A society must be judged by how it cares for those who are weakest.

Plato, the Greek philosopher, said that about the elderly 2,500 years ago.

Today it's still the elderly, but added to them are the homeless, the victims of AIDS, the unemployed, the illiterate, and all the others who have no share in the affluence enjoyed by the top crust of society.

Let's start with the homeless. In 1994, in New York City alone, authorities estimated there were about 100,000 homeless people. They were seen everywhere—in the subways and alleys, on the streets and park benches, and in doorways. But an innovative new program launched by Volunteers of America (VOA) was bringing a glimmer of hope to the desperate needy. Called Operation Outreach, it is designed to reach the most fragile homeless groups—women, children, people...
To illustrate the variety of opportunities open to volunteers, here is a list taken from one issue of the *Boston Globe*. Almost any community could provide the same kinds of openings. Look about you, and you'll see what you could do.

**Volunteer Opportunities**

**Boston Community Services.** Is seeking volunteers to become members of its Human Rights Committee. Members will advocate the rights of people with mental illness and meet once a month. Lawyers, paralegals and individuals with a human service background are needed for the committee.

**Newton-Wellesley Hospital.** Volunteers needed to deliver Sunday newspapers to patients in the hospital.

**Milton Hospital.** Seeks volunteers to work in gift shop and at transportation desk.

**New England Aquarium.** Whale watch volunteers needed. Become a marine interpreter and educate passengers on board the *Voyager II* about whales, whale ecology and conservation, and habitat protection. Volunteers are asked to donate a minimum of three hours per week, days and weekends, and must be at least 16 years of age.

**La Alianza Hispana.** Tutors needed to work with Spanish adults studying English and who are also preparing for their GED exam.

**Halcyon Place.** Volunteers needed to serve as receptionists, hosts, and to perform office duties.
Norfolk Mental Health Association. Volunteers needed to distribute literature, plan the auction, and help market the "Spring Fling" event.

Computer Museum. Volunteers needed to assist in all phases of publicity and promotion and other operations of the Public Relations department.

Masspirg. Volunteers needed for various administrative tasks. Minimum of 3 hours a week and a three-month commitment.

Shortstop Inc. An emergency shelter for homeless adolescents is gearing up for its annual fund drive. Volunteers needed to answer phones, do light typing, mailing, and other administrative duties. Hours and days are extremely flexible.

American Cancer Society. Volunteer drivers are needed to bring cancer patients to and from treatment appointments through the Society's Road to Recovery program. Appointments take place weekdays during business hours. A car and safe driving skills are needed. Free training provided; flexible schedule.

Massachusetts Coalition for a Healthy Future. Collect signatures on a petition to help reduce smoking among children, sponsored by the American Cancer Society and more than 25 other organizations. Signature collection takes place May 6 through June 17. Volunteers are also needed to distribute literature and work in the campaign office.

with AIDS, and those so weakened by malnourishment, disease, and hopelessness that their lives are in danger on the streets.

The volunteers go into the public places where homeless people congregate for warmth and security. They enter bus terminals, subway tunnels, and the lower reaches of other buildings to bring food, water, on-site emergency medical care, and other immediate services. Wherever they go, they try to build the trust needed to bring the homeless into shelters, where they can get counseling, substance-abuse treatment, and other services that will help them make a better life for themselves.

The results are very promising. About 80 percent of the homeless who are reached by the program—more than 600 per month—succeeded in finding a better place
to live. VOA itself now operates New York’s largest shelter for homeless men, under the auspices of the city’s Human Resources Administration.

On the West Side of Manhattan, there is a Catholic school whose cafeteria is used as a shelter for fifteen homeless women. Each evening, volunteers convert it into a dormitory. When the call went out for physically fit people to set up beds before the women came, neighbors responded. The volunteers have to fold and put away cafeteria tables, sweep the floor, put up heavy metal collapsible beds with mattresses, and bring out sacks of clean sheets and towels. Two volunteers each night stay in to oversee the dormitory, sleeping on cots. At 6:30 A.M. other volunteers arrive to reverse the routine, lugging the beds back into closets. It’s a hard job, reports one young woman volunteer. She says, “There is nothing noble about it. It just soothes my conscience. I work in the Pan Am building, and I must step over a dozen of these people every day between home and work. It makes you think.”

In Chicago, volunteers gave their weekends to fixing up abandoned apartments in a rundown public housing project. At first they were only a dozen parishioners from middle-class and mostly white churches. Their example led tenants themselves in the Cabrini-Green complex to repaint walls that hadn’t been touched for decades. The effort proved so effective that soon 70 to 100 volunteers each weekend, joined by tenants, were reclaiming dozens of apartments rendered unlivable by gangs, vandals, drug dealers, and squatters. “This is the very essence of community,” according to one volunteer.
Cabrini’s bleak buildings house more than 10,000 people, most on some sort of welfare. The volunteers appeared weekends at 8:15 A.M., put on hard hats, and spread out through the housing project. Some groups cleaned, some painted, some installed floor tiles, some scoured dirt and grease off walls and cabinets during the eight-hour shifts.

The program moved the local housing authority to expand the volunteer effort to public housing elsewhere in Chicago. The idea of volunteer labor in such projects became part of a larger strategy to improve the lives of tenants. It boosted the morale of the tenants, showing that there are people who really do care. It made them feel they are not alone.

Feeding the hungry is another vital need that volunteers try to meet. Just ten years ago there were only a
handful of soup kitchens in New York. In 1992 there were more than 700 food programs—the soup kitchens that serve hot meals, and food pantries that supply carry-out food packages. They provide 2.5 million meals each month. To illustrate how rapidly the number of hungry people has grown, one soup kitchen served some 50,000 meals in 1989. In 1991, it served nearly twice as many. Not only do the volunteers provide meals, but they help clients fight evictions, get drug treatment, and apply for food stamps. And of course they are constantly on the hunt for funds to run their programs.

There are some professions whose very nature implies an obligation to help others. Medicine is one of the most obvious. The function of the physician is to take care of and heal the sick. All doctors do this in the course of their everyday work, and most are very well paid for it. But some, like Dr. Andrea Fox, go beyond routine care.

In her thirties, Dr. Fox makes house calls to sick elderly people who cannot leave their homes. For most doctors the elderly are not a priority. Dr. Fox was raised to see things differently. Her grandmother organized New York’s garment workers, and as a child Andrea was taken on many peace marches. She grew up with a social conscience. She took her residency at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx partly because it has a program focused on the health needs of the poor. Dr. Fox specialized in geriatrics and started a program called the Physician Visits for the Homebound Elderly, into which she drew other doctors and nurses. Supported by several foundations, it serves the people of the Bronx. It isn’t
easy work that makes you rich, but with an aging population it becomes a more vital service every day.

Dr. Neil Kahanovitz is another example of a physician who stretches himself beyond the routine. When the terrible earthquake shook Armenia in 1988, the orthopedic surgeon volunteered to operate on quake victims. He made five trips to the region to care for people desperate for his skills. The Soviet Union gave him an award for his “courageous and selfless actions.”

The health problems of the nation’s homeless are staggering. They struggle for survival every day and don’t seek health care until they’re badly hurting. This means minor illnesses turn into serious and costly medical problems. Studies by medical teams show these problems include very high rates of serious respiratory conditions, such as pneumonia and tuberculosis, and a variety of foot problems, including poor circulation and infections. In some shelters about 30 percent of the homeless are infected with the AIDS virus. Homeless families with children (one of every four homeless people is a child) are a major challenge. The children get no well-child care, such as screening for sickle cell anemia and routine immunizations for diseases like polio and measles.

About 100 homeless health-care programs were operating in 1990, receiving some federal money for the treatment of more than 20,000 patients. Foundations supported some medical projects for the homeless, especially those doing experimental work. But most health care for the homeless relies heavily on charity and volunteers. Louisville, Kentucky, provides an example of the
medical profession's willingness to help. When the Jefferson County Medical Society took over a 200-bed men's shelter, many of its members offered free health care to the shelter's residents.

In New York City, Dr. Mark Dollar is one of a group of health-care professionals willing to carry his share of the huge burden. He sees about twenty-five men, women, and children a day at the Lamb's Clinic near Times Square, where many of the homeless congregate. Such physicians, medical assistants, and nurses have to learn to deliver care in a setting where the traditional tools of modern medicine—hi-tech equipment, bed rest, fluids, even aspirin—are often not available.

There are, of course, many other medical people who care for patients for free. Some serve as medical missionaries in third world countries or as volunteers in impoverished sections of the United States. Others staff free clinics, perform screening examinations in shopping centers, or in other ways help some of the more than 30 million Americans who have no health insurance. The combined value of such voluntary service is great, though no one can place a figure on it.

Still, what is done is not nearly enough, according to leaders in the field. They have recently been urging doctors to renew the ancient traditions and contribute more to the care of the poor. They believe that the majority of doctors today act more out of self-interest and less out of public spirit than in the past. The president of the American Medical Association has said that physicians have a basic duty to care for the poor and the needy in their community.
communities because the taxpayers have subsidized their education. And the editor of the AMA’s journal has called on physicians to donate at least fifty hours a year.

Dr. David Hilfiker, a physician who serves the poor in Washington, D.C., knows it is not easy to help. He writes:

_We know that it does little good to offer a medication when our patient needs a home, a meal, a family, love, money and a thousand other things that we ourselves take for granted. We also confront the limitations of a society that refuses to accept responsibility for its broken ones, and so it is tempting to turn away, offering nothing, sparing ourselves the deep frustration._

In rural and suburban communities the volunteer ambulance corps has long been a tradition. In recent times, with funds and service shrinking as the economy spiraled downward, the cities, too, saw the growth of volunteer corps to ease the pressure on existing services. In New York City alone, there are forty volunteer ambulance corps, most of them in Brooklyn and Queens. They serve areas where poverty and violence add great strain to the city’s already overburdened Emergency Medical Service. Licensed by the state’s Department of Health, they fill an important need. The members are so devoted to their mission they often pay for equipment out of their own pockets.

There are also teachers and social workers who make a practice of giving to others less fortunate. And lawyers?
What about them? There is a long-standing tradition of the legal profession to do pro bono work.

What is pro bono work? It is work done for free. It can range from representing a death-row inmate with his appeal, to counseling immigrants on their rights. Or from helping a cultural group buy a building to assisting poor tenants facing evictions.

Many years ago Congress set up the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) to provide funds for legal services to the poor. The local offices of LSC have managed to provide such specialized services to thousands of people in need. They perform probably the most thankless task in the justice system. In New York City, for example, these lawyers handle nearly 70 percent of the cases that go through the city's justice system each year. They carry terribly heavy caseloads. Yet they work for comparatively low wages. In 1990 the average annual pay of a legal services lawyer in the United States was $24,000. It is a salary that big-firm lawyers wouldn't bother to sniff at.

Some law firms offer fellowships to law school graduates to practice public-interest law. The graduates' sponsors are public service organizations that provide legal aid to the poor, the homeless, the disabled, the elderly, and those deprived of civic rights.

The need is great. A nationwide survey of poor families concluded that 80 percent of the legal needs of low-income families are not met. Many of those in the fellowship program find that their experiences make them want to stay in public-service law. "I took up law," says one young woman, "because I want to help people not repre-
sent in society to become effective and learn to use their own strength." Another, a young man, had planned on a career with the Foreign Service. But after working with a Homeless Family Rights Project, he says, “I discovered there was a population of the poor in the United States living as if they were in a little third world country and needing all the help they can get.”

One of the fellowship lawyers is Steven Hawkins, who grew up in Ossining, New York, near Sing Sing prison. Sponsored by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, he produced a handbook for lawyers on the treatment of blacks by the criminal justice system. He
traveled into small southern communities to examine how that system operates for his own people, the African-Americans. He learned that "the situation of black criminal defendants is still atrocious, with blatant violations of constitutional rights with respect to forced confrontations, denial of basic trial process and discrimination against blacks serving on juries." Hawkins as a
teenager showed concern for others in need when he visited and befriended men inside Sing Sing. He won a scholarship to Harvard and tutored neighborhood youngsters in his college years. He also worked with troubled adolescents in a summer youth program and moved to one of Boston’s poorest neighborhoods to be more available to those who needed help.

Hundreds of lawyers have shown they are ready to help people with AIDS. They write wills, prepare powers of attorney, draft medical directives—such as “do-not-resuscitate” orders—and handle other issues important to people with AIDS. In New York many lawyers donate their time at legal clinics held by the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. If people are too ill to attend, the lawyers make visits to homes or hospitals. In the first seven years of the pro bono work about 2,300 people with AIDS got help from 350 volunteer lawyers. The AIDS crisis has done much to bring out compassion and caring for others—in victims, families, friends, community.