

# Activating the Power of Strategic Volunteer Engagement for a Better World

A Conversation Starter for  
Funders and Nonprofit Leaders



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May 2023

# Dear Friends,

Volunteers are often the first to respond to pressing needs in a community. From the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change and social inequalities, volunteers are the first to come together when a disaster breaks, and the first to step in with much-needed support when financial resources are lost.

They also remain one of the most undervalued resources in the philanthropic ecosystem.

Engaging volunteers takes time, expertise, planning, and sufficient resources. It demands strategy. Too often, volunteer engagement falls short in these categories, leaving untapped the immense potential of people who want to contribute their time and talent. This missed opportunity not only hampers the progress of funders, nonprofits, and the communities they serve but takes from those who volunteer the chance to make a real and meaningful difference.

Driven by the power of volunteer energy and grounded in comprehensive research, the Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement launched with a single objective: **to provide practical recommendations for funders and nonprofit leaders to invest in strategic volunteer engagement.** This strategy is win-win-win. It benefits nonprofits and volunteers and strengthens funder investments.

To activate this energy, funders and nonprofits must meet in the middle—finding common ground to work together towards fulfilling their missions. This guide is designed to initiate a dialogue between both partners and help bring you closer to achieving your shared goals.

Within the following pages, you will find resources and practical steps to bolster your collective efforts in moving missions forward and cultivating stronger communities. We welcome your feedback and the lessons learned from your experiences.

Together, we can embark on this journey, where the force of compassion and the spirited dedication of so many brings us to a brighter future.

With a firm belief in positive change,  
Betsy McFarland and Jeffrey Glebocki  
Co-Directors, Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement



# About the Initiative

The Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement is a joint effort of funders and nonprofits to promote more thoughtful and strategic volunteer engagement that benefits the community served, the nonprofit, volunteers, and funders. Through practical and research-informed tools and resources, we equip:

**Nonprofits** to engage volunteers with purpose and intention.

**Funders** to invest in strategic volunteer engagement.

## What is Strategic Volunteer Engagement?

Strategic volunteer engagement recognizes those who volunteer as vital partners in community service, performing work critical to an organization's ability to advance its mission and accomplish its goals. Organizations that embrace strategic volunteer engagement prioritize and invest in supporting volunteers to ensure success. Strategic volunteer engagement provides tangible and long-term benefits for funders and nonprofits—it's **good grantmaking and good business**.

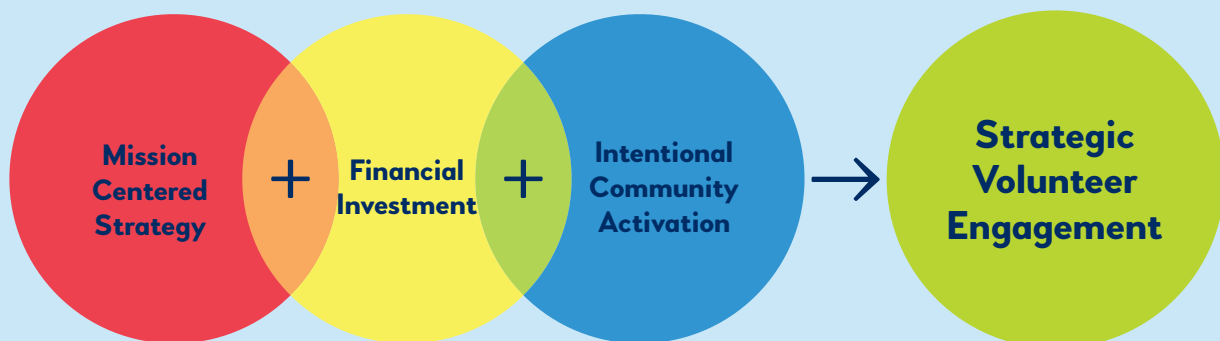
### Strategic Volunteer Engagement in Practice

Strategic Volunteer Engagement is most successful as a shared responsibility—when all involved are invested in its success and sustainability. Strategic volunteer engagement requires resources, support, and leadership, just like any core business function.

**When appropriately invested in, strategic volunteer engagement:**

- Increases an organization's **capacity**
- Enhances funder ROI leading to lasting, positive **change**
- Strengthens **community**

Strategic volunteer engagement calls for a mission-centered strategy, sufficient financial investment, and deliberate activation of the community.



# The Research

In 2022, the Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement commissioned two national research studies to better understand why funders and nonprofit executives do (or do not) prioritize volunteer engagement. This groundbreaking research, paired with the extensive experience of partners, serves as the basis for the actionable insights highlighted in this guide and aims to support both funders and nonprofits in maximizing volunteer impact to transform the future of volunteer engagement.

This body of research includes a quantitative study led by The Do Good Institute at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy and a qualitative study led by Dr. Sue Carter Kahl.

## What We Found

Nonprofits faced an increase in demand for their services in recent years, but many organizations report operating with reduced funding and staff since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While nonprofit leaders believe that volunteers provide quality services they otherwise couldn't offer their community, they often struggle to recruit and retain volunteers. Despite this gap, nonprofit leaders largely have not requested funding for volunteer engagement.

Meanwhile, funders have identified many potential, yet different, benefits of engaging volunteers, but also expressed uncertainty about achieving those benefits—citing concerns about volunteer commitment, an organization's capacity to effectively engage volunteers, and the capacity to effectively engage volunteers, and the funder's return on their investment. As a result, funders are largely not investing in the infrastructure necessary to engage volunteers.

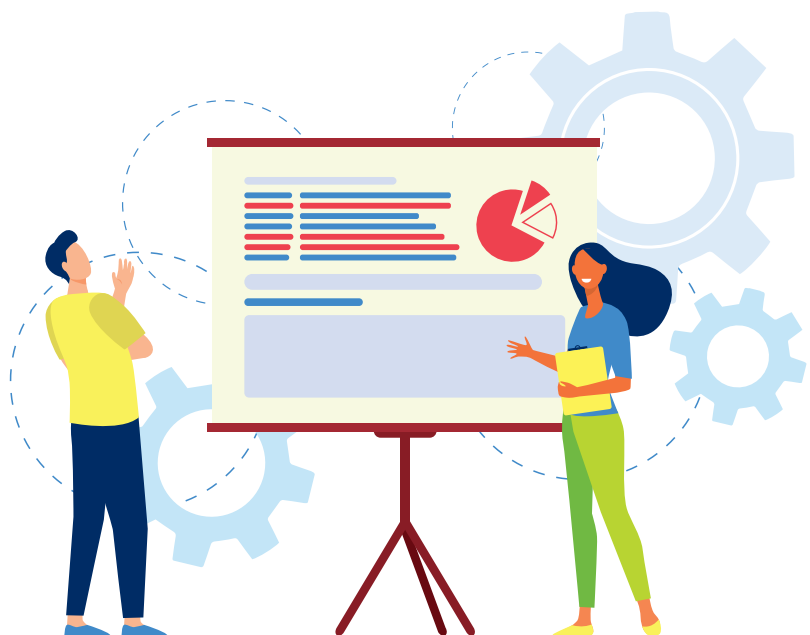
*There is a gap and an opportunity on both sides of the funder/nonprofit relationship, and strategic volunteer engagement could close the gap—leading to significantly greater impact with win-win-win results.*

### Strategic Volunteer Engagement is Win-Win-Win

**Nonprofits →**  
Stronger programs and operations that drive mission-accomplishment

**Funders →**  
Greater impact of grantmaking dollars

**Volunteers →**  
Meaningful and fulfilling experiences that activate diverse skill sets to meet real community needs



## Findings at a Glance<sup>1</sup>

1	Nonprofits are experiencing an uptick in demand as our nation recovers from the height of the pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>51%</b> report increased demand in services.</li><li>• <b>64%</b> report increased staff workload.</li></ul>
2	Volunteers are seen as an essential part of the nonprofit workforce by nonprofit leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>2 in 3</b> nonprofit leaders believe volunteers increase the quality of their services and extend their reach.</li></ul>
3	While experiencing increased demand, nonprofits face challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers to meet this need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Just <b>13%</b> of nonprofits are able to engage more volunteers. Worse, only <b>18%</b> of funders see a lack of volunteers as a problem nonprofit leaders face.</li></ul>
4	But nonprofit executives are not seeking funding for the strategic engagement of volunteers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>1 in 3</b> funders has never received a funding request for volunteer engagement.</li><li>• Successful and strategic engagement of volunteers requires infrastructure—recruitment, training, supervision, resources, and support. All of which requires funding.</li></ul>
5	Strategic volunteer engagement amplifies the diverse perspectives of community members and strengthens community ties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>62%</b> of nonprofit leaders see volunteer engagement as improving community relations.</li><li>• <b>55%</b> of funders believe volunteer engagement improves the organization’s capacity to make connections with people and within the community.</li><li>• <b>70%</b> of funders connect volunteerism to a stronger civil society.</li></ul>
6	Strategic volunteer engagement builds organizational capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>74%</b> of nonprofit leaders experience direct cost savings from volunteers.</li><li>• <b>66%</b> of nonprofit leaders believe that volunteers allow the organization to provide more detailed attention to the people served.</li></ul>

1 Dietz, Nathan, and Grimm, Robert T., Jr. 2023. “The State of Volunteer Engagement: Insights from Nonprofit Leaders and Funders” Research Report: Do Good Institute, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland.



# Meeting in the Middle

**The purpose of this guide is to facilitate a shared understanding of the benefits of strategic volunteer engagement as a mission-critical strategy for both funders and nonprofit leaders.**

According to the research, funders and nonprofit leaders have differing perceptions about the benefits of volunteer engagement. While nonprofit leaders cite recruiting sufficient volunteers and finding skilled volunteers who are available during the traditional work day as the two main challenges, funders believe the biggest challenge to strategic volunteer engagement is financial resources.

## Why It Matters?

To best leverage this opportunity, funders and nonprofit leaders must first align on volunteer engagement as a powerful and effective strategy for mission advancement, and a tool that delivers long-term societal benefits. While benefits may first be experienced through a nonprofit's ability to advance its mission, there are clear reverberating effects that are felt by engaged funders and the community.

There's a gap between how funders and nonprofit leaders see volunteers.



**2 IN 3**

nonprofit leaders believe volunteers increase the quality of their services and extend their reach.



**1 IN 3**

funders has never received a funding request for volunteer engagement.



# A Guide for Funders

## Why Fund Strategic Volunteer Engagement?

Funders that invest in volunteer engagement report doing so because it amplifies the perspectives of community members, strengthens nonprofit capacity, and leverages funder goals and financial investments. Research has revealed the following outcomes from engaging volunteers well:

- **Stronger, more effective, and more efficient organizations as a whole.** Organizations that enable and fundamentally leverage volunteers and their skills to accomplish their missions are significantly more adaptable, sustainable, and capable of scaling.<sup>2</sup>
- **More people power to support the mission and operations.** Many funders noted that volunteers are significant contributors to “how the work gets done” in nonprofits.<sup>3</sup> Funding in volunteer engagement is an investment in the nonprofit workforce that provides programs and services.
- **Greater return on investment (ROI) and leverage.** In one national initiative, organizations that engaged volunteers strategically realized an increased financial return on that investment. Beyond financial terms though, supporting volunteer engagement also resulted in agencies identifying new board members, community partners, and donors. In other cases, it meant that the nonprofit could serve more people or locations.<sup>4</sup>
- **Stronger community voice and involvement.** A strong volunteer engagement strategy equips and activates community members, increasing connection and amplifying their perspectives. Funders shared that engaging the community as volunteers incorporates local expertise, ideas, and experience that helps ground them in community need.<sup>5</sup>

*“Start small. Pick one area of work where you’d like to see volunteers being used strategically within your organization. Collect stories, garner buy-in, and then scale.”*

**RINA COHEN, SENIOR  
PLANNING EXECUTIVE, CARING  
& THE LAB, UJA-FEDERATION  
OF NEW YORK**

2 TCC Group. “Positive Deviants’ in Volunteerism and Service: Research summary”  
3 Kahl, Sue Carter. 2023. “Investing in Strategic Volunteer Engagement: A Qualitative Study.”  
4 Chertok, Fern, Carter Kahl, Sue, Shaul Bar Nissim, Hanna, Minkin, Rachel, Koren, Annette. 2017. “Time for Good in Action.”  
5 Kahl, Sue Carter. 2023. “Investing in Strategic Volunteer Engagement: A Qualitative Study.”

# Action Steps for Funders

The questions that funders ask of their grant partners have been shown to fundamentally shift how nonprofits approach vital organizational issues (e.g., DEI, succession planning). The following recommendations have been curated from the research and best practices of current funders of volunteer engagement. To determine which nonprofit grantees might benefit from your investments in strategic volunteering, and to explore this strategy within your own grantmaking portfolio, consider the following:

## ✓ Make Support for Volunteer Engagement Visible

Include questions about volunteer engagement in grant applications and reporting. Ask how volunteers contribute to advancing an organization's mission, programs, and operations. Solicit successes and challenges of volunteer engagement. List volunteer engagement as one of your funding priorities alongside other issue areas of support.

## ✓ Diversify and Track Impact

Monitor volunteer data beyond numbers, hours, and financial value. Encourage nonprofits to holistically capture volunteer contributions by asking impact-driven questions in grant proposals, applications, and evaluations. Explore how volunteers help nonprofits improve the quantity or quality of their services. Use qualitative stories to demonstrate depth of impact and numbers to show breadth.

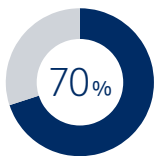
## ✓ Keep Volunteer Engagement on the Agenda

Ask for updates about volunteer impact and dilemmas during check-in conversations, site visits, and grant reports. Inquire about insights on the impact that volunteer strategies are having and how those strategies could be improved with additional investments.

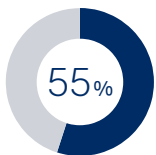
## ✓ Budget for Volunteer Engagement Operations and Capacity Building

Encourage grant partners to include budget line items, where strategically appropriate, to fund a volunteer engagement professional, volunteer management technology, and engagement training and coaching for staff.

Strategic volunteer engagement amplifies the diverse perspectives of community members and strengthens community ties.



70% of funders connect volunteerism to a stronger civil society.



55% of funders believe volunteer engagement improves the organization's capacity to make connections with people and within the community.





### ✓ **Pool Funds with Peer Foundations**

Convene other funders in your community to explore how you might amplify volunteer engagement strategies within shared grantees.

### ✓ **Cultivate Community Collaboration**

Make introductions between nonprofits and other community partners (e.g. other nonprofits, businesses, funders, and community leaders) when there are opportunities to link prospective volunteers with community needs.

### ✓ **Promote Professional Development**

Provide or underwrite professional development opportunities, training, and resources on effective volunteer engagement strategies to nonprofit partners.

### ✓ **Support and Share Research**

Support studies on effective volunteer involvement in partnership with higher education institutions and policy research centers. Share relevant volunteer-related research with grant partners who may be unaware it exists.

### ✓ **Become an Advocate**

Champion the benefits of volunteer engagement for both funders and nonprofits and raise awareness of the important role that volunteers play in the social sector and in strengthening communities.

### ✓ **Recognize Excellence**

Elevate and publicize the work of community grantees who are effectively incorporating strategic volunteer engagement into their nonprofit management practices.



# A Guide for Nonprofits

## Why Practice Strategic Volunteer Engagement?

When nonprofits actively engage their community as volunteers, they are more effective at meeting their missions and supporting their operations. The research demonstrates the following benefits:

- **More adaptable, sustainable, and scalable organizations.** Volunteer engagement helps nonprofits meet their goals and advance their mission, vision, and strategy, by tapping people power, lived expertise, and community knowledge. Organizations that involve 50 or more volunteers and leverage their time and skills effectively are significantly more adaptable, sustainable, and capable of scaling.<sup>6</sup>
- **Leveraged impact of grant and budget dollars.** When engaged effectively, volunteers augment an organization's financial and in-kind resources, producing greater value for each dollar invested. Funder investments and organizational budget dollars stretch farther when a nonprofit engages volunteers in mission-focused activities.
- **Increased impact and awareness.** Volunteers can enhance the impact of a nonprofit's work by bringing in new skills, resources, and perspectives that complement the work of staff. They also can amplify awareness of the nonprofit's work when they take their experience back out into the community.<sup>7</sup>
- **Stronger community ties.** Thoughtful volunteer engagement supports nonprofits' work to become more equitable and better reflect the needs of the community. It provides a vehicle for diverse community members to work together and see the mission in action.
- **Improved fundraising.** Volunteers donate to charity at twice the rate of non-volunteers.<sup>8</sup> Research clearly shows that volunteer engagement is directly related to increased funding for an organization. People give their money where they give their time.<sup>9</sup>

*"We're moving more and more to volunteers really adding value. We're trying to support the vision and mission through providing dedicated volunteers. They are really part of a team supporting a vision."*

**VOLUNTEER DIRECTOR**

6 TCC Group, "Positive Deviants' in Volunteerism and Service: Research summary"

7 Carter Kahl, Sue. 2019. "Make the Invisible Visible: Capturing the Multidimensional Value of Volunteerism in Nonprofits."

8 VolunteerPro. 2019. "Five Surprising Myths about Volunteers and Donors."

9 Fidelity Charitable, Fidelity@Charitable Gift Fund Volunteerism and Charitable Giving in 2009 Executive Summary

# Action Steps for Nonprofits

Implementing strategic volunteer engagement means prioritizing time and talent investments internally and incorporating them into requests from foundation partners, as appropriate. The following suggestions come from research, nonprofit leaders, and volunteer engagement consultants.

## ✓ Set the Foundation

Formalize volunteer engagement as an organizational priority by building it into the strategic plan, hiring a volunteer engagement professional, and creating volunteer engagement policies and procedures.

## ✓ Integrate Volunteerism Throughout the Organization

Provide training to staff and volunteers, and assess the effectiveness of volunteer engagement strategies together. Brainstorm how strategic volunteer engagement can help address organizational challenges.

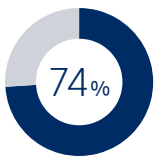
## ✓ Prioritize the Strategy

Include your volunteer engagement professional on the organization's leadership team so that volunteer involvement aligns with strategic goals. Dedicate budgetary resources to volunteer engagement, such as staff, technology, training, and recognition, so that engaging volunteers is supported across the organization.

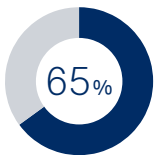
## ✓ Build in Volunteer Engagement to Funding Requests

Explicitly request funding for strategic volunteer engagement in grant applications. Share the ways volunteers contribute to program or operational success in grant requests to make their involvement more visible. Include the expenses that make volunteer participation possible such as planning, recruiting, placement, training, supervising, and recognition. Help funders understand the ways that nonprofits create conditions for positive volunteer impact.

Strategic volunteer engagement builds organizational capacity.



of nonprofit leaders experience direct cost savings from volunteers.



of nonprofit leaders witness intentional and authentic service from volunteers.





### ✓ **Start a Dialogue**

Facilitate internal and external conversations about the benefits and challenges of volunteer engagement. Discuss concerns such as volunteer retention and work quality. Work as a team to identify solutions that can mitigate issues and amplify benefits.

### ✓ **Revisit Recruitment and Retention Strategies**

COVID-19 and the changed landscape of volunteerism mean that traditional strategies may no longer succeed. Assess which aspects are working or not and for whom. Adapt or experiment with methods to better align the current needs of the nonprofit, paid staff, and volunteers. Share updated strategies with funding partners.

### ✓ **Demonstrate and Communicate Impact**

Move beyond tabulating the number of volunteers and logged hours to demonstrate volunteer impact that includes quantitative and qualitative examples of how volunteers sustain, expand, or improve your organization's programs. Track and report the contributions volunteers make to operational goals, so that organizational and volunteer impact efforts are more deeply connected. Share the ways that volunteers help a nonprofit fulfill its purpose and live its values. Link stories with statistics to paint a multifaceted picture of volunteer support.



# Join Us

Strategic volunteer engagement intentionally supports nonprofit organizations in maximizing volunteer impact. It works best when both funders and nonprofits recognize and co-invest in the strategy. And when done well, the impact is measurable and meaningful to mission advancement.

If you are a funder or a nonprofit leader looking to take your strategic volunteer engagement practice to the next level, we invite you to **join our community** at [www.strategicvolunteereengagement.org](http://www.strategicvolunteereengagement.org). Here, you'll find information and links to the community of professionals committed to and engaged in the work of strategic volunteer engagement, along with additional resources and tools including assessment guides, measurement frameworks, and impact tools.

*"As a capacity-building funder, I focus on ways to help nonprofit organizations be more effective, more efficient, more expansive in their impact. Supporting strategic volunteer engagement enables nonprofits to enhance and enrich their ability to fulfill their missions."*

**LOIS SAVAGE, PRESIDENT, THE LODESTAR FOUNDATION**



*"If our hopes of building a better and safer world are to become more than wishful thinking, we will need the engagement of volunteers more than ever."*

**KOFI ANNAN**  
**FORMER SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

**INITIATIVE FOR** **STRATEGIC  
VOLUNTEER  
ENGAGEMENT**

[strategicvolunteerengagement.org](http://strategicvolunteerengagement.org)

INITIATIVE PARTNERS



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