



Giving Back

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Giving Back: Your Guide to Making an Impact in Belgium

Welcome to your comprehensive guide on giving back in Belgium. As an expat, you've embarked on an incredible journey of building a new life. You have your routine, your job, your favorite spots. But perhaps you still feel a slight sense of disconnection, a feeling of living **in** the city, but not yet being a part of its heartbeat.

This guide is designed to change that. We'll explore how volunteering and community involvement can bridge that gap, transforming your expat experience from one of temporary residence to one of deep, meaningful connection. Giving back is one of the most powerful ways to weave yourself into the fabric of your new home, meet people from all walks of life, and find a profound sense of purpose. Let's get started.

Why Give Back as an Expat?

Moving to a new country means building a sense of community from scratch. Volunteering fast-tracks this process, offering benefits that go far beyond the act of helping itself.

- **Forge Authentic Connections:** Step outside the expat bubble and meet Belgians and internationals you might never encounter otherwise. These shared experiences build strong, lasting friendships.
- **From Visitor to Resident:** Actively participating in the community shifts your perspective. You're no longer just an observer; you're a contributor, an active resident invested in the well-being of your city.
- **Discover Your New Home:** Volunteering often takes you to different neighborhoods and introduces you to the city's social, cultural, and economic layers in a way that tourism or work never could.
- **Boost Your Well-being:** One of the best cures for feelings of loneliness or isolation is connecting to a cause bigger than yourself. It provides structure, purpose, and a powerful sense of belonging.
- **Practice Language Skills:** There is no better way to practice your French or Dutch than in a real-world, low-pressure environment. People appreciate the effort, and you'll learn colloquialisms you'd never find in a textbook.
- **Develop New Skills:** Whether it's project management, communication, or a practical skill like repairing electronics, volunteering is a fantastic way to enhance your CV and personal development.

The Expat's Volunteering Directory

One of the biggest hurdles for expats is knowing where to start, especially with potential language barriers. The good news is that Brussels is a truly international city, and many organizations are

thrilled to welcome English-speaking volunteers. Here is a curated list of trusted organizations and platforms to begin your search.

Serve the City Brussels

Who they are: A values-based movement that partners with various non-profits to create volunteering opportunities. They focus on showing kindness in practical ways to people in need.

What you can do: Their projects are diverse and flexible. You could be serving meals to the homeless, participating in a park clean-up, running activities for children with disabilities, or visiting the elderly.

Language: Primarily English-friendly. They are very accustomed to international volunteers.

Good for: People seeking flexibility. You can sign up for single events (“shifts”) on their “ServeNow” platform without a long-term commitment.

Website: <https://www.servethecity.brussels>

BelRefugees

Who they are: A citizen platform that provides support for refugees and asylum seekers across Belgium. They have a major hub and presence in Brussels.

What you can do: Opportunities are varied and crucial. You can help prepare and serve meals at shelters, sort donated clothing at their Humanitarian Hub, teach French, Dutch, or English classes, or help organize cultural and sports activities.

Language: English is widely spoken among volunteers and staff. Language teaching roles for French/Dutch obviously require proficiency in those languages.

Good for: Those passionate about supporting displaced people and who want to be part of a large, dynamic team. They hold monthly information sessions for new volunteers, which is a great way to learn more.

Website: <https://www.belrefugees.be>

Red Cross (Croix-Rouge / Rode Kruis)

Who they are: The well-known international humanitarian organization. In Brussels, they run shelters for asylum seekers, blood donation centers, and social support services.

What you can do: In their shelters, you can help with daily life activities: assisting children with homework, leading creative or sports workshops, sorting donations, or simply providing a friendly presence.

Language: Many activities are English-friendly, but this is also a great environment to practice your French or Dutch with residents and local volunteers.

Good for: Individuals looking to support a large, established organization with a structured volunteer program.

Website: <https://www.croix-rouge.be> (French) or <https://www.rodekruis.be> (Dutch)

Les Petits Riens / Spullenhulp

Who they are: A major social enterprise known for its second-hand shops. Their mission is to fight poverty and social exclusion through the collection and sale of donated goods.

What you can do: Their needs are vast. You can help in the shops (sorting, customer service), in their workshops (repairing furniture or appliances), in logistics, or even with creative tasks like content creation for their social media.

Language: While customer-facing roles may require some French/Dutch, many behind-the-scenes roles are accessible to English speakers.

Good for: People interested in the circular economy, social enterprise, and gaining practical skills.

Website: <https://petitsriens.be>

Brussels Greeters

Who they are: A program partnered with Visit Brussels, part of the International Greeter Association. Greeters are volunteers who share their love for their neighborhood with small groups of visitors or newcomers.

What you can do: Become a local guide! You share your personal stories and favorite spots in your area, offering an authentic, non-touristy perspective of the city. The commitment is minimal, usually just a few hours per month.

Language: You can offer tours in any language you are fluent in, including English.

Good for: Expats who have been here a while and want to share their knowledge and passion for the city. It's a fantastic way to meet new people and see your own city through fresh eyes.

Website: Search for "Brussels Greeters" via the Visit Brussels website.

Platforms for Finding Opportunities

If you'd like to browse a wider range of options, these platforms act as search engines for volunteering.

Give a Day

What it is: This is the main platform recommended by the City of Brussels for finding volunteer work. It's a comprehensive database that connects volunteers with hundreds of non-profits.

How it works: You can create a profile and filter opportunities by your interests (e.g., animals, environment, social), location, and crucially, by language. You'll find everything from one-off event help to long-term commitments.

Website: <https://www.giveaday.be/brussels>

European Solidarity Corps (ESC)

What it is: An EU-funded program for young people (typically up to 30 years old) to volunteer or work in projects in their own country or abroad that benefit communities.

How it works: These are typically longer-term, full-time placements (2-12 months). They often include accommodation, insurance, and a small allowance. Projects can be in social care, environment, culture, and more. While many are for going abroad, you can also find placements within Belgium.

Website: European Youth Portal (youth.europa.eu)

Your Step-by-Step Guide to Getting Started

Feeling inspired? Here's a practical path to turn your good intentions into action.

1. Self-Reflection: Define Your ‘Why’ and ‘How’ Before you start browsing, take a moment to think. What causes are you passionate about? What skills do you want to use or learn? How much time can you realistically commit per week or month? Answering these questions first will make your search much more focused.

2. Research and Shortlist Use the directory above and the ‘Give a Day’ platform. Don’t just look at the mission; read about the specific volunteer roles. Make a shortlist of 2-3 organizations that genuinely excite you.

3. Make Contact This is the moment of truth!

- **Online Form:** Most large organizations will have a volunteer application form on their website. Be thorough and honest in your answers.
- **Email:** If you’re contacting a smaller organization, write a clear and concise email. Introduce yourself, explain why you’re interested in their work specifically, mention any relevant skills, and state your availability. Use the vocabulary table below to help!

4. Attend an Information Session Many organizations, like BelRefugees, host regular info sessions for prospective volunteers. This is a no-obligation way to learn more about their work, understand the expectations, and ask questions in person. It’s highly recommended.

5. Your First Day You got a placement – congratulations! On your first day, be open, be curious, and don’t be afraid to ask questions. Listen more than you talk. Your main goal is to understand how you can best support the existing team. Bring a positive attitude, and remember that every little task contributes to the bigger mission.

Your “Giving Back” Checklist

Use this checklist to guide you from consideration to contribution.

- Reflect on my interests, skills, and availability.
- Explore the organizations in the Expat’s Volunteering Directory.
- Browse for opportunities on the ‘Give a Day’ platform.
- Create a shortlist of 2-3 organizations that feel like a good fit.
- Draft and send an introductory email or fill out an application form.
- Sign up for an info session if one is available.
- Prepare for my first day of volunteering.
- Share my experience in the ExpatsatHome community forum to inspire others.

Key Vocabulary for Volunteers

Navigating the non-profit world in a multilingual country can be tricky. Here are some key terms to help you.

English	French	Dutch
Volunteer	Bénévole	Vrijwilliger
Non-profit organization	Association sans but lucratif (ASBL)	Vereniging zonder winstogmerk (VZW)
To help / To support	Aider / Soutenir	Helpen / Ondersteunen
Donation (goods or money)	Don	Schenking / Gift
Shelter / Welcome Center	Centre d'accueil	Opvangcentrum
Shift / Duty	Permanence	Dienst / Shift
Schedule / Timetable	Horaire	Rooster
Team	Équipe	Team / Ploeg
Training	Formation	Opleiding

Insider Tips from a Local

💡 Tip: Start Small: You don't need to commit 15 hours a week to make a difference. Start with a one-off event or a commitment of just a few hours a month. It's much better to start small and grow your involvement than to overcommit and burn out.

⚠️ Important: Understand the Commitment: Be realistic about your availability. Many organizations, especially those working with vulnerable people, rely on the consistency of their volunteers. A regular two-hour weekly shift can be more valuable than a sporadic full day once every three months. Read the role description carefully and be honest with yourself.

💡 Tip: Combine with Your Hobbies: The best way to stick with volunteering is to enjoy it. Love animals? Look for an animal shelter. Passionate about reading? See if a local library or school needs help. Are you a great cook? Sign up to help in a community kitchen.

💡 Tip: Don't Be Shy About Language: Your effort to speak French or Dutch will almost always be met with appreciation and encouragement. Volunteering is a safe space to make mistakes and learn. Simply starting with "Bonjour, je suis ici pour mon shift de bénévolat" will go a long way!

Taking the step to give back is a gift you give not only to the community but also to yourself. It will enrich your life in Brussels in ways you can't yet imagine. Be curious, be open, and enjoy the journey of becoming a true part of your new home.