Organizational Considerations for Engaging Older Adults in Virtual Volunteerism

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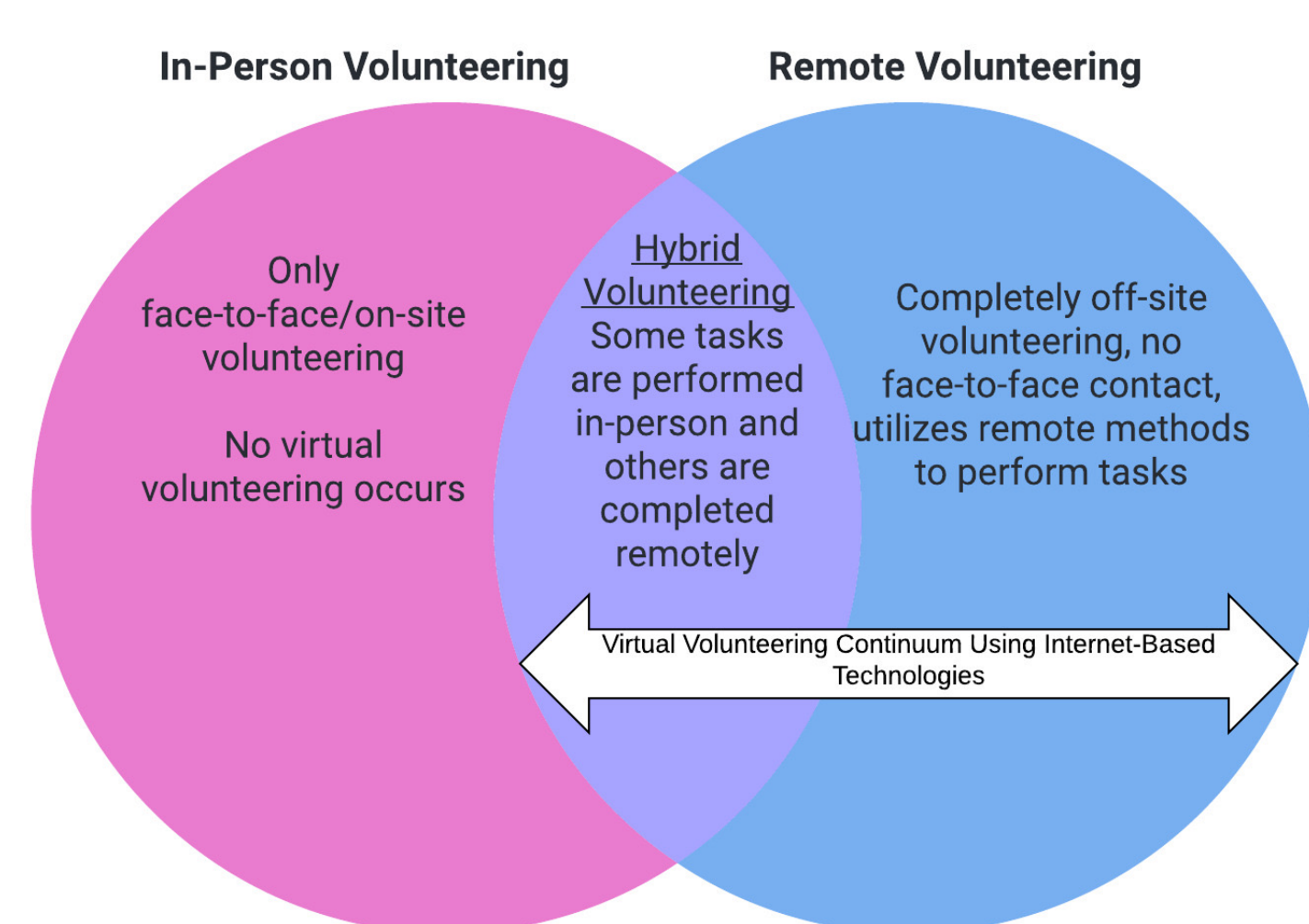
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Rational & Background

Volunteering is a long-standing activity shown to improve health, well-being, and social connection among older adults (Hsu et al., 2023; Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019; JBS International, 2019). Research has demonstrated the positive effects that volunteering has on older adults across different stages of later adulthood and disability status. The COVID-19 pandemic critically impacted the health and wellness of older adults and communities. As research progressed, it became clear that COVID-19 was a critical health risk for older adults in particular (Mueller et al., 2020), leading to the development of socially isolating infection control measures, like quarantining and social distancing. As many aspects of society moved online, virtual volunteering provided an avenue for continued connection and community engagement among older adults. Organizations were presented with the opportunity to transition volunteer roles to virtual spaces, create more long-term roles for virtual volunteering, and sustain a wider use of virtual volunteering into the future (Lachance 2021). Newly learned digital skills scaled up by the pandemic could have continuous benefit for older adults who wish to engage in internet-based leisure activities such as virtual volunteering (Li et al., 2021).

Conceptualizing Virtual Volunteering

In-Person Volunteering — Only face-to-face/on-site volunteering; No virtual volunteering occurs

Hybrid Volunteering — Some tasks are performed in-person and others are completed remotely

Remote Volunteering — Completely off-site volunteering, no face-to-face contact, utilizes remote methods to perform tasks

Virtual Volunteering Continuum Using Internet-Based Technologies

Aims & Objectives

To further explore the implications of virtual volunteerism in a post-pandemic world, this research explores the benefits of, challenges to, and opportunities for the expansion of virtual volunteerism among older adults including:

- How and to what extent are volunteer sites engaged in virtual volunteerism?

- What are the challenges at the host site level in developing and deploying virtual volunteering?

- What attracts volunteers to these types of opportunities and what factors might lead them away from virtual volunteering?

- What resources can be brought to bear to encourage virtual volunteerism?

Methodology

Recruitment

Two groups of interviewees were recruited for this study:

- Thought leaders, technology leaders, program managers, and volunteer coordinators with expertise to share on topics related to virtual volunteering and technology.

- RSVP program directors throughout the U.S.
  - The RSVP program is a national older adult volunteer program, administered by AmeriCorps, that recruits and places older adults into volunteer service in local community organizations.

Semi-Structured Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews with key informants were carried out via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed.

- Question sets addressed topics such as volunteer management, benefits and challenges of using virtual volunteerism, technology considerations, and identification of practices/strategies that are most and least successful when applied to virtual volunteerism.

- 36 representatives from 30 organizations participated in interviews:
  - 16 RSVP volunteer programs
  - 14 non-RSVP key informants with expertise in technology and volunteerism.

Data Analysis and Coding

- The coding process was organized in Dedoose qualitative software

- The codebook was generated using an iterative process and multiple coders.

- Development of initial codes were generated by two coders.

- The full research team then refined the codebook and collaboratively placed codes

- The coding scheme was reviewed for any discrepancies by the research team.

Figure 1. RSVP interviewee profile information: Primary geographic area served by volunteer program
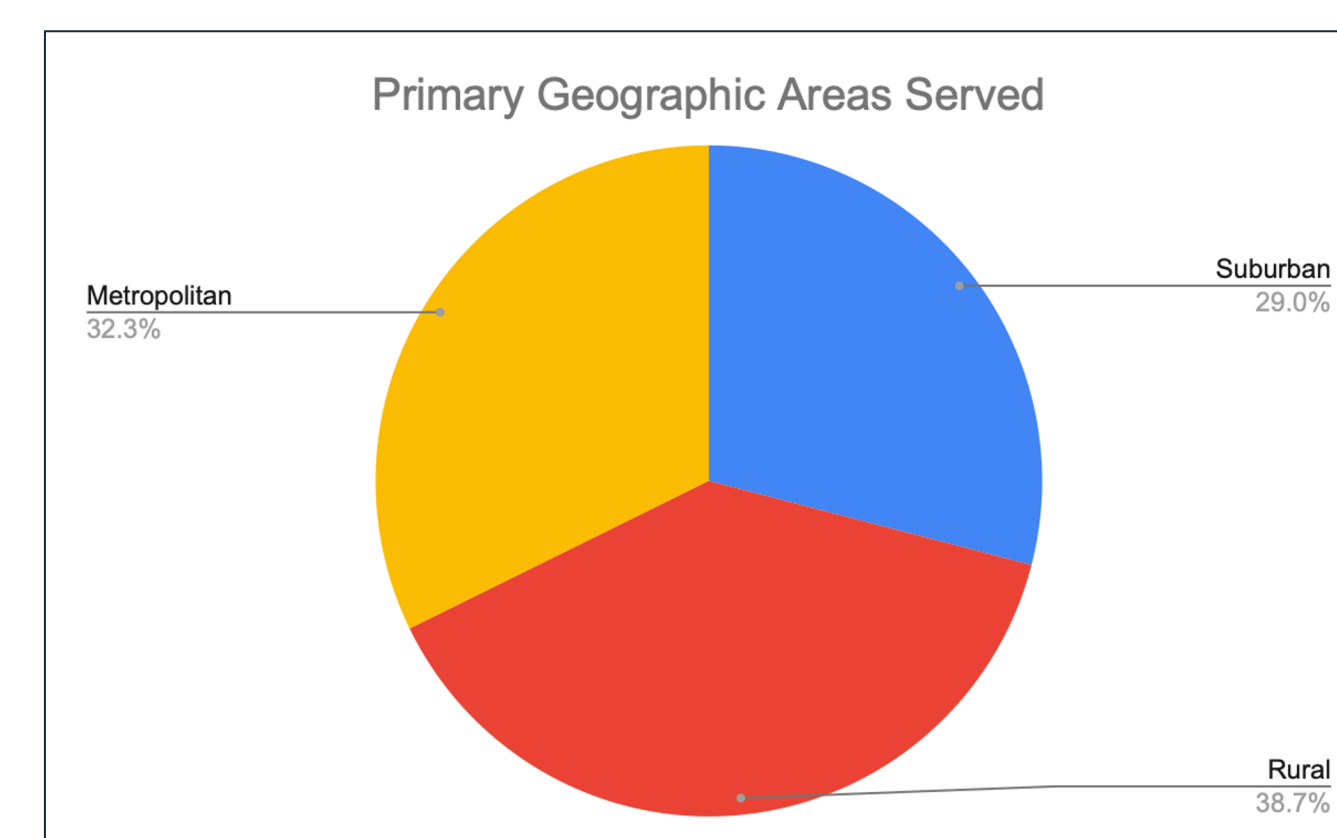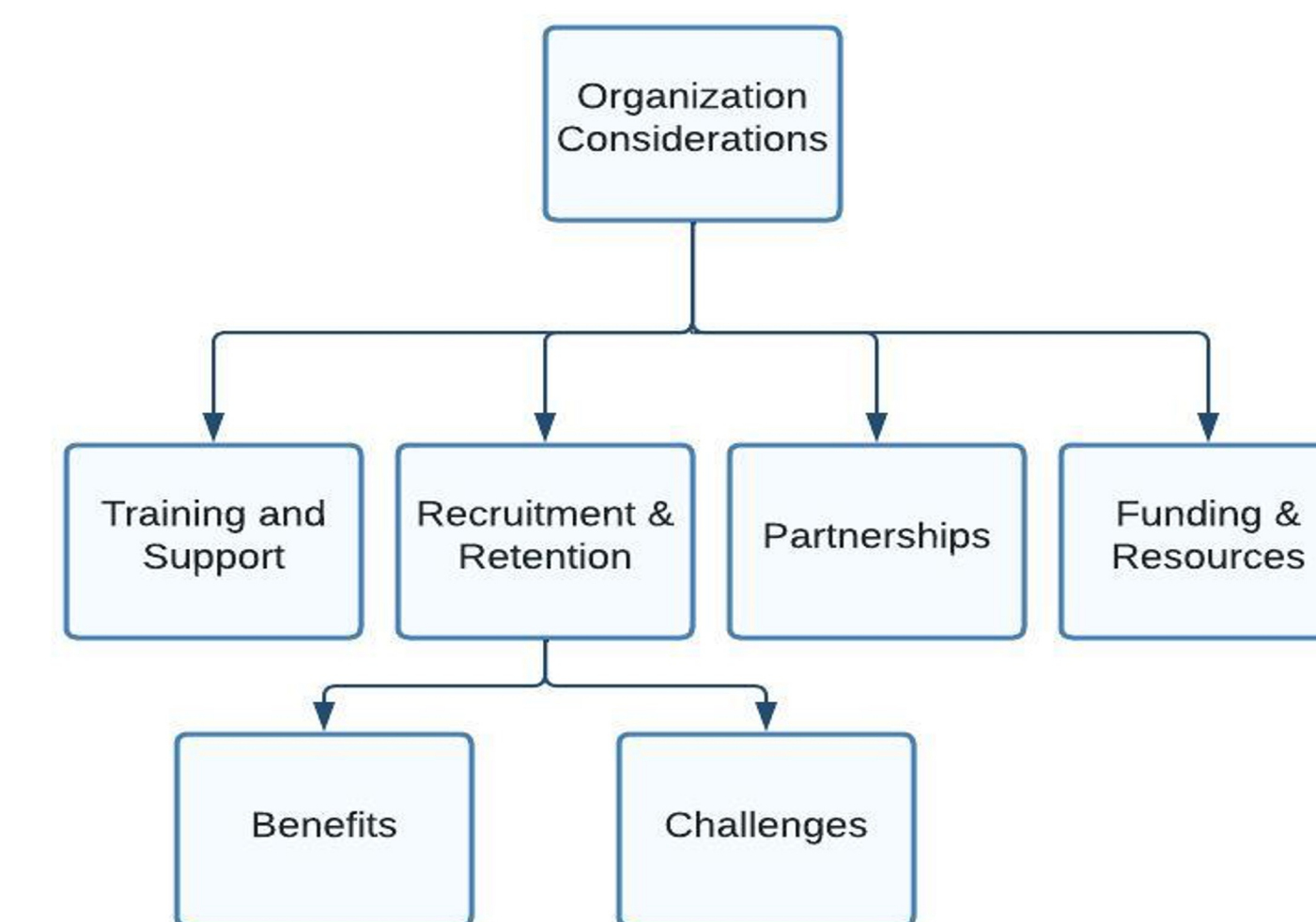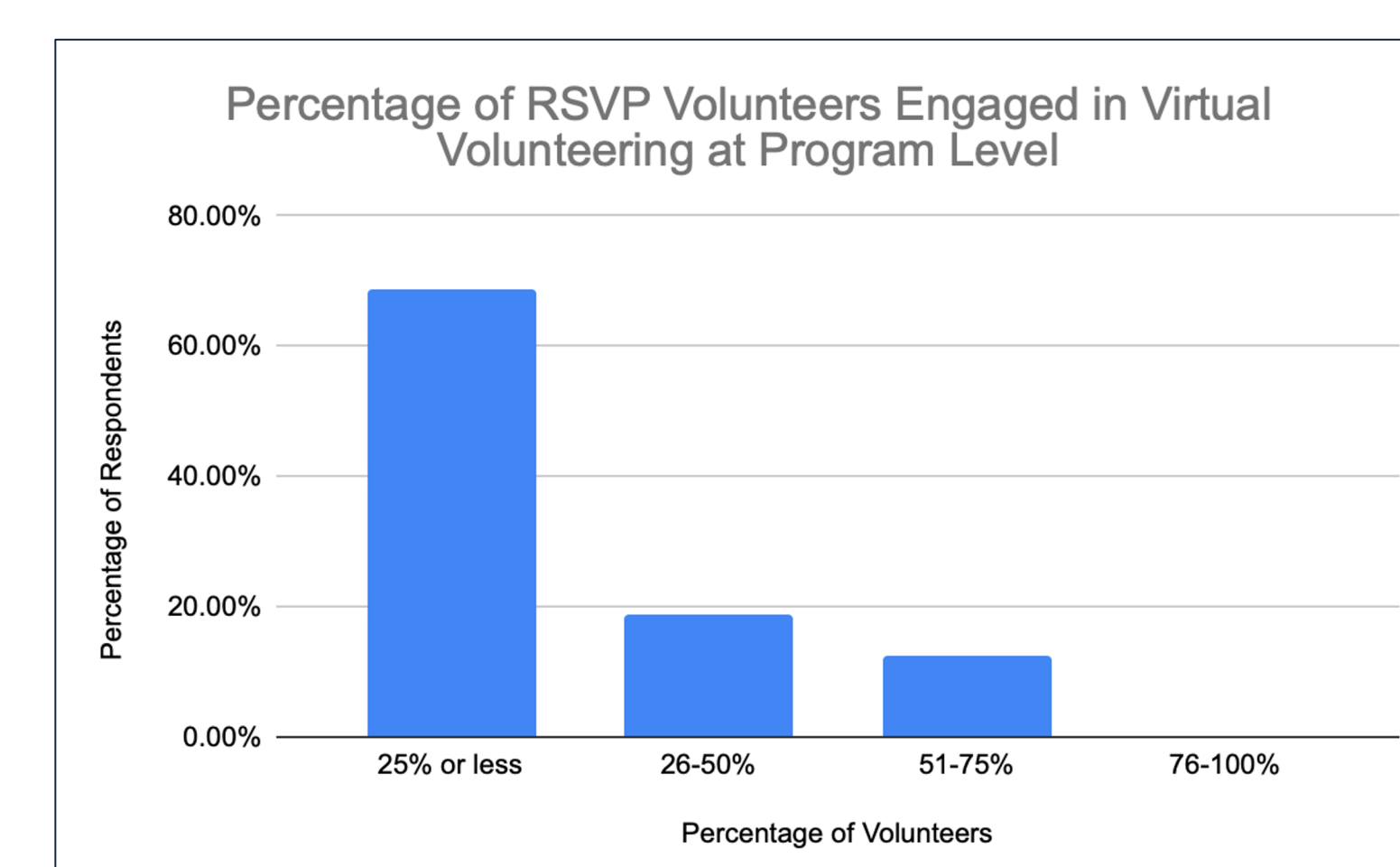
Primary Geographic Areas Served

Suburban 29.0%
Metropolitan 32.3%
Rural 38.7%

Figure 2. RSVP interviewee profile information: Proportion of volunteers in virtual assignments

Percentage of RSVP Volunteers Engaged in Virtual Volunteering at Program Level

Findings

Organization Considerations → Training and Support / Recruitment & Retention / Partnerships / Funding & Resources → Benefits / Challenges

Organizational Consideration Themes

Interviewees broadly discussed concepts related to volunteerism at a programmatic level and/or related to the management of volunteers. Topics included recruitment & retention, volunteer matching, training & support, volunteer appreciation, funding & resources, and organizational partnerships forged.

Recruitment and Retention

Efforts to recruit and retain volunteers were recognized as key to volunteer management success for both volunteering generally and for virtual volunteerism specifically. Incentives, approaches to volunteer recognition, role matching, and other tools/strategies used for recruitment or retention were topics encompassed by this theme. Interviewees were asked about recruitment benefits and challenges surrounding virtual volunteering. Virtual strategies were discussed in regard to helping keep or attract new volunteers and challenges were noted with regard to finding volunteers who were a good fit for virtual volunteer assignments.

Benefits

"…I think what we found with the virtual environment was a lot of those people got to remain engaged, and actually had people that had previously fallen away come back to their local [program name] as volunteers, students, instructors, volunteer instructors"-K.I. # 3

Challenges

"It's easier to evaporate, you know, volunteers evaporate. They just kind of, if no one's paying attention, they just stop signing in or they just, you know, it's a very easy thing to leave a virtual- Well it's easy to leave any, but particularly a virtual role if you don't feel like anybody is relying on you." - K.I. #9

Training and Support

Interviewees discussed considerations regarding the training and support needed to successfully carry out virtual volunteer assignments. Examples included individual or group technology training and providing mechanisms for tech support. For this theme, training and support was discussed as pertaining to largely in-house activities facilitated by the volunteer program.

"The other thing we've been doing is we've been sending recorded videos to the volunteers. And so that way, then they can receive a recorded video and they are listening to us having conducted a training previously. So that is a tool that we've used for training those that are really going to be kind of the virtual folks."-RSVP #1A

Partnerships

Interviewees identified partnerships to address programmatic needs. Organizational partnerships were forged, anticipated, or desired, for addressing funding, technology training, hardware/software, and volunteer recruitment. The most frequent themes under the partnerships code were related to technology hardware/software, technology training, and funding.

"And there's a lot of other small nonprofits in our state that do tech training, digital literacy training, connect people to, you know, refurbished computers, and try to you try to help them connect to that affordable connectivity program as well."-K.I. #6

Funding and Resources

Funding and staffing affected aspects of virtual volunteer programs impacting a program's ability to acquire hardware, software, internet, technology training, and program development and support. Several respondents discussed this theme in relation to a lack of staffing and funding needed to carry out virtual volunteer programs. For programs that could provide resources, it was often reported that funds were from temporary source available during the COVID-19 pandemic such as federal/state grants.

"We were early on recipients of some good COVID grants that enabled us to provide Samsung tablets to our volunteer database pretty quickly in the pandemic. I would say, you know, within the first six months we had, we probably had 60% of our older adult demographic 'Zooming' with us on a regular basis."-RSVP #2

Opportunities

Interviewees discussed opportunities for virtual volunteering to expand in the future. Some interviewees connected this growth with the trend that future cohorts of older adults are likely to be more tech-savvy and bring with them the expectation for virtual options. Some interviewees discussed how views of technology were changing and how that shift would likely permeate the volunteer space, as well.

"I would, I would like to see it [virtual volunteering] grow. And also keep it as a continuous option. Yeah, I don't want people to fall out of it completely. I want to make sure that it kind of stays in our regular routine of, of services and things that are offered and opportunities. I haven't quite figured out how to do that because everyone is so excited about being in-person. So, if you know, you all have any ideas on how to promote that, or you know, keep it, keep it on the forefront of programming, I'd be thrilled to hear."-RSVP #4

Discussion

- The quick transition to a virtual volunteer platform during the pandemic left many in a state of uncertainty and faced with a need to quickly scale this option. This pivot to a virtual platform provided opportunities for both programs and volunteers to become more tech savvy, continue important work through a new modality, and give space for trying new approaches that may not have otherwise come to fruition.

- Interviewees imagined a future for virtual volunteering, one that is likely to expand based on projected changes to the interests and technological abilities of future cohorts of older adults.

- The future of virtual volunteerism will in large part be driven by volunteer preferences, interests, and abilities coupled with infrastructure supports that increase staff resources, training, capacity, and technology access.

Key References

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