

# **Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities**

**Benchmarking a Pre-Pandemic Field  
and Assessing Future Directions**

**APRIL 2021**

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We are not at all thankful to COVID-19, although we must acknowledge its influence on the content of this report. The pandemic scuttled the research environment immediately after we had finished collecting the data for our study.

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## In Memory

*On the call to plan final release of this brief, Jeff Brudney was not feeling well. He went to the hospital. When he found out he had to spend the night, he asked his wife to bring his laptop so he could work. However, over the next week Jeff's health deteriorated. He died on April 4, 2021. Jeff has been a good friend for more than a quarter-century. During the pandemic, I looked forward to our weekly calls to discuss our work and the progress of our lives. He leaves a big hole, both in my life and in the field. He is sorely missed.*

— Mark Hager

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*“Volunteers are the heartbeat of our organization. We have volunteers that support each pillar of operation for our organization: workforce and economic development, membership and government affairs. We are able to increase our deliverables because of the people who volunteer their time and talents.”*

Wisconsin nonprofit

# Executive Summary

If any fortune tellers foresaw the advent and havoc of the COVID-19 health pandemic when we began this study three years ago, they did not warn us. Our study reflects its vintage in a pre-pandemic world. Nevertheless, it provides a benchmark of the recent past and glimpses into possible future directions for Volunteer Management Capacity (VMC) in the United States.

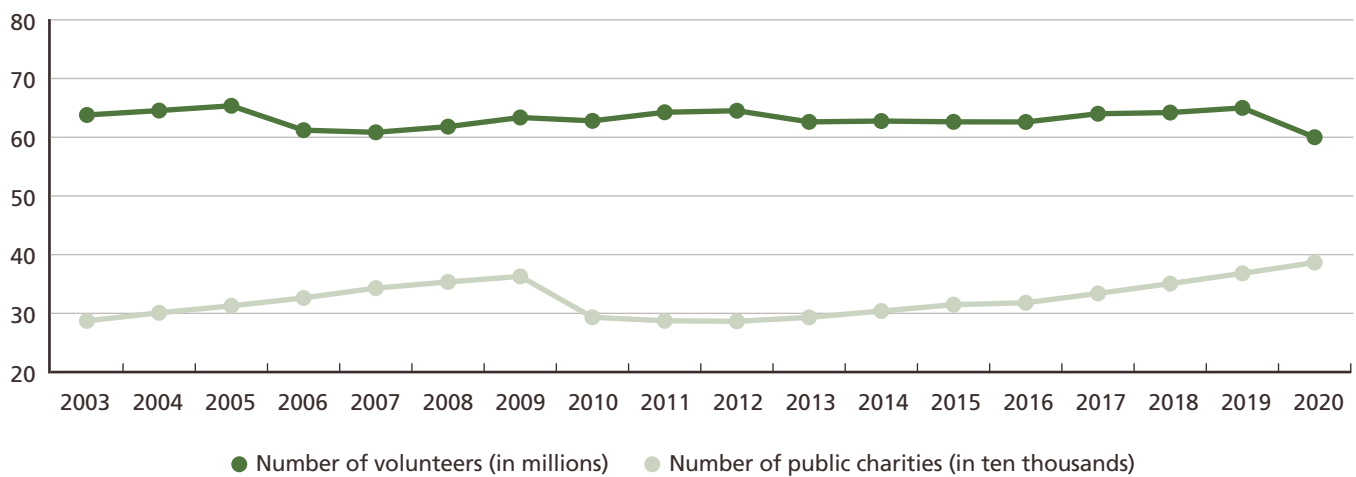
As we write this report, thousands of volunteers across the nation are helping to administer vaccines to millions of Americans. However, for over a year, more traditional avenues for volunteer engagement have been disrupted. Performing arts venues, youth clubs, and churches have been shuttered, or at least seen their operations fundamentally altered. Their volunteers stay home, or organizations have found new or virtual ways to engage them. The future will look different than the past.

If past is prologue, this report documents *where we were* with respect to VMC just before the pandemic

hit the United States. How did we engage volunteers? What practices did we implement? What challenges did we face, and what benefits did we achieve? Our report provides a benchmark against which we can measure our progress in Volunteer Management Capacity as we recover from the pandemic.

This report follows up our first *Benchmark Report*, released in 2003. Back then, we celebrated how nonprofits were engaging volunteers but lamented the low levels of investments in volunteer management capacity. Both the adoption of prescribed practices and the dedication of staff to volunteer administration are vital to VMC, yet only the largest organizations seemed to have the wherewithal to develop high-quality volunteer programs. The world has changed in some ways since 2003, but looks similar in others ways. As the graph below shows, the number of volunteers and the number of nonprofits in the United States have not changed all that much.

**Figure 1.** Number of Volunteers and Number of Nonprofits in the United States



Sources: The Urban Institute, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, AmeriCorps, and author estimates.

In 2019 we returned to 353 of the nonprofits (U.S. public charities) we first heard from in 2003. We also collected information from 330 fresh, younger organizations, so that we could form a representative picture of the U.S. nonprofit sector. We weight data by subsector, age, and size of nonprofit to adjust for biases in who responded, so that our sample is representative of the 2019 nonprofit sector. Details of the sample and response appear in the Methodology section on page 19 of this report.

What did we learn about the state of VMC before the onset of the pandemic in March 2020?

- *The nonprofit sector is extremely diverse in the scale at which its organizations engage volunteers.* For every organization that engages more than 1,000 volunteers in a typical year who contribute over 1,000 hours in a typical week, two others enlist a handful of volunteers who average just several hours per week. This scale, or *intensiveness*, sets the stage for how much the organizations tend to invest in their volunteer programs.
- *Nonprofits rely on older volunteers.* Typical volunteers are in their mid-40s. In religious nonprofits the typical volunteer is closer to 60. This reliance on older volunteers will have immediate implications for how well nonprofits can use new technologies to mobilize volunteers and resources.
- *Long-term volunteering was already eroding by 2019,* giving way to increasingly episodic or short-term assignments. Virtual assignments (participation through online means) accounted for only one in eight volunteers before the pandemic, but this form of volunteering is sure to accelerate in the new normal.
- *Less than a quarter of nonprofits that engage volunteers have a staff member who spends at least half of their work time on volunteer administration.* When volunteer administration accounts for “less than half

my job,” these workers do not identify as professional volunteer managers. Workers who invest more than half their time are much more likely to have training in volunteer management practices.

- *As we learned in 2003, nonprofits in 2019 vary widely in adoption of volunteer management practices.* Standard practices to recruit and place volunteers are most common. Assessment practices are comparatively rare.
- *Despite fairly low levels of volunteer management capacity across the nonprofit sector, volunteer administrators report few challenges.* Recruitment problems are most common – a “big problem” for a quarter of the organizations. The quality of performance by volunteers is not an issue for most nonprofits.
- *Correspondingly, organizations are effusive about the benefits that volunteers bring to their operations.* The value that volunteers bring to their financial bottom line is prized most highly, although programmatic benefits rank highly as well.

*“Our volunteers mainly help in the areas of events and community outreach programs. Being at a hospital most of our staff needs to be working in the hospital, and so it helps to have volunteers that can go out to trade-shows, community events, and fairs to represent our brand and support our mission.”*

Idaho nonprofit

# Introduction

In 2003 we conducted the first national (U.S.) survey of nonprofit volunteer management capacity based on a representative sample of U.S. public charities. A summary brief published by the Urban Institute, *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations*, presented an overview of management practices, capacities, deficiencies, challenges, and benefits of working with volunteers. It became a go-to report on the status of volunteer administration: As of 2021 more than 60 other publications or articles refer to it, and keynote speakers commonly drew on it for factoids.

With every passing year, though, those factoids became more and more out-of-date. Technology transformed how volunteer administration was carried out, and social media revolutionized how people interacted with each other. We approached a major funder for the 2003 Study, the Corporation for National and Community Service (now re-branded as AmeriCorps), and pitched an update. They went for it. The report you are reading now summarizes major themes from the 2019 data and offers a new and updated benchmark for the field.

Unfortunately, the report may well be dated. In March 2020, shifting social and financial patterns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced the operations of nonprofit organizations in fundamental ways. Over the past year many nonprofits have not been able to engage volunteers in the same ways they engaged them in the past. The world has changed. Nevertheless, even if this report is unable to document what volunteer administration in the United States looks like at present, it serves two other important purposes. First, it documents the evolution of the field from our first snapshot report in

2003 to this second snapshot report in 2019. Second, it shows where we were immediately prior to the pandemic and can offer glimpses into the likely future of volunteer administration. It can guide our aspirations for the field in the post-pandemic era.

This report presents and analyzes the experiences of nonprofits that work with volunteers. Thus, it excludes the 16 percent of organizations in the sample that said they do not work with volunteers. This distinction rests on the definition of a “volunteer” used in the study.

We define a volunteer as *any person who works on a regular, short-term, or occasional basis to provide services to the organization or to the people the organization serves, but is not a paid staff member or a consultant*. If workers receive a small stipend, we left it to the discretion of the respondent whether the organization thought of such workers as a volunteer or not.

Importantly, the survey asked respondents to exclude board members from their definition of “volunteer.” Although board members are important volunteers, they perform different tasks than typical operational or service volunteers and, accordingly, are involved in different ways. We also asked respondents to exclude special events participants from the definition of “volunteer” unless those participants also planned or worked the event. Lastly, we asked respondents to exclude volunteers whom they recruit and refer to other organizations, as a volunteer center might do. We focus on management of the volunteers that organizations recruit to do work in their own entities.

*“Volunteers help with our day-to-day operations, as well as special projects and events. Without volunteers our organization would roughly need to add \$500,000 each year to hire employees to accomplish our mission.”*

Georgia nonprofit

# Volunteer Intensiveness

**Key Point: Nonprofits are extremely diverse in the number of volunteers they engage and how many hours they contribute to the operations of the organization. No wonder challenges and benefits from working with volunteers, administrative staffing, and adoption of volunteer management practices vary so widely as well.**

Figure 2 shows the diversity of scale in volunteer engagement across the nonprofit sector, which we call “intensiveness.” At the upper left corner of the table is low volunteer intensiveness, as reflected by few volunteers contributing few hours. As we move

down the diagonal to the lower right corner, volunteer intensiveness increases, either due to an increase in the number of volunteers, their number of hours, or both. We present in shaded groupings the eleven levels of volunteer intensiveness.

**Figure 2.** Intensiveness of Volunteer Use

		Number of hours volunteers work over a typical week					
		1 to 10	11 to 25	26 to 50	51 to 150	151 to 1000	Over 1000
Number of volunteers over the last 12 months	1-10	7.3	1.5	1.3	0.2	0.0	0.0
	11-25	6.6	3.3	1.3	0.2	0.0	0.0
	26-50	6.8	2.7	2.0	1.1	0.2	0.2
	51-150	7.3	3.3	3.3	5.1	1.6	0.0
	151-1000	4.6	5.1	4.7	5.8	4.9	0.7
	Over 1000	1.6	1.5	1.1	4.7	6.4	3.6

Note: Cell values are percentages of all nonprofits with volunteers.

**Volunteer Intensiveness Logic.** In the upper left corner we identify the lowest value of volunteer intensiveness with nonprofits using few volunteers who contribute few hours. Many nonprofit organizations are small, so we might not be surprised that so many organizations fall in the low-intensiveness cells of the table. In the first cell representing the lowest intensiveness, we observe that 7.3 percent of nonprofits used ten volunteers or less, and those volunteers worked ten or fewer hours in a typical week.

**Only 3.6 Percent of Nonprofits are Mega-Intensive.** In the lower right corner of the table we observe the highest values of volunteer intensiveness with nonprofits using more volunteers and reporting the most hours of volunteer work. The mega-intensiveness category has 3.6 percent of nonprofits with the highest volunteer intensiveness reporting over a thousand volunteers in the last 12 months who collectively contributed over a thousand hours per week. That’s a lot of volunteer activity to manage.

# Different Organizations Draw Volunteers of Different Ages

**Key Point:** Different missions appeal to different people. Young people are attracted to particular causes or tasks, while older people might be interested and available for others. Volunteer managers have to consider which people are available when recruiting.

We asked nonprofits to tell us the proportion of their volunteers who fell into different age groups: 17 and under, 18 to 23, 24 to 55, 56 to 65, and 66 and over. From this distribution of ages we estimated the typical age of a volunteer in each organization. The “box plot” graph below shows how the prevailing age of volunteers differs across organizational subsectors.

**Reading a Box Plot.** Each box plot gives five pieces of information: (1) The median or typical case, as a line inside the box; (2) the 25th and (3) 75th percentiles, represented by the lower and upper bounds of the box; and the (4) minimum and (5) maximum values represented by the “T” lines below and above the box.

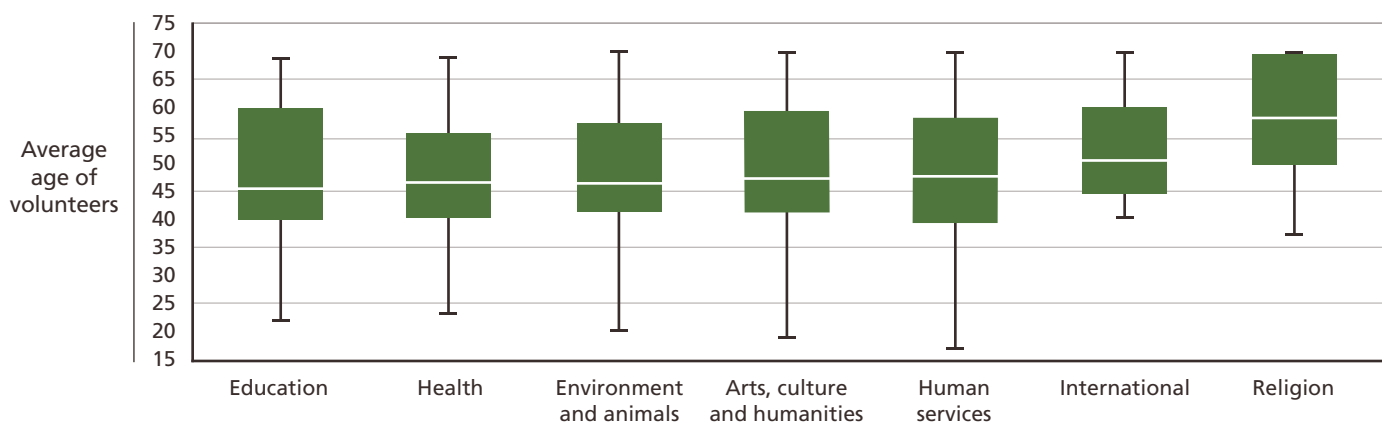
**Typical Volunteers are in their Mid-to-Late-40s, except in International and Religious Nonprofits.**

On average, education nonprofits claim the youngest typical volunteer, at 46 years of age. Health, environment and animals, arts, and human service organizations are not much different, ranging up to 48 years. It’s the international organizations with the 51-year-old typical volunteers and religious nonprofits with the 60-year-old typical volunteer that really stand out.

**Health and International Organizations Rely on a Narrower Age Band Than Other Nonprofits.**

Although volunteers in education and health organizations are about 46 years old on average, health volunteers typically fall between 42 and 55, while typical education volunteers fall between 40 and 60. International organization volunteers also fall in a narrower band, between 44 and 48 years.

**Figure 3.** Typical Age of Volunteers by Nonprofit Subsector





# Nonprofits Rely on a Mix of Long-Term and Episodic Volunteers

**Key Point:** Before the pandemic seven out of eight volunteers worked as face-to-face volunteers. That concentration of effort has changed, and we will not likely return to those pre-pandemic numbers.

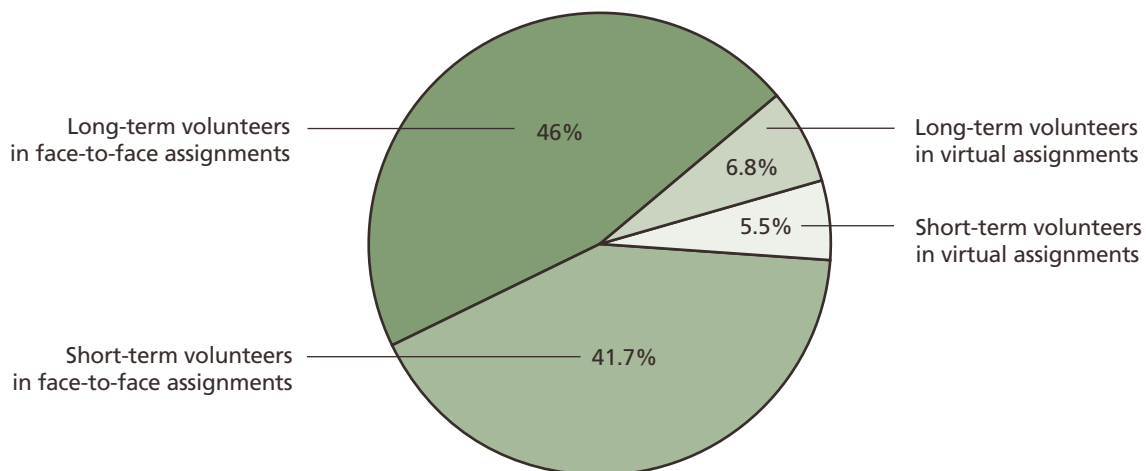
We asked nonprofits to estimate how their volunteer hours were split between short-term and long-term commitments and between face-to-face and virtual assignments. Short-term volunteers work with the organization on only one or several occasions, for special events, or during a season. Long-term volunteers have an ongoing commitment with the organization, volunteering regularly with an expectation that the relationship will continue indefinitely. Face-to-face volunteers are physically present in the office or field, working with clients or on organizational operations. Virtual volunteers do their work remotely, at home, or at some other site using online tools.

**Most Volunteers Hours Were in Long-Term Assignments, but Barely.** When we released our first report in 2003, people were not talking much about episodic volunteers. Since then, observers and researchers have pointed to an increase in interest in short-term or

temporary assignments, especially among younger people. Perhaps in response, organizations have made more of these assignments available to volunteers. Before the pandemic most volunteer hours came through long-term assignments, but not by much. The 52.8% long-term and 48.2% short-term split is like flipping a coin.

**Face-to-Face Volunteering was the Norm in 2019, but This Was to Disappear in 2020.** While episodic volunteering was just emerging as a trend in 2003, virtual volunteering was obscure. With the growth and common adoption of technology, the options for remote work blossomed, not only in the paid workplace but also for volunteers. By 2019, 12.3% of volunteer hours were contributed virtually or remotely through electronic means. Although the pandemic has very seriously disrupted the patterns of both organizations and volunteers, the stage was set in 2019 for a new normal of online, virtual, and remote engagement with volunteers.

**Figure 4.** Distribution of Long-term, Short-term, Face-to-face, and Virtual Volunteers in 2019



# Investments in Management Talent

**Key Point: Volunteer administration is accomplished in a variety of different ways, from full-time staff to all volunteer.**

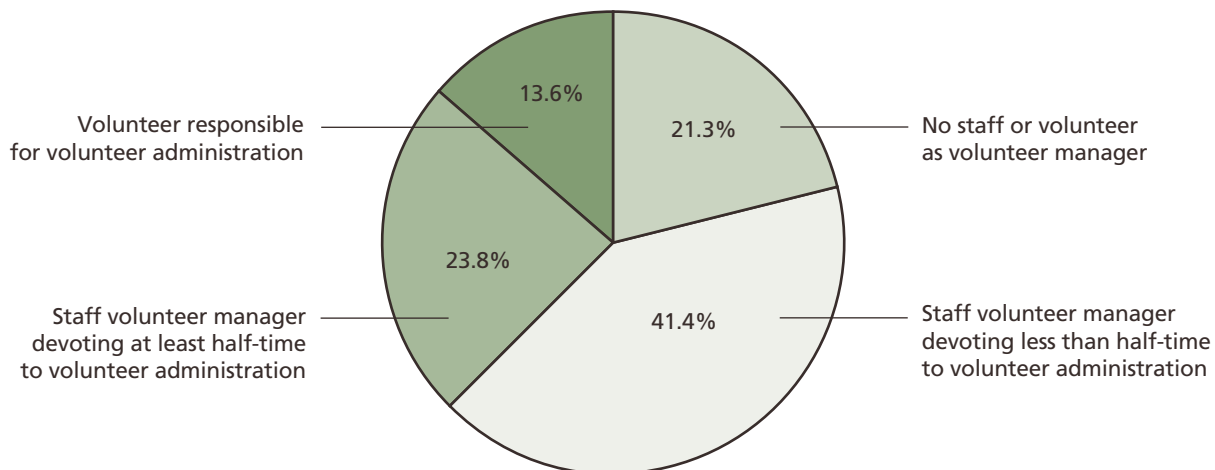
One of the eye-opening statistics from our 2003 report was that more than a third of nonprofits that work with volunteers do not invest in any staff time to manage those volunteers. And even when they do, the typical paid staff member in 2003 spent only 30 percent of her or his time on volunteer administration. The numbers in 2019 looked about the same, although we break it out a bit differently this time.

**Four Spheres of Volunteer Management.** The pie chart below illustrates what we call “spheres” of volunteer management. They represent four fundamentally different approaches to volunteer administration, with a substantial portion of organizations appearing in each slice. The most typical situation is that the organization has a staff person working on volunteer

administration, but this person spends less than half-time on this obligation. This situation is tenuous for these organizations, because this staff member is unlikely to identify as a professional volunteer administrator. Nevertheless, paired with the 23.8 percent of organizations that do have someone working at least half-time on volunteer administration, we see that nearly two-thirds of U.S. charities make at least some investment in (paid) staff with this responsibility.

However, this distribution leaves a third of nonprofits without a staff person to organize volunteers. In some cases volunteers themselves carry out this role. More often, though (in 21.3 percent of the organizations), nonprofits tell us that no one has responsibility for volunteer management.

**Figure 5. Volunteer Management Spheres**



# Investments in Management Talent

**Key Point: Career training for volunteer administrators is another kind of investment. It is concentrated in larger organizations that dedicate staff to management of volunteers.**

**Bigger Organizations Invest More in Volunteer Management.** No surprise, bigger organizations are more likely to have staff members working at least half time on volunteer administration. Smaller organizations are less able or willing to make this investment or, perhaps, do not realize its importance.

**Investments Differ across Nonprofit Subsectors.** Nonprofits in the international, health, and human services subsectors are more likely to have a paid staff person managing volunteers than the other sectors. Nonprofits in the arts, environment, and animal subsectors are more likely to have volunteers responsible for volunteer management than other nonprofit subsectors.

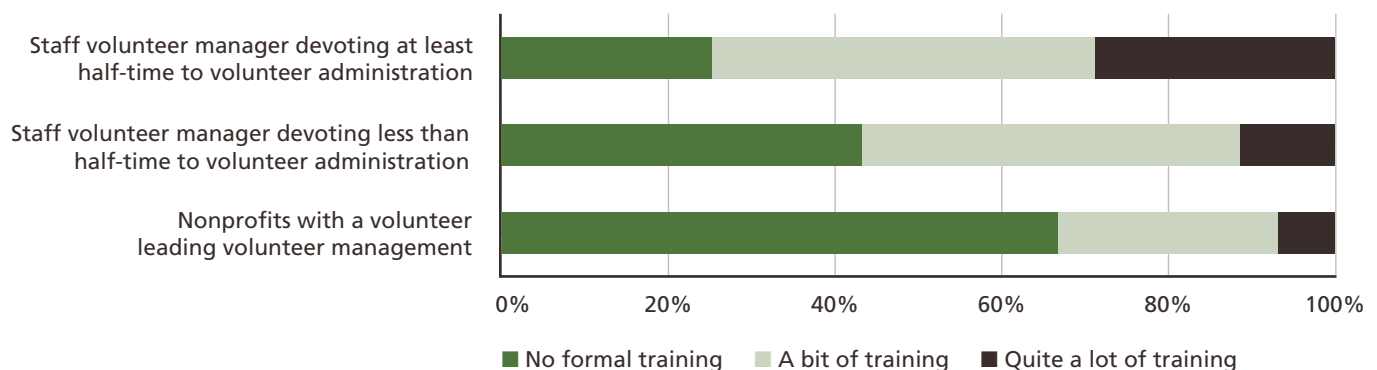
**Investing in Staff also Means Investing in Training.** If an organization had a volunteer or a staff member

working in volunteer administration, we asked whether that manager had some professional training in volunteer administration. As we might expect, staff members who spend at least half-time on volunteer administration and thereby identify professionally with the career, are much more likely to have training in volunteer administration. The chart below illustrates the contrasts. The bottom bar in the figure shows that two-thirds of volunteer administrators who are themselves volunteers have no such training.

**Size Matters for Training, Too.** Smaller organizations are less likely to have formal training for their volunteer managers, whether they are paid staff or volunteer. Larger organizations are better able to make those investments, which gives them a leg up in providing better experiences for their volunteers.

**Figure 6.** Volunteer Administration Training

Does this person [working in volunteer administration] have any formal training in volunteer administration, such as coursework, workshops, or attendance at conferences that focus on volunteer management?



# Volunteer Management Practices

**Key Point: Nonprofits are receptive to best practices in volunteer management, but such practices are not very widely adopted.**

We presented to nonprofits eighteen volunteer management practices identified as “best practices” in the literature. We asked respondents to indicate whether their organization has adopted each of these practices

to a large degree, some degree, or not at all. The figure on this page shows the list of practices and the degree of adoption reported by nonprofits in 2019.

**Figure 7. Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices**

## Recruitment and Placement

- Matching of volunteers to appropriate tasks or jobs
- Screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers
- Written policies and job/position descriptions for volunteer involvement

## Support

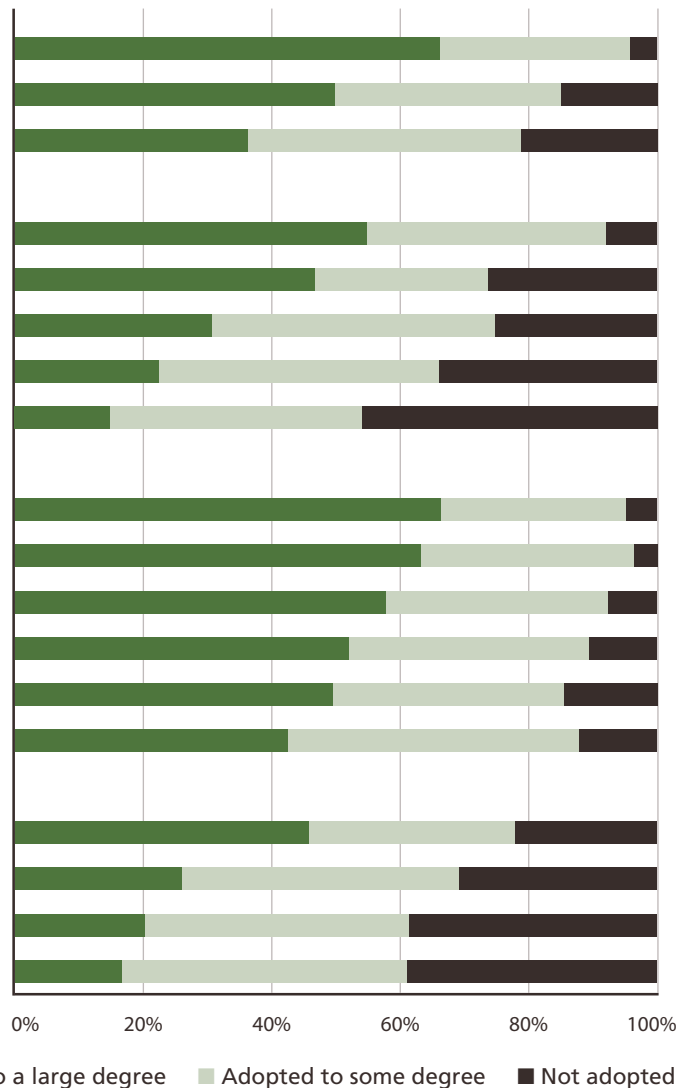
- Regular supervision of volunteers
- Liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers
- Recognition activities, such as award ceremonies, for volunteers
- Training and professional development opportunities for volunteers
- Training for paid staff in working with volunteers

## Communication

- Communication of value of volunteers to volunteers
- Regular in-person communication with volunteers
- Communication of value of volunteers to the board of directors
- Regular technology-mediated communication with volunteers
- Communication of value of volunteers to funders
- Communication of value of volunteers to the general public

## Assessment

- Regular collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours
- Annual measurement of the impacts volunteers have
- Calculation and communication of organization’s return on investment in volunteers
- Regular review of volunteer experience or performance with individual volunteers



**Nonprofits Vary Widely on Adoption of Recruitment and Placement Practices.** Two-thirds of the nonprofits tell us that they match volunteers to appropriate tasks or jobs “to a large degree,” making it one of the most common management practices. However, comparatively fewer organizations have written job descriptions for their volunteers. Little more than one-third have adopted this practice to a large degree, and one in five have not adopted it at all.

**Support of Volunteers and Staff in Working with Volunteers Lags Other Practices.** Only about half of the nonprofits tell us that they regularly supervise volunteers “to a large degree,” setting the stage for relatively low levels of investment in support for volunteer programs. In 2003, 35 percent of nonprofits said that they had adopted recognition activities for their volunteers to a large degree, but by 2019 the estimate had fallen to 31 percent. Training for paid staff in working with volunteers is still the least common practice in our reports, falling from adoption to a large degree by 19 percent in 2003 to 15 percent in 2019.

**Size Matters: Larger Organizations Are More Likely to Supervise and Track Volunteer Work Than Smaller Ones.** Larger organizations are more likely to tell us that they regularly supervise their volunteers. While about one in fourteen nonprofits with the smallest annual revenues in our study (less than a half-million dollars) do not supervise their volunteers at all, this same lack of oversight is almost unheard of among larger nonprofits. Not surprisingly, across the sample of nonprofits, investment in volunteer management practices is related to scale of revenue.

**Smaller Organizations are More Likely to Communicate the Value of Volunteers Than Larger Ones.**

Organizations with less than a half-million dollars in annual revenue are more likely to communicate the *value of volunteers to their board, funders, the general public, and to the volunteers themselves* than are their bigger counterparts. So while they supervise less, they are more likely to communicate – and bring – value, perhaps because in smaller organizations volunteers can make a proportionately greater contribution.

**Communication With and About Volunteers is a Popular Practice.** The most commonly adopted volunteer management practices concentrate on communication. Both in-person and technology-mediated communication with volunteers are adopted by a large majority of organizations, with more than half doing both to a large degree. Also popular are efforts to promote the value of volunteers to different stakeholders, including the board, funders, the general public, and to the volunteers themselves.

**Assessment Practices are Among the Least Commonly Adopted Management Efforts.**

Almost half of the nonprofits say that they monitor the number of volunteers and the hours they work “to a large degree,” but that finding is the most optimistic news in this category. Impact measurement, calculation of return on investment, and individual performance reviews are more likely to be adopted only to some degree or not adopted at all.

*“Since we are an all-volunteer organization, we rely on our volunteers for everything. Oversight of our entire volunteer staff of over 400 people is managed by one volunteer.”*

Massachusetts nonprofit

# Challenges in Volunteer Management

**Key Point: Recruiting enough volunteers is the biggest challenge, but only a quarter of organizations say it is a big problem.**

We presented survey respondents with twelve challenges they might face in recruiting, supporting, and gaining value from volunteers. We asked whether each challenge

was a *big problem*, a *small problem* or *not a problem*. The figure below presents the results.

**Figure 8.** Percentage of Nonprofits that Cite Various Challenges as a *Big Problem*, a *Small Problem*, and *Not a Problem* in Their Volunteer Programs

## Recruitment

- Recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers
- Recruiting volunteers available during the workday
- Recruiting volunteers with the right skills or expertise
- Having more volunteers than the organization can accommodate

## Funding and Support

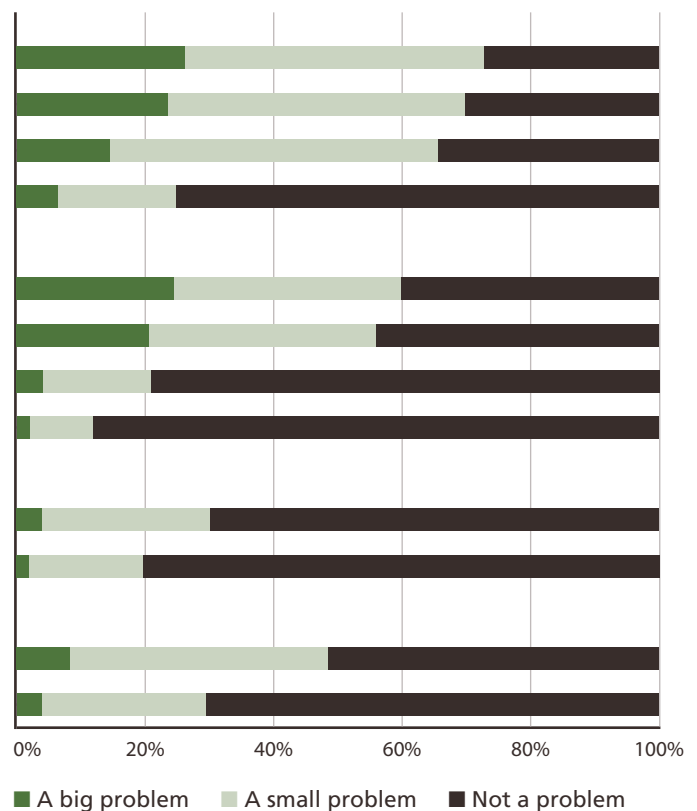
- Lack of paid staff time to properly train and supervise volunteers
- Lack of adequate funds for supporting volunteer involvement
- Indifference or resistance on the part of program staff toward volunteers
- Indifference or resistance on the part of management or the board toward volunteers

## Regulatory and Liability

- Regulatory constraints to working with volunteers, such as background checks
- Legal liabilities and associated costs, such as insurance

## Volunteer Performance

- Absenteeism, unreliability, or poor work habits or work quality on the part of volunteers
- Unwillingness or disinterest of volunteers in following rules and procedures



*“We have volunteers doing a year of service with us and their main task is to recruit more people to serve as well.”*

New York nonprofit

**Recruitment Stands out as a Key Challenge.** Some of the most common challenges faced by nonprofit volunteer management programs concern recruitment of volunteers. *Recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers* comes out as the number one challenge, with *volunteers available during the workday* following directly behind. By contrast, 6.4 percent of organizations tell us that they have a big problem with *too many volunteers*, i.e., more than their organization can accommodate. Some causes are more difficult to recruit and mobilize than others.

**Funding and Support Pose Challenges for Some Volunteer Administrators.** *Lack of staff time to train and supervise volunteers* is as big a problem for nonprofits as *recruiting enough volunteers*. The lack of staff time and funding to support volunteer involvement points to persistent under-investment in volunteer administration. Comparatively fewer organizations tell us that their staff, managers, or board are *indifferent* to volunteers, which does not usually translate into resources to support those volunteers.

**Few Nonprofits Express Concern about Regulatory or Liability Constraints.** Less than five percent of respondents consider regulatory constraints or legal liabilities and costs a big problem for their organization. These issues are small problems for a substantial segment of organizations, and a large majority tell us they are not problems for their volunteer program.

**Volunteers Themselves are Sometimes a Challenge, but Not Usually.** One in twelve organizations tells us that they have a big problem with absent, unreliable, lazy, or otherwise poorly performing volunteers. Another two in five organizations say this type of volunteer behavior is at least a small problem. Most nonprofits say that such behavior is not an issue, but nearly half cite it as some degree of a challenge. Interestingly, smaller organizations are less likely to report this issue, possibly pointing to the value of interaction and accountability in more close-knit settings. When problems do arise with volunteer workers, it can be as much a product of poor or absent management as lapses in volunteer behavior.

*“During special events, such as our carnival and school-wide after school activities, volunteers help run stations that serve participants. We truly value great volunteers and always are in need, however, we do not have a great deal of time to recruit and train volunteers.”*

Ohio nonprofit

*“Our staff recruit Spanish-speaking individuals to both tutor and formally teach English as a Second Language classes to non-native English speakers. The tutors help students practice in an informal manner and are therefore easier to recruit. The teachers help students in a more formal manner and are challenging to recruit because of the commitment.”*

New York nonprofit

# Benefits Volunteers Bring to Nonprofits

**Key Point: Nonprofits emphasize financial and program benefits from volunteers over their expressive value.**

We asked nonprofits to report the extent to which volunteers bring different kinds of benefits to the organization and its clients. Survey respondents were able to rate the extent of each benefit on a scale from zero (not at all) to ten (great extent). We created three categories: not at all (0 to 4.25), moderate extent (4.26 to 8.25) and great extent (8.26 to 10).

**What Do Nonprofits Value Most in Their Volunteers? Contributions to the Bottom Line.** Although respondents value the programmatic benefits of volunteers, they value their financial contributions a bit more. The opinions that volunteers *provide cost-savings* and *extend the organization's budget* fell into the “great extent” range on the scale more often than any other benefit item.

**Figure 9.** Percentage of Respondents who State That Volunteers Bring Various Benefits to Nonprofit Organizations to a *Great Extent*, *Moderate Extent*, or *Not at All*

### Financial Value

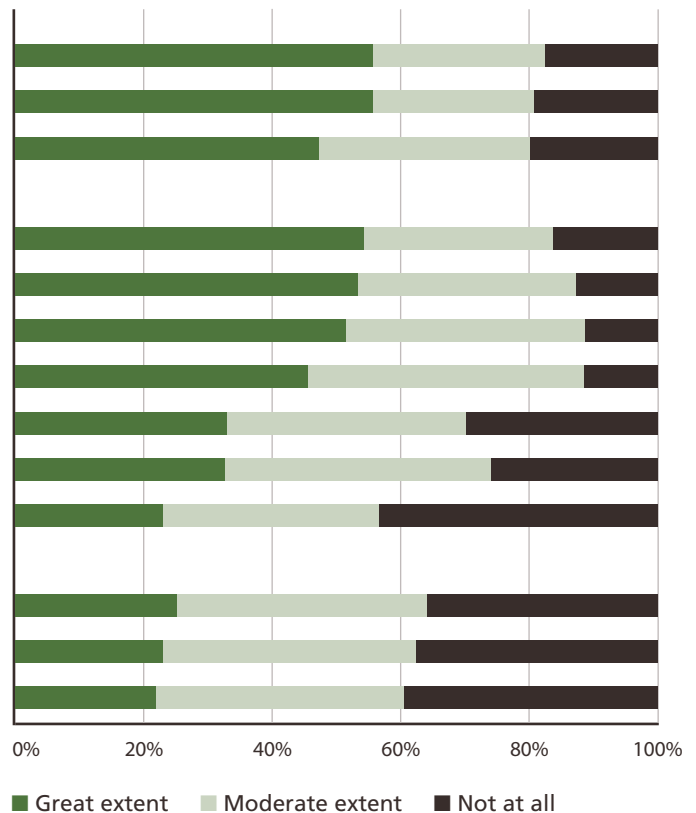
- Provide cost-savings to the organization
- Extend the organization's budget
- Increase the organization's return on its resource investments

### Program Value

- Allow the organization to provide services or levels of services it otherwise could not provide
- Increase the quality of services or programs provided
- Extend the organization's reach
- Provide increased public support for programs, or improved community relations
- Provide more detailed attention to the people served
- Provide an enhanced organizational focus on mission
- Provide access to specialized legal, financial, management, or technology expertise

### Expressive Value

- Bring more authenticity to mission than staff are able to bring
- Bring more energy to mission than staff are able to bring
- Bring more passion to mission than staff are able to bring





## Benefits Volunteers Bring to Nonprofits

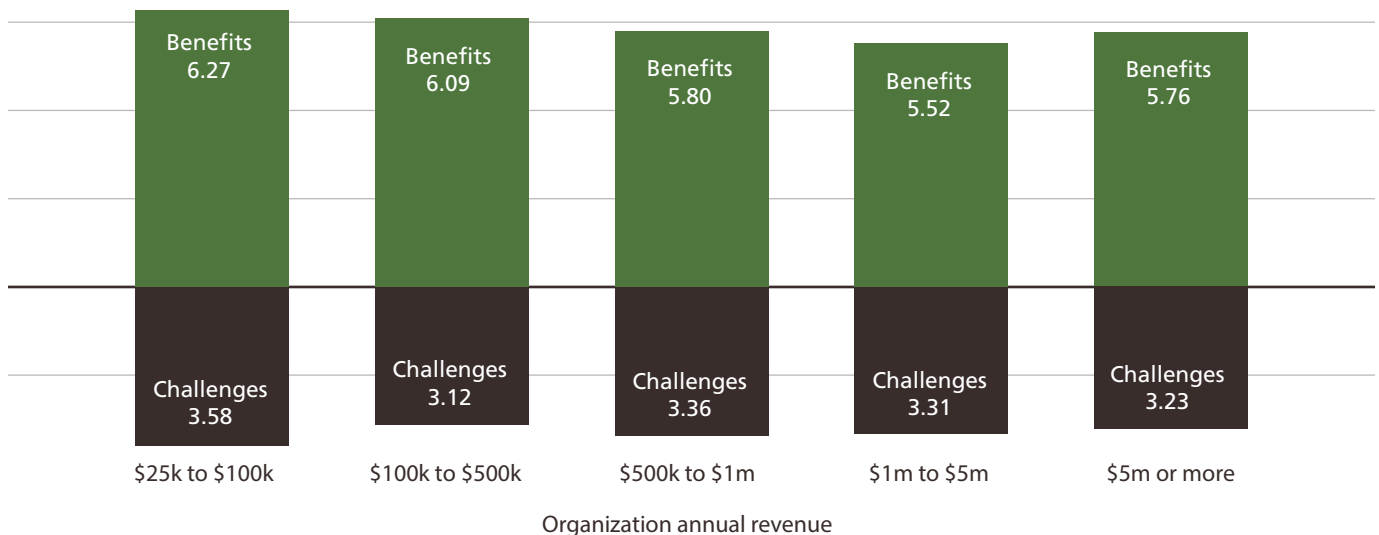
**Volunteers Also Bring Substantial Programmatic Benefits, but Some Contributions are Valued More Highly than Others.** More than half of the nonprofits place substantial value on how volunteers allow them to *provide services they could not otherwise provide*, *increase quality of programs*, and *extend the organization's reach*. These nonprofits are lukewarm on other program contributions, such as *providing more detailed attention to people served*. Less than a quarter of organizations greatly value their volunteers for their *specialized expertise*.

**“Expressive” Contributions from Volunteers are Valued to a Lesser Degree.** New in the 2019 report, we investigated the extent to which organizations feel that volunteers bring authenticity, energy, or passion to the nonprofit that paid staff – given the time, energy, and

service demands placed upon them – may not be able to bring to program delivery. Organizations placed a comparatively low value on these items, perhaps because they were unwilling to disparage the contributions of staff in relation to volunteers. That said, more than one in five nonprofits felt that volunteers brought these unique expressive contributions to their mission.

**Volunteers Bring More Benefits Than Challenges.** On average nonprofits in 2019 realize more benefits than challenges from volunteers – nearly two times as many. While the average nonprofit reports about three challenges, it cites about six benefits from volunteers. Figure 10 shows that the “benefit-challenge” ratio or “net benefit” ratio resulting from volunteer involvement is nearly 2 to 1.

**Figure 10.** Benefits and Challenges of Volunteers by Organizational Size



*“We have one volunteer. She runs the office, does fundraising, pretty much does everything here.”*

Minnesota nonprofit

# Takeaways

Although the field has changed in ways both subtle and substantial since 2003, many of our observations about investments in volunteer administration dating from our first report in 2003 still hold in 2019. Nevertheless, big changes are afoot that demand our attention. Despite changes in the field in the wake of the pandemic, our study provides leverage not only to document past developments but also to project new trends in volunteer management in a post-pandemic world.

## Three Things that Have Not Changed Much So Far This Century

**1. On average, nonprofits have not increased their volunteer management capacity.** Some organizations have made strategic investments in both the people and practices that help volunteers to be both satisfied and productive in their volunteer roles. However, as in 2003, a substantial number of nonprofits work on a shoestring, under-valuing volunteers by short-changing the amount of time, effort, and resources that they devote to support of their volunteers.

**2. Investments in volunteer management capacity result in greater benefits from volunteers.** Nonprofits report more benefits from volunteers than challenges associated with engaging them at a ratio of almost 2 to 1. The benefits that volunteers bring vary directly with how well-prepared the organization is to welcome and work with them. This report confirms an enduring lesson about investment in volunteer practices and people established in our 2003 report: *The more you put in, the greater the return.*



**3. Nonprofit size and attention matter.** Smaller organizations may be able to establish closer relationships with their volunteers, but they lack the resources of larger organizations to provide training and oversight. This situation produces new challenges for smaller nonprofits

as their size may lead them to seek more volunteers without adequate support structure. In larger organizations challenges can arise with volunteers due to inattentive management. They are put in the position of providing a large number of volunteers the experience of working in a smaller, close-knit social environment.

## Three Things that Have Changed Quite a Bit

**1. Volunteers are more interested in episodic, short-term assignments.** Some say that this development stems from a change in the American psyche after the 2001 terrorist attacks, but Americans are more interested than ever in volunteer engagements that do not demand a regular or long-term commitment. The “super volunteer” of an earlier era who anchored the work life of an organization day-in and day-out for years on end is increasingly rare. Nonprofits have to be prepared to find ways to deepen their engagement with volunteers who increasingly prefer shallow connections.

**2. Electronic tools and social media are re-arranging how we interact with volunteers.** In 2003, nonprofit organizations were adopting computer applications to recruit, train, track, and otherwise manage their work with volunteers. Electronic tools are now the rule in the modern workplace. More revolutionary is social media, which has both transformed how nonprofits present themselves and how they find, engage, and recognize their volunteers. Nonprofits that are not attuned to the evolving technological revolution are in danger of becoming obsolete. Information technology may restrict traditional human interaction, but with the right touch it can extend our reach.

**3. Volunteers will help to craft a new civil society.** Creating civil society was difficult even in the pre-pandemic world, where unbridled, spontaneous human interaction was common. In a cautious, if not fearful, post-pandemic world, bridges of trust and human interaction must be re-established. That responsibility will fall squarely on nonprofit organizations. Volunteers can be on the front lines of this effort. Nonprofits have to be prepared to engage new and old volunteers in innovative ways. They must be prepared to support these volunteers as they navigate and create new pathways and expressions of civic engagement.

# Methodology

The 2019 snapshot (cross-sectional sample) of nonprofit organizations described and analyzed in this report combines two different waves of data collection in the Volunteer Management Capacity II project. The *original sample* was composed of 1,354 nonprofits that we talked to about volunteer management capacity in our original survey conducted in 2003. They are public charities that filed a Form 990 with the IRS in 2000. In 2018 and 2019, the research team at Arizona State University searched for new contact details for volunteer administrators (or comparable official) at those original organizations. We succeeded in finding active organizations and contact details for 823 of them. The research team was able to solicit survey responses from 773 original organizations. We received responses from 353 of these nonprofits (response rate 45.7%).

Since all of the original organizations were at least 18 years old in 2018, we knew that they were no longer representative of the U.S. nonprofit sector. To compensate, we drew a *fresh sample* of 1,505 public charities (listed in December 15, 2017 Business Master File, or BMF) that had an IRS ruling date after 2000. The research team could find online contact details for only 1,141 of these organizations. The team solicited responses from this fresh sample, resulting in 330 responses (response rate 28.9%).

The two samples were combined into one dataset. In sum, we contacted 1,914 organizations by email and secured survey responses from 683 (aggregated response rate 35.7%). The survey questionnaire was distributed

online using the Qualtrics platform. Our searching or “sleuthing” for respondent names and email addresses included scans of webpages, email inquiries, and telephone calls to organizations. We sent an email link to these contacts that invited them to respond to our online survey. The questionnaire consisted of ten thematic blocks with 116 items. The average time to answer the questionnaire was 15 minutes.

Of the 683 organizations surveyed, 15.6 percent report not having volunteers as we define them (please see the Introduction to this report). The statistics and analysis in this report come from those organizations that engage volunteers.

Because this sample of organizations did not accurately reflect the distribution of subsector, age, or size of nonprofits across the sector, we “weight” cases to correct for this problem. We used the RAKE procedure in the statistical package program SPSS to calculate weights based on the population parameters for eight standard categories of the National Taxonomy of exempt entities, eleven categories of age (calculated as time since IRS recognition as a public charity), and five categories of size (annual revenue, as updated in the BMF). In our sample, nonprofits that were over-represented on a characteristic received a lesser weight, and nonprofits that were under-represented on a characteristic received a greater weight. We utilized the RAKE weight to adjust our sample to nonprofit population parameters. We use weighted data in all statistics in this report.

**Figure 11. Sample Construction**

