

REIMAGINING
SERVICE
2035

POWERED BY POINTS OF LIGHT



National Volunteer Strategy:

A roadmap for engaging
more Americans in purposeful
volunteering by 2035

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A Letter from the Points of Light CEO

When asked, “Why a national volunteer strategy?”, my answer is simple. We are in an urgent moment as a nation. Volunteering meets this moment. Volunteering is essential infrastructure for stronger communities, building trust and connection, and increasing civic participation.

Communities face urgent needs, and yet nearly half of nonprofits are unable to fill critical volunteer roles. People are increasingly divided and isolated, and yet 65% of people said volunteering helped them connect over differences.¹¹ Volunteering is not just nice; it’s necessary. Until we start treating it that way, it will be underutilized as a tool to solve our most pressing challenges.

Reimagining Service 2035 is a long-term collective national effort to strengthen social connection and civil society through volunteering over the next decade. The first step is this National Volunteer Strategy, a roadmap for the work ahead. It’s a shared framework that supports ecosystem coordination.

Points of Light serves as the backbone organization for this effort, but success requires shared leadership. Its adoption and implementation require nonprofits, businesses, government, philanthropy, civic institutions, and volunteers in communities across the country to come together.

This strategy builds on the great work already happening in the field. There are organizations and individuals already creating conditions for volunteering to thrive. We want that work to continue, with the National Volunteer Strategy providing a framework for even more impact.

I’m inviting you to shape the next era of service and volunteering in the United States. As we recognize the nation’s 250th anniversary, we have the rare opportunity to define what volunteering means for the future. We know volunteering can meet this moment. The question is whether we will organize, lead and invest as if it’s essential.



Jennifer Sirangelo
President & CEO, Points of Light

We have the
rare opportunity
to define what
volunteering
means for
the *future*.

Dedication

This strategy is for the people who show up.

For the volunteers who give their time, skills, and compassion to help their communities thrive.

For the nonprofit leaders, educators, employers, faith leaders, researchers, public servants, funders, and community builders who work tirelessly to create opportunities for people to engage.

For the young people who are creating change today and who will shape the future of volunteering for generations to come.

For those who believe stronger communities are built when people work together, take responsibility for one another, and contribute to something larger than themselves.

And this strategy is for everyone committed to building a future where more people feel like they belong and make a difference.

Because the future of volunteering will not be built by any one organization, sector, or person. It will be built together.



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Introduction

In June 2025, Points of Light announced a bold and ambitious goal: to double volunteering in the United States over the next decade. But from the beginning, this goal has never been about increasing participation for its own sake. At a time when many people feel disconnected from one another, from institutions, and from civic life, our intention is to create more opportunities for people to deepen community connection, work across differences, and contribute to solutions that matter to them.

This goal also raised big questions: What would it take to effectively support that level of participation? What would need to change across the volunteer ecosystem? And what could become possible for communities if more people were able to contribute in meaningful ways?

Reimagining Service 2035 is the 10-year initiative created to help answer those questions and turn aspiration into coordinated action across the volunteer ecosystem. The first phase of this work focused on developing a shared roadmap for the future: a National Volunteer Strategy.

The United States is not the first country to develop a national strategy for volunteering, and global strategies helped inform this approach. However, the U.S. is shaped by its own unique mix of geographic scale, cultural context, and civic traditions. This strategy reflects that reality while outlining the role that individuals, communities, and institutions across sectors can play in strengthening volunteering over the next decade.

Volunteering in 2025

2x

Volunteering in 2035

Executive Summary

Why A National Strategy Matters Now

Why should volunteering matter to someone struggling to pay rent, balance caregiving responsibilities, or navigate uncertainty in daily life? Why nonprofits, businesses, or local governments facing growing demands and limited resources?

Volunteering is not separate from the challenges communities face today; it is one of the ways people respond to them together.

Strong volunteer ecosystems help communities build the relationships, trust, and civic infrastructure needed to navigate crisis, support one another, and solve problems collectively. They help nonprofits extend their reach and deepen community connection. Volunteer ecosystems help businesses improve employee engagement, leadership development, and public trust. They help schools and universities create opportunities for civic learning, leadership, and belonging. These ecosystems help faith communities strengthen service, connection, and care. They help governments partner more effectively with residents to address local challenges. And they help individuals find purpose, build skills, form relationships, and participate more fully in community and civic life.

That is why this strategy matters.

The United States already has millions of people willing to contribute their time, skills, relationships, and lived experience to help their communities thrive. Volunteers, volunteer engagement professionals, nonprofit leaders, civic institutions, businesses, faith communities, and local partners all form one of the country's hidden impact engines – an often-overlooked force that helps communities endure, adapt, and thrive.

This strategy honors that foundation while asking what more could be possible if the systems around volunteering matched the dedication already present in the field. With the right infrastructure, investment, coordination, and modern approaches to engagement, volunteering can help power a national movement for connection, problem-solving, and shared responsibility.

What This Strategy Is

The goal of this effort is bigger than increased participation. Reimagining Service 2035 is focused on creating communities where people feel more connected to one another, where civic participation is stronger, where organizations are better equipped to respond to local needs, and where service is recognized as essential infrastructure for healthy communities, resilient society, and a vibrant democracy.

The purpose of the National Volunteer Strategy is to provide direction, identify opportunities for collaboration, surface shared priorities, and help guide long-term investment in volunteering as essential civic infrastructure. Its success will depend on coordinated action across nonprofits, businesses, government, philanthropy, schools, volunteer engagement professionals, faith and civic institutions, and communities themselves.

The National Volunteer Strategy is a 10-year roadmap, and the guide for Reimagining Service 2035, to strengthen volunteering in the United States. It is not a single program or campaign, and it is not owned by any one organization. Instead, it is a shared framework designed to help align efforts across the broader volunteer ecosystem while creating space for local adaptation, experimentation, and leadership.

What Will Be Different By 2035

By 2035, volunteering will be more deeply woven into everyday life in the United States. More people will have meaningful ways to contribute to their communities, organizations will have the leadership, systems, and support needed to engage volunteers effectively and realize their missions, and communities themselves will have greater voice in shaping how volunteer efforts are designed and delivered.

This work will help shift volunteering from something often treated as supplemental or nice to have into a more valued and necessary force for shared responsibility, participation, and collective action across American civic life.

By 2035, volunteering will be more deeply woven into everyday life in the United States.

The Case for Reimagining Service

Our Core Belief

The United States is experiencing a time of deep change. Many people feel disconnected from one another, from institutions, and from the systems meant to support their communities. Trust is low.² Loneliness and division are high.³ Nonprofits, schools, governments, and community organizations are being asked to do more with fewer resources. Communities across the country continue to face urgent challenges that no single organization or sector can solve alone.

And yet, every day, people still show up for one another.

They volunteer at food banks and schools. They check on neighbors after disasters. They organize mutual aid efforts, coach youth sports, care for animals, protect natural spaces, and step in to mentor students when help is needed. Some do this through formal volunteer programs. Others do it informally, without ever calling it “volunteering” at all.

This strategy starts from a fundamental belief: every act of service matters deeply in American life. But the way we think about volunteering, and the systems we have built around it, must evolve to meet this moment.

From Nice to Necessary

For too long, volunteering has been treated as something extra: a nice thing to do when time and resources allow. In reality, service plays a much bigger role in the strength of our communities and our democracy. As shared in the Points of Light Volunteer Theory of Change:

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.⁴

Volunteering also provides something increasingly difficult to find in modern life: opportunities for people from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to work together toward a shared goal. While service alone

cannot solve the divisions facing the country, it can create spaces where people build relationships, develop trust, and practice working alongside one another to address community challenges. In that way, volunteering helps strengthen not only communities, but the civic culture and democratic norms that allow communities to function.

This strategy does not claim that volunteering will solve every problem facing the country today. It will not. But service can be part of the solution. When people are meaningfully engaged in their communities, the benefits extend far beyond any one project or organization.

The challenge and the opportunity are that today’s volunteer ecosystem was not built for the world we live in now.

Where We’ve Been

The original Reimagining Service initiative was created following the passage of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act as a national effort to increase social impact through effective volunteer engagement across sectors. When the initiative concluded in 2015, it reflected a belief that important progress had been made in elevating volunteer engagement as a strategy for impact.

A decade later, the landscape has changed again.

Since the original initiative launched in 2009, the country has experienced enormous social, economic, and technological change. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped how people work, connect, and participate in community life. New forms of mutual aid and digital engagement emerged. Many nonprofit organizations experienced increased demand, uncertain funding environments, burnout, and staffing shortages. Younger generations began looking for more flexible, skills-based, and purpose-driven ways to contribute. Communities faced rising climate disasters, economic uncertainty, and growing mental health challenges. And many people became increasingly isolated from civic and community life.

The need is not to recruit more volunteers into existing systems. It is to build a stronger, more inclusive, more adaptable culture and infrastructure that expands who can participate, how participation happens, and what meaningful engagement looks like. Doing so will require investing in what is already working while also creating new approaches where needed.

This strategy starts from a fundamental belief: every act of service matters deeply in American life. But the way we think about volunteering, and the systems we have built around it, must evolve to meet this moment.

Where We're Going

Reimagining Service 2035 is grounded in the conviction that expanding participation in service requires more than recruiting more volunteers. It requires building the systems, culture, and infrastructure that make purposeful volunteering possible. Because the goal is not simply more volunteering for volunteering's sake. The goal is stronger communities, deeper connection, greater resilience, and a broader culture of shared responsibility for one another.

This strategy is also being released alongside the United States' semiquincentennial. Americans hold many different perspectives about the country's history, present, and future. But across those differences, service remains one of the clearest expressions of what people hope this country can be at its best: people coming together to help one another, strengthen their communities, and contribute to something larger than themselves — a commitment reflected by volunteers, veterans, national service members, and community builders across generations.

Nearly two centuries ago, French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville observed this same tendency while traveling through the young United States, noting how Americans regularly came together to solve problems, support one another, and advance shared goals. While the forms of participation have evolved, the underlying impulse remains an important part of American civic life.

Reimagining service is ultimately about building toward that future together. The next 10 years offer an opportunity not only to grow volunteering, but to strengthen the connections, institutions, and communities that make civic life possible.

Volunteering and Service in the United States Today

Volunteering and service already play a significant role in American life. Understanding the size of today's ecosystem, how people participate, and where opportunities for growth exist helps establish the baseline for the work ahead.

The Broader Service Ecosystem

Service in the United States extends far beyond any single program, sector, or form of participation. It includes formal volunteering through organizations and institutions, informal helping among neighbors and communities, and national service programs that create structured pathways into public service.

The nonprofit sector alone includes nearly two million organizations, generates trillions of dollars in economic activity, and employs more than 12 million people across the United States.⁵ Yet those figures tell only part of the story. Much of the sector's ability to serve communities depends on volunteers. An estimated 75–85% of nonprofits engage volunteers in delivering programs and services, while tens of thousands of organizations operate entirely without paid staff.⁶ Volunteers are not simply an enhancement to community impact; they are part of the infrastructure that makes that impact possible.

While nonprofits remain the largest organized mechanism for volunteer engagement, volunteering also plays a significant role across schools and universities, faith communities, government agencies, hospitals, cultural institutions, and workplaces. More than half of U.S. businesses report supporting some form of employee volunteering, and workplace volunteer programs contribute millions of hours of service annually.⁷ Volunteer firefighters continue to represent roughly two-thirds of the nation's fire service personnel, and thousands of local governments rely on volunteers to support everything from emergency response and parks programs to advisory boards and community initiatives.⁸

Beyond formal volunteer roles, informal helping remains widespread across communities. In 2023, more than half of Americans reported helping neighbors or supporting others outside formal organizations through activities such as exchanging favors, providing practical support, or responding to community needs directly.⁹

The broader service ecosystem also includes national service programs, which engage hundreds of thousands of members and volunteers each year while helping build the organizational capacity needed to support volunteering at larger scale.¹⁰ In many communities, national service members and volunteers serve side-by-side, with service programs helping recruit volunteers, strengthen organizations, and expand community impact.¹¹

Why This Strategy Focuses on Formal Volunteering

All forms of service matter. However, this strategy focuses primarily on formal volunteering because it represents one of the largest and most scalable pathways into community participation. Formal volunteering already engages tens of millions of Americans and is also where investments in leadership, funding, technology, training, and infrastructure can have the greatest influence on participation and long-term impact.

The recommendations in this strategy are therefore largely aimed at strengthening the systems and organizations that make formal volunteer engagement possible while recognizing, supporting, and encouraging the important and complementary roles informal helping and national service play within the broader ecosystem.

50%+

**More than half of Americans reported
helping neighbors or supporting others
outside formal organizations**

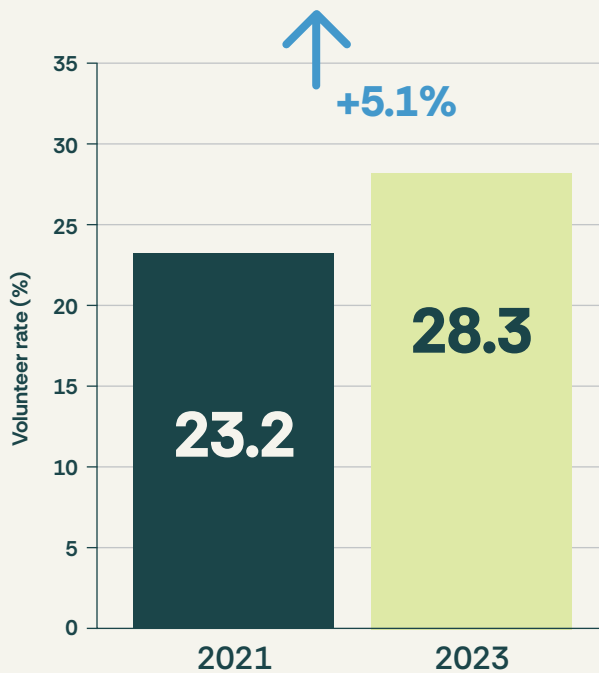


2023 Findings

75M

Approximate number of Americans that formally volunteered through an organization.

U.S. Formal Volunteering Participation Rebounded After the Pandemic



Source: U.S. Census Bureau & AmeriCorps, Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement (CEV), 2023

Current Participation in Formal Volunteering

At the time this strategy was developed, the most recent comprehensive national volunteering data available came from the 2023 Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement (CEV), released by the U.S. Census Bureau and the federal AmeriCorps agency. The 2025 data had not yet been released. Put in place after September 11, 2001, the CEV is one of the nation's most robust efforts to track volunteering and civic engagement over time, providing national, demographic, and state-level data.

The 2023 findings reflected both resilience and change within the volunteer ecosystem. Approximately 28.3% of Americans formally volunteered through an organization between September 2022 and September 2023. This was a significant rebound from the sharp decline seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when formal volunteering dropped to 23.2% in 2021, the steepest decline recorded in decades of civic engagement research. However, participation had not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels, underscoring that volunteering continues to evolve.⁷

Goals for Formal Volunteering

The 2023 CEV serves as the baseline for many of the participation measures referenced throughout this strategy. Reimagining Service 2035 aspires to double volunteering in the United States over the next decade. Using the 2023 baseline as a guide, that aspiration would translate to substantial growth in both the rate of Americans who volunteer and the total number of people engaged in formal volunteering. For example, doubling the 2023 participation rate would mean more than half of Americans volunteering and, based on projected population growth, well over 150 million people engaged in formal service by 2035.

These targets are intentionally bold and ambitious. They are not intended as forecasts, but as moonshot goals designed to inspire the level of innovation, investment, partnership, and systems change needed to make volunteering a more accessible and integrated part of everyday life. While this work is not solely about achieving a specific participation rate or number of volunteers, both measures provide important indicators of whether more people have meaningful opportunities to contribute to their communities and civic life.

As new research and national data become available over the coming decade, the strategy will continue to evolve, helping ensure that goals, priorities, and approaches remain responsive to emerging trends and realities.

Our Vision for 2035

We envision a future where volunteering is purposeful and a part of everyday life in America.

This vision is ambitious, but achievable. Research tells us that when volunteering is meaningful, impactful, and fully supported, it becomes a powerful force for stronger communities, deeper connection, and lasting civic participation.

By 2035,

The right conditions are in place for volunteering to thrive.

Volunteering is supported by strong leadership, sustainable investment, modern infrastructure, and cross-sector collaboration. Organizations are healthy, resilient, and equipped to effectively engage volunteers and realize their potential in addressing community challenges. Service is no longer treated as an “extra,” but as a measure of strong communities and a healthy society.

By 2035,

Volunteering is impactful for individuals, communities, and society.

Communities have greater power to shape solutions that meet local needs. Service is recognized not only for helping address immediate challenges, but for strengthening civic life, building resilience, and creating lasting social change. Organizations and institutions work alongside communities, not just for them.

By 2035,

The volunteer experience is meaningful.

People feel connected to each other and the causes and communities they serve. Service creates belonging, purpose, trust, and stronger relationships across communities; it builds empathy and bridges divides. More people see themselves in volunteering and have opportunities to contribute in ways that reflect their lives, skills, and identities.

Our Foundations

Recognizing Systems and Tensions

Strengthening volunteering in the United States requires more than expanding programs or recruiting more participants. It requires understanding the systems, assumptions, relationships, and conditions that shape how service is experienced, supported, and valued across communities and institutions.

To better understand those dynamics, we examined the volunteer ecosystem through FSG's Water of Systems Change framework. These conversations explored not only visible challenges like funding, staffing, technology, and policy, but also the relationships, power dynamics, cultural norms, and underlying assumptions that shape how volunteering functions across communities and institutions.¹²

Mental models — the beliefs and assumptions people hold about who volunteers, how impact is defined, and what purposeful participation should look like — shape everything from how volunteer roles are designed, to what gets funded, to who feels included, valued, or empowered to participate. Many of the tensions explored in this section reflect not only operational challenges, but deeper shifts in how service and civic participation are understood in the United States today.

This section is not meant to suggest that the volunteer ecosystem is broken, or that every tension can or should be fully solved. Some of these tensions are a natural part of a large and evolving field. Others reflect bigger systems challenges that will take time, investment, collaboration, and ongoing learning to address.

Rather than eliminate every point of tension, this strategy aims to make these dynamics more visible so the field can move forward with greater clarity, shared direction, and intentionality and better understand why the goals and recommendations that follow matter.

Before exploring where important tensions emerged, it is worth noting where there was broad agreement. Across sectors and communities, participants consistently affirmed several foundational conditions that must be in place for volunteering to thrive:

Volunteering creates lasting change and benefits for people who serve,

Meaningful experiences and belonging are essential to volunteer engagement,

Organizations need staffing, infrastructure, and long-term investment to effectively engage volunteers,

Service should create real impact for communities and be informed by community voice,

Technology should reduce barriers and expand access, and

Strong volunteer ecosystems depend on collaboration, trust, flexibility, and quality experiences.

Even with broad agreement on these foundational conditions, important questions remained about how the field should move forward. Several recurring tensions emerged throughout the strategy process, reflecting different perspectives on how volunteering should evolve in the years ahead.

These shifts do not represent a rejection of the extraordinary work already happening across communities every day. Rather, they reflect a growing recognition that the future of volunteering will require both continuity and change: investing in what is already working while building new approaches for a rapidly changing world.

Tensions

Evolutions

Throughout this strategy, a core tension centers on the sustainability of organizations that make volunteering possible. Stakeholders consistently recognized organizations as a powerful force for community change, innovation, and civic engagement. At the same time, many organizations described growing expectations to deliver impact while operating within constrained resources and systems that often underinvest in the infrastructure needed to support their work.



We must hold both realities at once: volunteer-engaging organizations are a source of tremendous strength, expertise, and community leadership, and realizing their full potential will require sustained investment in the people, resources, and support systems that make effective volunteer engagement possible.

Another major tension centers on who defines community need and success. Throughout the strategy development process, many participants emphasized that communities themselves should have greater voice in shaping volunteer engagement and defining meaningful impact.



We must embrace a future in which the people closest to community needs have greater influence over how service is designed and evaluated. This will require organizations to intentionally and sustainably elevate community voice and leadership.

A third tension centers on the relationship between volunteer needs and organizational needs. Volunteers are increasingly seeking flexibility, meaning, belonging, and opportunities aligned with their identities, skills, and schedules, while organizations continue to navigate increasing community needs and roles that cannot always be modified to fit volunteer interests.



We must adapt across the ecosystem to address this tension. Organizations will need to create more flexible and meaningful pathways into service, while volunteers need to balance personal preferences with the responsibilities and continuity that effective service often requires.

Finally, stakeholders also raised important questions about the future of workplace (in particular corporate) volunteer programs. Significant changes are underway and have the potential to offer increased participation and investment in communities. With this potential comes the need to balance increased participation with meaningful community outcomes and priorities.



We must ensure that workplace volunteer engagement is developed in partnership with communities and evaluated by the value it creates beyond participation alone.

Principles

The tensions and choices outlined in the previous section do not always have simple or universal answers. Different communities, organizations, and sectors will navigate them differently based on their goals, capacities, and contexts. But throughout the development of this strategy, one thing became consistently clear: how we approach this work matters as much as what we hope to achieve.

These principles are intended to guide how the volunteer ecosystem moves forward together.

As this strategy was developed, stakeholders surfaced new ideas, evolving expectations, and important shifts in how volunteering is understood today. Yet many of the core ideas and principles from the original Reimagining Service initiative continued to resonate just as strongly as they did more than a decade ago. This strategy builds on that original foundation while updating and expanding the principles to reflect the realities, opportunities, and challenges shaping service today.

The following principles are intended to inspire and help guide decision-making, partnership, and implementation throughout the next decade of this work:

1 Collaborate

The volunteer ecosystem is more effective when all sectors participate in its evolution.

Volunteerism is not confined to one sector. Nonprofits, private businesses, faith-based organizations, education, and government all have roles to play. Collaboration across these sectors strengthens the system and increases overall impact.

2 Integrate

Make volunteering a core strategic function, not an add-on.

Volunteers are essential to achieving organizational goals and social missions. Embedding volunteer engagement into core organizational strategy engages stakeholders in advancing shared goals, expands reach, and increases impact. Integrating volunteer engagement also builds capacity for sustainable growth while creating opportunities for purpose, connection, and skill development.

3 Trust

Focus volunteer engagement on true community needs.

Lasting impact depends on understanding what communities need most and aligning volunteer talent to support those goals. Build trust through long-term relationships, shared decision-making, co-creation, and accountability to community-defined priorities.

4 Invest

In order to get a return, you have to invest.

Impact at scale requires investment in the infrastructure, governance, and partnerships that support volunteer engagement. By resourcing community partners and equipping volunteer leaders to build the capacity needed to deliver sustainable, meaningful impact across the ecosystem.

5 Understand

Treat volunteer engagement as a practice of continuous learning and improvement.

As community needs, volunteer expectations, and social challenges change, organizations must listen, learn, and adapt. Measuring what matters creates a foundation for stronger relationships and greater impact.

Key Terminology

Volunteering and service can mean different things to different people. Throughout this strategy, the following terms are used to provide a shared understanding of key concepts. These definitions are intended to support consistency throughout the document while recognizing that volunteering continues to evolve across communities, sectors, and contexts.

Formal Volunteering

The intentional act of freely giving time, skills, or expertise through an organization, institution, program, or coordinated initiative

Informal Volunteering

The intentional act of freely giving time, skills, or expertise directly to individuals, neighbors, or communities outside of a formal organization or program

National Service

A structured term of service through a federal, state, or other designated program in which individuals dedicate sustained time to addressing community needs, often with modest financial support

Community-Centered Volunteering

Volunteer engagement that is informed by community voice, guided by community priorities, and developed in partnership with the people most affected by the work

Purposeful Volunteering

The intentional act of freely giving time and skills to align with community-defined priorities and drive toward transformative impact for individuals, community, and society

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

Volunteer Ecosystem

The interconnected network of people, organizations, institutions, and communities that participate in, support, and shape volunteering and service

Volunteer Infrastructure

The funding, technology, policies, institutions, and support systems that enable people and organizations to participate in community life, volunteering, and collective action



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Our Process

The National Volunteer Strategy was developed over 18 months through a multi-phase research, listening, and co-create process led by Points of Light in partnership with stakeholders across the volunteer ecosystem.

This strategy was intentionally designed to balance research, lived experience, and practical implementation realities. Rather than relying on any single source of input, the process combined quantitative data, qualitative insights, existing literature, and stakeholder expertise to identify the most consistent and actionable patterns across the field.



A more detailed overview of the research process, literature review, surveys, stakeholder engagement, and supporting findings can be found in the [2026 National Volunteer Strategy Progress Report](#).¹

This work was informed by:

18
Months

23

Cross-sector roundtables
and focus groups

>270

Leaders across nonprofit, corporate,
government, faith, youth, technology,
academic and community sectors

NATIONAL SURVEYS

1,207
Individuals

1,116
Organizations

A Role for Everyone

The opportunities and recommendations included throughout this strategy are intended to illustrate potential pathways for action, collaboration, and investment across the volunteer ecosystem — not to be led or owned by one single organization, but coordinated collectively.

Many organizations, communities, and networks are already advancing work aligned with these goals, and realizing the full vision of this strategy will require building on that momentum through shared leadership, partnership, and collective action.

The Role of Points of Light

Strengthening volunteerism at a national scale requires more than individual programs or isolated efforts. Large-scale systems change efforts like this often benefit from a backbone organization — a recognized role in collective impact efforts that helps coordinate action, connect partners, and sustain momentum over time.

Points of Light is committed to serving in that backbone role for Reimagining Service 2035. This does not mean owning or directing all aspects of the work. The focus will be connecting people, organizations, and resources in ways that allow the strategy to grow, evolve, and create meaningful impact over time. At the same time, Points of Light will also directly lead or invest in select initiatives where the organization can contribute unique expertise, capacity, or national reach in support of the broader strategy.

This role builds on Points of Light’s leadership in the original Reimagining Service initiative launched in 2009, which helped elevate volunteer engagement as a strategic driver of social impact across sectors. More than a decade later, Points of Light remains committed to helping strengthen and evolve the volunteer ecosystem for a new era of service and civic life.

As the strategy moves into implementation, Points of Light will manage the structures needed to guide the strategy over time, ensuring that its continued development reflects shared input, learning, and leadership across the volunteer ecosystem.

Strengthening
volunteerism at
a national scale
requires more
than individual
programs or
isolated efforts.



© Lisa Lam

The Role of Different Contributors

Different organizations and individuals have different roles to play in strengthening volunteering. No single sector can accomplish this work alone. The strategy is intentionally designed to encourage greater coordination across organizations and sectors while recognizing that implementation will look different across communities, sizes of organizations, and local contexts.

No single sector
can accomplish
this work alone.

Contributor	Possible Roles
Points of Light	Convene partners, champion volunteering, and steward shared learning
Reimagining Service Coalition	Align priorities, elevate what works, and co-lead action
Volunteers	Contribute time, skills, and leadership while helping shape solutions
Volunteer Action Centers	Coordinate locally, connect partners, and strengthen volunteer infrastructure
Volunteer Engagement Professionals	Design experiences, build capacity, and translate participation into impact
Communities	Shape priorities, co-create solutions, implement partnerships
Employers	Expand participation, invest in communities, and strengthen workplace volunteering
Faith Communities	Mobilize service, foster belonging, and strengthen community care
Institutional Funders & Individual Donors	Invest in infrastructure, strengthen proven approaches, and support innovation
Nonprofits	Engage communities, model practices, and share learning
Public Sector	Shape policy, invest in infrastructure, and strengthen civic participation
Researchers	Generate evidence, understand impact, and identify emerging opportunities
Schools & Universities	Build pathways into service, develop civic leaders, and strengthen community partnerships






U.S. National Volunteer Strategy

The goals and opportunities that follow are intended to provide a shared direction for strengthening volunteering in the United States over the next decade.

They are not meant to function as a rigid blueprint or a centralized work plan owned by any one organization. While Points of Light is committed to serving as a backbone organization for this effort, many organizations and networks across the country are already advancing efforts that align with the goals of this strategy, whether or not they use the language of Reimagining Service 2035. That work matters and contributes to the broader vision this strategy represents.

The opportunities included here are intended to illustrate possible pathways for action, collaboration, and investment across the ecosystem, not prescribe a single model for implementation. As communities test approaches, partnerships evolve, and new insights emerge, those learnings should inform and revise the strategy itself. This roadmap is intended to evolve alongside the field over time.



What it takes
for *purposeful*
volunteering
to thrive

The Strategic Framework (Three Layers)

The National Volunteer Strategy is organized around three interconnected areas that together help explain what it takes for purposeful volunteering to flourish: a thriving ecosystem, transformative impact, and meaningful engagement.

These areas are deeply connected and mutually reinforcing. A thriving ecosystem helps power transformative impact. Transformative impact helps make volunteering more meaningful for the people and communities involved. And meaningful engagement builds the trust, participation, and long-term commitment needed to sustain and strengthen the ecosystem.

A Thriving Ecosystem

Volunteering is supported by the systems, leadership, infrastructure, investment, and partnerships needed to support volunteer engagement over time.

Transformative Impact

Volunteering helps create stronger communities where people are more connected, needs are better met, and change is shaped by those closest to it.

Meaningful Engagement

Volunteer experiences are relational, flexible, and responsive to people's lives and community priorities.

Together, these three areas provide a framework for understanding both what makes volunteering possible and why it matters. The goals and opportunities that follow are organized across these areas while recognizing that many efforts contribute to multiple parts of the framework.



Emerging Opportunities for the Field: Summary

The following summary highlights the major opportunities identified across the strategy's 12 goals. They are intended to help readers navigate the strategy and identify areas of interest. Detailed descriptions, context, and considerations for each opportunity are provided in the goal-specific sections that follow.

A Thriving Ecosystem

What makes volunteering possible

#1: CAPACITY

- Broaden Access to Volunteer Engagement Training
- Advance Career Development for Volunteer Engagement Professionals
- Reinforce Volunteer Engagement as a Strategic Function
- Curate a Shared Volunteer Engagement Resource Hub

#2: INVESTMENT

- Create a Shared Case for Investing in Volunteer Infrastructure
- Launch a Volunteer Infrastructure and Innovation Fund
- Establish Volunteer Infrastructure as a Public Good
- Recognize Volunteer Engagement in Funding Decisions

#3: TECHNOLOGY

- Convene a Working Group on Emerging Technology and AI
- Guide Alignment Between Field Needs and Volunteer Technology Platforms
- Improve Interoperability Across Volunteer Technology Platforms

#4: POLICY

- Collaborate on a Dynamic Policy Agenda for Volunteerism
- Help Organizations Navigate Policy and Participation Barriers

#5: WORKPLACE

- Establish Community Partnership Standards for Workplace Volunteering
- Scale Workplace Volunteering Models for Small Businesses
- Expand Volunteer Access for Harder-to-Reach Employees
- Strengthen Support for Leaders of Workplace Volunteering

Transformative Impact

Why volunteering matters

#6: EVALUATION

- Collaborate Through a Volunteerism Research Network and Hub
- Develop a Volunteer Outcomes and Impact Framework
- Strengthen Volunteer Impact Measurement and Storytelling Across the Field
- Integrate Volunteer Engagement in Public Measures of Organization Impact

#7: CULTURE

- Explore New Narratives on Volunteering for Media and Public Campaigns
- Ignite a Nationwide Movement for Volunteering
- Equip Volunteers to Champion and Share the Value of Volunteering
- Elevate Recognition for Volunteer Service and Leadership

#8: PARTNERSHIP

- Promote Adoption of Community-Centered Volunteer Engagement Practices
- Resource Co-Created Volunteer Engagement Models
- Recognize Organizations Modeling Effective Community-Centered Engagement

#9: LOCAL

- Launch Local Action Coalitions in Partnership with Community Institutions
- Map Volunteer Infrastructure Assets and Gaps Across Regions
- Strengthen Volunteer Infrastructure Organizations as Essential Civic Hubs

Meaningful Engagement

What volunteering looks like

#10: EXPERIENCE

- Define Purposeful Volunteering Frameworks and Standards
- Support Volunteer Growth and Leadership
- Strengthen Faith-Based Entry Points into Volunteering
- Connect Informal and Formal Volunteering Pathways

#11: LIFECYCLE

- Expand Volunteer Engagement Through Educational Institutions
- Connect People to Service Across Life Stages
- Scale Intergenerational Volunteer Programming
- Bridge Volunteering, Workforce Skills, and Career Pathways
- Grow Successful Volunteer Models for Older Adults

#12: ACCESS

- Streamline Volunteer Screening Processes
- Adapt Volunteer Models to Today's Work, Care, and Transportation Realities
- Reimagine Court-Ordered Service as a Civic Pathway



Diving Deep: The Goals & Opportunities

The 12 goals that follow represent key areas of focus for strengthening volunteering in the United States over the next decade. They reflect the wide range of conditions that shape how volunteering happens across communities and institutions.

These goals are intended to function as a shared framework, not a rigid sequence or checklist. Many organizations, networks, and communities are already advancing important work connected to these areas, often in different ways and combinations depending on their mission, capacity, geography, and local context. The goals are also deeply interconnected: progress in one area often strengthens progress in others.

The opportunities included under each goal are grounded in research, stakeholder engagement, existing practices, and emerging models from across the field. At the same time, the strategy is intended to evolve over time. While the goals themselves are designed to provide consistent long-term direction, the specific opportunities, partnerships, and implementation approaches connected to them may continue to adapt as communities test ideas, new evidence emerges, and the volunteer ecosystem continues to evolve.





A Thriving Ecosystem

What makes volunteering possible

Volunteering is supported by the systems, leadership, infrastructure, investment, and partnerships needed to support volunteer engagement over time.

GOALS INCLUDED



CAPACITY



INVESTMENT



TECHNOLOGY



POLICY



WORKPLACE



Capacity

Strengthen Organizations and Their People to Engage Volunteers Effectively

What We Mean

Capacity for volunteer engagement means organizations are equipped, and their people are supported and recognized as credible professionals to engage volunteers as partners in meeting different needs, creating meaningful experiences, and sustaining participation over time.

Why Capacity?

Organizations and volunteer engagement professionals are already creating impactful opportunities for people to serve. Capacity is about strengthening the conditions that allow that work to flourish: skilled leadership, effective practices, useful tools, thoughtful role design, and the organizational commitment needed to engage volunteers as true partners in advancing community impact.

Across focus groups and surveys, stakeholders reinforced that the primary challenge is not volunteer interest, but whether organizations have the structures and support systems needed to translate that interest into meaningful opportunities. While 78% of organizations said volunteers play a major role in achieving their community missions, 42% reported lacking the funding, staff, or capacity needed to engage volunteers consistently and effectively.

Organizations frequently cited a lack of time, training, and systems needed to recruit, onboard, support, and retain volunteers effectively. Broader research also emphasizes that volunteer engagement professionals are often overstretched, undervalued, and operating without clear professional pathways, even as they are responsible for translating public willingness to serve into safe, meaningful, and continued participation.¹³ In another report, nearly half of volunteer managers reported not having enough time to manage engagement effectively.¹⁴

Our major opportunities lie in supporting not just organizations but also the people who lead volunteer engagement. By expanding access to effective and affordable training and tools for organizations while also promoting professional recognition and career pathways for volunteer engagement professionals, we can create better experiences for volunteers and staff, respond more effectively to community needs, and sustain participation over time.

“If volunteerism is a national priority, then volunteer infrastructure must be a national priority. We cannot expect communities to mobilize millions of volunteers without investing in the people, systems and technology that make engagement possible.”

NICOLE R. SMITH, CVA (ASSOCIATION OF LEADERS IN VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Broaden Access to Volunteer Engagement Training

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP



EXPERIENCE



EVALUATION

Invest in scaling evidence-based volunteer engagement trainings and updating existing resources with modern practices so organizations of all sizes have access to a shared baseline of knowledge. Training should be accessible for smaller organizations and groups with limited staff or budgets and help organizations incorporate modernized approaches to volunteer engagement, including meaningful and flexible role design, community co-creation, and other adaptable practices that support sustained volunteer participation.

2. Advance Career Development for Volunteer Engagement Professionals

Connected Goals:



INVESTMENT



CULTURE



POLICY

Partner with credentialing organizations, universities, technical colleges, and field leaders to strengthen career pathways for volunteer engagement professionals. This could include exploring opportunities to recognize volunteer engagement professionals within federal occupational classification systems, elevating shared professional competencies, expanding affordable certification and training options, supporting new or existing academic degree programs, and exploring financial support that makes these pathways more accessible to practitioners and organizations.

3. Reinforce Volunteer Engagement as a Strategic Function

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP



CULTURE



INVESTMENT

Collaborate to help organizations understand how volunteer engagement leaders and volunteer initiatives can be leveraged as strategic, cross-functional drivers of mission impact. This could be a playbook that guides organizations on how to include volunteer engagement perspectives in conversations about programs, fundraising, operations, community partnerships, and impact. It could include case studies, organizational models, and practical guidance for large organizations, small teams, and volunteer-led groups seeking to better align volunteer engagement with mission goals.

4. Curate a Shared Volunteer Engagement Resource Hub

Connected Goals:



TECHNOLOGY



POLICY

Develop a collaborative online resource hub where volunteer-engaging organizations can find, download, and share practical tools with one another to save time and strengthen practices. Maintained by a curator or coordinating partner, the hub could include searchable templates, sample policies and guides, role descriptions, training materials, and other resources contributed by organizations across the field.



Investment

Fund What It Takes for Volunteering to Succeed

What We Mean

Investment means fully funding and supporting what it takes for volunteering to succeed by understanding its true costs, directing resources where they have the greatest impact, and mobilizing public, private, and philanthropic partners to treat volunteering as essential infrastructure for communities.

Why Investment?

When volunteer engagement is properly funded, organizations can move from simply managing volunteer interest to intentionally building systems and experiences that turn that interest into sustained community impact. Investment makes it possible to support skilled volunteer engagement professionals, design meaningful roles, adopt effective tools and technology, measure outcomes, and build the local and national infrastructure needed for volunteering to thrive. Past research from TCC Group found that every \$1 invested in effective volunteer engagement generated an estimated \$3–\$6 in community impact. While the study was published in 2009, it remains a useful benchmark for the return on investing in volunteer infrastructure as we examine today’s labor costs, service demand, and organizational infrastructure needs.¹⁵

With an estimated 2 million nonprofits, civic groups, and public agencies relying on volunteers across the U.S., the potential for volunteers to help tackle major issues — from food insecurity to education access — is enormous.

At the same time, volunteer engagement and infrastructure are chronically underfunded. Only 0.19% of private funding supports volunteer engagement, and recent public funding cuts have further reduced organizations’ ability to mobilize volunteers.¹⁶

Some theorize that a gap between how organizations and funders view the value of volunteers’ contributions derails further investment. In one study, 72.2% of organizations said that volunteers improved the quality of their services, yet only 25.2% of funders agreed.¹⁷

A major opportunity is to strengthen the case for funders to support volunteerism, and increase investment in volunteer engagement in ways that reflect its impact and value.¹⁸ By investing in what it takes for volunteering to succeed — including skilled leadership, practical tools and training, technology, evaluation, accessibility, and local infrastructure — funders, policymakers, businesses, and institutions can help organizations engage volunteers more effectively, expand participation, and strengthen the civic infrastructure communities need to thrive.

“Investment [can] be transformative. Volunteers [can] become a true force multiplier, strengthening community trust, increasing local capacity, and helping shift our work from reactive crisis response to proactive, community-driven solutions.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Create a Shared Case for Investing in Volunteer Infrastructure

Connected Goals:



CAPACITY CULTURE EVALUATION

Develop a public, adaptable case for support that helps organizations speak to why volunteer engagement requires real investment in staffing, systems, training, technology, and evaluation. Designed especially for smaller and community-based organizations, this resource could be tailored for a variety of partners to encourage dialogues that build a shared understanding of what it takes to engage volunteers in effectively creating transformative impact.

2. Launch a Volunteer Infrastructure and Innovation Fund

Connected Goals:



CAPACITY CULTURE EVALUATION ACCESS

Establish a dedicated funding vehicle that provides grants for the people, tools, and systems needed to engage volunteers effectively. Fueled by investments across private, state, and federal funding, grants would support volunteer engagement staff, training and professional development, technology, evaluation, accessibility supports, or other infrastructure needs identified by organizations. The fund could also serve as a shared platform for National Volunteer Strategy coalition partners to coordinate fundraising, attract new investment, and invite funders to make visible commitments to strengthening volunteer infrastructure at scale.

3. Establish Volunteer Infrastructure as a Public Good

Connected Goals:



LOCAL CAPACITY POLICY CULTURE

Build stronger partnerships among philanthropy, local government, volunteer infrastructure organizations, and community partners to prove volunteer infrastructure is a public good — a shared civic asset that benefits entire communities and warrants sustained public and private investment. Drawing inspiration from historic models such as Carnegie's support for public libraries and public investments in early childhood education, this could include studying existing local funding models, identifying promising public-private partnerships, and developing a case for support that helps cities, counties, and other local institutions invest in the systems that make volunteer engagement possible.

4. Recognize Volunteer Engagement in Funding Decisions

Connected Goals:



CAPACITY CULTURE EVALUATION

Provide practical guidance and technical support to help funders incorporate volunteer engagement in grantmaking strategies as a core part of organizational capacity and mission success. This could include inviting applicants to describe how volunteers strengthen organization priorities, reflect community voice, expand public support, or contribute to long-term impact, making it easier for funders to see and support volunteer engagement as central to the work. It could also include developing guidance, case studies, evaluation tools, and grant application questions that help funders better understand both the value volunteers create and the investments required to engage them effectively.



Technology

Advance Technology to Support Modern Volunteering

What We Mean

Technology is critical enabling infrastructure that supports how organizations manage volunteer engagement and how individuals discover and participate in service. To remain effective and relevant, systems must evolve from fragmented tools to integrated, accessible platforms that reduce friction, expand access, and support meaningful participation at scale.

Why Technology?

Over the past few decades, technology has transformed volunteering, making it easier for millions of people to find opportunities, sign up online, and even participate virtually. For organizations, digital tools have helped streamline volunteer scheduling, recruitment, tracking, and communication.

But as expectations change and participation becomes more flexible, distributed, and personalized, the future of volunteering will require technology that does more than digitize old processes. Technology must support broader access, enable deeper engagement, personalize discovery, and better help organizations measure community outcomes.

Today, many organizations still rely on fragmented systems, from spreadsheets to volunteer platforms that do not always integrate well or meet the full needs of modern volunteer engagement. Stakeholders consistently described persistent challenges for volunteers trying to navigate unclear entry points and disconnected platforms. Among organizations surveyed during development of the strategy, 60% said a lack of integration between the systems they use to manage volunteers creates barriers and inefficiencies.

Organizations are also navigating if, when, and how to utilize AI and other emerging technologies to support their volunteer engagement efforts. In one report by the Center for Effective Philanthropy, two-thirds of organizations reported using AI in some aspect of their work, but 56% expressed uncertainty about how to best utilize it.¹⁹ Respondents also voiced concerns around bias in AI algorithms, inaccurate results, and data security. Further

guidance and support for organizations exploring AI use in volunteer engagement is an identified need.

Our major opportunities include not only expanding access to technology that's working but also collaborating across the field to explore approaches where technology can effectively and ethically support personalization, outcomes evaluation, and interoperability.

“

For the true potential of volunteerism to be met, leaders of volunteers need technology solutions that make their work easier, that understands the process, anticipates their needs, and facilitates the connection between volunteers and organizations without requiring work-arounds or duplicated efforts, so they can focus on building strong relationships with volunteers.”

JENNIFER BENNETT (IDEALIST)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Convene a Working Group on Emerging Technology and AI

Connected Goals:



Form a cross-sector working group to explore when and how AI can be used ethically to support effective and meaningful volunteer engagement. This group could examine opportunities to improve personalized volunteer matching, reduce attrition, streamline administrative work, strengthen accessibility, and support better decision-making. The working group could also help identify risks and offer practical guidance for organizations of different sizes.

2. Guide Alignment Between Field Needs and Volunteer Technology Platforms

Connected Goals:



Collaborate with volunteer-engaging organizations, technology partners, and field experts to develop a practical guide for volunteer management system vendors and related platforms. Building on feedback from organizations of different sizes, the guide could identify priority features like stronger analytics, impact measurement, integrations, AI-supported administration, volunteer-role matching, and relationship management tools that help organizations sustain meaningful connections with volunteers over time.

3. Improve Interoperability Across Volunteer Technology Platforms

Connected Goals:



Explore ways to help volunteer platforms and related systems work together more easily, whether through shared standards, voluntary API guidance, universal volunteer applications or single sign-on, or other interoperability approaches. The goal would be to reduce friction for volunteers and organizations by making it easier to share basic information, streamline applications, connect tools, and support coordination across platforms while allowing vendors and organizations to maintain ownership of their systems and data.



Policy

Advocate for Policy that Amplifies Volunteering

What We Mean

Policy shapes the conditions under which participation is possible, scalable, and equitable. Modern policy must align rules, laws, and incentives to remove barriers, unlock investment, and enable volunteerism to grow, adapt, and thrive across communities.

Why Policy?

Policy across institutions and levels of government has a significant impact on how volunteerism succeeds at scale. Policy influences resource allocation, addresses root causes and barriers preventing progress, and can shape service delivery across regions.

In focus groups, stakeholders described how fragmentation, unclear standards, and policies often lag behind how volunteering is evolving for the modern world. The result is more friction for everyone. For example, volunteers face outdated, inefficient screening processes that can make it harder to get involved. In one study, nonprofit leaders cited “regulatory constraints to working with volunteers, such as background checks” and “legal liabilities and associated costs” as challenges affecting their ability to effectively engage volunteers.¹³ In the workplace, legal and compliance concerns can also make employers cautious about expanding employee volunteer programs, including questions about wage-and-hour rules, workers’ compensation, and liability.

Policy related to public investment in volunteerism is an important lever. Funding tools like the federal Volunteer Generation Fund have been created to strengthen local volunteer capacity, but the fund remains limited and is unable to sufficiently invest in the infrastructure needed for expanding and sustaining service. Evidence shows, however, that meaningful public investment has long-term impacts on communities’ ability to sustain volunteer engagement. One study outlined how nonprofits that received support from the federally funded Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program were able to retain volunteers years after the program concluded.²⁰

Across the field, many organizations are working on pieces of these and other policy challenges, but the efforts are still scattered.

A major opportunity lies in creating a clear, unifying policy agenda to help align efforts, reduce unnecessary barriers, support safe and accessible volunteering, and make it easier for communities and organizations to sustain the capacity to grow meaningful volunteer engagement.

“The time to advocate for local, state, federal policies that advance service and volunteerism is now. We, as a field, have the ability to influence the ecosystem volunteering can thrive in. We must do our part in advocating for policies that make volunteering more accessible, safeguards communities, and aids the organizations that are facilitating service.”

ALLI ZUEL (AMERICA’S SERVICE COMMISSIONS)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Collaborate on a Dynamic Policy Agenda for Volunteerism

Connected Goals:



INVESTMENT WORKPLACE ACCESS LOCAL

Form a cross-sector policy task force to regularly identify policy windows, emerging trends, and priority actions to strengthen volunteer infrastructure and expand access and participation. Rather than producing a static list of recommendations, the task force could maintain a dynamic policy agenda and develop adaptable policy resources for governors, mayors, agency leaders, legislators, funders, and other decision-makers. This agenda could examine timely issues at the federal, state, and local levels such as expanding the Volunteer Generation Fund, understanding how SNAP work requirements affect volunteers and organizational capacity, and pursuing formal federal recognition of volunteer engagement occupations. Together, these efforts could help leaders act when opportunities arise to identify and align funding, standards, incentives, and public leadership around the systems needed for volunteering to grow.

2. Help Organizations Navigate Policy and Participation Barriers

Connected Goals:



ACCESS CAPACITY LIFECYCLE PARTNERSHIP

Create a practical guide to help organizations identify and reduce barriers that may prevent people from volunteering. It could include modernized guidance on risk, liability, reimbursement, accessible volunteer design, and relevant compliance considerations, along with adaptable templates and case studies that help organizations expand access while managing responsibilities appropriately.



Workplace

Align Workplace Volunteering with Community Needs

What We Mean

Workplace leverages the reach, resources, and people across institutions (business, government, academia, etc.) to invest in and co-create volunteering with communities – expanding employee participation while delivering meaningful, community-defined impact.

Why Workplace?

Workplace volunteering is already a powerful lever for increasing volunteering nationwide, with some reports indicating over half of businesses engage in or support some kind of employee volunteering.²¹

Despite current levels of participation, stakeholders in our focus groups highlighted how workplace volunteering is not yet meeting its full potential for community impact.

Corporate social responsibility leaders and nonprofits both noted persistent misalignment between workplace volunteering programs and community needs. This sentiment was echoed in Benevity's *State of Corporate Volunteering 2026* report, which found that despite an increase in the volume of workplace volunteer hours, only about 20% of nonprofits supported by these initiatives felt they contributed meaningfully to long-term capacity and impacts.²²

Workplace volunteering extends beyond the corporate sector alone. Universities, hospitals, government agencies, and other institutions all play important roles in connecting people to service through the workplace. Nonprofit organizations occupy a particularly unique position within this ecosystem: many are both employers and the primary hosts and coordinators of volunteer engagement. As a result, nonprofits often experience workplace volunteering differently, balancing the opportunities created by external volunteer partnerships with the staffing, infrastructure, and community relationship demands required to support them effectively.

There is a central challenge for the field: how to design and uplift workplace volunteer programs that galvanize employee participation, while also meaningfully advancing community-defined needs.

Our opportunities are many. They include but are not limited to supporting how workplace volunteer programs build partnerships with nonprofits and communities, investing in co-created approaches, better resourcing CSR and workplace volunteer program leaders, and providing tools that help employers evaluate the results of these programs for both their workplace and the communities in which they operate. With the right support and partnerships, workplace volunteering can move toward deeper, more strategic engagement that works for communities, employees, and businesses alike.

“

The workplace holds a vast pipeline of volunteer talent for communities, and if directed and deployed in a strategic and community-informed way, they can create value for society, employees and the companies that enable this type of thoughtful engagement.”

BOBBI SILTEN (FSG)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Establish Community Partnership Standards for Workplace Volunteering

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP CAPACITY INVESTMENT

Build on existing dialogue to create and scale a national standard and practical toolkit that defines what responsible and community-oriented workplace volunteering can look like across workplaces of different sizes, sectors, and structures. Leaning into the principles driving this strategy, this effort could help guide workplaces in designing volunteer initiatives that are aligned with community needs, better capitalize on skills-based and pro bono service, appropriately resourced, and connected to broader organizational purpose.

2. Scale Workplace Volunteering Models for Small Businesses

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP LOCAL

Identify and develop support for effective workplace volunteering models that are realistic for small businesses, small agencies, and other “small shop” workplaces with limited staff, time, or infrastructure. In partnership with chambers of commerce, volunteer action centers, and local nonprofits, this effort could help smaller employers understand how to participate in meaningful, community-aligned ways that fit their capacity.

3. Expand Volunteer Access for Harder-to-Reach Employees

Connected Goals:



ACCESS EXPERIENCE

Collaborate to develop a resource guide that helps workplaces expand access to volunteering for employees who are often harder to reach through traditional programs, including remote, nightshift, frontline, off-site, or hourly workers. This could include guidance, case studies, and messaging for HR and leadership on policies and formats such as paid volunteer time, employee-led volunteering, flexible scheduling, and other approaches that make participation more accessible across the workforce.

4. Strengthen Support for Leaders of Workplace Volunteering

Connected Goals:



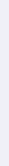
INVESTMENT EVALUATION PARTNERSHIP CULTURE

Partner with field leaders to strengthen support systems for the people who drive and champion workplace volunteering. This could include expanding peer communities, sharing business case and ROI tools, policy examples, staffing and program models, and resources for those who formally and informally support employee engagement.

Main
Out patients



George Eliot
Hospital Charity
make the difference
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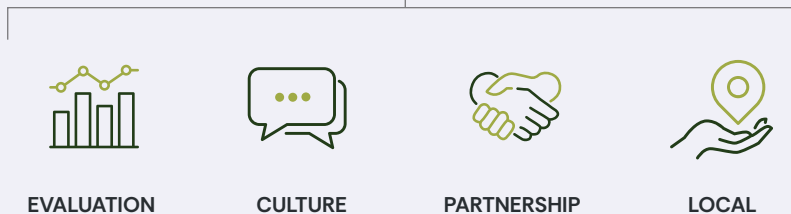
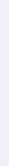


Transformative Impact

Why volunteering matters

Volunteering helps create stronger communities where people are more connected, needs are better met, and change is shaped by those closest to it.

GOALS INCLUDED





Evaluation

Measure and Show the Difference Volunteering Makes

What We Mean

Evaluation ensures that the impact of volunteering is visible, credible, and actionable. It requires moving beyond basic outputs to capture meaningful outcomes – enabling organizations, funders, and policymakers to understand what works, improve effectiveness, and invest with confidence.

Why Evaluation?

Improving evaluation and measurement of volunteer engagement is perhaps one of the biggest levers for changing how society understands and supports volunteerism.

Survey responses found that while 85% of organizations track volunteer hours, only 31% track community outcomes. A significant part of the challenge is that the impact of volunteering is broad, varied, and hard to capture simply. Its impact includes but is not limited to higher quality services, deeper civic trust, better outcomes for the people served, and meaningful growth and connection for volunteers themselves.

Yet many organizations do not have affordable tools, staff time, or training to measure that full picture. When asking organizations about their main barriers to more deeply evaluating the impact of their volunteer engagement, they reported a need for more training on measuring and communicating impact (54%), technology with better analytics capabilities (48%), capacity constraints (40%), more easy-to-use measurement tools (35%), and clear measurement frameworks (30%).

Our challenge here is to scale or develop solutions that are useful, realistic, and affordable. At the same time, guidance must be actionable while honoring the vast diversity of volunteer activities and experiences. Without these solutions, volunteering’s full impact remains harder to see, harder to improve, and harder to fund.

Our major opportunities lie in investing in better tools, training, and shared knowledge and structures to help organizations measure what matters most and tell the compelling story of volunteering beyond hours logged.

“

For decades, we’ve limited volunteer reporting to numbers, hours, and financial values, obscuring other ways to capture the essential ways that volunteers contribute to causes and community. This narrow approach has left volunteerism underappreciated and under-resourced. The answer isn’t just more data, but meaningful data that tell the full story of volunteerism and its worthiness as an investment.”

DR. SUE CARTER KAHL (POINTS OF LIGHT)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Collaborate Through a Volunteerism Research Network and Hub

Connected Goals:



Bring together researchers, academic institutions, funders, practitioners, and data partners to identify priority gaps in volunteerism research, conduct baseline studies, and support new research that can strengthen the field, particularly in communicating the impact of volunteering. This effort could also create a searchable online hub that makes existing research and data easier to find. Together, the network and hub would help expand shared understanding of issues such as the connections between volunteering and belonging, social trust, civic health, and community resilience.

2. Develop a Volunteer Outcomes and Impact Framework

Connected Goals:



Develop a flexible volunteer outcomes library and simple online tools to help organizations better measure and communicate the many ways volunteering creates value. Rather than setting one rigid standard, the library could offer adaptable outcome categories, sample indicators, optional measures, and real-world examples that organizations can tailor to their mission, community, volunteer model, and capacity. This would help organizations move beyond basic outputs, such as hours served, toward clearer evidence of impact, while also contributing to a broader national picture of the value of volunteering over time.

3. Strengthen Volunteer Impact Measurement and Storytelling Across the Field

Connected Goals:



Partner with experts and funders to expand access to training that helps organizations collect, understand, and communicate the full value of volunteering through both data and stories. This could include practical support on framing volunteer contributions, collecting meaningful evidence, communicating impact ethically, and using findings to strengthen volunteer engagement, funding, and public understanding.

4. Integrate Volunteer Engagement in Public Measures of Organization Impact

Connected Goals:



Partner with nonprofit information and charity rating websites to give organizations an opportunity to share how volunteers contribute to their mission. This could include low-lift options to highlight volunteer metrics, stories, and infrastructure needs to potential supporters visiting their profile pages on these widely used sites. Over time, this additional visibility could help donors and the public understand the connection between volunteer engagement and community impacts without creating burdensome reporting requirements.



Culture

Change How We Talk About and Value Volunteering

What We Mean

Culture shapes how people understand, value, and see themselves in service. It requires using language and storytelling that resonate with diverse communities, creating opportunities for individuals to move from passive to active participation, and normalizing volunteering as part of civic identity and leadership.

Why Culture?

Volunteering thrives when communities, institutions, and civic systems actively make it visible, valued, and accessible. Stronger narratives can help people recognize service not only as charity or a formal activity, but as a meaningful expression of civic identity, belonging, agency, and shared responsibility.

Today, many public narratives about volunteering still lean on outdated assumptions: that volunteering is “free,” that only some people can help while others are helped, or that only people with certain time, income, credentials, or life circumstances can participate. Public narratives, especially in media, often focus on traditional portrayals of volunteering (e.g., hands-on service at a soup kitchen, packing donations, or building homes). Though important, these representations capture only a small portion of how people volunteer today. Some narratives even lean into a harmful and limiting caricature of service — one in which volunteering primarily functions as a punishment or volunteers are more trouble than they’re worth.

We must develop and highlight narratives around volunteering that are broad, modern, and connected to peoples’ lived realities. For example, a recent report found that many Gen Z volunteers are driven by connection, skill building, and career growth,²³ while older adults and retirees may connect more deeply to messages about purpose and continued contribution to their communities. Generational differences are only one part of the picture. Rather than trying to identify a single cultural narrative around volunteering, stakeholder feedback points to a need to better understand what language, stories, messengers, and invitations will resonate across different communities, cultures, and life experiences.

However, strengthening public narrative alone is only one step. One poll noted that 36% of U.S. adults said they wanted to volunteer but did not, with 54% citing they were unsure how to participate, and 51% saying they had not been invited or encouraged.²⁴ These findings point to both a cultural opportunity and activation gap: people may be open to volunteering, but they need clearer entry points. They also need invitations from people they trust, more visible examples of how to begin, and what service looks like.

Participants in focus groups also emphasized that the people and organizations who make volunteering possible are often missing from the stories we tell about service. Even when narratives celebrate volunteers showing up, they rarely show the planning, coordination, training, partnerships, and support that make those moments possible. When these behind-the-scenes stories are left out, it makes it easier to undervalue the investment needed to make volunteering meaningful and impactful.

Our opportunities are to broaden public understanding of what service looks like today, inspire people to take their first step into action, recognize the individuals and organizations that sustain volunteer engagement, and equip trusted messengers to share more stories about what volunteering looks like today and why more people should get involved.

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Explore New Narratives on Volunteering for Media and Public Campaigns

Connected Goals:



LIFECYCLE EXPERIENCE INVESTMENT EVALUATION

Launch a messaging initiative to research and test new ways of talking about volunteering that resonate across different audiences. Once tested, messaging could be paired with outreach campaigns tackling a number of topics, from the many ways volunteering shows up in community life, to highlighting the important role of volunteer engagement professionals and volunteer action centers, to helping organizations strengthen internal understanding of volunteers as strategic partners in mission impact. Partnerships with TV shows, brands, influencers, and others could integrate resonant stories and messaging into media and public campaigns.

2. Ignite a Nationwide Movement for Volunteering

Connected Goals:



CAPACITY LOCAL ACCESS EXPERIENCE

As the infrastructure, systems, and pathways needed to support volunteering are strengthened, launch a bold national campaign that inspires more people across the United States to volunteer and connects them to meaningful opportunities to serve. While participation alone is not the goal of this strategy, helping more people find meaningful ways to serve remains an important outcome. This campaign could bring together national media, cross-sector partners, community institutions, and trusted messengers to elevate volunteering as a visible and valued part of American life. Tested narratives could help people move from inspiration to action through clear, welcoming, and impactful ways to contribute.

3. Equip Volunteers to Champion and Share the Value of Volunteering

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP EXPERIENCE INVESTMENT LOCAL

Create a guide that helps organizations invite current volunteers to share their experiences and raise awareness about the value of volunteering in their communities. This could include story prompts, talking points, sample messages, and easy actions volunteers can take to broaden public understanding of what volunteering looks like, support recruitment, and advocate for the funding and infrastructure needed to engage volunteers well. These stories could also contribute to a national story bank that reflects the many ways people serve across communities.

4. Elevate Recognition for Volunteer Service and Leadership

Connected Goals:



INVESTMENT LOCAL

Explore how high-profile national recognition efforts could help galvanize greater participation and public support for volunteering. This could include strengthening the visibility and influence of existing volunteer service awards, while also expanding recognition for cities, regions, organizations, and local leaders that are building strong cultures of volunteerism.

“**Volunteering rarely scales because someone delivered the right message. It scales when culture shifts, when communities come to see volunteering as simply part of who they are. That’s the deeper work: not persuading people to volunteer, but reshaping the norms that make it second nature.**”

DERRICK FELDMANN (AD COUNCIL)



Partnership

Center Communities in How Solutions Are Built

What We Mean

Community-centered volunteering ensures that community voice, priorities, and leadership shape how volunteer efforts are designed and delivered. It requires shifting from top-down models to shared power—where solutions are co-created with communities, not for them.

Why Partnership?

When volunteer initiatives are designed with communities, they create more transformative impact. Community-centered volunteering helps ensure that service and solutions are shaped by the people closest to the needs, making volunteer efforts more relevant and effective.

One challenge centers around how to make community voice, volunteer agency, and shared leadership a more common and integrated approach to volunteer engagement at scale. Building authentic community partnerships often requires time, trust, relationship-building, and a willingness to share decision-making power. While some forms of volunteering can be organized quickly, meaningful community engagement is rarely a one-time activity and often develops through sustained relationships over time.

In focus groups and survey feedback, organizations noted a strong desire to adopt more community-centered volunteer approaches but expressed constraints in putting them into practice. Specifically, 50% of organizations said more staff time or capacity would help them gather community input to design volunteer approaches, and 30% said more training or guidance in community-centered planning or partnership-building would help them realize these shifts. Moving toward more community-centered approaches requires not only resources, but organizational commitment to building and maintaining relationships with communities over time.

A major opportunity is collaborating with organizations, practitioners, and experts to equip organizations and community leaders with the training, tools, time, partnerships, and support to co-create volunteer efforts with communities, building trust and improving outcomes across the field.

“

By reframing volunteerism around who and what we are serving, rather than what we personally gain, we strengthen trust, effectiveness, and long-term commitment across the field.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Promote Adoption of Community-Centered Volunteer Engagement Practices

Connected Goals:



Partner with community-centered volunteering experts to expand access to training, technical support, and practical tools for organizations exploring or deepening community-centered approaches. This could include funding additional training offerings, creating or elevating existing frameworks or guides, and sharing language organizations can use to explain the value of co-create to staff, partners, and funders.

2. Resource Co-Created Volunteer Engagement Models

Connected Goals:



Help organizations and community partners test or grow volunteer engagement approaches co-created with the people and communities most affected by the work. This could include grants that support the time, relationships, facilitation, and implementation support needed to move from community input to shared action.

3. Recognize Organizations Modeling Effective Community-Centered Engagement

Connected Goals:



Create recognition opportunities for organizations and community partners that are demonstrating strong community-centered volunteer engagement practices. This could include developing case studies, conference visibility, awards, and thought leadership opportunities that elevate the value of these approaches and model practical examples others can learn from and adapt.



Local

Invest in Place-Based and Rural Volunteering

What We Mean

Place-based volunteering recognizes that participation depends on local infrastructure, relationships, and context. Every community — especially those historically under-resourced — must have the organizations, networks, and support needed for volunteerism to take root, grow, and be sustained over time.

Why Local?

Volunteering is grounded in local relationships, infrastructure, trust, and context. National and state strategies can set direction and align investment, but participation ultimately happens in communities through local organizations, neighborhood networks, schools, faith communities, workplaces, and civic leaders who understand the conditions on the ground.

The conditions that support volunteerism vary across the country. AmeriCorps and U.S. Census data show wide variation in formal volunteering rates across localities and states, highlighting how participation is shaped by place-based factors such as local infrastructure, community norms, access to opportunities, and organizational capacity.⁸

Across focus groups and surveys, stakeholders reinforced the notion that structural barriers to volunteering (e.g., transportation, infrastructure, and economic constraints) limit participation in varying ways depending on geographical context, especially for youth and underrepresented communities.

Trends for both formal and informal volunteering look different across regions. Community context especially matters in shaping volunteer participation across rural and urban places.²⁵ We know that a successful strategy can't rely on one-size-fits-all approaches, which are unlikely to work across all communities.

Our major opportunity is to better understand and support the local conditions that allow volunteerism to grow and last. This means investing in place-based infrastructure, especially in historically under-resourced communities; supporting local volunteer action centers, nonprofits, networks, and community leaders; and adapting strategies to the relationships, assets, barriers, and culture of each place. By pairing national coordination with strong local leadership and infrastructure, the field can ensure that every community has the support needed for volunteerism to take root, respond to local needs, and contribute to sustained social progress.

“

[We must get] people volunteering at the most local level, with [their] neighborhoods and communities. In neighborhood-based groups, people can engage more directly, see direct impact, and be more likely to stay involved.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Launch Local Action Coalitions in Partnership with Community Institutions

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP CAPACITY INVESTMENT WORKPLACE

Form regional or local coalitions that bring together community organizations, government, faith groups, businesses, volunteers, and other partners to further the goals of the National Volunteer Strategy. With support from a backbone organization (e.g., volunteer action center, state service commission, or local intermediary), each coalition could identify priority goals, host cross-sector co-create sessions, create an action plan, and pilot or expand local efforts that strengthen volunteer engagement in the community.

2. Map Volunteer Infrastructure Assets and Gaps Across Regions

Connected Goals:



INVESTMENT PARTNERSHIP CAPACITY TECHNOLOGY

Partner with communities to identify where volunteer infrastructure is strong, where gaps exist, and what kinds of support are most needed. This could include assessing local assets and needs related to funding, technology, training, coordination, leadership, and community partnerships, then working with community leaders to co-create investment strategies that strengthen volunteer infrastructure where it is needed most.

3. Strengthen Volunteer Infrastructure Organizations as Essential Civic Hubs

Connected Goals:



CAPACITY INVESTMENT PARTNERSHIP CULTURE

Invest in the long-term health and sustainability of volunteer action centers and other community-based volunteer infrastructure organizations that serve as local hubs for volunteer engagement, cross-sector collaboration, and civic participation. This could include leadership development for executive leaders, board development and governance training, peer learning networks, organizational health assessments and benchmarking tools, succession planning support, and other efforts that help local volunteer infrastructure organizations thrive and expand their impact.





Meaningful Engagement

What volunteering looks like

Volunteer experiences are relational, flexible,
and responsive to people's lives and real
community priorities.

GOALS INCLUDED





Experience

Design Volunteering that Meets People Where They Are and Drives Impact

What We Mean

Experience means moving beyond one-size-fits-all models to design volunteering that is meaningful, flexible, and relevant to people’s lives – recognizing informal and formal participation alike, and creating experiences that build connection, purpose, belonging, and a sense of agency while driving real community impact.

Why Experience?

When volunteering is meaningful, flexible, relational, and clearly tied to community needs, people are more likely to return over time and see themselves as part of something larger than a single act of service.

Stakeholder feedback continuously reinforced how participation depends on fit: how well opportunities work within people’s lives, whether organizations are equipped to engage them, and whether the experience cultivates purpose, belonging, and impact.

Our challenge is that many volunteer models were built for a different era than the one people and organizations are navigating today. Many people want to serve, but they are looking for opportunities that fit real-life constraints, offer flexibility, and in some cases, enable them to grow and lead. And in an increasingly disconnected world, belonging is also taking center stage; 44% of respondents in our community survey shared how they had decided not to sign up to volunteer at some point because they were unsure they would feel like they belonged.

At the same time, organizations are trying to meet community needs, fill essential roles, and retain volunteers with limited resources. Despite these challenges, organizations still see the potential and need for cultivating connection and belonging in volunteer experiences. In our organization survey, 45% of respondents said more opportunities for volunteers to build community and connect with one another would help strengthen retention.

Navigating the mismatch between what volunteers are seeking and what organizations need is not new. But across the country, organizations are already experimenting with more flexible, relational, and impact-centered models of service. We have an opportunity now to learn from those examples, scale what works, and support organizations in designing volunteer experiences that work for both organizations and people who want to help today.

“Meeting volunteers where they are by creating meaningful relationships and opportunities that fit their lives and connecting them to a clear sense of purpose and impact is crucial. Expanding participation in service will require more than creating opportunities—it will require designing experiences that people want to return to, grow within, and champion.”

DEIRDRE MCGINLEY-GIESER (MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Define Purposeful Volunteering Frameworks and Standards

Connected Goals:



CAPACITY PARTNERSHIP ACCESS

Provide guidance that organizations can use to design volunteer experiences that are meaningful, flexible, and community-centered. This could include open self-assessment tools, design guides, training, and recognition opportunities that help organizations reflect on their practices and strengthen the volunteer experience over time.

2. Support Volunteer Growth and Leadership

Connected Goals:



PARTNERSHIP LOCAL ACCESS CAPACITY CULTURE

Help organizations integrate volunteer growth and leadership pathways in opportunities to deepen volunteer engagement. This could include expanding or developing tools, trainings, and scalable “volunteer stewardship” program models that support the volunteer journey from first-time experiences to leading a project, mentoring others, or serving on a board. Designing journeys to include learning and reflection would help volunteers better understand the communities they serve and connect their service to broader community outcomes, making volunteering more meaningful for participants while strengthening organizational capacity and volunteer retention.

3. Strengthen Faith-Based Entry Points into Volunteering

Connected Goals:



LOCAL LIFECYCLE ACCESS PARTNERSHIP

Deepen partnerships with faith institutions and interfaith networks to strengthen community-rooted entry points into volunteering. Faith communities often hold deep relationships, local credibility, physical space, and a long tradition of service, making them important partners in expanding participation and connecting people to meaningful opportunities. This could include but is not limited to supporting opportunities for collaboration between faith institutions, nonprofits, volunteer action centers, and public-sector partners to share learning, improve coordination, and align service efforts.

4. Connect Informal and Formal Volunteering Pathways

Connected Goals:



ACCESS CULTURE PARTNERSHIP

Help people move more easily between the informal ways they already support their communities and formal volunteer opportunities, while also helping organizations support informal community action. In practice, this could include creating low-barrier “try it” opportunities that invite neighbors into an organization’s work, partnering with mutual aid groups or neighborhood leaders to offer resources and referrals, equipping volunteers to organize community-led projects, or helping people who begin through informal service connect to ongoing roles when they choose to. By creating more pathways between informal and formal service, we recognize the ways informal service can strengthen organizations and organizations can strengthen community-led service.



Lifecycle

Support Participation for All Ages and Life Stages

What We Mean

Participation over a lifetime means volunteering is designed to evolve with people across life stages – starting with strong early entry points for young people and continuing with pathways that adapt to changing needs and build skills, opportunity, and sustained engagement over time.

Why Lifecycle?

A lifecycle approach recognizes that people do not volunteer in the same way at every age or stage; their time, motivations, responsibilities, social networks, and access points shift as they move through school, work, caregiving, parenting, retirement, and other transitions.

A volunteer journey that begins at a young age shapes how people see their own ability to contribute throughout their lives. It is especially powerful when young people are given voice, agency, and leadership — not just invited to participate, but trusted to help define problems, design solutions, make decisions, and reflect on what they are learning. In those moments, volunteering becomes more than an activity; it becomes a formative experience that builds confidence, belonging, civic identity, and a lasting expectation of contribution.²⁶

However, rather than separating youth and older adults into distinct categories, a lifecycle approach recognizes that volunteering is cumulative. Early experiences can shape long-term habits and identity, while later experiences build on the skills, relationships, and commitments developed over time.

Our challenge is to gain a better understanding of how volunteering looks at different milestones.

Volunteering is shaped not only by individual motivation, but by the influences, institutions, and social networks people have access to at different life stages. For example, students may encounter service through schools, campuses, service-learning, clubs, internships, and peer networks; parents may be invited through children's schools and community activities; working age adults may be reached through workplace programs; and older adults

may engage through retirement, faith, senior-serving, or neighbor-helping networks. Major life transitions can serve as entry points to service, such as starting school, becoming a parent, transitioning from military service to civilian life, or moving to a new town, among others.²⁷ Research shows that volunteering patterns vary by age, family status, and social connections, which fluctuate throughout one's life.⁵

Expanding volunteerism will require different approaches to designing opportunities, recruitment, and overcoming barriers. For example, according to research from Youth Service America's (YSA) New Era initiative, younger adults face unique barriers such as lack of viable opportunities, equitable resources, knowledge and skills, or sense of agency.²⁸ Stakeholder feedback in focus groups and surveys highlighted how midlife adults are more likely to face caregiving and family-related challenges. And research from the Do Good Institute highlights a need to adapt our approaches, because the volunteering behaviors of past generations are evolving with delays in other life milestones or demographic shifts in our current population.²⁹

If our aspiration is to build sustained volunteer participation and a stronger civic culture, **our opportunity** is to structure volunteering as a lifelong journey rather than a single event — and to consider how the institutions people move through over time, from schools and universities to workplaces and retirement communities, can serve as stewards of that journey.³⁰

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Expand Volunteer Engagement Through Educational Institutions

Connected Goals:



Strengthen infrastructure and partnerships that make meaningful volunteer engagement a more integrated part of K–12 and higher education. Starting as early as elementary and middle school, this could include expanding student service models like service–learning that emphasize youth agency, leadership, and problem–solving, and facilitate reflection and skill building. To adequately resource youth service and organizations, this could also include providing more funding for organization hosts, school–community partnerships, and designated coordination roles, and expanding transportation access.

2. Connect People to Service Across Life Stages

Connected Goals:



Coordinate with researchers, practitioners, and other experts to develop a framework that helps organizations engage volunteers during different life stages. This could map common volunteer needs and motivations across different age groups or milestone moments such as leaving school, starting a family, changing careers, or retiring, and offer sample recruitment, engagement, and retention strategies organizations can adapt for different groups.

“Service isn’t a phase of life, but a thread that should run through all of it for every American. When we treat volunteering at different life stages as separate tracks, we miss the opportunity to build lifelong pathways to service.”

ALEX EDGAR (MADE BY US)

3. Scale Intergenerational Volunteer Programming

Connected Goals:



Examine and invest in models that bring people of different generations together through meaningful volunteer service. This could include investing in expanding existing programs, developing case studies, sharing the benefits for volunteers and communities, and supporting more organizations in designing intergenerational opportunities that build connection, learning, and shared problem–solving across age groups.

4. Bridge Volunteering, Workforce Skills, and Career Pathways

Connected Goals:



Partner with higher education, workforce organizations, employers, government, and technology platforms to make skills developed through volunteering more visible, recognized, and transferable. Equip volunteers with tools to translate their experiences into workforce–ready competencies and help employers better understand volunteer experience as a legitimate source of skills, leadership, and civic contribution.

5. Grow Successful Volunteer Models for Older Adults

Connected Goals:



Identify and invest in successful volunteer engagement models that support older adults in contributing their skills, experience, and leadership. This could include learning from regional, federal, and independent models to identify barriers to growth, equipping organizations to effectively support these volunteers, and efforts to scale promising approaches across communities.



Access

Remove Barriers So Everyone Can Volunteer

What We Mean

Access means removing the systemic, logistical, and policy barriers that limit participation so that volunteering is truly within reach for everyone and not just those with the time, resources, or flexibility to take part.

Why Access?

Reducing barriers to volunteering can unlock participation for millions of people, making service a broader opportunity for agency, belonging, community leadership, and shared problem-solving.

Research reinforces that access barriers are often tied to life circumstance, not lack of interest. For example, a 2026 peer-reviewed study found that people with lower income or wealth may face barriers including costs of volunteering, transportation, health challenges, caregiving responsibilities, disability, and limited prior volunteer experience.³¹

In another example, we see how access may be shaped by caregiving responsibilities that fall heavily on adults in midlife. AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving estimate that 63 million U.S. adults now provide ongoing care, including 16 million “sandwich generation” caregivers balancing care for both adults and children.³² These realities underscore why expanding access to volunteering requires models that account for caregiving, financial strain, transportation, health, and other life circumstances that affect who can realistically participate.

These sentiments echoed across our own focus groups and surveys. Stakeholders also described fragmented systems and geographic disparities that make it harder for people to get involved even when they are motivated to serve. Organizations also face administrative and policy-related barriers, such as a lack of systems to streamline background checks, regulatory constraints, and legal liabilities — all challenges that increase friction for volunteer engagement.

We have an opportunity to identify, test, and scale models that clear the way for volunteering, mitigate transportation barriers and costs to participate, and expand tools that help organizations reduce friction without compromising community impact.

“

If we are serious about being a nation where everyone has the opportunity to serve, our strategy must include those who most need to belong and give back.”

-RACHEL CURRIE TRISKA (VOLUNTEERNOW)

Emerging Opportunities for the Field

1. Streamline Volunteer Screening Processes

Connected Goals:



Build on existing field dialogue on this subject to expand solutions that reduce unnecessary friction in volunteer screening while maintaining appropriate safeguards. This could include developing or expanding nationally aligned, risk-tiered screening frameworks, standardized policies, templates, and implementation guidance that organizations can adapt within their existing systems, while also exploring ways to lower costs, reuse recent checks where appropriate, and better understand barriers to broader screening coordination.

2. Adapt Volunteer Models to Today’s Work, Care, and Transportation Realities

Connected Goals:



Identify, test, and scale volunteer engagement models for people whose work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, transportation options, or other realities make traditional volunteer opportunities difficult to access. This includes helping organizations and local partners pilot or expand models for flexible scheduling, family-friendly opportunities, transportation partnerships where mobility is a barrier, caregiving supports, neighborhood-based service options, and other approaches that make participation more feasible, strengthening the experience of volunteers without compromising the quality of service provided to communities.

3. Reimagine Court-Ordered Service as a Civic Pathway

Connected Goals:



Explore models that turn court-ordered service from a compliance task into a more structured and meaningful pathway into civic participation. With appropriate funding for participating organizations, these models could include clearer service pathways, stronger onboarding processes, better placement tools, training and skill building, and next-step opportunities such as skills recognition, workforce connections, and future volunteer leadership opportunities.

The Path to 2035

Reimagining service is long-term work. Achieving this vision will require **sustained collaboration**, investment, experimentation, and adaptation across the volunteer ecosystem over the next decade.

No single organization, sector, or initiative can accomplish this work alone. Progress will depend on building shared ownership and coordinated action across communities, nonprofits, businesses, governments, philanthropy, volunteer engagement professionals, and civic institutions.

This roadmap is intended to evolve over time. As new research emerges, partnerships grow, and communities test new approaches, the strategy will continue to adapt alongside the changing realities of service and civic life in the United States.

The timeline that follows outlines key phases through 2035:

2026 → 2029

Laying the Foundation

Focus: Coalition-building, infrastructure, pilots, and alignment

2030 → 2032

Scaling What Works

Focus: Scaling promising models and strengthening ecosystem alignment

2033 → 2035

Igniting the Movement

Focus: Long-term sustainability, cultural normalization, and systems change

3-Year Action Plan (through 2029)

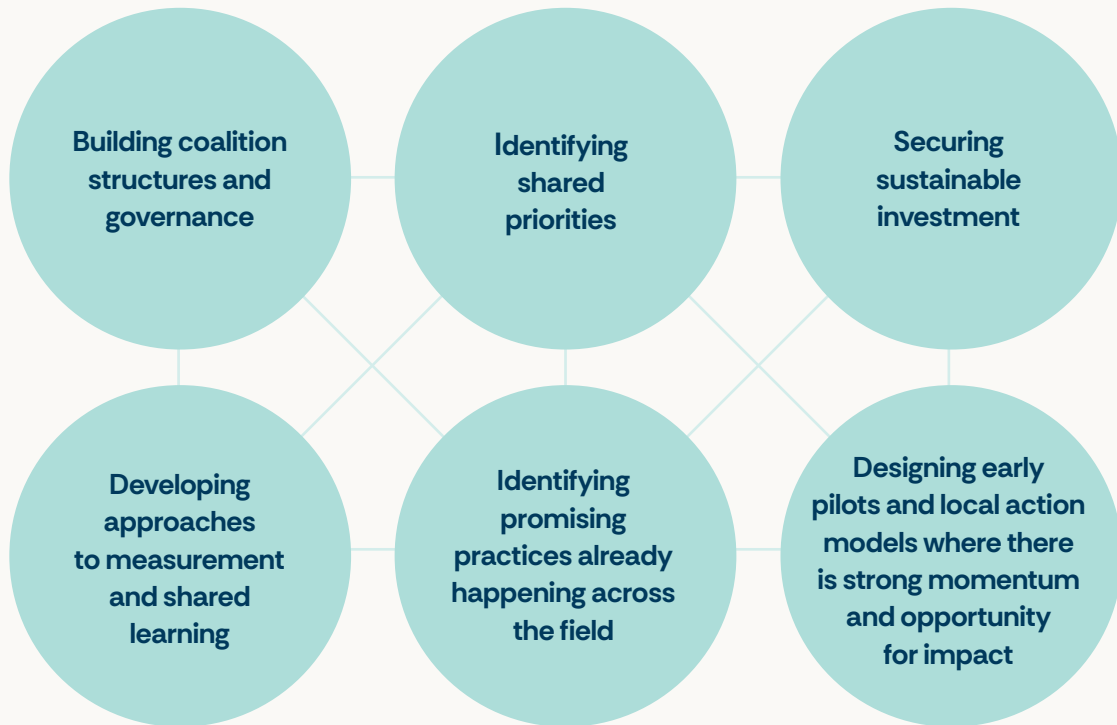
Publishing this strategy is not the end of the process; rather, it's the beginning of a new phase of work.

Developing the National Volunteer Strategy required significant time for research, listening, relationship-building, and alignment across a diverse ecosystem of stakeholders. Implementation will require the same level of intentionality, coordination, and long-term commitment.

Large-scale systems efforts like this often benefit from a backbone organization: an entity that helps convene partners, coordinate across sectors, maintain shared

direction, support communication and learning, and sustain momentum over time. Points of Light is committed to serving in that backbone role for Reimagining Service 2035. At the same time, this work cannot and should not be owned by a single organization. Progress will depend on shared leadership, investment, experimentation, and collaboration across the volunteer ecosystem.

Over the next six months early efforts will focus on building the conditions needed for long-term implementation. This includes:



Particular emphasis will be placed on local implementation and partnership.

While this strategy is national in scope, meaningful change ultimately happens within communities. Early efforts will likely include local action coalitions and community-based pilots designed to translate national priorities into local action, learning, and adaptation. Further coordination and mapping of current efforts will occur in partnership with states.

2027 → 2029

The following priorities represent several areas where Points of Light, together with coalition partners and field leaders, intends to focus early implementation efforts between 2027 and 2029.

These priorities were selected because they will help strengthen the broader conditions needed for long-term systems change. While many other efforts across the field will continue contributing to the goals of this strategy, these areas are intended to serve as early points of alignment, learning, and momentum-building for the next phase of Reimagining Service 2035.

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Ways to Get Involved

Most people experience the impact of volunteering long before they think about how it happens.

It shows up in the coach who runs a youth sports team, the mentor who helps a student succeed, and the volunteer firefighter who responds to an emergency, among many others. Behind these moments are organizations, institutions, partnerships, and community leaders who create opportunities for people to serve. Whether you engage volunteers directly, invest in community work, shape policy, conduct research, mobilize employees, support local infrastructure, or volunteer yourself, you play a role in what volunteering can become.

The next decade presents a choice. We can continue to treat volunteering as something that happens on the margins, or we can recognize it for what it is: one of the ways communities build capacity, solve problems, and create opportunities for people to contribute to something larger than themselves.

The future of volunteering will be shaped by the choices we make together. The goals and opportunities in this strategy are one invitation to help build that future.



Visit ReimaginingService.com to find up-to-date details on National Volunteer Strategy initiatives, current opportunities to participate and share what you're working on, and downloadable resources.

What You Can Do Now

Everyone has a role to play in strengthening volunteering over the next decade.

Here are just a few of the ways you can act today, whether you are a national nonprofit, grassroots organization, company, volunteer leader, funder, or an individual champion in your community:

Share your work

Tell us how your organization or community is already advancing these goals.

Connect locally

Join or help convene conversations in your region or sector.

Strengthen volunteer practice

Review your volunteer engagement approach through the lens of the strategy.

Invest in what works

Resource the people, systems, and infrastructure that make volunteering possible.

Collaborate across sectors

Explore partnerships with organizations, companies, schools, governments, or community groups.

Stay connected

Join the interest list to receive updates, tools, stories, and future opportunities to participate.

Acknowledgements

This strategy was shaped through the contributions of hundreds of individuals and organizations across the volunteer ecosystem.

We are deeply grateful to the members of the National Volunteer Strategy Advisory Council, participants in focus groups and roundtables, survey respondents, interviewees, research and analytical partners, sponsors, and the many organizations and individuals who contributed thought partnership, feedback, facilitation, analysis, and support throughout the process.

This strategy was built through a spirit of shared ownership and collective learning. While no single document can fully capture the breadth of contributions that shaped this work, each conversation and perspective helped inform the direction of the strategy and the future it seeks to support.

We also extend our appreciation to the proxy representatives who regularly participated and contributed on behalf of Advisory Council members: Karen Daniel, Scott Ganske, Steph Halpin, Cameron Katz, Katie Padmore, Anyu Silverman, and Jordan Tetting.

National Volunteer Strategy Advisory Council

The National Volunteer Strategy Advisory Council helped guide this work from concept to strategy. Council members brought experience from across sectors, helped widen participation through their networks, and offered thoughtful feedback as ideas developed. Their input helped ensure the strategy reflects both the realities facing the field today and the opportunities ahead.

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Youth Service America

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Michael Minks

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The UPS Foundation



THE MCJ AMELIOR
FOUNDATION

Southwest



Altria

Survey Administration, Analysis, and Outreach Partners

The National Volunteer Strategy process was strengthened through the contributions of partners who supported survey design, administration, outreach, and analysis.

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Survey data analysis was conducted by Kristin Williams of NineteenEleven Consulting. Survey administration and public engagement were supported through the PublicInput platform.

Survey Outreach Partners

Our survey outreach partners played an essential role in ensuring this process reflected a broad range of experiences and perspectives. By sharing the surveys across their networks, these organizations helped engage hundreds of individuals and organizations nationwide, expanding participation and strengthening the foundation of the National Volunteer Strategy.

America's Service Commissions (ASC) and the state service commission network

Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement (ALIVE)

Better Impact

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Campus Compact

Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration (CCVA)

Idealist/Volunteer Match

Made By Us

(Survey Outreach Partners continued)

Meals on Wheels

Michigan Nonprofit Association

NYC Service

Service Year

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

VolunteerNow

Walmart Foundation

Youth Service America (YSA)

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Several thought leaders and partners shared their expertise to deepen specific areas of the strategy. Their knowledge, experience, and feedback helped us better understand complex issues, test emerging ideas, and strengthen the recommendations in areas where they brought deep perspective.

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Breauna Dorelus

Jane Leighty Justis

Betsy McFarland

Tim Parsons

Bobbi Silten

Beth Steinhorn

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The Points of Light Team

This effort was strengthened by the support and contributions of Points of Light colleagues across the organization. From leadership and strategic guidance to research, communications, operations, and engagement, their collective commitment helped bring the National Volunteer Strategy from concept to completion.

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