



Toward Purposeful Volunteerism: A Theory of Change

MAY 2026

Executive Summary

Volunteering has long been recognized for its ability to create positive outcomes for individuals, communities, and society at large. Indeed, it is a potent vehicle for cultivating connection and sustaining organizational effectiveness while contributing to social and civic impact. As challenges such as isolation, a fraying civic culture, and unmet community needs mount, there is an opportunity to expand volunteering's potential by strengthening the conditions that contribute to positive outcomes.

This Theory of Change for volunteering provides a clear, evidence-based framework for understanding how volunteer engagement leads to meaningful impact. It connects:

- the design and support of purposeful volunteer opportunities,
- the experiences and outcomes for individuals, and
- the broader outcomes on communities and civil society when purposeful volunteering thrives.

In addition, this Theory of Change reveals that the difference between connection and disconnection, trust and skepticism, impact and inefficiency lies in how volunteer engagement is designed, supported, and sustained. When volunteerism is designed with intention and supported by strong systems, it produces measurable benefits for individuals and strengthens our communities and society.

The Volunteering Theory of Change Framework:

- Clearly links **actions to outcomes**
- Strengthens the **case for investment and support**
- Provides a **common foundation** for strategy and decision-making
- Positions volunteering as a **deliberate and scalable approach to social and civic impact**

At Points of Light, we believe volunteering changes *everything*.

When we invest in purposeful volunteering by aligning roles with real community needs, funding engagement practices, and fostering reflection and reciprocity, we unlock benefits that extend far beyond any single project. Individuals develop a deeper sense of belonging and agency, organizations and institutions become more responsive and resilient, and communities grow stronger and more connected. These outcomes are not isolated; they reinforce one another over time, creating a compounding effect across individual, community, and societal levels.

This Theory of Change is both an invitation and a responsibility. It invites leaders to see volunteering as a strategic lever for community change. It underscores the responsibility to invest in the conditions that cultivate meaning and belonging through service. When we move from participation alone to purposeful design, volunteering becomes more than an act—it becomes a collective practice for building a more connected, responsive, and thriving society.



Introduction

Engaging volunteers in a meaningful way is an important strategy for cultivating connection, meeting organizational and institutional needs, and supporting a strong community—when service is designed with intention.

To that end, Points of Light developed this Theory of Change to identify research-based influences on volunteering that lead to positive outcomes over time for individuals, communities, and society. It also synthesizes the outcomes and impact of volunteering in one reference document since benefits of service tend to be reported for the volunteer, or the organization and community served, or society at large. The reality is that, with the right support, these outcomes happen concurrently, making volunteerism a potent lever for positive change for each of these audiences, according to Piatak and Sowa.¹

Ideally, this document supports leaders in making a stronger case for volunteering and the investments and conditions that maximize its potential.

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.

Service characteristics: volunteer project or role components

Community practices: volunteer engagement practices

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

Internal influences on outcomes and impact: elements of service that volunteer-involving organizations can shape

External influences on outcomes and impact: elements of service present in the broader environment and that are difficult to change

Short-term and intermediate outcomes: the more observable positive results that occur because of volunteering

Long-term impact: results that unfold over a longer period

Theory of Change Overview

The following overview explains each section of the Theory of Change, identifying influences, outcomes, and impacts of volunteering and drawing connections between them. It is not exhaustive given the many forms that service takes. Rather, it provides a strong foundation based on research and field insights about the primary effects of service.



Influences on Effectiveness

Influences of Volunteerism Outcomes and Impact

This Theory of Change demonstrates the link between the outcomes and impact of volunteerism and the various forms of influence on its success. More specifically, the influences on volunteerism are the actions, environmental factors, and attitudes² that lead to its outcomes and impact. They are the areas to focus attention and intervention to achieve a desired outcome. These influences apply to organizations hosting volunteers as well as institutions that mobilize volunteers such as businesses, faith-based, or educational groups.

Some examples of these service characteristics are:

- how long and frequently service occurs (Piliavin & Siegl)³
- choices about roles, projects, and other forms of involvement (Caligiuri, Mencin, & Jiang)⁴
- the extent to which volunteering responds to authentic community needs rather than busy work (Reimagining Service)⁵ and generates benefits to everyone involved (Steinhorn & Tennille)⁶

- whether volunteer opportunities include time for reflection on the value of the service and connections made (Wisner, Stringfellow, Youngdahl, & Parker)⁷

Community practices further contribute to purposeful service. According to research conducted by UT Austin in partnership with the Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement,^{8,9} these practices include alignment between volunteer, organizational, and institutional strategies; meaningful involvement of senior leaders; resources for volunteer engagement; training for volunteers and those supervising them; recognition; evaluation; and impact communication.

External influences also play a role. These are typically beyond the control of individual organizations and reflect large-scale occurrences such as natural or human-made disasters, technological advances, or policy changes.

Outcomes and Impact

Individual Outcomes and Impact

When volunteer experiences are thoughtfully designed and well-supported, volunteering leads to more meaningful outcomes for individuals, both in the short term and beyond.

For example, volunteering has been shown to offer a range of benefits, whether experienced individually or as a group. 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.¹⁰ A Deloitte IMPACT Study found that volunteers experienced professional skill development¹¹ while another study reported gains in leadership skills.¹² Other positive benefits include a better understanding of community issues, increased empathy, and personal growth.

These outcomes do more than benefit individuals in isolation. They connect people

more deeply to a cause and build awareness that we all have a role to play in thriving communities. As a result, those who volunteer may also feel a stronger sense of civic responsibility. When their service is a positive experience, Einolf's 2012 literature review found that they are more likely to continue volunteering as well as encourage others to get involved.¹³

Sustained volunteering may deepen these benefits. Contacts become community, involvement turns into trust and reciprocity, and growth leads to life satisfaction. Over time, individuals can realize more benefits, connection, and fulfillment from involvement in a cause bigger than themselves. Although it is difficult to track all relevant factors or establish direct causation, intermediate outcomes likely contribute to this long-term impact.

These outcomes highlight the ways that service can benefit volunteers personally and also cultivate connection and belonging—when it is designed well. Thoughtful involvement of individual and group volunteers creates a

foundation of civic responsibility and deepens community.

Community Outcomes and Impact

Intentionally designed volunteer engagement strengthens organizational capacity and institutional goals while contributing to the well-being of the communities served. Strong volunteer experiences lead to more benefits such as retention and more people who want to give their time, which contributes to higher program quality and greater breadth of impact. A 2017 study additionally found that service provides a vehicle to incorporate expertise, lived experience, and skills from communities and outside institutions into programs and operations and helps reflect the community served.¹⁴

As organizations improve their volunteer engagement, benefits accrue. They deepen capacity (TCC Group),¹⁵ expand programs (Carter Kahl),¹⁶ extend reach and awareness

(CNCS),¹⁷ and cultivate funding (Fidelity Charitable).¹⁸ Direct community involvement between volunteers and beneficiaries yields greater trust and transparency (Independent Sector),¹⁹ which are critical foundations for organizational success. In time, these outcomes translate into organizations that are more responsive and resilient.

These diverse outcomes underscore that volunteer engagement is not just a programmatic function but has the potential to be a core driver of organizational effectiveness. With time, the presence of trusted, responsive, and effective organizations contributes to the broader social and civic fabric of the community.



Societal Outcomes and Impact

At the societal level, the cumulative effects of volunteer engagement extend beyond individual experiences and organizations to shape larger patterns of civic life.

Purposeful volunteer engagement can contribute to increased civic awareness, motivate others to serve, support a shared identity across groups, and develop community leadership. With time and consistency, service becomes a way to build civic muscle. That muscle strengthens through involvement with people from different backgrounds, collective effort across lines of difference, and commitment toward shared goals. These civic actions become the foundation for a culture of civic engagement and an understanding of community that is relational rather than transactional. As a result, volunteerism benefits all involved. It sparks many forms of community and institutional investment and participation. These deep roots can eventually grow into stronger communities that are more open, curious, and understanding as well as less divided.

These dynamics show that volunteerism at its best influences more than participation. It shapes trust, leadership, and the strength of relationships across communities. Over time, these effects accumulate, strengthening communities in ways that contribute to a more connected, resilient, and engaged society.

In summary, the Theory of Change reveals how purposeful volunteerism is a function of design and alignment between volunteer, organizational, institutional, and community goals. It exists along a dynamic continuum. Each decision point is an opportunity to embrace purposeful volunteerism and take a step closer to organizations better equipped to meet community needs and to a stronger civil society.

Putting the Theory of Change to Work

Intentional investment and thoughtful practice in volunteer engagement contribute to a society that functions as a participatory exercise where everyone has something to give and something to receive. It enlarges notions of community, creating a bigger circle of “us”. With practice, reciprocity becomes a habit and more people in society can flourish.

Each part of the volunteer ecosystem has a role to play in applying the Theory of Change. Here are a few recommendations:

Funders

- Include volunteer engagement in funding priorities and ask about it in grant applications and site visits.
- Invest in program and capacity-building expenses related to volunteer engagement, from staffing and professional development to technology and recognition.
- Request data beyond volunteer numbers, hours,

or financial value, such as how volunteers contribute to the quality, quantity, or reach of programs.

Corporations

- Build and implement an employee engagement strategy and identify outcomes at the intersection between company goals, employee interests, and authentic community needs.
- Develop programs and policies that unlock local volunteer engagement, such as a Volunteer Time Off policy, volunteer matching grants, board placement programs, and an Ambassador program.
- Invest in community partners’ planning and facilitation of employee volunteer projects and their year-round volunteer engagement.

Nonprofit (and Other Volunteer-Involving Organizations)

- Use the Theory of Change to guide practices and inform a case for volunteer engagement support.
- Include expenses for volunteer engagement in program and capacity-building grant requests.
- Track and report volunteer engagement outcomes in ways that link volunteer activity with organizational and community outcomes.

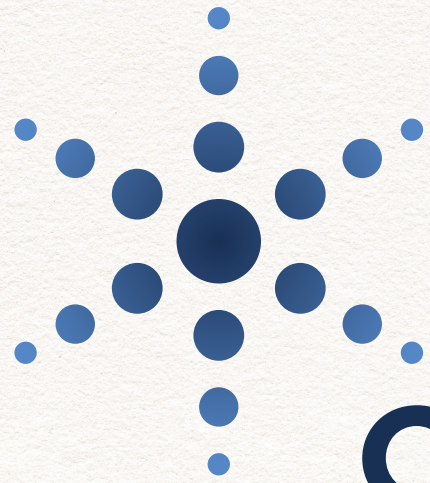
Researchers

- Assess relationships between service characteristics/community practices and outcomes.
- Identify other internal influences on volunteerism outcomes.
- Share research findings so they are accessible and applicable to practitioners and help refine the Theory of Change.



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