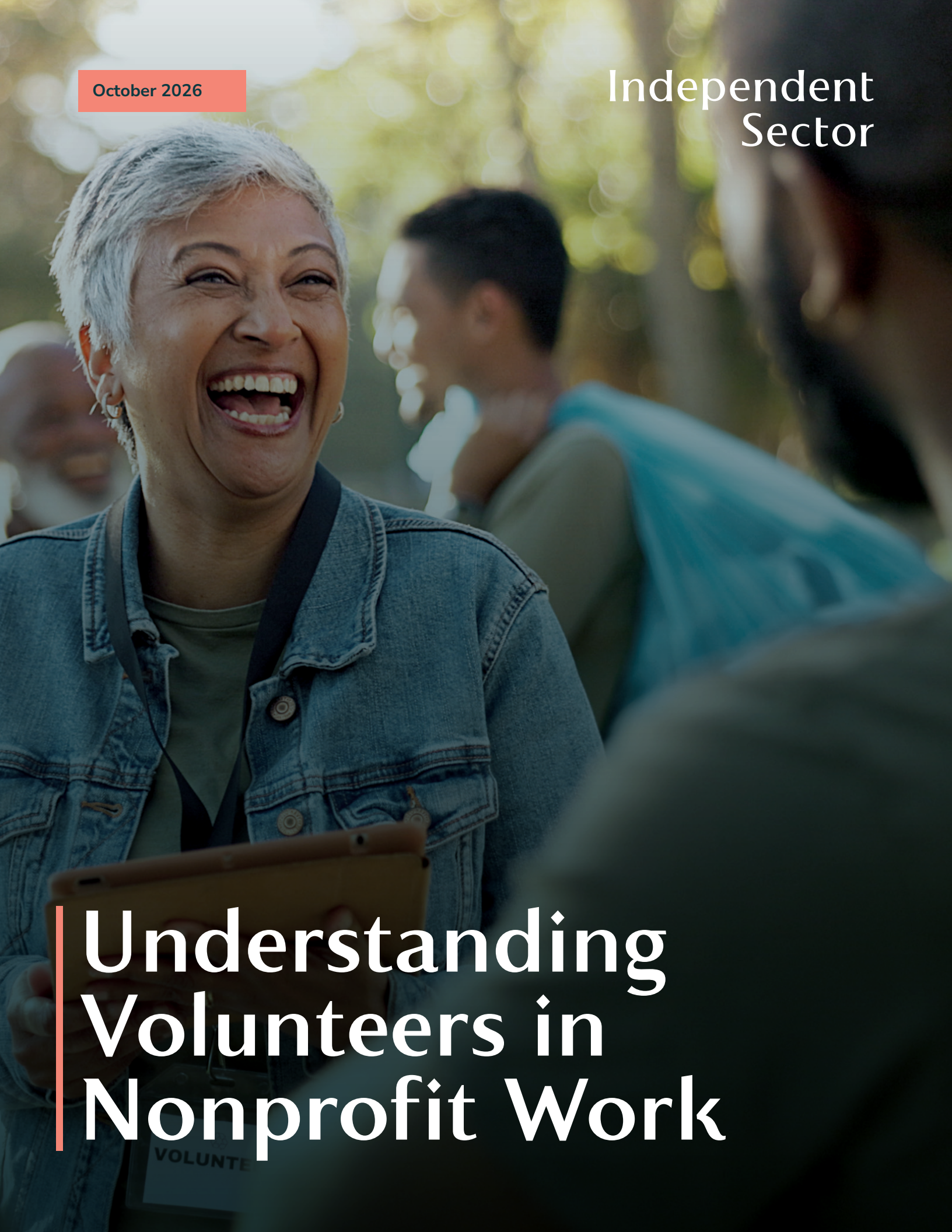
October 2026

Independent Sector



Understanding Volunteers in Nonprofit Work

Key Takeaways

- Most nonprofits report that volunteers are important or essential, with especially high reliance among smaller organizations; environment and animals organizations; arts, culture, and humanities organizations; and human services organizations.
- Many staffed nonprofits depend substantially on volunteers, but reliance on volunteers varies by context. Rural organizations and organizations with regular volunteers as opposed to episodic volunteers are more likely to say volunteers are very important or essential to carrying out their work.
- Adoption of volunteer management practices is uneven. Many organizations with volunteers have dedicated staff, orientation, training, or written policies, but fewer allocate budget for volunteer involvement or measure volunteer impact; one in five report none of these practices.
- There is substantial variation in how stakeholders view volunteers. Even among organizations that rely on volunteers, many do not consider them part of their workforce, though smaller organizations and those with higher volunteer reliance are more likely to do so.

Nonprofit organizations play many roles in American society, and volunteers play many roles within them. To better understand the nuanced roles of volunteers in the nonprofit sector, inform the work of the Center on the Nonprofit and Philanthropic Workforce, and further explore what we have learned from the field and through our research, Independent Sector conducted a comprehensive review of existing research, programming, policies, and funding connected to the nonprofit workforce. This included commissioning the Workforce Module in the 2026 National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts, a nationally representative survey[1] of 501(c)(3) organizations that previously reported having at least one paid employee,[2] from the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute, along with American University and George Mason University.

In order to reach a wider group of nonprofits than is captured through the Nonprofit Trends Survey Core Sample — which excludes foundations, higher education institutions, schools (day cares, preschools, and K-12 schools), churches and other houses of worship, and other nonprofits with unique business models and contexts — Independent Sector commissioned the development of the Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Module. The Workforce Module reached a sample of all types of 501(c)(3) public charities with paid staff and many 501(c)(3) private foundations with paid staff, with a total of 2,057 organizations responding. The development of this survey module was informed by Independent Sector's comprehensive review of existing research and resources.

Independent Sector's comprehensive review began in early 2025 and took approximately one year. This review included in-depth desk research on nonprofit workforce issues, public policies affecting the nonprofit workforce, capacity-building and workforce development programs for nonprofit staff, funders addressing workforce issues and nonprofit capacity, and structured engagement of nearly 300 stakeholders from around the sector—including volunteers, volunteer managers, and organizations that rely on volunteers—through virtual meetings, expert interviews, and an online survey.

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[1] Data are representative of 501(c)(3) public charities that reported one or more employees on their most recently available IRS Form 990, and 501(c)(3) private foundations that reported more than $50,000 in compensation or wages and positive grants paid on their most recent IRS Form 990-PF, excluding private operating foundations that fund a single related organization and pass-through or conduit foundations.

[2] To ensure that all survey questions were relevant, the survey was sent to the Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample commissioned by Independent Sector, a sample of 501(c)(3)s that excluded organizations with no paid staff. This sample includes three distinct subsamples of 501(c)(3) organizations that are excluded from the Nonprofit Trends Survey Core Sample: 1) grantmaking organizations, including private foundations and public charity grantmakers; 2) hospitals, universities, schools, and similar entities; and 3) religious organizations, clubs and societies, and some other organizations. These subsamples were included to compare their characteristics with those of the service-providing nonprofits examined in the Nonprofit Trends Survey Core Sample.

It was evident from these conversations that there is substantial variation in how stakeholders view volunteers. We heard strong opinions from some that volunteers should not be considered part of the workforce, as that characterization focuses on only one of the multitude of functions that they fulfill, and that volunteers are better understood as engaged community members or donors (of time). Others, particularly unions, may view volunteers as potentially harmful to paid workers, as they could displace positions or suppress wages. However, some stakeholders supported characterizing stipended volunteers as part of the nonprofit workforce. These differing opinions on the role and description of volunteers shaped the questions included in the Workforce Module in the 2026 National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts.

The first research brief in Independent Sector's series focused on these survey results, *Doing the Work of Nonprofits*, found many staffed organizations have more volunteers than paid staff; most organizations with paid staff report having regular volunteers (67%) and/or episodic volunteers (72%); and a small number (6%) report having AmeriCorps volunteers. Smaller organizations (by expenses) are more likely to report having regular volunteers than larger organizations, though larger organizations have a larger number of volunteers (Miller, 2026).

Most organizations with paid staff report having regular volunteers (67%) and/or episodic volunteers (72%); and a small number (6%) report having AmeriCorps volunteers.

Nonprofit organizations rely on paid workers, board members, volunteers, and consultants to complete different functions. More than one-quarter of organizations with volunteers rely on them to deliver programs and services. The most common functions performed by non-board volunteers are programs/services and individual fundraising (Miller, 2026).

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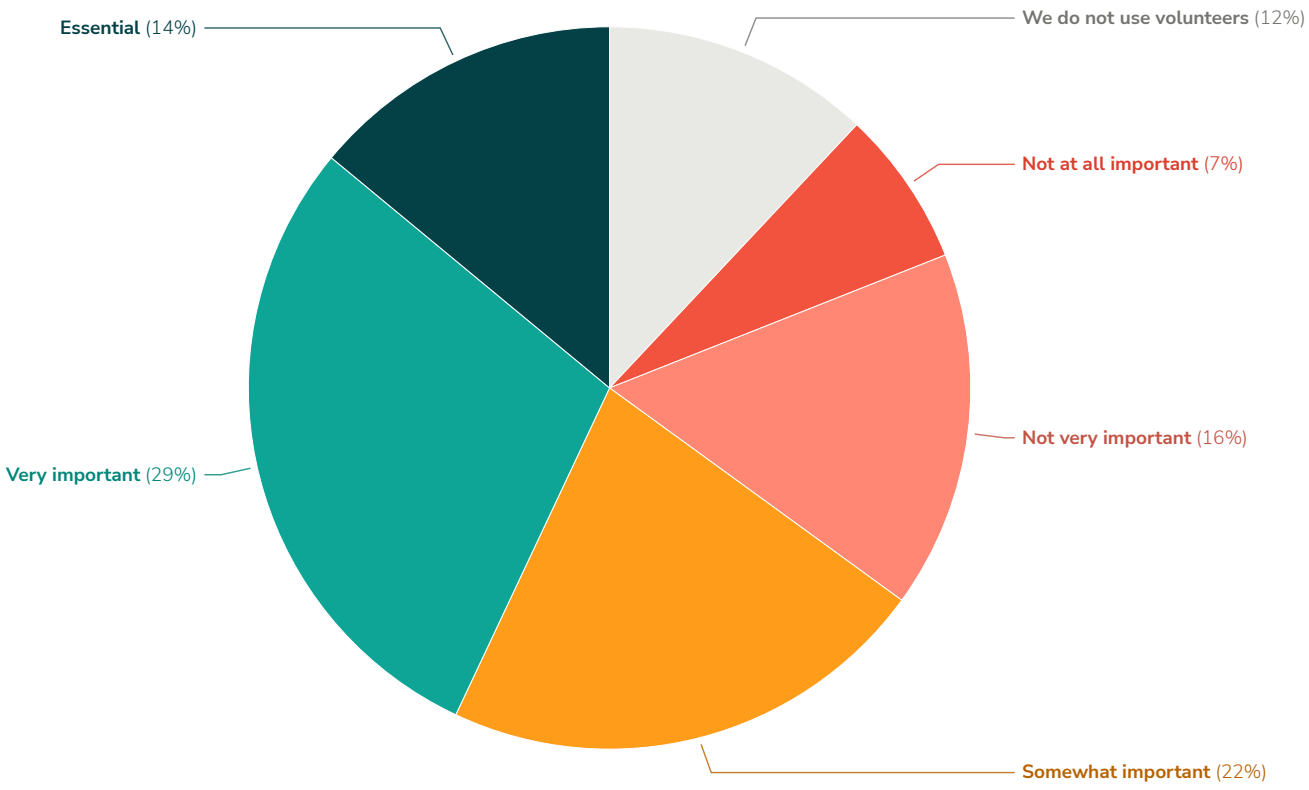
This research brief will focus on findings from the Workforce Module in the 2026 National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts on the importance and management of non-board volunteers in nonprofit work.

How important are volunteers to nonprofit organizations?

Most staffed organizations (65%) consider volunteers important or essential to the work they conducted in 2025 (Figure 1). Organizations with less than $500,000 in annual expenses were more likely to report volunteers as very important (36%) or essential (22%) than organizations with annual expenses of $10 million or more (24% and 5%, respectively) (Table 1, in Appendix). Considering smaller organizations are more likely to report having regular volunteers than larger organizations, it is unsurprising they would be more likely to describe them as important or essential to their work.

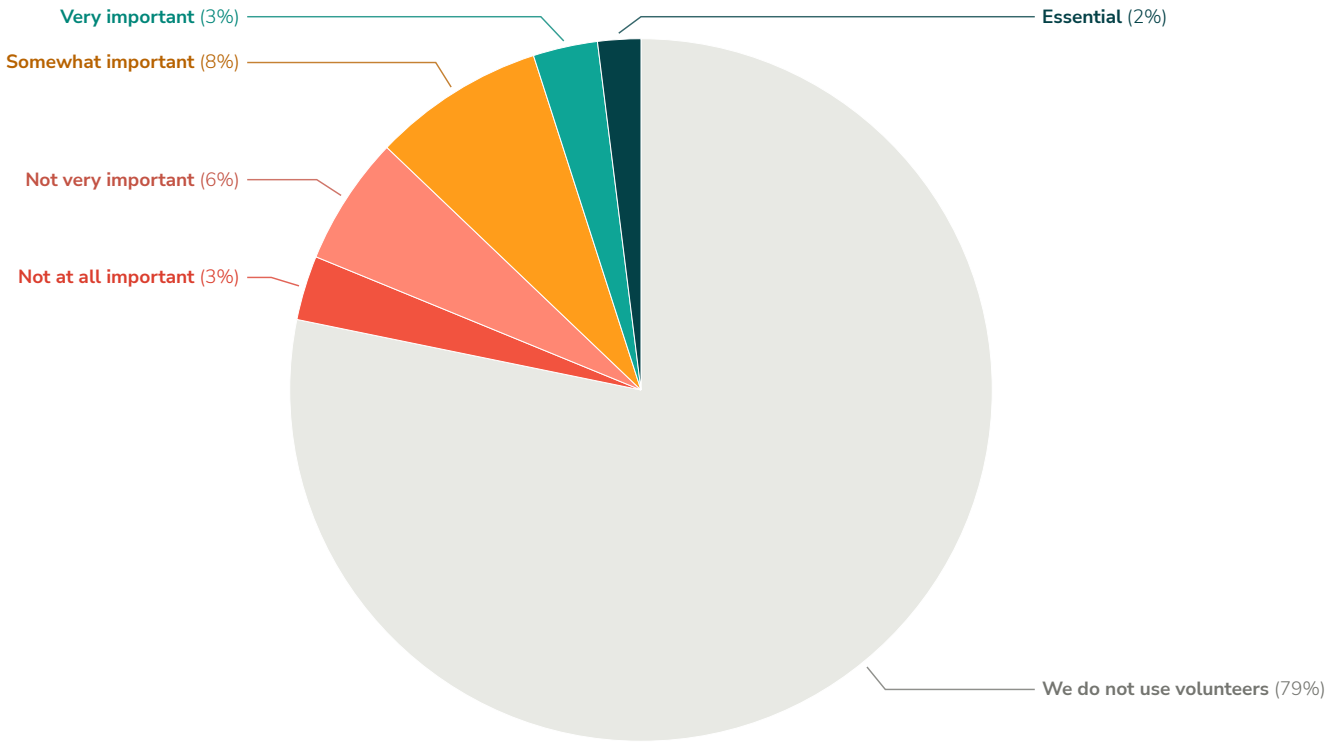
Figure 1. Importance of volunteers to the work staffed organizations conducted in 2025



Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Among private foundations, 79% report that they do not use volunteers. Relatively small shares describe volunteers as somewhat important (8%), not very important (6%), not at all important (3%), very important (3%), or essential (2%) (Figure 2).

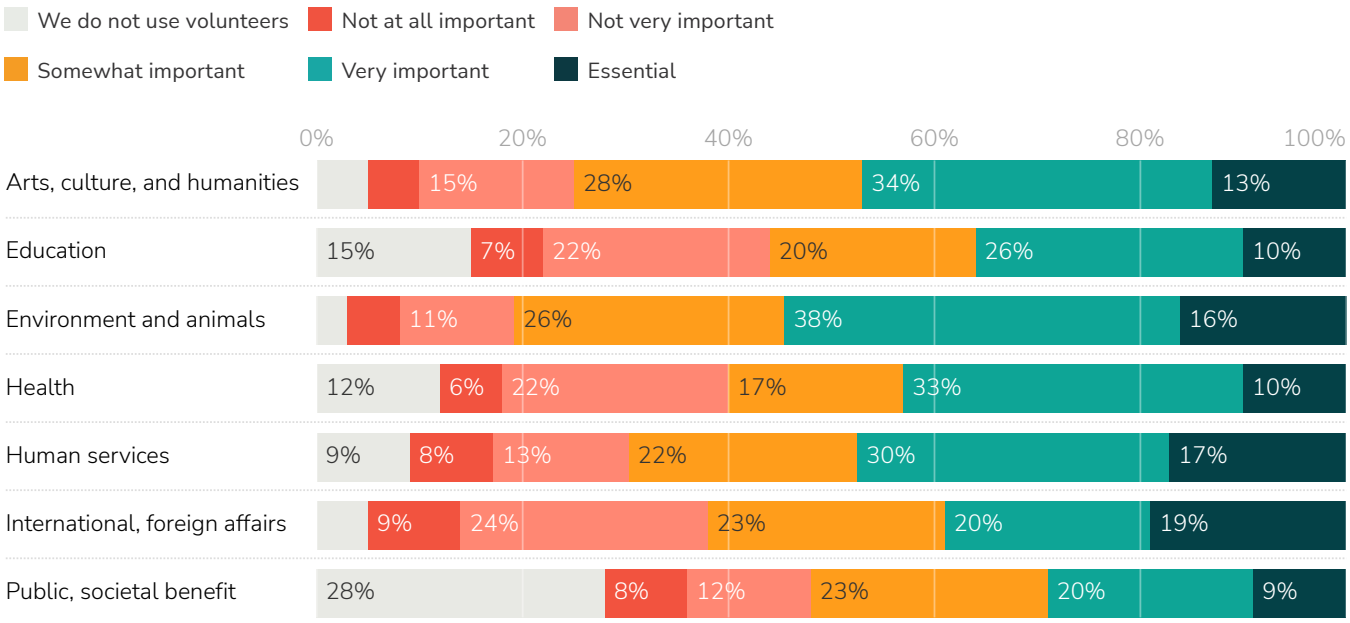
Figure 2. Importance of volunteers to the work staffed private foundations conducted in 2025



Note: Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Figure 3. Importance of volunteers to the work staffed organizations conducted in 2025, by subsector



Note: Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

When considering organizations by mission area or subsector, environment and animals organizations; arts, culture, and humanities organizations; and human services organizations are most likely to report volunteers as either somewhat important, very important, or essential (Figure 3). Organizations located in rural areas are more likely to report that volunteers were either very important (39%) or essential (16%) compared to organizations in urban areas (28% and 13%, respectively) (Table 2, in Appendix).

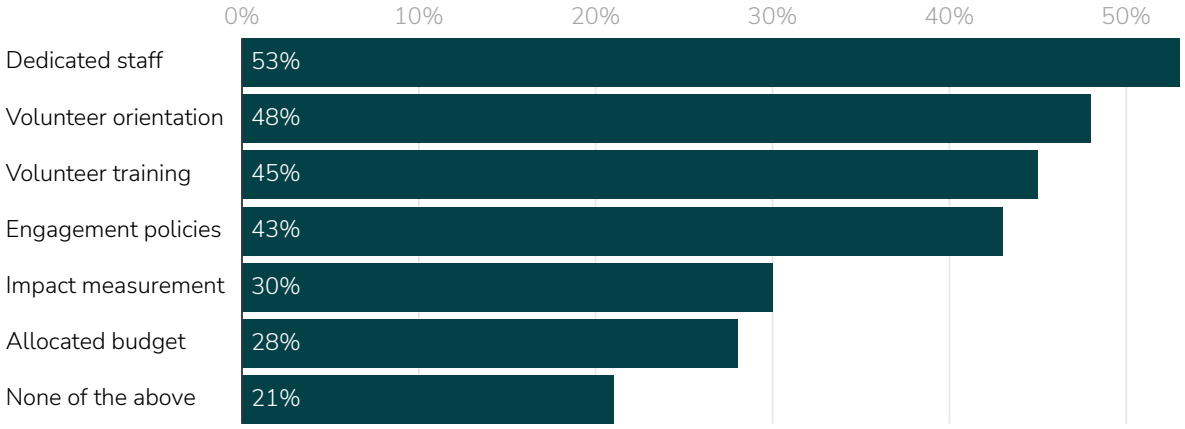
Organizations that *only* have regular volunteers are more likely to report volunteers are very important (31%) or essential (18%) than organizations that only have episodic volunteers (15% and 6%, respectively). This suggests that organizations with regular volunteers rely on volunteers more heavily than organizations that only have episodic volunteers.

How do organizations manage volunteers?

The following results focus on organizations that report having volunteers; they are not reflective of the full sample of nonprofit organizations.

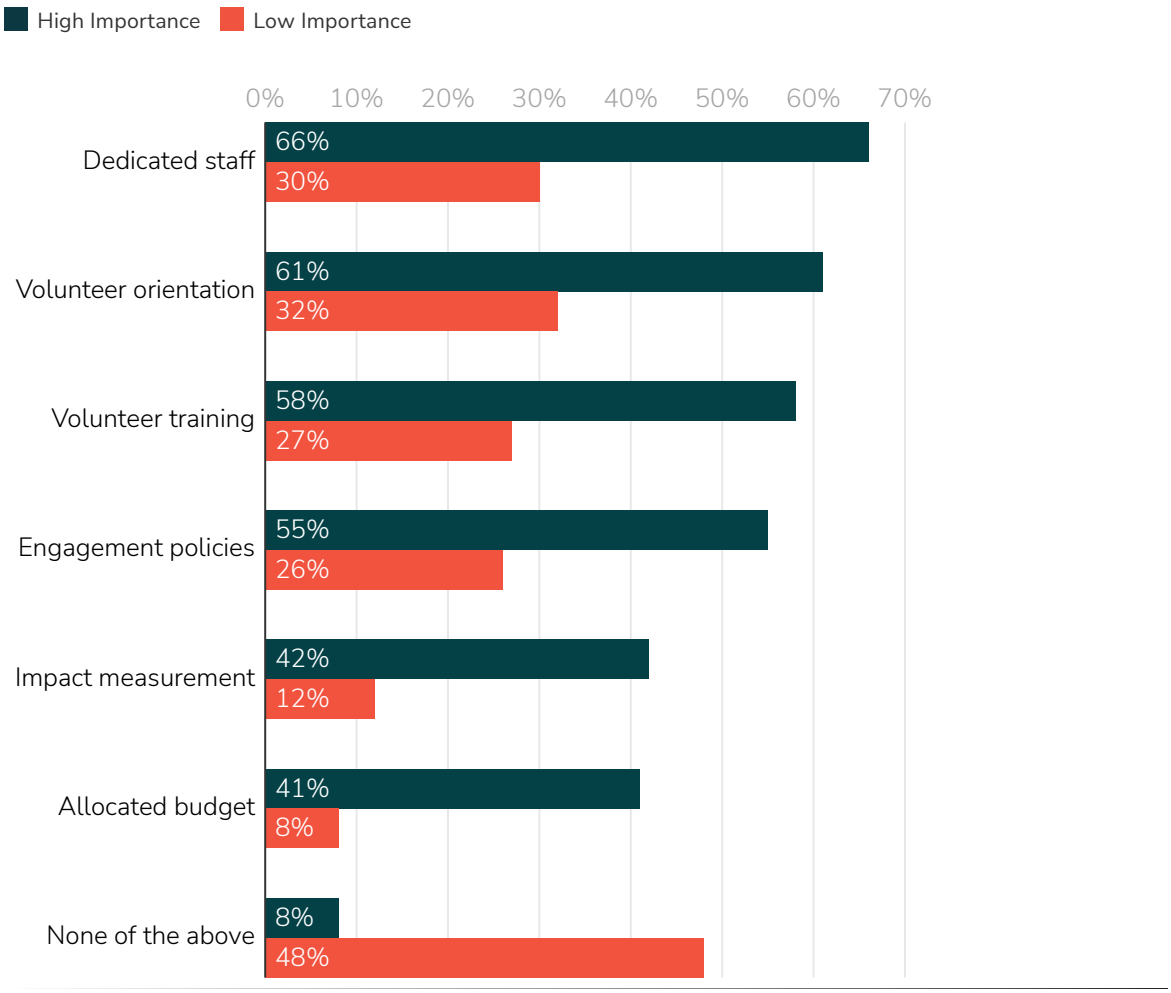
Among organizations that report having volunteers, approximately half have staff dedicated to volunteer management (53%), a volunteer orientation process (48%), a volunteer training process (45%), and written volunteer engagement policies (43%). Less than one-third measure the impact of volunteer involvement (30%) or allocate budget to support involvement (28%). Over one-fifth of organizations (21%) do not do any of these volunteer management activities (Figure 4). Unsurprisingly, organizations that report high importance of volunteers (volunteers are very important or essential) are more likely to engage in these volunteer management activities than organizations that report low volunteer importance (volunteers are not at all important or not very important) (Figure 5). However, it is striking that many of these volunteer management practices are not universally adopted by organizations that utilize volunteers.

Figure 4. Volunteer management activities among staffed organizations with volunteers



Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Figure 5. Volunteer management activities among staffed organizations with volunteers, by volunteer importance



Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

When considering organizations by size (by expenses), larger organizations are more likely to have staff dedicated to volunteer management compared to small organizations (Table 4, in Appendix); however greater size is not consistently associated with adoption of other volunteer management practices. Organizations with less than $500,000 in annual expenses are more likely to allocate budgets to support volunteer involvement than organizations with annual expenses of $10 million or more (29% compared to 25%).

Reviewing organizations by subsector or mission area, human services, environment and animals, and health organizations are more likely to engage in these volunteer management activities (Table 5, in Appendix). Education organizations are the least likely to engage in volunteer management practices. Subsectors that were more likely to report high importance of volunteers were more likely to report engaging in volunteer management activities.

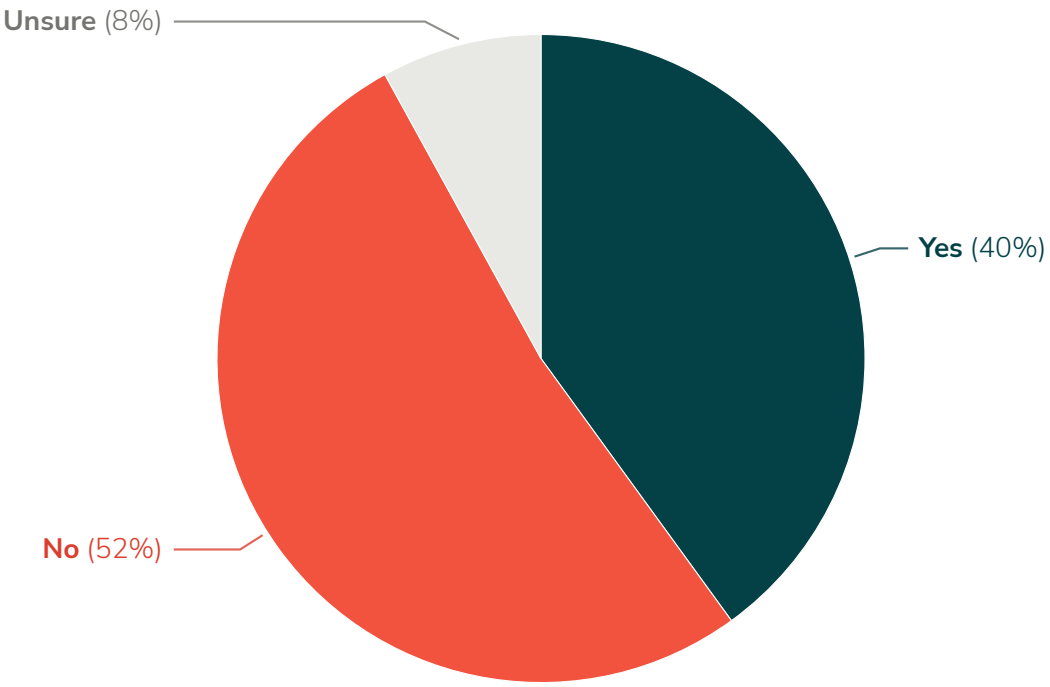
Organizations that *only* have regular volunteers are more likely to engage in these volunteer management activities than organizations that only have episodic volunteers (Table 6, in Appendix). For instance, organizations that only have regular volunteers are more likely to have a volunteer orientation process (48% versus 25%) and a volunteer training process (46% versus 23%) compared to organizations that only have episodic volunteers. This raises questions about the training, preparation, and types of roles assigned to episodic volunteers.

Are volunteers part of the nonprofit workforce?

The following results focus on organizations that report having volunteers; they are not reflective of the full sample of nonprofit organizations.

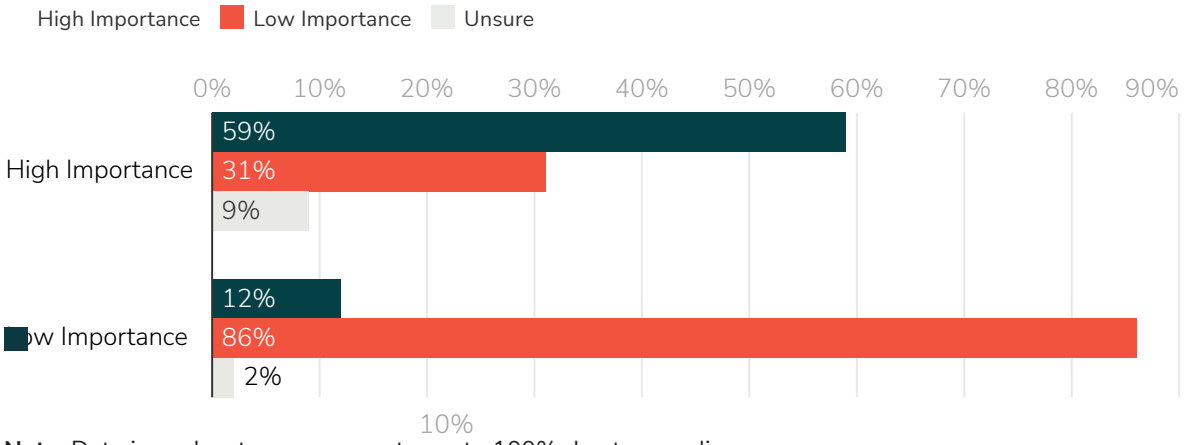
Among organizations that report having volunteers, approximately half (52%) do not consider volunteers as a part of their workforce, while 40% do consider volunteers to be part of their workforce, and 8% are unsure (Figure 6). Organizations that report high importance of volunteers are more likely to consider volunteers as part of their workforce (59%) than organizations that report low importance of volunteers (12%). Still, nearly one-third (31%) of organizations that report high volunteer importance do not consider volunteers to be part of their workforce (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Whether staffed nonprofits with volunteers consider volunteers to be part of their workforce



Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Figure 7. Whether staffed nonprofits with volunteers consider volunteers to be part of their workforce, by volunteer importance



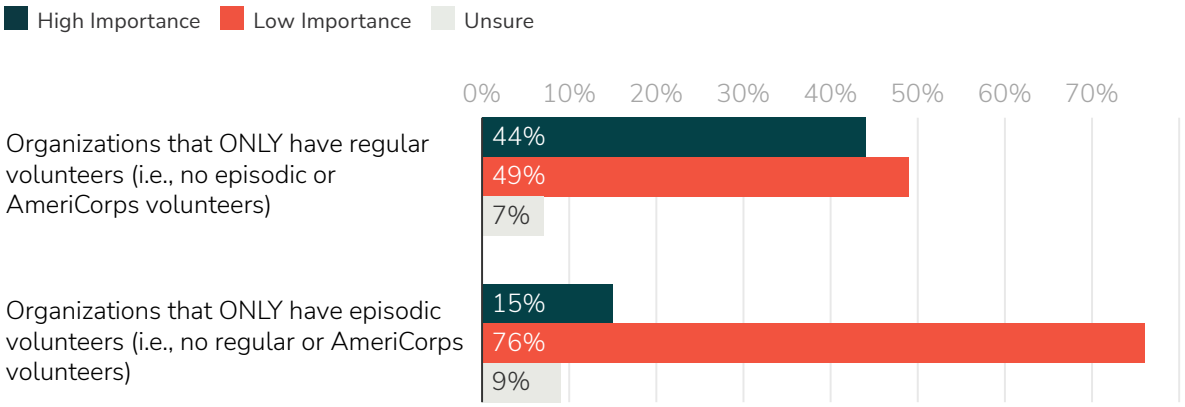
Note: Data in each category may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Smaller organizations (by expenses) are more likely to consider volunteers as part of their workforce compared to larger organizations (Table 7, in Appendix). Arts, culture, and humanities organizations are the only subsector or mission area with more respondents that do consider volunteers as part of their workforce (48%)[3] than those who do not consider volunteers as part of their workforce (35%), and it is also the subsector that expresses the most uncertainty (18%) (Table 8, in Appendix). Human services organizations, another subsector reporting high volunteer importance, are roughly split with 44% that do consider volunteers to be part of their workforce and 49% that do not.

Organizations that only have regular volunteers are more likely to consider volunteers as part of their workforce than organizations that have only episodic volunteers (44% and 15%, respectively) (Figure 8). However, among organizations that only have regular volunteers, more do not consider volunteers as part of their workforce than do (49% compared to 44%).

Figure 8. Whether staffed nonprofits with volunteers consider volunteers to be part of their workforce, by types of volunteers



Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

[3] The environment and animals and international, foreign affairs subsectors Ns were too small for analysis.

Conclusions and next steps

These findings should be interpreted in light of the survey's scope. The Workforce Module commissioned by Independent Sector was administered to a sample of staffed 501(c)(3) organizations, so the findings may not generalize to nonprofits without paid employees or other types of tax-exempt organizations. Our survey and others like it only examine incorporated nonprofit organizations and therefore offer no insight into people giving their time to informal groups (e.g., neighborhood mutual aid). In addition, relatively few organizations reported having AmeriCorps volunteers, limiting our ability to examine these organizations separately. Future research could further explore how AmeriCorps and other stipended service roles fit within nonprofit workforce structures and volunteer-management practices. It is also worth noting that "nonprofit employee" and "volunteer" are not permanent states; people move in and out of those categories. For instance, former AmeriCorps members often pursue public service employment (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007).

> ***Our findings make it clear that volunteers are not peripheral to nonprofit work, even among organizations that also have paid staff.***

Our findings make it clear that volunteers are not peripheral to nonprofit work, even among organizations that also have paid staff. For many organizations, especially smaller nonprofits and those in volunteer-reliant subsectors, they are central to carrying out mission-critical activities. Yet formal volunteer-management practices remain uneven, even among organizations that rely heavily on volunteers. Many organizations that depend on volunteers lack dedicated staff or resources, formal policies, training, orientation, or impact measurement practices. The findings also reveal complexity around whether and when volunteers are understood as part of the nonprofit workforce.

This research brief is the second in a series sharing insights from our comprehensive review of nonprofit workforce issues and findings from the Workforce Module commissioned by Independent Sector in the 2026 National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts, using data from the Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample commissioned by Independent Sector. We also plan to share findings in other formats and to host virtual events on select topics.

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Citations

Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. (2007). *AmeriCorps: Changing lives, changing America*. Washington, DC. Issue Lab Archive.

Miller, K. (2026). Doing the Work of Nonprofits. Independent Sector. https://independentsector.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Doing-the-Work-of-Nonprofits.pdf

Urban Institute. (2026). Nonprofit Workforce: Staff and Volunteer Numbers, Functions, and Importance. Accessible from https://datacatalog.urban.org/dataset/nonprofit-workforce-staff-and-volunteer-numbers-functions-and-importance-0. Data originally sourced from, and developed at the Urban Institute in collaboration with American University and George Mason University, and made available under the ODC-BY 1.0 Attribution License.

Special thanks to The Walmart Foundation and The Bernier McCaw Foundation for their support of the Independent Sector Center on the Nonprofit and Philanthropic Workforce, which made this research possible.

Appendix—Tables 1-8

Table 1. Importance of volunteers to the work staffed organizations conducted in 2025, by organization size (annual expense)

Size (annual expenses)	Not at all important	Not very important	Somewhat important	Very important	Essential	We do not use volunteers
Less than $500K	4%	13%	20%	36%	22%	4%
$500K to $999K	6%	14%	27%	29%	16%	8%
$1M to $9.9K	8%	20%	25%	27%	8%	11%
$10M or more	14%	17%	20%	26%	5%	19%

Note: Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 2. Importance of volunteers to the work staffed organizations conducted in 2025, by urbanicity

Urbanicity	Not at all important	Not very important	Somewhat important	Very important	Essential	We do not use volunteers
Rural	5%	17%	16%	39%	16%	7%
Urban	7%	16%	23%	28%	13%	13%

Note: Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 3. Importance of volunteers to the work staffed organizations conducted in 2025, by type of volunteers

Types of volunteers	Not at all important	Not very important	Somewhat important	Very important	Essential	We do not use volunteers
Organizations that ONLY have regular volunteers (i.e., no episodic or AmeriCorps volunteers)	6%	14%	28%	31%	18%	2%
Organizations that ONLY have episodic volunteers (i.e., no regular or AmeriCorps volunteers)	15%	29%	28%	15%	6%	6%

Note: Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 4. Volunteer management activities among staffed organizations with volunteers, by organization size (annual expenses)

Size (annual expenses)	Allocated budget	Dedicated staff	Engagement policies	Volunteer orientation	Volunteer training
Less than $500K	28%	44%	39%	44%	41%
$500K to $999K	29%	63%	49%	48%	48%
$1M to $9.9K	28%	54%	46%	53%	48%
$10M or more	28%	64%	43%	52%	48%

Source: For more detail on response options, see Figure 4.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 5. Volunteer management activities among staffed organizations with volunteers, by subsector

Subsector	Allocated budget	Dedicated staff	Engagement policies	Volunteer orientation	Volunteer training
Arts, culture, and humanities	24%	51%	37%	45%	40%
Education	16%	45%	29%	31%	35%
Environment and animals	35%	59%	46%	52%	46%
Health	29%	58%	46%	58%	49%
Human Services	33%	56%	52%	54%	52%
International, foreign affairs	18%	54%	42%	31%	27%
Public, societal benefit	28%	46%	33%	46%	39%

Note: For more detail on response options, see Figure 4.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 6. Volunteer management activities among staffed organizations with volunteers, by type of volunteers

Types of volunteers	Allocated budget	Dedicated staff	Engagement policies	Volunteer orientation	Volunteer training
Organizations that ONLY have regular volunteers (i.e., no episodic or AmeriCorps volunteers)	32%	50%	41%	48%	46%
Organizations that ONLY have episodic volunteers (i.e., no regular or AmeriCorps volunteers)	10%	29%	23%	25%	23%
Organizations with regular, episodic, and/or AmeriCorps volunteers	29%	53%	44%	49%	46%

Note: For more detail on response options, see Figure 4.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 7. Whether staffed nonprofits with volunteers consider volunteers to be part of their workforce, by organization size (annual expenses)

Size (annual expenses)	Yes	No	Unsure
Less than $500K	51%	36%	13%
$500K to $999K	45%	48%	6%
$1M to $9.9M	33%	63%	4%
$10M or more	22%	74%	4%

Note: Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)

Table 8. Whether staffed nonprofits with volunteers consider volunteers to be part of their workforce, by subsector

Subsector	Yes	No	Unsure
Arts, culture, and humanities	48%	35%	18%
Education	34%	58%	7%
Health	38%	58%	4%
Human Services	44%	49%	7%
Public, societal benefit	22%	72%	6%

Note: The sample is too small to calculate for the environment and animals or international, foreign affairs subsectors. Data in each row may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Nonprofit Trends Survey Workforce Sample (Urban Institute, 2026)