International**

There are 90,000 Optimists in about 3,000 Optimist Clubs around the world. Every year, Optimists conduct 65,000 service projects and serve more than six million young people.

To learn more about joining, visit the My Sidewalk page online at [www.optimist.org](http://www.optimist.org). At My Sidewalk, request information about a variety of topics. An Optimist volunteer will contact you.

#### **Veterans of Foreign Wars**

The VFW traces its roots to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service. There are 2.2 million members.

To join, call VFW headquarters at 217-546-2128; e-mail [vfwil@vfwil.org](mailto:vfwil@vfwil.org); visit a local VFW post and fill out application; or go online at [www.vfwil.org](http://www.vfwil.org) and click the "Join the VFW" link.

### American Legion

The American Legion was chartered and incorporated by Congress in 1919. It is the largest veterans service organization with 2.6 million members

To join: Go online at [www.legion.org/join](http://www.legion.org/join) or contact your local Legion post

### Sertoma

The first official luncheon meeting of the founding club was held on April 11, 1912, at the Coates House Hotel, then the fashionable hotel in Kansas City.

There are 20,000 members in the United States. During the last 10 years, its annual fund has provided graduate scholarships to 231 applicants — the largest number of scholarships to be granted to the hearing and speech field in the country.

To join, go online at [www.sertoma.org](http://www.sertoma.org).

### Lions International

With 45,000 clubs and more than 1.3 million members, Lions is the world's largest service club organization.

Founded in 1917, the clubs are best known for fighting blindness. One million children have been screened by the club's vision screening program.

Membership in a Lions club is by invitation. Contact a local club, ask if you can attend a meeting to learn more. At the meeting, ask about becoming a member.

Comments (12)

austindave

1 day ago

Report Abuse

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Report Abuse

ABC is one of Springfield's oldest and largest service organizations

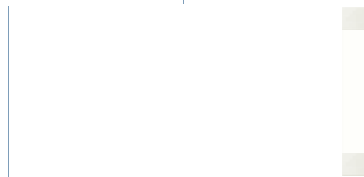
Austin Dave

demented

1 day ago

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Report Abuse

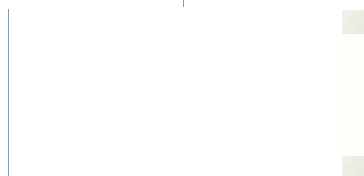
Interesting that they skipped, entirely, the Masonic organizations. The Masons are pretty big around here, along with the Scottish Rite, Shrine, and Order of the Eastern Star....

Disgusted

1 day ago

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Report Abuse

The Lodge number for the Elks featured in your article is 158. Not only does this lodge hustle and provide lots of events for members, it has the only Elks pipe and

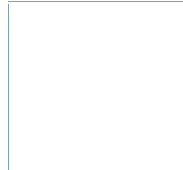
drum band in the nation! Look for them out and about during the St. Pat's season.

scottannamom

1 day ago

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The Masons do GREAT things here in Springfield. They provide free, yes free tutoring to dyslexic children so they can learn to read. What an awesome organization, and I am not a member just a grateful person they trained for free. I teach dyslexics every day with the training and tools they gave me. One word: awesome.

kingpin

1 day ago

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Report Abuse

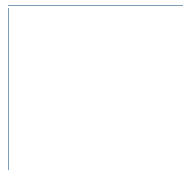
Hate to say it, but the smoking ban did not prevent me from rejoining the Elks club after one year. It was the food and what they offered. Just was not for me. Smoking kept me away. The smoking ban let me try it due to my allergies and sinuses.

dawgs88

1 day ago

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Report Abuse

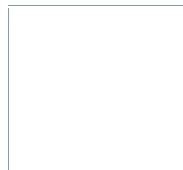
They also skipped over the Jaycees. But the media normally does skip over the Jaycees any way.

sjr-reader

22 hours ago

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Report Abuse

Just a thought. Not sure if anyone who reads these articles will care. Most who post are usually not interested in listening to others. But.

Have these organizations thought of trying to recruit people other than the ones they must normally recruit?

I say that because after 30 years of living in Springfield I've never had anyone ask me to join any of these organizations. In fact I don't have any idea what most of them even do.

Rotary, I think that is a Roman Catholic organization but have no idea what they do. Anytime I asked about them no one would answer or did not know.

Eagles, heard of them but again have no idea what they do. I've heard of them having dances I think.

Sertoma, have no idea what they do.

Jaycees, I think they help build parks. all I know about them.

American legion, I think they are Veteran related. VFW obviously is. I am a veteran of foreign wars and no one has ever invited me.

Kiwanis, have no idea what they do.

Moose, some kind of family club.

Are these just cleaned up taverns or what? No insult intended.

I've asked people over the years what these groups were and no one I spoke to knew. Point is I certainly could have looked into them and showed interest but, how are you going to get new members when people have no idea what you are, why you are, why become a member, etc.

Don't bother to respond with smart elec remarks of living in a cave which is usual for these forums. They won't change anything. A lot of people have no idea you are even there because you apparently have to recruitment mechanism to them.

Tyler W

22 hours ago

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Report Abuse

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Obesity is the # 1 health problem of people who sit all day long and go to meetings and service meetings and eat eat eat, free food ! That is why they are there -- I call it as it is.

Darla sez  
19 hours ago

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You must be logged in to report abuse.

Report Abuse

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I am with sjr reader on this. For one thing I am a woman and most of these orgs are male centered and the wives get dragged in. I have heard many older men complaining about the loss of membership in these type of clubs. I say it is their own fault for being secretive, racist, and sexist. I read obits every day and see the orgs people were in and I have no idea what they are either. I am 45 years old and what I know about these clubs is very little, mostly fried food, beer drinking, smoking folks who like parades. This info is from people whose parents were in such orgs. They need better advertising if they want to recruit younger folks!

Vet  
19 hours ago

Report Abuse  
You must be logged in to report abuse.

Report Abuse

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The problem with the Eagles, VFW & American Legion posts, is that if you are not into sitting and drinking all day, you are not considered a part of the 'in' crowd.

JMG  
14 hours ago

Report Abuse  
You must be logged in to report abuse.

Report Abuse

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sjr-reader - you don't want to hear it, but you said it yourself, ' I certainly could have looked into them and showed interest...' yet, you didn't.

Since when do adults who have an interest in giving back to their community need to be taken by the hand like a little child and led to what interests them?

Grow up. Be a responsible, mature, confident adult and show some individual initiative to investigate for yourself something that might interest you. Unwilling or not capable of doing that? Then talk with your friends and if you're afraid to go by yourself to assess some of these community groups, perhaps a few of those friends will go with you to a meeting of these service groups.

What has happened since our parent's and grandparent's era to nurture this attitude where people are afraid of trying something new by themselves?

Steely Dan  
12 hours ago

Report Abuse  
You must be logged in to report abuse.

Report Abuse

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Vet - With all due respect - assuming you were honorably discharged - you are wrong to stereotype vets of VFW and American Legions as sitting around all day and drinking. As a matter of fact as a member of the VFW I am insulted. Comments like yours don't help.

Login or register to post a comment:

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I am over 13 years of age

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