# FROM NICE TO NECESSARY

## Unleashing the Impact of Volunteering Through Transformative Investment

POINTS OF LIGHT

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# AN OPEN LETTER TO LEADERS: OUR GREATEST OPPORTUNITY – INVESTING IN & INCREASING VOLUNTEERING

To Social Impact Leaders and Philanthropic Partners,

Volunteering has long been a 'nice to have' – important, but not essential. We believe it's time to shift that mindset. Volunteering is not just a helpful extra; it's a powerful, often untapped resource that drives meaningful, measurable change. It's time to see volunteering not as secondary to the mission, but as central to how we achieve impact.

Today, one-third of the nonprofit workforce is comprised of volunteers. Yet national participation remains stagnant, hovering between 20 and 30 percent, with current rates at just 28 percent. Nonprofits continue to struggle to recruit and retain the volunteers they need – with about half of critical volunteer roles going unfilled each year. This is more than a workforce gap; it's a missed opportunity to engage more people in building stronger, more resilient communities.

**Why Volunteering Matters Now**
Volunteering meets this moment. It supports individual well-being, reduces loneliness and creates connection. It helps nonprofits meet rising demand amid limited resources. And at a societal level, it builds civic trust and brings people together – especially at a time when so many Americans feel divided. Volunteering is more than service; it's a foundation for a healthier, more connected world.

At Points of Light, we see the potential in every person to make a difference and ensure that volunteering is not just sustained, but elevated. Informed with research conducted by The Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit advisory firm – we embarked on a mission to better understand how we drive transformative change in volunteering.

The findings are both eye-opening and encouraging. They show us where challenges exist – and where incredible opportunity lies.

**1. The True Impact of Volunteering Remains Unmeasured – And That's a Problem.**
Volunteers drive real impact, but without data and resources, their contributions often go unseen and unsupported.

**2. Nonprofits Are Absorbing the Cost of Volunteer Engagement – With Little Support.**
Recruiting, training and managing volunteers takes investment, yet most nonprofits lack funding or tools to do this work effectively.

**3. Funders and Nonprofits Are Not Fully Aligned – And Its Stifling Investment.**
While 72 percent of nonprofits see volunteers as essential to achieving their mission, only 25 percent of funders agree – leading to massive underinvestment. Of the $1 trillion in foundation giving from 2016 to 2025, just 0.19 percent supported volunteer engagement.

**4. The Opportunity Is Clear – It's Time to Invest Boldly.**
When we invest in volunteering, we invest in lasting impact. Stronger data, smarter funding and shared commitment can transform the way we serve communities and ensure nonprofit sustainability.

## What You Can Do Now

**Recognize Volunteers as Essential**
Volunteers are central to nonprofit success. Supporting them means supporting the mission. Whether you're an individual, company or funder, investing in volunteer infrastructure is a high-impact way to drive change.

**Invest in a Stronger, More Connected Society**
Volunteering brings people together. It builds empathy and trust, and helps address issues like loneliness, mental well-being, and civic disengagement. Funding this work means helping people to find meaning and belonging, while meeting real needs.

**Help Shift the Narrative**
Volunteers must be seen as core to every cause. Let's talk about the real impact of volunteer roles, the programs that rely on them, and what's at stake when they go unfilled. Sharing these stories can help elevate volunteering in funding proposals, reports and across every conversation that shapes how we invest in social change.

**Points of Light's Commitment**
At Points of Light, we're dedicated to uplifting volunteering as a powerful force for good. Building on our history of mobilizing millions through our Global Affiliate Network, we're creating a cross-sector coalition for a national volunteer movement, bringing together partners across sectors to double the number of volunteers by 2035. This isn't just a campaign, it's a shared vision for a future where every person sees themselves as a changemaker and has the opportunity to act.

**A Vision for the Future**

When we realize this vision, people will live lives filled with meaning and purpose, grounded in social connection and a deep sense of responsibility to one another and their communities. Nonprofits will have the human capital they need to meet growing demand and deliver on their missions. Volunteering will become a natural part of our culture – embedded in everyday life, strengthening civic engagement, building understanding across differences, and helping bridge the divides that separate us.

This is one of the greatest opportunities of our time – to reimagine how we engage people, support nonprofits, and build a stronger, more connected society. We invite you to join us in this movement and be part of what comes next.

With Gratitude and Partnership,

Jennifer Sirangelo

President and CEO, Points of Light

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteering is more than a "nice to have." Volunteers are the backbone of communities; in interviews with nonprofit leaders conducted for this report, we heard again and again how fundamental the work of volunteers is for carrying out their missions to improve the lives of individuals, build stronger communities and drive broader societal progress. **In fact, nearly one-third of the nonprofit workforce is made up of volunteers.**[1] Volunteers don't just fill gaps – they power the missions of organizations large and small, fuel impact, and enable nonprofits to amplify their reach in ways that paid staff alone never could.

Yet despite growing demand, nonprofits are struggling to recruit enough volunteers. The need far outweighs participation, leaving crucial work undone and limiting the impact organizations could have on individuals, community, and society. **When volunteer spots go unfilled, so do opportunities to strengthen communities, support those in need and create a more connected, engaged society.**

Consider adult volunteers who serve as mentors for youth. Youth mental health is in crisis. In the decade before 2019, disorders and suicidal behaviors among high school students rose by more than 40%,[2] making mental health the leading cause of death and disability in this age group. Research shows that strong, supportive relationships with caring adults help promote positive youth development.[3] In communities across the U.S., volunteer mentors help build positive and consistent relationships with young people, offer emotional support, and help mentees build lifelong skills and resilience. The mentor "workforce" is composed almost entirely of volunteers, many of whom make multi-year commitments to their roles. This dedication enables organizations to engage and support youth on a scale that would be infeasible with paid staff alone, vastly amplifying their reach and impact. Yet, the need for volunteer mentors outpaces their availability. One study found that approximately 22% of young people who are seeking mentorship are on a waitlist for a mentor[4] – a volunteer who can make a lasting difference in their lives.

> **"Volunteers don't just fill a need; they create transformation. When they show up, they see the challenges, they build relationships and they act in ways that ripple beyond that one act of service. That's how communities change."**
>
> **NONPROFIT LEADER**

Or consider the role of volunteers in disaster relief. Volunteers, both general and specialized, are the backbone of disaster response and recovery. When a hurricane, tornado, wildfire, or other disaster strikes, they work as early responders. Large numbers can rapidly mobilize to assist in the immediate aftermath, performing tasks that require no special training or skills, such as cleaning up or staffing donation centers to ensure those affected have access to

> Volunteers are critical in the aftermath of disasters to scale operations quickly and respond effectively."
>
> **NONPROFIT LEADER**

information, services, and basic relief items. In the recovery phase, skilled volunteers such as attorneys, translators and fair housing advocates are essential in assuring traumatized survivors are not further victimized by unscrupulous bad actors.

In addition to its positive impact on communities, for volunteers themselves, volunteering has been shown to improve mental health, combat loneliness and build critical skills that are applicable to the workplace and other areas of life – outcomes that are especially relevant in today's context of social isolation. Many of the leaders we interviewed also shared that in a time of deepening polarization, volunteering has the potential to bridge divides, foster civic engagement and strengthen democracy.

But a critical shortage of volunteers means that much of this potential individual, community and societal impact remains unrealized. Many nonprofits are skilled at leveraging volunteers to meet community needs. Yet data from the Points of Light network, which supports volunteerism at tens of thousands of organizations, finds that **approximately 50% of critical volunteer openings remain unfilled each year.**[5] While broad societal factors can account for some of this challenge, our research demonstrates that **a major reason is a financial resource gap that makes it hard for many nonprofits to effectively build the volunteer engagement infrastructure needed to recruit, train, recognize and retain the volunteers they need to advance their missions.**

**Points of Light Spotlight**

> Volunteerism is a huge element of the success of Brilliant Detroit. Many of our programs are fueled by volunteer support, including our high dosage literacy tutoring. Our goal in utilizing volunteers is to further include community in our work and also educate volunteers as to why current conditions exist. We believe it is important that volunteers understand factors that led to the inequities we see today in Detroit. Volunteers bring a passion and a diverse set of perspectives and experiences to our families."
>
> **CINDY EGGLETON —** CEO OF BRILLIANT DETROIT[6]

This report from Points of Light, informed with research conducted by The Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit advisory firm, and focused on the U.S., uses information from interviews, focus groups and data analysis to examine the impact of volunteers, the cost of effectively recruiting and deploying them, and their potential – both met and unmet – for building a better society. It looks at how volunteerism is understood, valued, and funded. **One of our goals in publishing this report is to better equip nonprofits to communicate volunteer impact and costs to funders, helping get the resources needed to recruit and**

**manage a productive volunteer workforce. A second and equally important goal is to help better position funders to recognize and support volunteerism as a critical driver of meaningful and lasting change at the individual, community, and societal level.**

Here are the highlights of what we found:

- **The impact of volunteers is enormous but hasn't been sufficiently quantified.** Volunteering drives social impact at the individual, community, and societal levels, yet its effects are not fully quantified or documented. While nonprofits often have data on volunteer outputs (e.g., volunteer hours) and substantial research exists on volunteerism's impact on the individual volunteer, data showing the true impact of volunteers on social outcomes is very scant. This is particularly true as it relates to broader community and societal impacts.
- **The full cost of volunteer engagement (i.e., effectively recruiting, training, deploying, recognizing, and retaining volunteers) hasn't been sufficiently quantified.** Effective volunteer engagement is a complex process that requires substantial resources and collaboration across multiple stakeholders. Yet, most nonprofits and intermediaries (i.e., organizations that serve as connectors between volunteers and other nonprofits) lack the infrastructure to systematically track the associated costs. Among the more than 20 organizations interviewed for this report, only a handful had the tools to provide informal, back-of-the-envelope cost estimates for recruiting and deploying volunteers. These estimates ranged from $136 to $2,000 per volunteer, indicating both a lack of precision and the variation in what resources may be required across different organizations and types of volunteering.
- **Limited impact and cost data fuels a lack of alignment between nonprofits and funders.** Limited data makes it harder for nonprofit leaders to articulate the specific costs and benefits of volunteers in their work and for funders to understand how investments in volunteer infrastructure might help achieve the measurable outcomes they are seeking. As an example of the misalignment driven by a lack of data on the impact of volunteers, research by the Do Good Institute found that while 72% of nonprofits surveyed report that volunteers increase the quality of services or programs provided, only 25% of funders reported sharing this view.[7]
- **Corporate funders support volunteer efforts at higher levels than foundations, though direct support for volunteer engagement is still limited.** Today, more than one-third of corporate employees participate in volunteer programs and over 66% of Fortune 500 companies offer paid volunteer time.[8] Corporations give directly to volunteer engagement at a higher rate than foundations – yet it still represents a small part of their overall giving portfolios. **Our analysis found that all company-sponsored foundations, businesses and corporate giving programs combined directed 0.54% of their giving directly to volunteer engagement.**[9] The lack of impact data on community and societal outcomes is less of a barrier to corporate

funding, since many corporations look to volunteerism to support employee engagement, skill building and community investment. However, the lack of accurate cost data means corporations may not be fully accounting for the required resources and infrastructure to support volunteer engagement.

- **This lack of alignment limits funding that flows to volunteer engagement and infrastructure from institutional funders.** Many foundations support nonprofits that rely heavily on volunteers, but funding is typically directed to programmatic efforts in the foundation's priority issue areas (e.g., education, health). We analyzed total giving to volunteer engagement across all U.S.-based family, community, independent and operating foundations, and public charities. **From 2016 to 2025, only 0.19% (or $1.7 of $915.7 billion) of these funders' total giving was directed specifically to volunteer engagement.**[10] The 10 largest (ranked by total giving) independent and operating foundations allocated an even smaller portion – just 0.07% of their portfolios – and the 10 largest family foundations allocated only 0.03%. Smaller family foundations, and community foundations, gave at slightly higher levels, but still less than 0.25% of their total giving.[11] When asked, foundation leaders we spoke with expressed some interest in providing more support for volunteer engagement. However, since the critical role of volunteers in achieving impact in their priority issue areas is often "hidden," funding for volunteer engagement remains limited.

**These findings point to what we are calling "the cycle of underinvestment in volunteering."** From a nonprofit and intermediary perspective, the lack of high-quality data on the impact and costs of volunteering, along with their perceptions that funders lack interest in volunteer capacity building, makes nonprofit leaders ill-equipped and hesitant to pursue more robust funding for volunteer engagement. And while funders may be more open to supporting volunteer engagement if they had better data, few are proactively supporting the research and infrastructure that would be required to make that possible. This cycle results in volunteer infrastructure that is often underdeveloped, and an inability to fully realize the impact of those volunteers in driving meaningful individual, community, and societal outcomes.

**Breaking this cycle of underinvestment will require long-term commitment by a range of stakeholders under a shared vision** that redefines volunteering not as a mysterious intangible – but rather as a resource-intensive, powerful, measurable force for driving social impact. We believe co-creating a field-level agenda for action across this stakeholder group will be key, and we recommend three actions as part of that agenda:

1. BETTER DATA: **While the impact on the individual volunteer is well explored and documented, we need to do more to quantify and document volunteerism's broader impact on communities and society.** This kind of research could provide vital information about the role of volunteers in helping achieve the outcomes that align with both nonprofits' and funders' strategic priorities.

2. **STRONGER INFRASTRUCTURE: We need more resources and standardized tools to help nonprofits and intermediaries more accurately and consistently assess the full financial investment required for effective volunteer engagement.** Data and analysis developed through the use of this more robust infrastructure can also help funders better understand the costs of achieving the outcomes they seek.

3. **MORE DIALOGUE: We can use this impact and cost data to encourage dialogue and develop alignment between funders and nonprofits about the role of volunteers in driving social outcomes.** These kinds of conversations can only be healthy for the sector – furthering understanding and driving action that strengthens the capacity of nonprofits to recruit and deploy volunteers to carry out critically important jobs.

Expanding support for high-quality volunteer engagement can contribute to a world where nonprofit organizations provide a range of essential services at scale to those who need it, help communities rebuild trust and reduce inequality, and spur society toward positive change.

# BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

## *Methodology*

This work was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the perception today of volunteering among nonprofit leaders and funders?
- What does the current funding landscape for volunteerism look like?
- How do funders perceive the costs of volunteering, and how does this perception shape the level of funding they allocate to support volunteering?
- What are the resources required to build and maintain a high-quality volunteer base?
- What actions may be needed to ensure nonprofits have the infrastructure and funding to fully realize the potential of volunteering?

To shed light on these questions, we reviewed existing literature and conducted interviews and focus groups with over 60 nonprofit, intermediary, corporate and philanthropic leaders, along with field experts. We also undertook data analysis on funding trends, staff-to-volunteer ratios, and other subjects. Please see the appendix for more on the report's methods.

## *Understanding Volunteering*

Volunteering encompasses a broad spectrum of activities where people willingly give their time to support others, not expecting or receiving any monetary compensation in return. These activities can be categorized into two primary forms:

1. **Formal Volunteering:** Helping others through structured opportunities managed by an organization, such as mentoring youth, participating in disaster relief efforts or providing administrative support for nonprofits.
2. **Informal Volunteering:** Helping others through self-initiated acts of kindness, such as assisting a neighbor or watching each other's children.

**For this report, the focus is on formal volunteering as there is greater availability of data on participation rates, funding, and social outcomes.** This report does not capture the vital contributions of volunteers who perform countless informal acts of service.

Formal volunteering activities can encompass a wide spectrum of opportunities, ranging from short-term, one-off tasks to long-term commitments requiring significant skills:

- **General vs. Specialized:** Roles that require specific skills (e.g., financial advising) versus more general tasks (e.g., food distribution).
- **One-Time vs. Consistent:** Episodic opportunities (e.g., annual events) versus ongoing commitments (e.g., weekly tutoring).

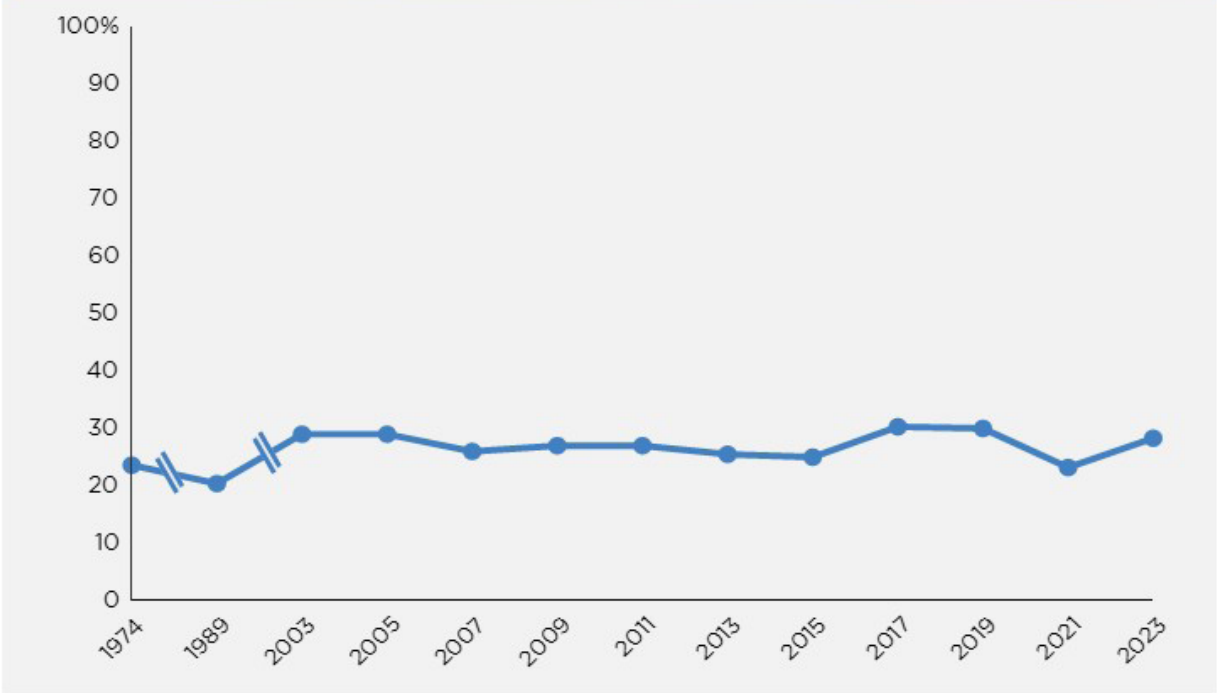
- **Internal vs. Client-Facing:** Supporting organizational operations versus directly engaging with beneficiaries.

The volunteer ecosystem that supports these formal activities is made up of three main actors. First, there are the nonprofit organizations that provide direct service opportunities for volunteers and are the link to the beneficiary and the community impact that volunteers play a critical role in. Then there are intermediary organizations that connect nonprofits to the volunteers themselves. They provide recruitment, matching and training support for volunteers and contribute to the field through research, convenings and sharing best practices. Finally, there are the funders providing the capital that allows both nonprofits and intermediaries to play their symbiotic roles in the volunteer ecosystem.

### *Volunteering Participation & Demand*

Over the last 50 years, formal volunteering rates in the U.S. (i.e., the percentage of adult Americans volunteering with an organization at least once a year) have fluctuated between 20% and 30%. In the 1970s and 1980s they ranged between 20% and 24%. In 2005, they rose to 28%, likely influenced by the surge of civic engagement following 9/11.[12] This was followed by a period of slow but steady decline until 2015,[13] a brief uptick from 2015 to 2017, and then a more pronounced decline starting in 2019-2020.[14]

**Figure 1: Adult Rates of Volunteering in the U.S.**




Sources: Nonprofit Quarterly, "Doing Good by the Young and Old: Forty Years of American Volunteering," 2016; Corporation for National and Community Service, "2017 State of the Evidence Annual Report"; AmeriCorps, "AmeriCorps Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Dashboard"; AmeriCorps, "Volunteering and Civic Life in America," 2024.

Nonprofit leaders and experts we interviewed for this report cited several factors likely to have contributed to the decline in rates of volunteerism since 2019, including disruptions caused by COVID-19, changes in the economy, an ongoing decline in religious affiliation (though 30% of volunteers continue to give their time to religious organizations), and generational shifts, in which activities like advocacy through online platforms is sometimes seen as a form of volunteering.

It's important to note that the most recent Volunteering and Civic Life in America report showed volunteering rates increasing back to 28% between September 2022 and 2023,[15] approaching a return to pre-pandemic levels. **This recent momentum is promising, but the need for volunteers still far exceeds current participation. Nonprofits continue to face significant gaps in engagement, with Points of Light Affiliates reporting that approximately 50% of critical volunteer openings remain unfilled each year.**[6]

# FINDINGS

Through interviews, data analysis, and secondary research, this report seeks to identify how to break the persistent cycle of underinvestment in volunteering. Our findings are presented in three interconnected sections. The first examines how volunteerism is currently perceived and funded – highlighting a disconnect between its value and how it is prioritized by funders. The second explores the broad impact of volunteering on individuals, communities, and society, underscoring the consequences of that underinvestment. The third delves into the resources and infrastructure required to fully realize that impact, revealing significant gaps in funding, capacity, and tools. Together, these sections point to a shared conclusion: that without better data, stronger infrastructure and more intentional dialogue between funders and nonprofits, the full potential of volunteering to help advance our civil society will remain out of reach.

## *Perceptions of, and Funding for, Volunteer Engagement*

### SUMMARY

- **Nonprofit and funder perceptions about the impact and cost of volunteer engagement can differ significantly.** Without a common understanding of the role of volunteers in driving outcomes that funders care about, many nonprofits do not get the funding they need to effectively recruit, train, deploy, recognize, and support volunteers.
- **This lack of a common understanding is driven in part by a lack of solid data.** Most nonprofit leaders we interviewed believe that volunteering is essential to their organization's impact, though they often lack the resources to quantify and communicate this impact.
- **Driven by these perceptions and lack of data, limited funding flows directly towards volunteer engagement.** While the funders we interviewed generally had positive views of volunteerism, our analysis shows that across all funder groups less than 1% of total giving from 2016-2025 went directly to volunteer engagement. Corporations give the most, while large institutional foundations give the least as a percentage of their portfolios.

Existing research highlights significant differences in how nonprofits and funders perceive volunteering. While most nonprofits and funders recognize the importance of volunteering in extending an organization's reach, stark contrasts emerge on other critical measures. For example, research from the Do Good Institute shows that 73.9% of nonprofits believe that volunteers provide cost savings to their organizations, compared to only 38.9% of funders.

Similarly, 72.2% of nonprofits agree that volunteers increase the quality of services or programs provided, whereas only 25.2% of funders share this view.[7] Research from the Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement further underscores this gap, noting funder skepticism about whether volunteering delivers tangible benefits to communities and whether nonprofits have the capacity or infrastructure to sustain effective volunteer engagement programs.[16]

Our report's research likewise finds distinct differences in how nonprofit leaders, intermediaries and funders perceive volunteering. This stems in part from a lack of robust data, which makes it hard to understand the full cost and impact of volunteering. Compounding this, nonprofits and funders each have their perceptions about how the other group views volunteering, which may not be fully accurate. The result is a reluctance from nonprofit leaders to discuss their volunteer engagement needs with funders. **This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of underinvestment, resulting in missed opportunities to fully harness the transformative scale and potential of volunteering.**

The interviews and analyses we conducted during this work surfaced the following perspectives and findings:

### Nonprofits and Intermediaries

Leaders of nonprofits and intermediaries that we interviewed believe in the critical role of volunteering and see it as a key part of human capital, organizational impact, and scalability. Many leaders recognize that in resource-constrained environments like the ones they navigate, volunteers are essential for scaling programs and delivering critical services. Existing research supports this perspective, showing that 68% of nonprofit leaders believe volunteers allow the organization to increase its return on its resource investment.[7]

> **"Volunteers aren't just free labor. We invest significantly in ensuring they're screened, trained and supported for success."**
>
> **NONPROFIT LEADER**

The nonprofit leaders we interviewed also recognize that effective volunteer engagement is resource intensive. Many nonprofit leaders and intermediaries emphasize that significant investment in recruitment, matching, onboarding, training recognition, and ongoing support is required.

Despite the critical importance of volunteering and the significant resources required for effective implementation, nonprofits often struggle to secure adequate funding to support these activities.

Interviewees highlight that this challenge is driven by several factors, including:

- A perception among nonprofit leaders that funders are not fully aware of the key role played by their volunteer workforce and that funders are reluctant to invest in capacity-building initiatives such as volunteer engagement, despite some movement among funders over the past decade to support more capacity-building efforts. This significantly limits discussions between nonprofits and funders about the critical role of volunteerism in achieving their shared goals.
- A perception among nonprofit leaders that funders think volunteering is largely free, overlooking the substantial investment required to effectively recruit, train, manage, recognize, and retain volunteers.
- Insufficient data by which to communicate the broader impact of volunteering, particularly at the community and societal levels.
- Insufficient infrastructure to systematically track the full costs of volunteering.

> **"Many funders don't view volunteering as necessary, even when it's essential for nonprofits to function."**
>
> **NONPROFIT LEADER**

### Funders

Funders, for their part, bring diverse perspectives to volunteering. Our interviews and research uncovered some of these perspectives as well as some interesting distinctions between institutional, individual, and corporate funders in terms of goals, motivations, and direct support for volunteer engagement.

In general, while many funders provide support for nonprofits that rely heavily on volunteers, little funding flows directly to volunteer engagement and infrastructure at those nonprofits. We analyzed total giving to volunteer engagement in the U.S. across various sources from 2016-2025 to further understand this point. We found that, over the past 10 years, of the $915.7 billion combined giving by all U.S.-based family, community, independent and operating foundations and public charities, only $1.7 billion (or 0.19%) was directed specifically to volunteer engagement.[17] That percentage was lower for the largest (as ranked based by total giving) foundations, and slightly higher for the smallest family foundations and community foundations.[18] Corporate giving to volunteer engagement was the highest during this period, though it still represented less than 1% of total corporate funding.[19] Individual giving is much harder to track systematically, though there is some evidence that individuals support volunteer engagement at higher levels than institutional funders.

**Figure 2: Total Giving in the U.S. (2016-2025)**

| | % of Total Giving to Volunteer Engagement | % of total Giving to All Other Areas |
|---|---|---|
| **All Family, Community, Independent & Operating Foundations and Public Charities** | 0.19% | 99.81% |
| **10 Largest Family Foundations** | 0.03% | 99.97% |
| **10 Largest Independent and Operating Foundations** | 0.07% | 99.93% |
| **Smaller Family Foundations (excl. 10 Largest)** | 0.22% | 99.78% |
| **Community Foundations** | 0.24% | 99.76% |
| **Company-Sponsored Foundations, Businesses & Corporate Giving Programs** | 0.54% | 99.46% |

Source: Foundation Center by Candid (foundationcenter.org).

**Large institutional foundations:** Leaders of some of the largest institutional funders that we interviewed acknowledge that they rarely initiate conversations about volunteer engagement. These funders have developed clear strategic priorities around the issue areas they care about, and their giving is focused on those priorities. Volunteering is often an essential part of enabling their grantees to achieve these priorities. And the cost of volunteer engagement is often as much a part of achieving their missions as program supplies or staff salaries. **But, if volunteering's essential role in delivering on these funders' priorities is not explicitly established, direct support for volunteer engagement does not become a funding priority.**

> "Volunteerism per se was not a part of the stated priorities. We funded groups based on our priorities, and while some relied on volunteers, that wasn't really top of mind in our decisions."
>
> **FUNDER**

These trends and perceptions are reflected in the patterns of grantmaking for volunteer engagement. Further analysis of funding activity reveals that, over the past 10 years, the 10 largest independent and operating foundations in the U.S. allocated an even smaller portion of their funding for volunteer engagement than did the broader set of foundations and public charities overall. **In fact, only 0.07% of their portfolios (that is, 70 cents out of every $1,000) were allocated exclusively to recruitment, training, and deployment of volunteers.** We found a similar trend among the largest 10 family foundations, who gave an even lower percentage (0.03% of their portfolios).[20]

When we raised the topic of volunteers specifically with the large institutional funders we interviewed, most acknowledged the important role volunteers play in supporting their grantees' work. And many said they would be open to providing more support for volunteer engagement. They noted that it would be important for nonprofits to demonstrate how volunteers are critical to delivering impact (in line with the funders' strategic priorities) and the full costs associated with effective volunteer engagement. The potential for increased funding for volunteer engagement might be especially significant in two areas:

Fields where volunteering is critical to service delivery: This report's research also indicates that over the past 10 years, while foundations allocated little funding directly to volunteer engagement, 64% of their total portfolios did go to support work within issue areas where volunteering often plays an important role in delivering impact, including education, human services (including youth development), health (including mental health), housing development and disaster & emergency management.[21] These issue areas map closely to those where these foundations directed most of their $1.7 billion for volunteer engagement as well (please see the appendix for a breakdown of total foundation giving to volunteer engagement by issue area). Funders' emphasis on high-level societal outcomes – such as improved health or economic stability – often positions volunteerism as a secondary consideration rather than a strategic investment in achieving those goals. **Highlighting the critical role volunteers play in driving outcomes in these specific issue areas, which funders are already prioritizing, could unlock additional investment.**

Volunteering as a driver of societal change: Additionally, institutional funders we spoke with are increasingly interested in broader societal-level outcomes. Some prioritize community building and strengthening; others emphasize civic engagement, democracy-building, pluralism or reducing polarization. While volunteerism is often seen as logically connected to these goals, funders acknowledged that rigorous research demonstrating its impact remains limited. There is little data substantiating how volunteer engagement directly contributes to these efforts. Interviews suggest that some funders are open to investing in volunteer engagement as a driver for societal change, but they need stronger evidence of its impact.

> "You have to make the case for how volunteerism relates to the 'flavor of the day,' like systems change or strengthening democracy. It's rarely prioritized as its own area of focus."
>
> **FUNDER**

Funding data shows an increase in funding focused on societal change. From 2013 to 2022 (the last year where complete data was available), annual giving from foundations and public charities to policy, advocacy and systems reform in the U.S. nearly tripled.[22] Over the past 10 years, foundations and public charities allocated 6% of their total giving to policy, advocacy and systems reform – compared to just 0.19% for volunteer engagement. This means foundations and public charities have allocated over 30 times more funding to policy, advocacy, and systems reform than to volunteer engagement.[23] This disparity underscores

the opportunity to better position volunteerism as a critical driver of the societal outcomes that funders are seeking to achieve.

**Community and smaller family foundations:** Our analysis shows that community foundations and smaller family foundations give more to volunteer engagement than the largest institutional foundations. However, volunteer engagement is still not a top priority for these funders – only 0.24% of funding from community foundations and 0.22% of giving from smaller family foundation (i.e., family foundations other than the 10 largest) went directly to volunteer engagement from 2016-2025.[24]

**Individuals:** Individual funders appear to support volunteer efforts at a higher level than institutional funders, though limited data exists. The study on the State of Volunteer Engagement by The Do Good Institute found that individual donors are the primary focus for nonprofit leaders when seeking support for their volunteer engagement efforts, with 34% of CEOs reporting they had requested funding from this group. Notably, almost three quarters of those requests were successful, demonstrating the significant role individual funders play in supporting volunteer engagement.[7] And a study by Fidelity Charitable found that 50% of volunteers say they give more financial support to nonprofits because they volunteer.[25]

It is difficult to analyze giving from larger individual donors, given the lack of available data. However, as one example, an assessment of publicly available giving from MacKenzie Scott from 2016-2025 shows that she gave directly to volunteer engagement at a higher rate (0.89% of total giving) than what we found across institutional funders.[26]

**Corporate funders:** Support for, and participation in, volunteer programs is significant among corporations. Today, more than one-third of corporate employees participate in volunteer programs and over 66% of Fortune 500 companies offer paid volunteer time.[10]

> "Volunteering helps employees feel connected to our company's culture, to their teammates and to the broader mission of the company. That cohesion is valuable for long-term engagement. Employees who volunteer are more likely to stay here and tell their friends it's a good place to work."
>
> CORPORATE FUNDER

The corporate funders we interviewed highlighted the value they see in volunteering for their employees, companies, and communities. That may explain why corporations give to volunteer engagement at a higher rate than foundations. Yet, this still represents a small part of their overall giving portfolios. In our analysis we found that all company-sponsored foundations, businesses, and corporate giving programs combined directed 0.54% of their giving directly to volunteer engagement over the past 10 years.[27]

Corporate and nonprofit interviewees also shared varying perspectives on the benefits and goals of corporate volunteerism. Many corporate volunteer programs are primarily designed to reinforce corporate identity and boost employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Several of the nonprofit leaders we spoke with shared that corporate

volunteering that prioritizes the employee experience certainly may benefit the individuals who volunteer. However, if not done well it can also sometimes strain nonprofit capacity without delivering real impact to the organizations or the communities they serve.

Some corporate funders we engaged in this process have embraced strategic volunteer engagement, designing programs that go beyond employee engagement to strengthen the work of nonprofits and deliver tangible community benefits. In these cases, volunteering becomes more than a one-time activity – it serves as a gateway for individuals to explore their passions, often inspiring them to take on more consistent, long-term roles that contribute to lasting individual and social impact. These corporate funders align their volunteer initiatives to support both their strategic objectives and the needs of local communities. Often, they also help volunteers understand the significance of their contributions and the impact of their participation.

Other corporate funders may go as far as developing programs that involve employee skill-sharing, contributing expertise to nonprofit operations while further building employee skills. Others support episodic volunteering activities tied to corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns.

> **"We're trying to help our employees feel connected to our culture of giving back. It's part of our DNA and we're looking to foster engagement in a meaningful way over a longer period of time."**
>
> **CORPORATE FUNDER**

Given these varying motivations among corporations, the lack of impact data on broader community and societal outcomes is less of a barrier to corporate funding in general and even less so among those corporations who are more focused on volunteering as a means of impacting employee engagement and skill building. However, the lack of accurate cost data means corporations may not be fully accounting for the required resources and infrastructure to support volunteer engagement. **Both corporate funders and nonprofit leaders recognize there is an opportunity to ensure that volunteering programs are designed around community needs and also adequately resourced such that nonprofits have the required infrastructure to deliver impact in the communities they serve.**

## *Impact of Volunteering*


### SUMMARY

- **Volunteering is critical for delivering social impact at the individual, community, and societal levels.**
- **For volunteers themselves, volunteering has been shown to improve mental health, combat loneliness, and build critical skills** that are applicable to the workplace and other areas of life – outcomes that are especially relevant in today's context of social isolation.
- **Nonprofit leaders we interviewed reinforce the community impact of volunteerism, which enables their organizations to provide critical services** like youth mentorship, disaster response, and food security at scale. While these nonprofits often have data on volunteer outputs (e.g., volunteer hours), data showing the true impact of volunteers on social outcomes is limited.
- **In a time of deepening polarization, many interviewees shared a belief that volunteering has the potential to bridge divides, foster civic engagement and strengthen democracy.** However, robust research directly connecting volunteerism to these broader societal outcomes is very scant.


### Individual Impact

Americans today face an epidemic of loneliness and social isolation,[28] with only 39% of adults in the U.S. reporting feeling very connected to others.[29] This widespread disconnection has significant consequences for public health, including a 29% increased risk of premature death from social isolation and a 32% higher risk of stroke linked to poor social connections.[30]

Nonprofit leaders we interviewed frequently highlighted the benefits of volunteering as a powerful tool to address these issues. There is significant research to back this view – a meta-analysis of volunteer research provides compelling evidence that volunteering reduces overall mortality risk and depression rates while improving psychological well-being and self-esteem.[31] These benefits are particularly significant for youth and aging populations.[36] One study revealed a 47% reduction in mortality risk among individuals aged 55 and older who volunteer.[32] Another study found that youth who volunteer for one hour a week are 50% less likely to abuse substances or engage in other destructive behavior.[33] **By fostering connection, purpose and engagement, volunteering not only**

> "Volunteering can heal. It builds a sense of identity, creates connectedness and fosters purpose. This is a message we need to amplify in the face of widespread loneliness and disconnection."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

**enriches individuals' lives but also offers a critical response to today's pressing public health challenges.**

In addition, the ability of volunteering to enhance critical workplace skills such as leadership, communication and problem-solving was highlighted by a number of interviewees. This enhances workplace readiness, especially for young volunteers who develop confidence and learn transferable skills. Research has shown that, for example, volunteers have a 27% higher chance of finding a job compared with non-volunteers.[34] Volunteering has also given the opportunity for formerly incarcerated individuals to rebuild meaningful careers in government and the social sector. This becomes increasingly important when challenging economic conditions make finding employment even more difficult.[35]

> "Post-incarceration I volunteered at [a nonprofit]; folks didn't want to hire me. Volunteering initially gave me skills that landed me my first job, then a state job, then a federal job."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

Given the urgency of rising loneliness, social isolation, and the continued challenges of a tight job market, there is an urgent need to raise awareness of the effects of volunteering on individual health, well-being and employable skills among both nonprofits and funders.

### Community Impact

Volunteers serve as essential human capital for the nonprofit sector. They are indispensable in enabling nonprofits to deliver services in their communities that could not feasibly be delivered with paid staff alone. They enable organizations to expand their reach, address urgent needs, and provide consistent, critical support to underserved communities. Seventy eight percent (78%) of nonprofit leaders reported that volunteers allow their organization to provide services or levels of services it otherwise could not provide.[7]

> "We track volunteer numbers, hours served and participation, but understanding their deeper impact on youth development or community outcomes is much harder to capture systematically."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

However, the causal relationship between volunteers and the community-level impact of these nonprofits is hard to quantify. Nonprofits typically measure the impact of volunteers through output metrics (e.g., number of volunteers or volunteer hours). But most nonprofit leaders we interviewed agree that it would be especially powerful to connect volunteers to community outcomes in a more systematic way. This might include, for example, linking the work of volunteers in staffing food banks to reductions in food insecurity in a community. Or perhaps linking the work of volunteers with environmental land trusts to the protection of millions of acres of land that have a meaningful impact on climate change indicators. Below

we share more detail on how volunteers play a critical role in delivering community benefits in key cause areas that rely heavily on volunteers.

**YOUTH MENTORSHIP**

**The need:** Youth mental health is in crisis. In the decade before 2019, disorders and suicidal behaviors among high school students rose by more than 40%,[2] making mental health the leading cause of death and disability in this age group. Research shows that strong, supportive relationships with caring adults promote positive youth development.[3] Yet, 16 million children and youth are in need of an adult mentor in America.[36]

**How volunteers play a critical role:** Mentors play a vital role in youth development by fostering positive, consistent relationships, offering emotional support, and helping mentees build essential skills and resilience. The mentor "workforce" is composed almost entirely of volunteers, many of whom make multi-year commitments to their roles. This dedication enables organizations to significantly amplify their reach and impact by engaging youth on a scale that would be virtually impossible with paid staff alone, given the cost.

**What it takes to do it well:** Managing the volunteer aspects of a youth mentor program is resource intensive. It involves recruitment, training, accountability processes (e.g., background checks), and ongoing volunteer management.

**DISASTER RECOVERY**

**The need:** Natural disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, causing devastating emotional and financial damage to individuals and communities. In 2024, the U.S. experienced the second-highest number of major disasters since FEMA began reporting in 1979[37] – a trend that will only intensify as climate change accelerates.

> "Volunteer labor allows us to stretch philanthropic dollars further, helping us rebuild 300 homes instead of just 100."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

**How volunteers play a critical role:** Volunteers, both general and specialized, are the backbone of disaster response and recovery. When a hurricane, tornado, wildfire, or other disaster strikes, they work as early responders. Large numbers can rapidly mobilize to assist in the immediate aftermath, performing tasks that require no special training or skills, such as clean up, or staffing donation centers to ensure those affected have access to information, services, and basic relief items. In the recovery phase, skilled volunteers such as attorneys, translators and fair housing advocates are essential in assuring traumatized survivors are not further victimized by unscrupulous bad actors.

**What it takes to do it well:** Recruitment and training of volunteers is an essential first step. In the aftermath, social media and online volunteer postings spread the word and recruit as many volunteers as possible to respond to the scene. Once they've arrived, volunteers need to be given relevant training, provided with tools and supplies, supervised, fed and supported.

## Societal Impact

The U.S. is facing growing polarization, with society increasingly divided along political lines. A striking 81% of Americans express concern over political divisions, and 71% believe that democracy is under threat.[38] In this climate, volunteering is perceived by many to have the potential to serve as a bridge across societal divides, fostering civic engagement and strengthening democracy.

> "There's a general belief that volunteering strengthens societies and breaks down polarization, but it's hard to point to robust research that proves that beyond self-reported data."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

Additionally, research suggests a relationship between social cohesion and volunteering, indicating that strong community ties create an environment conducive to volunteerism, and conversely, that volunteering fosters a sense of social connection.[39] Several nonprofit leaders shared with us data that they collect from their volunteers as it relates to societal outcomes. **For example, one nonprofit organization reports that 92% of its volunteers believe their efforts strengthen their communities, while 81% feel they contribute to improving the health of their communities.**[40] And research by the Do Good Institute finds a 12-percentage-point increase in voter participation rates (the most readily available measure of civic participation) among individuals who volunteer compared to those who don't volunteer.[41]

The nonprofit leaders and field experts we talked to, along with the volunteers themselves, have personally observed how volunteering can bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, break down barriers, and foster inclusion, dialogue, and collaboration. However, interviews also highlight that stakeholders lack a shared agreement on which specific societal outcomes can be most directly linked to volunteering. This stems from the fact that much of the data connecting volunteerism to these societal outcomes is based on case studies or offers correlational evidence at best because robust research on the societal impacts of volunteering is scant.

**These perspectives underscore the potential of volunteering to drive societal change, while also revealing a lack of rigorous empirical research and clear measurement frameworks.** Many nonprofit leaders, funders, and field experts that we interviewed recognize the urgent need to address significant gaps in defining and measuring broader societal impacts. They generally agree that the first step is to establish consensus on which outcomes should be prioritized, followed by rigorous research to explore how different types of volunteering contribute to achieving these outcomes. Closing these gaps is essential to fully understand and harness the transformative power of volunteerism in advancing societal outcomes.

## *Full Cost of Volunteer Engagement*


### SUMMARY

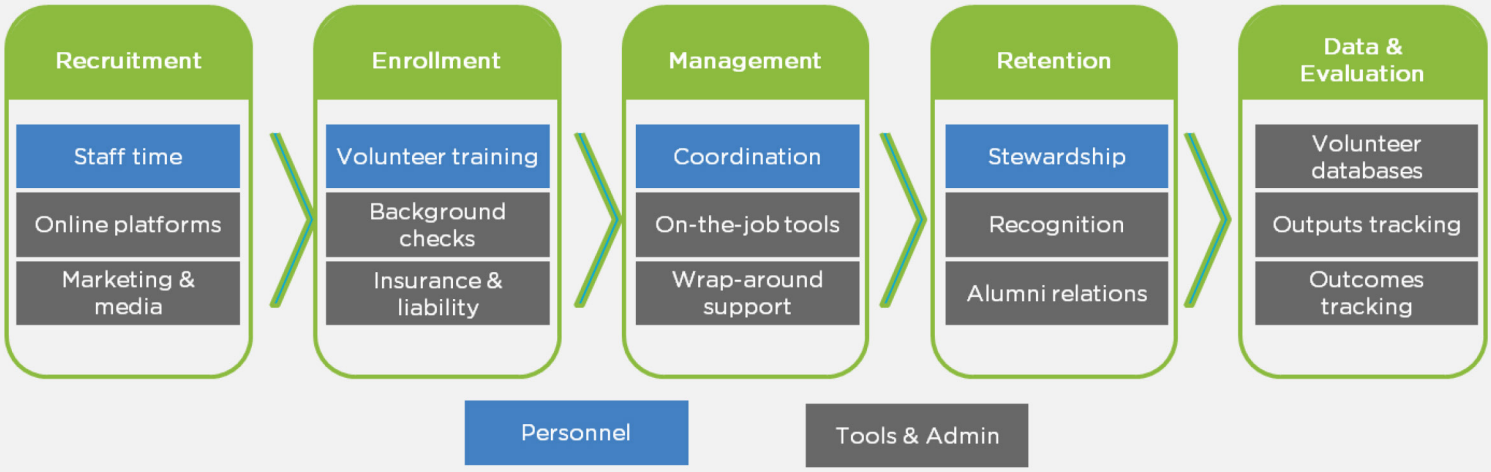
- **It is resource intensive to recruit, train, deploy, recognize, supervise, and support an effective volunteer workforce.** While the processes and activities required by nonprofits to support volunteer engagement can vary depending on the specifics of each organization's structure and work, it requires substantial time, money and supporting infrastructure to do this well.
- **However, many nonprofits do not have the infrastructure to systematically track the full costs associated with volunteer engagement.** Among the more than 20 organizations interviewed for this report, only a handful had the tools to provide informal, back-of-the-envelope cost estimates for recruiting and deploying volunteers.
- **Without a clear understanding of the full costs of volunteer engagement, nonprofits have difficulties clearly describing to funders the kind of investment in volunteer engagement that would unlock significantly more impact.**


Achieving the full potential of volunteer-driven impact requires a high-quality volunteer workforce. This means recruiting volunteers with the right skills, commitment, and support to do their jobs well. Investing in these processes helps organizations build a diverse, inclusive volunteer base, reduce short-term participation and high turnover, and foster lasting relationships that strengthen both volunteers and the organization.

> "Volunteer management touches every part of the organization, from safety policies to marketing, making it a resource-intensive process."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

Nonprofits and intermediary organizations agree that achieving this requires significant resources, which vary based on the nature, intensity, and duration of the engagement. Costs are incurred across five key stages of the volunteer journey, from recruitment to data and evaluation, with each phase requiring dedicated investment to ensure volunteers are effectively integrated and supported. While many of the core components are common across organizations,[42] their specific implementation and costs differ. For example, youth development organizations, on average, incur higher costs because of the intensive training and recruitment processes needed to onboard a volunteer mentor.

**Figure 3: Key Steps in the Volunteer Engagement Process**




Here are a few examples from specific organizations who outlined for us what it takes for them to engage and manage volunteers effectively. For organizations like these that rely on thousands of volunteers, the costs of these ongoing processes and systems can quickly become significant.

### YOUTH MENTORSHIP

**Recruitment:** This involves a targeted approach to attract volunteers who align with what the organization needs in a mentor. The organization engages in marketing, outreach and partnerships with corporations and community groups to identify potential volunteers.

**Enrollment:** Volunteers undergo rigorous vetting, including interviews, background checks ($50-$150 per person), and assessments to ensure alignment with the organization's standards. Once admitted, but before being matched with a mentee, volunteers complete structured training including topics like relationship-building, communication, and understanding mentee needs.

**Management:** Volunteers are supported through regular check-ins, ongoing communication, and community-building activities. This includes guidance from staff to address challenges and enhance the volunteer experience. A key focus is ensuring volunteers remain engaged and meet the organization's expectations. Additionally, background checks must be re-run every 1-3 years to ensure compliance and maintain a safe environment for mentees.

**Retention:** Volunteers are recognized for their contributions through newsletters, events, and personalized outreach to build long-term connections. And the organization provides opportunities for volunteers to stay involved beyond their initial role, such as through alumni networks or rematches.

**Data & Evaluation:** Technology plays a significant role in reducing inefficiencies, such as cutting down onboarding time and monitoring volunteer progress. Metrics tracked include volunteer numbers, time for onboarding, and mentee outcomes linked to volunteer efforts. The organization continuously improves its tracking systems to enhance the efficiency of the volunteer management process.

### DISASTER RECOVERY

**Recruitment:** Volunteers are recruited through multiple channels, including online platforms, outreach campaigns, schools, religious organizations, and community groups. Recruitment campaigns and awareness efforts, often conducted in partnership with intermediary organizations, are tailored to highlight both the ease and the impact of volunteering.

**Enrollment:** Volunteers are assessed and trained on-site to match their skills to appropriate tasks. Screening ensures safety and compliance, particularly in construction tasks.

**Management:** The organization coordinates logistics and scheduling and communicates volunteer roles and expectations in daily tasks through volunteer coordinators. Managers also ensure supplies and tools are in place for the volunteers' tasks to run smoothly.

**Retention:** Volunteers are encouraged to stay engaged post-service by becoming advocates or donors for the organization. Storytelling and recognition events are used to build emotional connections with the organization and its mission.

**Data & Evaluation:** Customer relationship management (CRM) software is critical to track volunteer engagement, communications, and program outcomes. Data is collected to measure the impact of volunteers on community recovery efforts, including metrics like the number and types of services provided to homes and the financial benefits of volunteer labor.

While organizations like those highlighted above understand their volunteer engagement requirements, most nonprofit leaders acknowledged that they are not able to accurately calculate the associated costs. **Many nonprofits and intermediaries simply lack robust tools, infrastructure, and staff capacity that would be required to regularly analyze and track the full costs of volunteer engagement.** While existing research on general volunteer management costs currently serve as a guidepost for many nonprofits, every organization's needs and associated costs are unique.

Independent Sector provides an estimate of the value of a volunteer's time at $33.49 per hour in 2024.[43] While this is one way to begin to understand the value of volunteer labor, it does not relate to the costs incurred by nonprofits in engaging and deploying volunteers. The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service benchmarked the cost of volunteering at $300-$410 per volunteer in 2003.[44] These are valuable data points, though they do not fully account for the diversity that exists across the sector in terms of costs incurred by specific nonprofits for their unique volunteer activities.

Among the 20+ organizations interviewed for this report, only a handful were able to provide high-level cost estimates for their volunteer activities. These organizations reported estimates ranging from $136 to $2,000 per volunteer, while acknowledging that these estimates weren't based on the type of rigorous analysis of full costs that they would like to perform (e.g., one that includes allocation of staff time). This wide variation reinforces the lack of precision of the calculations, and the diversity of organizational processes and tools associated with volunteer engagement. The resources required depend significantly on factors such as the organization's mission and location, the complexity of its programs, and the level of support required for volunteers. Even within the same issue area, two organizations engaged in the same type of work may have vastly different volunteer needs depending on the scope of services they provide. For example, in the chart below, the variation in cost estimates from two mental health organizations we spoke with reflects differences in their functions – organization A primarily focuses on building narratives and raising awareness, while organization D provides direct services, which require significantly more resources to operate. Similarly, two youth development organizations we interviewed showed high variation in cost estimates.

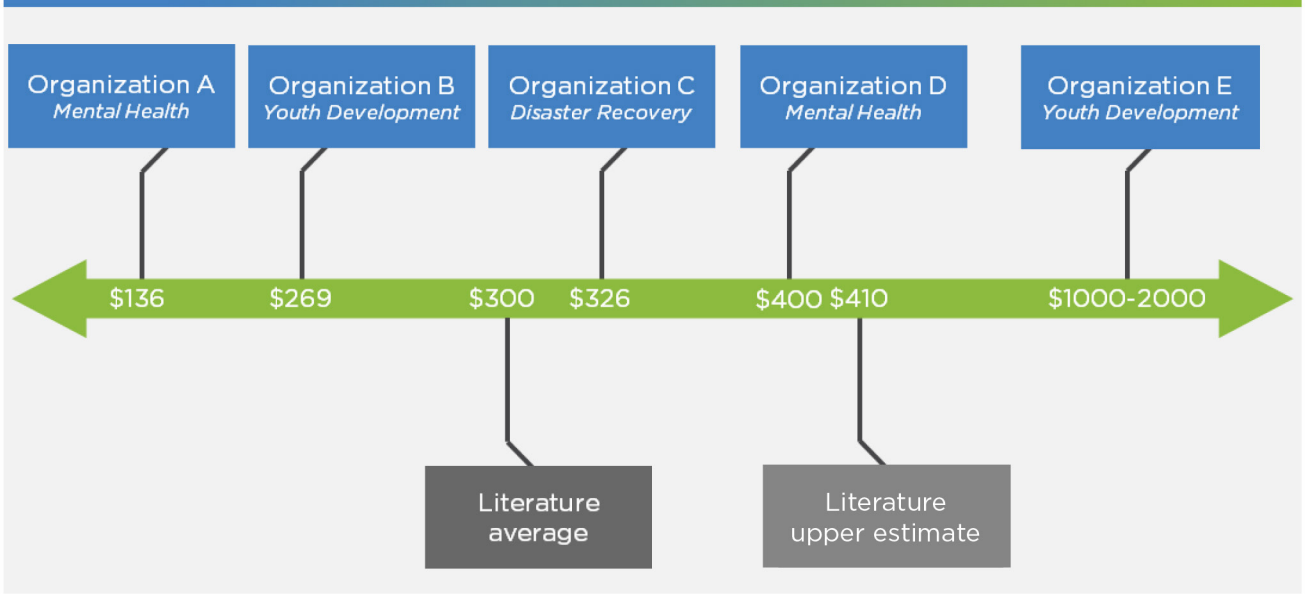
### Staff to Volunteer Ratios

The number of volunteers an organization relies on depends on the nature of volunteer activities and program needs. Findings from a study of staff-to-volunteer ratios across 20 nonprofits show that organizations focused on mentorship and education tend to have lower volunteer-to-staff ratios, averaging between three and 40 volunteers per staff member. These organizations typically invest more in training, management, and retention because individual volunteers play a critical role in student outcomes and often make long-term commitments.

In contrast, organizations that rely on rapid volunteer mobilization – such as disaster response groups and food banks – have much higher volunteer-to-staff ratios, often exceeding 1,000 volunteers per staff member. These organizations prioritize the quantity of volunteers over specialized skills or long-term engagement, as their impact is driven by large-scale participation rather than intensive individual contributions.

This ratio provides critical insight into how essential volunteers are to an organization's ability to fulfill its mission and the extent to which they function as a core part of service delivery. Given the lack of broadly available data, further research is needed to explore this dependency and its implications.

**Figure 4: Volunteer Engagement Cost Estimates**




Volunteer engagement processes can be complex, with responsibilities distributed across multiple functions and individuals within an organization. This makes quantifying the full investment required a challenging effort that few resource-constrained nonprofits are able to prioritize, especially given that it would divert staff time away from other essential responsibilities. Additionally, many nonprofits and intermediaries told us that they don't currently have sufficient infrastructure and tools to systematically and precisely track costs.

> "Volunteer management touches every little part of the organization in some way. It makes the process very resource intensive, but we haven't been able to break down exactly how much goes into it."
>
> **NONPROFIT LEADER**

It is important to note that even if the full costs could be accurately calculated, most of the nonprofits and intermediaries we interviewed told us that their current processes and tools are not nearly as effective or efficient as they need to be. While some nonprofits have more advanced processes and tools like customer relationship management (CRM) software, many rely on manual processes and simple tools like spreadsheets. Often systems that do exist within an organization are disconnected from one another, preventing easy data sharing and creating inefficiencies in volunteer management.

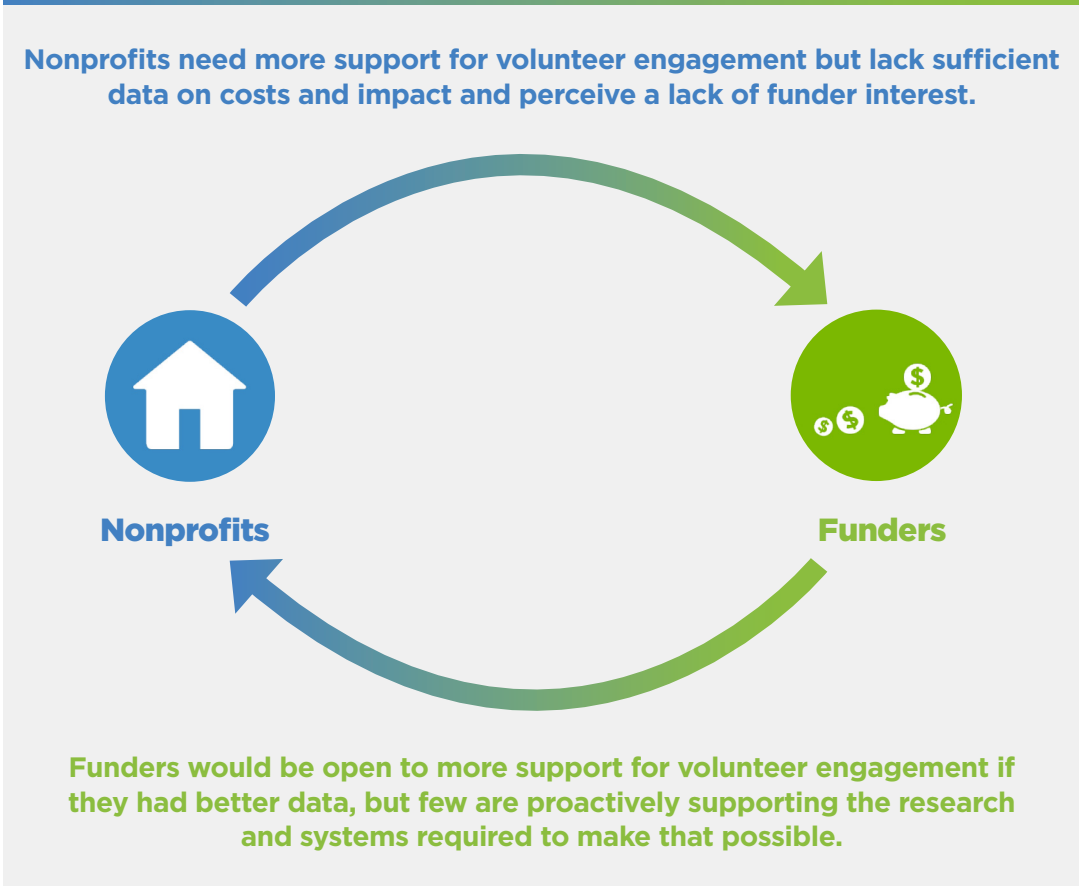
> Everything we do is manual, from tracking volunteer hours to clearance renewals. For example, I track each volunteer that has reached out, even the ones that reach out and are not being placed. If we had the right technology, we could automate so much of this and free up time to focus on actual engagement, but we just don't have the resources to make that happen."
>
> NONPROFIT LEADER

Nonprofits are making significant efforts to leverage their existing resources and systems to support volunteer engagement. **However, they recognize that with greater investment in staff capacity, technology, and infrastructure, they could enhance their ability to track costs more effectively, thereby optimizing volunteer engagement, and ultimately expanding their impact in the communities they serve.**

# THE CYCLE OF UNDERINVESTMENT IN VOLUNTEERING

**This report's findings point to what we are calling "the cycle of underinvestment in volunteering."** From a nonprofit and intermediary perspective, the lack of high-quality data on the full costs and impact of volunteering, along with their perceptions that funders lack interest in volunteering and capacity building, makes them ill-equipped and hesitant to pursue more robust funding. And while funders may be more open to supporting volunteer engagement if they had better data, few are proactively supporting the research and infrastructure that would be required to make that possible. **This cycle results in volunteer infrastructure that is often underdeveloped, and an inability to fully realize and harness the impact of volunteers.**

**Figure 5: The Cycle of Underinvestment in Volunteering**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

To make progress on breaking the cycle of underinvestment in volunteering, it is important to consider two key elements, drawing from existing research on what it takes to drive large-scale, population-level change:[45]

- **Bringing together diverse stakeholders under a shared identity and vision:** Including intermediaries and researchers who center volunteering in their work, as well as nonprofit organizations that rely heavily on volunteers but may not traditionally see themselves as part of this ecosystem, and funders.
- **Creating a field-level agenda for action:** A framework that addresses shared barriers, such as the those identified in this report, and drives collective progress. To be effective, this agenda must be co-created and continuously adapted, ensuring it strengthens the collective identity of the volunteer sector.

There are already organizations devoted to volunteerism that are developing practical tools, convening social sector leaders to promote strategic volunteer engagement, and driving promising momentum toward more effective volunteer practices. A shared identity and agenda would amplify these efforts, providing greater clarity and focus on the work still needed to fully realize the transformative potential of volunteer engagement.

Funders will play a key role in advancing volunteer engagement by supporting this shared agenda, positioning nonprofit leaders and intermediaries to better articulate the impact and full costs of volunteering. Their investment is crucial for implementing key recommendations and strengthening the infrastructure needed to scale and sustain volunteerism.

**Breaking this cycle of underinvestment will require long-term commitment by a range of stakeholders under a shared vision** that redefines volunteering not as a mysterious intangible input– but as a resource-intensive, powerful, measurable force for driving social impact. We believe co-creating a field-level agenda for action across this stakeholder group will be key, and we recommend three actions as part of that agenda:

3. **BETTER DATA:** While the impact of volunteering on the individual volunteer is well explored and documented, **we need to do more to quantify and document the impact of volunteering on communities, and society.** This should include volunteerism's role in delivering community outcomes for nonprofits and volunteerism's broader role in driving societal change – bridging community divides, fostering civic engagement, strengthening democracy, and driving systemic change. Such research could provide vital information about the role of volunteers in helping achieve outcomes that align with both nonprofits' and funders' strategic priorities.

4. **STRONGER INFRASTRUCTURE: We need more resources and standardized tools to help nonprofits and intermediaries more accurately and consistently assess the full financial investment required for effective volunteer engagement.** Data and analysis developed through the use of this more robust infrastructure can also help

funders better understand the costs of achieving the outcomes they seek.

5. **MORE DIALOGUE:** W**e can use this impact and cost data to encourage dialogue and develop alignment between funders and nonprofits about the role of volunteers in driving social outcomes.** A deeper understanding of these factors can help bridge gaps between funders and nonprofits, ensuring more informed investment and strategic alignment in volunteer engagement. These kinds of conversations can only be healthy for the sector – furthering understanding and driving action that strengthens the capacity of nonprofits to recruit and deploy volunteers to carry out critically important jobs.

Expanding support for high-quality volunteer engagement can contribute to a world where nonprofit organizations provide a range of essential services at scale to those who need it, help communities rebuild trust and reduce inequality, and spur society toward positive change.

# APPENDIX

## *Methods*

This report was developed through a comprehensive research effort that included:

**Review of existing knowledge on nonprofit volunteering trends**
Nonprofits, foundations, and subject matter experts have produced a wealth of publications and reports analyzing volunteering trends and perceptions across the social and private sectors. We reviewed research papers and other publications analyzing the trends and impacts of volunteering (please see bibliography for full list).

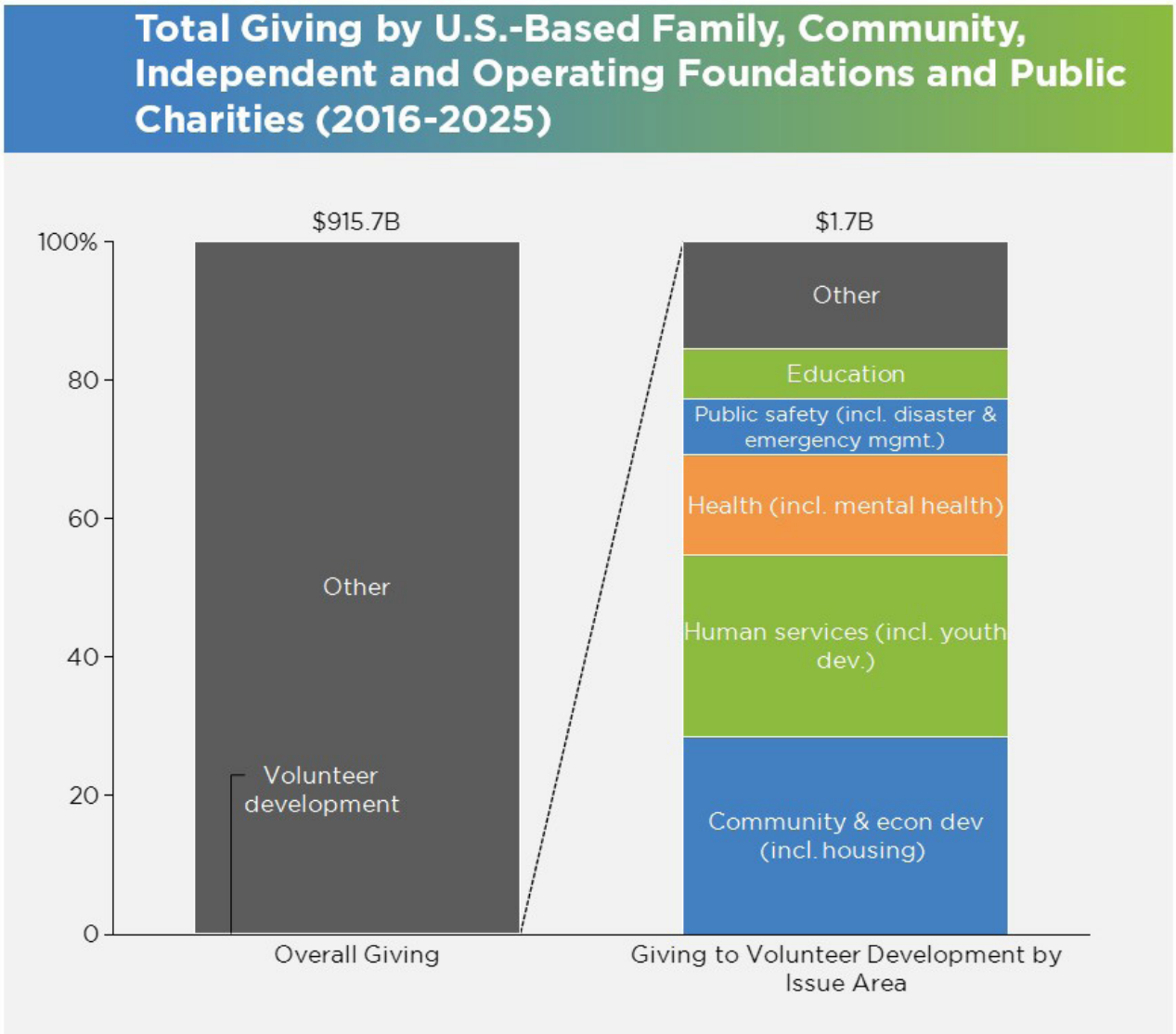
**Interviews and focus groups**
We conducted interviews and focus groups with over 60 individuals. They included nonprofit leaders (ranging from program officers to CEOs and spanning issue areas of youth development, mental health, environmental stewardship, disaster recovery, and food insecurity), leaders of intermediary nonprofits, leaders of corporate and philanthropic funding organizations, and thought leaders for volunteering and civic engagement.

**Analysis of staffing volunteer ratios**
We collected volunteer and staff data from 20 nonprofits using a combination of publicly available sources and information shared during interviews. To analyze the scale of volunteer engagement within these organizations, this analysis maps staff-to-volunteer ratios, providing insights into how nonprofits leverage volunteers.

**Analysis of Foundation Center by Candid data**
To better understand the resources allocated to volunteer engagement, an analysis of the funder landscape was conducted using data from the Foundation Center by Candid. Foundation Center tracks funding to NGOs globally, including information on which entities provide what funding and where it flows.

Our analysis focused on funding given to NGOs in the U.S. across a broad set of funders. This included all family foundations, community foundations, independent foundations, operating foundations, company-sponsored foundations, public charities, businesses, and corporate giving programs. Our analysis focused primarily on giving by these funders to "volunteer development," defined by Foundation Center by Candid as giving in support of the recruitment, training, and deployment of volunteer staff in administrative or program capacities. We use this term interchangeably with the term "volunteer engagement" in the report. We recognize that other giving from these funders could have been used to support volunteer engagement efforts (e.g., if a recipient received an unrestricted grant and used it for that purpose), but there is no accurate way to track the use of those funds, therefore they are not included. Additional analyses were performed using this data, and detail about those specific analyses is provided in the relevant endnote references.

*Detail on Foundation Giving to Volunteer Engagement by Issue Area*[46]




Source: Foundation Center by Candid (foundationcenter.org).

### *Detail on Costs Incurred by Sample Organizations*

| Organization | Costs |
|---|---|
| Organization A | Volunteers engage in narrative change work across the country organized in local chapters. The organization conducted specific budgeting exercises to calculate these costs, dividing expenses across their chapters and the number of volunteers. These figures are specific to operational needs, including full-time staff that support volunteer chapters and promotional materials. |
| Organization B | Similarly, this organization calculated its per volunteer cost in an independent analysis. However, this organization operates primarily in Central and South America where cost of goods and services is less than the U.S., so this estimate may not be directly comparable to others. |
| Organization C | This estimate was calculated as part of a direct cost-benefit analysis of its volunteer corps. The main cost drivers are the logistical and infrastructure costs required for managing large groups of volunteers doing intensive clean-up or home rebuilding efforts. |
| Organization D | Compared with organization A, this nonprofit does offer client services through its volunteers. Therefore, the primary cost drivers are recruitment, training, and ongoing engagement and recognition of volunteers. |
| Organization E | This cost is part of a more thorough process where the organization tracks expenses related to recruitment, onboarding and ongoing volunteer support. The upper range of this cost is tied to the intensive training for mentorship roles, after which the cost stabilizes at ~$1,000 per volunteer per year. |

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