

The Changing Volunteer Landscape



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A few years ago, I took part in an intensive volunteer project for a local nonprofit, telling the stories of families the organization had supported. The people I interviewed shared stories of the hope and acceptance they'd found in the nonprofit's support groups.

As intimate as the conversations I had with these people were, I never met them in person. It was early in the COVID pandemic, so I conducted interviews by videoconference and communicated with staff on video or email.

That's just one example of how the volunteer landscape has changed in recent years.

Nonprofit volunteer managers, and staff members who help nonprofits manage volunteer risk, face an increasingly complex environment. More volunteering takes place remotely. That can mean fewer slip-and-fall risks, but more digital risks like the possibility of data privacy breaches. Some communities that nonprofits support, like immigrants or the LGBTQIA+ population, are facing [more targeting](#) and [violence](#). That can increase safety risks to volunteers who may be part of or travel into those communities.

On top of all that, a volunteer manager in 2026 may work with individuals across an age span of up to seven decades.

This changing landscape requires flexibility, as well as attention to risk and safety. Luckily, those things aren't mutually exclusive. In this article, we'll share some key trends in volunteering and tenets to build a safe and flexible volunteer program.

How Volunteering Is Changing

Just finding volunteers who are willing and available can be a challenge. Nearly half of nonprofit CEOs say finding enough volunteers is a problem, according to the 2023 State of Volunteer Engagement survey by the University of Maryland School of Public Policy's Do Good Institute.

Formal volunteer service declined for years, exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, before [beginning to rise again in 2024](#), research by the U.S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps shows. About 28 percent of the American population volunteered that year. While some people (like me!) started new volunteer service commitments during COVID, more than a quarter of people who volunteered before the pandemic stopped volunteering during

it, according to a survey by University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice. Still, virtual volunteering increased during COVID.

The Johnson Center for Philanthropy predicted in a 2025 article that the prevalence of virtual volunteering would continue to increase. "Routine, in-person engagements—such as having the same volunteer show up for the same four-hour slot at an information desk week after week—are becoming harder to fill," [the Johnson Center wrote](#). The center also forecast more "bite-sized" small project-based volunteer engagements.

An increasingly diverse population is showing up to volunteer, whether in person or online. According to AmeriCorps and the U.S. Census Bureau, the largest relative increases in formal volunteering between 2021 and 2023 came among:

- Millennials (ages 27 to 42).
- People who identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic.
- Those with less than a high school education.
- People with family incomes of less than \$25,000.

As nonprofit teams consider how to reach, recruit, and retain a diverse volunteer base, they must also plan to train and equip those volunteers and manage the risks of volunteer service. Here's a thumbnail guide to do that at every step of the volunteer process. For additional information on volunteer training, see our accompanying article in this issue of *Risk Management Essentials*.

Start at the Beginning: Volunteer Recruiting

Before you seek volunteers, it's important to assess your nonprofit's volunteer needs.

- Where do you need volunteer help most urgently?
- How many volunteers can your organization realistically recruit, train, and supervise?
- Who will recruit volunteers? How much time and effort can they devote to the work?
- Who has the time, skill set, and interest to supervise volunteers?

Once you've decided what areas you want to focus your volunteer search in, create a volunteer position description. Identify:

- The responsibilities and key duties of each volunteer position
- Educational requirements, skills or licenses needed, and other qualifications
- Who the volunteer reports to and whether the volunteer will supervise others

Reflect on the risks a volunteer might experience.

- Consider the risks associated with each volunteer role, including risks volunteers face (such as driving clients in a multi-passenger van) and risks volunteers pose to clients and outside parties (e.g., especially if volunteers will work directly with clients or interface with long-time donors or their financial data).

Establish volunteer eligibility and disqualifying criteria.

- Consider the responsibilities of the role and set disqualifying criteria. For example, organizations screening candidates for teaching, coaching, or counseling positions might decide prior convictions for any crimes against people, sex offenses, or convictions for child abuse and neglect would automatically disqualify an applicant.
- Determine whether licensing or regulatory agencies have identified specific offenses that would disqualify applicants for some assignments with your organization.

Develop a recruitment plan.

- What groups of people might be most interested in your organization's volunteer opportunities?
- Where will you post and/or share those opportunities?

- How will you track applications?

Don't overlook potential volunteers who might not pop up in your traditional searches.

- Recruit within your own volunteer base. When a new opportunity arises, see if any of your existing volunteers would like to switch to that project. The best fit for a project could be someone who already knows and loves your organization.
- Have you received unsolicited volunteer offers, or expressions of interest from people your organization didn't have any volunteer work for at the time? Reach out to those people and let them know what opportunities are available.

Stay Involved: Volunteer Management

Provide a volunteer orientation. An orientation should cover:

- The nonprofit's history, mission, and services
- Instruction on the essential tasks and duties of the volunteer position
- Relevant volunteer policies and procedures, and where to find documentation of them
- A safety briefing that outlines the nonprofit's approach to client and staff safety, risk management program, and emergency protocols

Assign tasks thoughtfully.

- When you assign tasks to volunteers, give priority to your biggest needs. Assign as many volunteers as you can to those things, so you don't come up short on essential projects.
- Match tasks with volunteers' skills and interests to the best of your ability.
- Offer as much flexibility in volunteer assignments as you can. Many organizations lose volunteers because they assign tasks that don't interest enthusiastic volunteers, or never offer enthusiastic volunteers the opportunity to try something new.

Celebrate your volunteers.

- Make a schedule for volunteer celebration communications and promotions. Assign necessary tasks to make sure volunteer appreciation work gets done.
- With permission, give your volunteers shoutouts on social media.
- Highlight a special volunteer and their work in regular volunteer communications or newsletters.

Communicate expectations clearly.

- Spell out what volunteers can and can't do, and what great work in the role and on the assignment looks like.
- Use online tools and file sharing services to make it easy for volunteers to find information about scheduling and key documents they'll need for their work.

Measure and build on success.

- Gauge volunteer satisfaction rates. You can use a survey, informal questions during regular meetings, or any other method that works for your organization.
- Evaluate your progress and set goals for continued improvement.
- Share your wins with volunteers! Let them know when their work helps your organization achieve something it couldn't have done without them and make sure they know how their work impacts the people your organization serves.

Be Flexible, Be Risk-Aware

Many aspects of volunteer service are changing. Keep this evolving environment in mind as you consider how to manage the risks of working with volunteers. The effort will be rewarded. Volunteers can bring fresh perspectives to your organization and build connections with your community. They may see risks you hadn't

noticed and have unique ideas for solutions. With thoughtful preparation, you'll be able to create a flexible and risk-aware approach to navigate this changing volunteer landscape.

Rachel Sams is a Lead Consultant and Editor with the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. A few things have changed about volunteering since her short-lived stint as a teenage volunteer at her local hospital. Reach her with thoughts and questions about this article at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.

Sources and Resources:

[Managing Volunteers: Balancing Risk and Reward – Nonprofits Insurance Alliance](#)

[How to Build an Effective Volunteer Management Plan in Six Steps – WildApricot](#)

[The 27 Best Practices of High-Performing Volunteer Organizations – HuffPost](#)

[No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management](#)