



COVID-19 FRANCE BÉNÉVOLAT IN ACTION ON THE GROUND

NOTE: *"Text translated in the context of a Translation Work Experience module by students in the School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ UK".*



France Bénévolat and its territorial Network have been mobilised for almost two months, working every day alongside local and national associations, as well as many people ready to get involved. During the current crisis, this territorial Network is an essential support for maintaining solidarity and our mission is all the more important. We wish to shine a light on the exceptional involvement of our Network.

The exceptional involvement of France Bénévolat's volunteering teams

Our centres may be closed, but our mission is ongoing

Despite all of France Bénévolat's centres being closed in each of the regions where they are present (200 welcome centres), a large majority of France Bénévolat teams have been getting involved during the lockdown. This represents 5 to 15 active volunteers per Centre. For all of them, the reception, phone lines and email are maintained every day, sometimes even 24 hours a day, thanks to a dedicated mobile phone.

A new system to respond to priority needs

As soon as lockdown began, the Centres reorganised themselves in different ways:

- Into work groups that will take charge of actions specific to the situation
- By reviewing the distribution of tasks in order to better focus on the needs of associations and the expectations of those wishing to volunteer
- By strengthening team communication
- By having a team responsible for the regular monitoring of information
- By setting up a cloud, which allows each volunteer to find useful documents and references.

Our internal management tool has facilitated these reorganisations by allowing our local teams to remotely manage their announcements and publications, as well as registrations.

New tools for discussions...

Most centres have organised internal, weekly or fortnightly meetings, in the form of audio or visual conference calls, during which all active and inactive volunteers can meet.

This is a chance for each team to check in with the community and follow up on requests and emails. But most of all, it provides an opportunity for all those involved to share (lots of) information.

...and to keep in touch

Some centres have created a WhatsApp group intended for informal messages or are using WhatsApp or Telegram to stay in touch with their team of volunteers and hold group discussions. Composing monthly internal letters also allows them to inform and keep volunteers in contact with associations (local team and board of governors).

Training to improve skills and strengthen teams

To improve skills, France Bénévolat in Maine et Loire offered its volunteers the opportunity to develop skills related to digital tools and to talk with experts, through the PANA network (a programme which helps associations develop themselves online), of which France Bénévolat is a partner.

Our new volunteers continue to be trained:

- Either in groups, as in for our announcement and registration management tool
- Or individually and remotely for those new volunteers who will join the team after the lockdown is lifted

Continued support for associations

For our member associations...

All the Centres, mobilised since the start of the lockdown, have been keeping in touch with the associations daily, in order to ensure that their needs are met.

Their dedicated teams have contacted all the member associations in their area, in order to understand the situation of each of them during the lockdown and to examine how they can help them. Some centres have gone further by asking them about their post-lockdown needs already, for example: how they picture the future, if they think they will change or add anything to the way they currently do things and in which ways they can be helped to do so.

Several centres are sharing information about the specific actions, initiatives and plans from their member associations.

Others are doing the meticulous work of monitoring different social media sites to identify needs that have not been expressed by associations and offering guidance.

... and non-member associations

A majority of Centres have launched a large campaign alongside non-member associations:

- Offering those who wish to, the opportunity to publish for free during the lockdown period, which has been a very welcomed approach.
- Offering a free 3-month membership to new associations.
- Supporting all non-member associations with any type of need.
- Offering non-member associations, who work with hospitals, to post tasks for free.
- Discussing their actions and needs and establishing a link for the potential of future work after the pandemic.

And for the associations that are already members:

- Making the time spent in lockdown an “off-peak” period to offer them a certain flexibility.
- Sending a newsletter to their new and ongoing member associations each week.

A warm welcome and guidance are always guaranteed

Several centres have started by making contact with all the people who registered as “available in the event of a pandemic” on www.francebenevolat.org over the last 12 months.

Calls from people wishing to get involved during this period are systematically taken and depending on their expectations, are redirected towards:

- Tasks published on our website www.francebenevolat.org
- The website jeveuxaider.com
- Solidarity between neighbours, with the ‘Voisins solidaires (United Neighbours) plan’
- Mutual aid sites offered by the local authority or ‘département’ (county)
- ‘Fabrique des Solidarités’ (a charity which helps people who want to get involved to find tasks)
- Our member associations directly
- Local branches of the ‘Centre communal d’action sociale’ (CCAS – Community Social Action Association)

The majority of centres have noticed that there are more requests for immediate actions than there are offers, because a lot of associations are still closed due to the pandemic. Those seeking aid are informed of the situation and as soon as there is a need for essential tasks in the area (listening on the phone, bringing shopping or medications, childcare), the centres send an email to all the people who are registered and haven’t yet been assigned a task.

In some cases, a dedicated team monitors all the websites that post urgent announcements related to the Pandemic in order to respond to the surge of citizen solidarity.

Each person who is registered on our website can also offer non COVID-19 related tasks that they will be able to take up after the lockdown, and, as such, can lend a hand to the associations upon their reopening.

The centres also offer these people the chance to meet with a volunteer counsellor after the lockdown, and potentially even invite them to come and expand their team!

Volunteers registered on www.francebenevolat.org really appreciate being able to talk on the phone, and therefore find it regrettable that this is not the case with other platforms created for this use.

Public interest at the forefront of our mission

The centres were present on the radio and in the media as soon as the lockdown began. Some sent press releases to all of the regional and local media and newspapers. This was to let them know that they had mobilised to help associations and were ready to work with people wishing to take action in the face of the health crisis, sometimes even with a weekly published newsletter.

The urgent tasks, published on our website www.francebenevolat.org and categorised under 'COVID-19', resulting from the pandemic have been shared on as many different platforms as possible: local sites, Facebook pages, jeveuxaider.com. All information related to volunteering and the health crisis is also published and shared.

A campaign was launched on Facebook, the idea of which is that a question is posted, with the answer coming the next day. The aim of this campaign is to continue to promote volunteering during this period and to inform people about the different aspects of volunteering.

Some local websites have been updated to include a communication section on the home page, specific to COVID-19 mobilisation.

Taking action together on the ground

The territorial Network has gone beyond informing its local partners of their involvement, by committing to alliances with partners and/or cooperating with associations to take action together.

Alliances with local authorities include:

- New partnerships with county-specific organisations and associations that deal with sociocultural services (anything from sport committees to housing and education) and in Cholet, an ongoing partnership with the World Health Organisation and the Cholet local authority.
- A partnership with the Orléans local authority, which is looking for volunteers for urgent local tasks that the centres offer to the volunteers who are registered on www.francebenevolat.org and who have ticked the "pandemic" box or are on the civil reserve. These tasks come from the local authorities (municipal Concierge).
- Contact with local authorities (Prefect Delegates), as well as with local influential figures involved with struggling homeless people.
- Cooperation with new non-member associations and close monitoring of institutional aid in councils, counties, and regions. In addition, a collection of all the information and studies linked to volunteering during the pandemic took place.
- Close relationship with the towns of Narbonne and Carcassonne to bring help to vulnerable people.
- Contact with local councils and CCAS for requests of rural volunteers - Compiègne.

- Following a suggestion made by the ‘Clermontoise Community Life’ board, which wishes to open a collective debate alongside public services about the current period and the post Covid-19 period, a participation project resulting from a collective effort and a collaboration targeting non-member associations.
- Partnership with the local authorities in Evry to recruit volunteers to make masks (announcement published on our site). Contact was made with the Ris Orangis local authorities, who had implemented a mask making workshop.
- Search for tailor/seamstress volunteers to make protective gowns for the medical centre in Roanne, in permanent link with the local authorities in Roanne, CCAS and especially ‘Vie Associative’ (Community Life). A successful project thanks to new partnerships, notably with the local authorities (200 volunteers).
- Offering specific missions to volunteers selected in advance, for example, making and cutting out masks, and school support in partnership with local associations.

Focus on France Bénévolat Saint-Etienne “from schooling to solidarity”

The lockdown has distanced pupils from their schools and colleges and as a result many have been put in difficulty and made more vulnerable. France Bénévolat Saint-Etienne could not help but join in with this outpouring of generosity and decided to come to the aid of the pupils who are not at school. This centre launched an operation: ‘De la scolarité à solidarité!’ (from schooling to solidarity)

Remote teaching has made some young people more vulnerable and widened social divides. Many pupils are lost and/or have completely fallen behind... The idea was therefore to create a solidarity network and to put older students and volunteers (retired teachers for example) in contact with these young people.

France Bénévolat Saint-Étienne reached out to higher education establishments as well as to volunteers registered in our area who had offered to partake in tutoring. The centre got in contact with several schools and colleges in Saint-Étienne and Saint-Chamond.

At this time, the pilot establishment is Tézenas du Montcel school, which already had in place a partnership with the national higher education school of Mines: 10 final year students are receiving support from 10 university students.

“We are working to expand this solidarity network across the whole of France”

France Bénévolat Saint-Étienne has sent a press release to the media in order to promote this action.

We thank the AG2R GLOBAL group for its exceptional help which allows the national body to pursue its action with the willingness to share all the inspiring initiatives and practices that have come from the crisis, with France Bénévolat centres.