



# FROM NICE TO NECESSARY:

## UNLEASHING THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE INVESTMENT

### *Report Highlights*

Volunteering is not a peripheral activity—it is a foundational force that drives progress in every corner of society. At the individual level, volunteering improves mental and physical health, reduces loneliness, and builds skills and purpose. For communities, volunteers deliver critical services—from food distribution and youth mentoring to disaster response and community organizing—that would otherwise be unavailable or unsustainable. And at a societal level, volunteering is a catalyst for civic engagement, trust in institutions, and social cohesion—factors essential to a strong democracy and resilient nation.

Yet despite this profound value, volunteering remains undervalued, underfunded, and largely unmeasured.

The reality is stark: we will not make meaningful progress on any issue—whether it’s education, climate change, public health, social equity, or democracy—without a thriving, well-supported volunteer force. Volunteers are not an optional resource. They are essential drivers of impact. One-third of the nonprofit workforce is made up of volunteers, and they play a critical role in filling service gaps, reaching marginalized communities, and advancing systemic change. But without sustained investment in the systems that support them, their contributions are at risk—and so is our collective progress.

Informed with research conducted by The Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit advisory firm, Points of Light developed this report to challenge long-standing misconceptions and spark urgent investment in volunteer engagement. Our findings reflect what many in the sector already know: we are asking nonprofits to do more, while resourcing them—and the organizations that support them—with less.

### *Report Findings*

- **The impact of volunteers is enormous but hasn’t been sufficiently quantified.** Nonprofits often track outputs like hours served, and there’s substantial research on volunteerism’s impact on the individual volunteer, but few nonprofits have the resources to measure deeper outcomes that stem from volunteers—especially those that benefit communities and society at large.
- **The full cost of volunteer engagement hasn’t been sufficiently quantified.** Recruiting, training, deploying, recognizing, and retaining volunteers requires significant effort, yet most nonprofits lack tools and capacity to systematically measure and justify these costs.
- **Limited impact and cost data fuels a lack of alignment between nonprofits and funders.** There is a critical gap between the perceived and actual value of volunteers in effecting social change. While 72% of nonprofits say volunteers improve service quality, just 25% of funders agree—making it harder to secure necessary investment in volunteer strategies.

- **Corporate funders support volunteerism more than foundations, but still at low levels.** Though corporate giving to volunteer engagement is slightly higher, it remains a small portion of total giving. Many companies prioritize volunteerism for employee engagement, but broader impact on community and societal outcomes remains secondary.
- **This lack of alignment limits funding from institutional funders.** Over the past ten years, only 0.19% of total funding from US-based foundations and public charities was directed specifically to volunteer engagement. The top 10 U.S. foundations allocate even less—just 0.07% of their portfolios to volunteer engagement—leaving critical volunteer infrastructure under-resourced.

## The Bottom Line

Volunteers are essential to nonprofit reach and impact—but without strong data, funders often overlook the value of investing in volunteer engagement. Most nonprofits lack the resources to measure and communicate volunteer impact, making funding even harder to secure.

This creates a cycle of underinvestment: without funding, nonprofits can't build the infrastructure needed to fully harness volunteering—resulting in missed opportunities and diminished impact across the sector.

## Recommendations

To address these gaps and move the sector forward, the report outlines three urgent opportunities for action:

1. **BETTER DATA:** Expand research to measure the community and societal outcomes of volunteerism—data that aligns with the priorities of both funders and nonprofits.
2. **STRONGER INFRASTRUCTURE:** Provide tools and funding to help nonprofits accurately assess and communicate the full financial investment required for effective volunteer engagement.
3. **MORE DIALOGUE:** Use shared data to spark productive conversation between funders and nonprofits about the strategic role of volunteers in driving impact.

## What Points of Light Will Do

This report is a call to action—and Points of Light is responding with bold, strategic initiatives:

- **Convene a Research Advisory Council:** Develop a national research agenda to fill the research gaps around volunteering's true impact, particularly on communities and society.
- **Invest in Nonprofit Capacity Building:** Support nonprofits in collecting and using data to better understand and communicate volunteer value.
- **Create a National Coalition:** Launch a cross-sector coalition to double volunteer participation in the U.S. by 2035.
- **Join the Movement:** We're Calling on Volunteers! Now's the time to make a difference. Step up, get involved, and lend your time to the causes that matter most to you. Your support can spark real change—[volunteer today!](#)

Volunteering is not a secondary strategy—it is a vital force for creating change. It's time we align our investments, narratives, and systems to reflect that reality.

