

Points of Light Theory of Change

MAY 2026



Introduction

Points of Light inspires, equips, and mobilizes people to create positive change through volunteering and civic engagement. We believe that volunteering has the power to strengthen individuals, help people find their purpose, and uplift communities. As we see an increase in division and isolation, and a decrease in connected communities and mental wellness, we recognize the need for something to be done. We believe that purposeful volunteering is a critical lever to reduce polarization and isolation by connecting people through action and intent.

Points of Light is the leading organization bringing together a network of nonprofits, corporations, and community leaders, which engages nearly 3 million volunteers across 35 countries annually.

The Points of Light Theory of Change describes the strengths and work of the organization, the results of that work, and a summation of the broader social and civic outcomes and impact that can follow from stronger and more effective volunteering.

Key Terms

Purposeful volunteerism: the collective practice and infrastructure that intentionally designs, resources, and implements volunteer engagement that aligns with community-defined priorities and drives toward transformative impact for individuals, community, and society.

Individual: the person (or group) volunteering

Community: the nonprofits, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations where volunteers, staff, and the people they serve interact

Society: the broader collective of individuals, community, and beyond

Theory of Change Overview

This Theory of Change describes the challenges that Points of Light seeks to address, and how it brings its unique strengths, programs, strategies, and partnerships to address them. Points of Light engages in capacity-building, convening, coalition-building, storytelling, recognition, and cultural influence work that strengthens the volunteer ecosystem and helps transform culture, shifting mindsets about volunteerism. As a result, Points of Light aims to not only increase the amount of volunteerism, but also its effectiveness, responsiveness to community need, and overall quality. In doing so, volunteers, nonprofits and other volunteer-engaging institutions, communities, and society as a whole benefit, as is described in greater detail below.

The Points of Light Theory of Change may be read alongside [this theory of change on volunteerism](#), developed by Points of Light, which describes the effects of volunteering more broadly and the conditions under which it succeeds. While evidence is presented below

about the connections between volunteering and outcomes of interest, this complementary theory about volunteering offers greater detail about these outcomes and provides a strong foundation of research and insights from the field on the primary effects of service. It also highlights the importance of volunteering being designed well, indicating the value of Points of Light's mission to strengthen volunteer-engaging institutions in achieving positive social outcomes and a stronger civil society.



Challenges Impacting Individuals, Community, and Society

Many communities face real and growing challenges. There is a weakened culture of civic responsibility¹ and people are experiencing isolation and loneliness.² Many nonprofits and communities lack the capacity, tools, and support to engage volunteers effectively in meaningful opportunities. As a result, important community needs go unmet. The Points of Light Theory of Change explains how our organization responds to those challenges and the changes that result.

Our Unique Value Proposition

As a leading expert on purposeful volunteerism, Points of Light is uniquely positioned to support the infrastructure that will make volunteering and civic engagement a more powerful force for good. Our value comes from a distinct combination of strengths: deep expertise on volunteering, a global affiliate network of local volunteer action centers and partners, work that spans cause areas, and the ability to convene diverse stakeholders across sectors.

Our Work

Points of Light builds capacity for volunteer engagement, brings people and institutions together through convening and coalition-building, and influences culture to drive purposeful volunteering.

Through our **capacity-building** work, Points of Light provides training, resources, research, and consultation to the nonprofits, governments, companies, and philanthropies that constitute the foundation of the volunteering ecosystem: locally, nationally, and globally. We develop and execute leadership development, peer learning, technical assistance, and other professional development opportunities for leaders in volunteer engagement, both within our network of affiliates and for nonprofits more broadly. Points of Light also offers corporate social impact consulting and employee engagement opportunities to companies. These efforts set and advance standards for strategic, high-impact volunteer engagement across sectors.

Points of Light is a leader in **convening and coalition-building** around volunteerism, connecting stakeholders across sectors to learn from one

another and form partnerships to advance shared objectives. This occurs through premier learning and networking experiences like the Points of Light Conference, our Affiliate Network Global Gathering, and our Corporate Service Council Summit, among others. We also facilitate cross-sector, systems-change initiatives like Reimagining Service 2035, which aims to double volunteer rates in the United States over a decade. These collaborations bring together institutions to collectively strengthen, increase, and improve volunteerism.

Lastly, we **influence culture through storytelling and recognition**. This amplification of volunteering ensures that volunteers and the institutions engaging them are seen and celebrated. It contributes to a broad understanding of volunteerism's indispensable contributions to our social, economic, and civic fabric while inspiring others through examples of high-impact service. Toward that end, Points of Light leads Global Volunteer Month and National Volunteer Week in the U.S. to champion the impacts of volunteering as essential to civil society. We aim to shift perceptions of volunteering, encouraging every individual to recognize their own ability to make a positive difference in their community.



Points of Light Outcomes and Impact

These areas of work produce direct organizational outcomes through strengthening the volunteer ecosystem and transforming culture.

Points of Light **strengthens the volunteer ecosystem** by supporting local volunteer recruitment and retention, increasing volunteer activation through our network of multi-sector partners and improving fill rates of volunteer opportunities. Our efforts drive growth, sustainability, and efficacy of volunteer-engaging institutions in a variety of ways. We advocate for investment in volunteerism and bolster the credible evidence base of volunteering's impacts, empowering nonprofits to better meet their missions through strategic volunteer initiatives. Points of Light also enables more effective corporate social impact by equipping companies with information and connections.

We **transform culture**, elevating volunteering as a national priority. Points of Light increases the awareness and knowledge of leaders in

nonprofits, government, companies, and philanthropy about the potential of volunteers to meet community needs and provide mutual benefits. Our work also catalyzes attitudinal and behavioral changes in individuals and groups more broadly. This improves perceptions of volunteering. It also cultivates a stronger sense of shared civic responsibility and encourages more intentional and high-quality volunteering.

These outcomes contribute to Points of Light's impact, which is to make volunteer engagement stronger and more effective. We not only increase the number of people serving but also equip institutions to channel the intentions and actions of volunteers into relevant and impactful service experiences.

Volunteering Outcomes and Impact

Points of Light recognizes that increasing and improving volunteering matters because of the effects it has on individuals, community, and society. The impact extends well beyond the act of purposeful volunteerism.

For volunteers themselves, there are a range of benefits. One 2026 umbrella review of volunteering by Nichol, Wilson, Rodrigues, and Haighton revealed expanded social supports and sense of community, improved physical health and mental wellbeing, and a greater sense of purpose and life satisfaction as a result of service.³ A Deloitte IMPACT Study found that volunteers experienced professional skill development.⁴ Other positive benefits include a better understanding of community issues, increased empathy, and personal growth. Volunteers may also feel a stronger sense of civic responsibility; when they have a positive experience, they are more likely to not only continue volunteering but encourage others to do so as well.⁵ When more people engage in purposeful, well-resourced, designed, and managed service, the benefits are felt not only by them but by those around them.

Through strengthening and increasing volunteering, Points of Light's impact extends to nonprofit organizations and other institutions benefiting from volunteers, as well as the

communities they serve. Intentionally designed volunteer engagement increases organizational capacity to meet pressing needs⁶ and enables more organizations to expand programs,⁷ expand reach and awareness,⁸ cultivate funding,⁹ and develop greater trust among their stakeholders¹⁰. Engaging volunteers provides organizations with a vehicle to incorporate expertise, lived experience, and skills from communities and outside institutions into their work and better reflect the community served.¹¹

Purposeful volunteering also leads to a stronger, sustained culture of civic engagement. It leads to increased civic awareness, local leadership, and investment in one's community, and helps cultivate shared identity across groups. With time and consistency, service becomes a way to build civic muscle through collective effort toward shared goals with people from different backgrounds. These civic actions foster a view of community that is relational rather than transactional, and these roots can eventually grow into stronger communities that are more open, curious, and understanding, as well as less divided.¹²

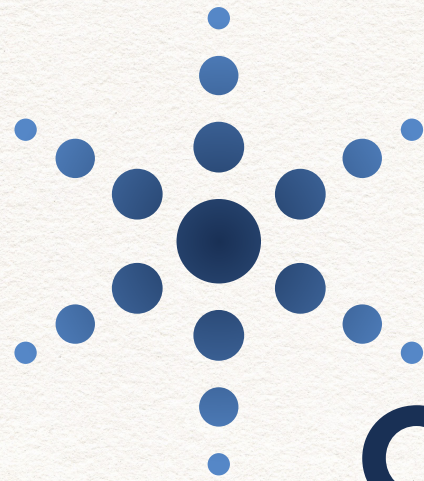
At Points of Light, we know that the difference between connection and disconnection, trust and skepticism, impact and inefficiency lies in how volunteer engagement is designed, supported, and sustained.

That's why we focus on strengthening the volunteer ecosystem and shifting mindsets toward investment and best practices in volunteer engagement. In doing so, Points of Light champions volunteering as a national priority and an effective lever for strong social impact and civil society.



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