

## 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



# Aims & Objectives

To further explore the implications of virtual volunteerism in a postpandemic world, this research examined the types of volunteer roles that were successfully launched during COVID and those that remain post-COVID. This included:

- What kinds of virtual volunteering activities have programs used to engage older adult volunteers?
- What are the types of training and support needed for older adult virtual volunteers?
- Which partnerships and resources are needed to support virtual volunteering roles and programming?



Scan here to visit the project website.

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# Virtual Volunteerism in a Post-Pandemic World: What Works? Jennifer A. Crittenden, PhD, MSW; Eve Flippen, MSG; Nathan Tarbox; Leah Campbell; Rachel Coleman, PhD, MA, MPP; Adrienna Thorne; Chelsea Chapman; & Sandra S. Butler, PhD

# Methodology

## **Recruitment: Key Informants**

Two groups of key informants were recruited for this study:

- . Experts on topics related to virtual volunteering and technology, including: thought leaders, technology leaders, program managers, and volunteer coordinators.
- 2. 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.

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



# Data Gathering: Semi-Structured Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews with 36 key informants were carried out via recorded and transcribed Zoom sessions.
- Interview questions covered the following topics: 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.

• The 36 interviewees represented 30 organizations:

- 16 RSVP volunteer programs.
- 14 unique organizations (non-RSVP volunteer programs).
- These were the key informants with expertise in technology and volunteerism.

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



# Data Analysis and Coding

• The coding process was organized in Dedoose qualitative software • The codebook was generated using an iterative process and multiple coders.

Initial codes were generated by two coders.

- The full research team then refined the codebook and collaboratively placed codes
- The coding was reviewed for any discrepancies by the research team.

- Increased accessibility of volunteering
- Enabling access for a wider range of participants/service recipients • Reducing geographic barriers to volunteering
- Increased convenience and flexibility for the volunteer
- Increased technology confidence among volunteers
- Increased opportunities for new, improved, and different ways for social connection
- Reduced COVID transmission risk

# **Virtual Volunteer Activities**

- The most frequently reported virtual volunteer assignments consisted of: Community health education activities

- e.g. tax preparation, financial education, and scam prevention Companionship
- e.g. friendly visiting and visits to reduce isolation
- Other roles: Disaster and emergency planning, administrative roles such as board membership
- Areas with increasing virtual volunteering opportunities also included tutoring and mentoring, and computer/technology education.

- "...pre-pandemic they would have done face to face [peer counseling] only ... And during COVID, we were able to pivot to getting clients that had the capacity and the technological literacy to engage in those sessions via zoom. Now, post pandemic, there are still people that choose to serve only in that Zoom environment and clients that that still choose to receive their
- service in that fashion." -RSVP #2

# Ideal Virtual Volunteer Traits

- Some personality traits sought after in virtual volunteers included: • Being friendly
- Open-minded
- Empathetic
- Proactive
- Willing to take chances/work outside of their "comfort zone"

#### *"...proactive, independent, willing to learn, willing to fail"* knowing that there are challenges, losing fear that nothing wrong was going to happen, and an interest to stay connected."-K.I. #8

# Partnerships, Resources, Training, and Support

Partnerships with local and national organizations were forged, anticipated, or desired with organizations as a key component for successful virtual volunteering offerings. This included partnerships that provided funding, access to technology, tech support, volunteer recruitment and training support, and facilitated or expanded volunteer programs.

Interviewees reported using similar recruitment methods, volunteer recognition strategies, and volunteer training methods for in-person and virtual volunteering.

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Findings

COVID served as a facilitator of virtual volunteering with numerous benefits expressed by interviewees, including:

- e.g. education around insurance, health, nutrition, addiction, and disease
- Financial services
- Interviewees discussed ways that they were able to transition in-person opportunities over to virtual:

#### "...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

Training and support considerations for successful virtual volunteer assignments included individual or group technology training and providing mechanisms (internal or external) for tech support. The need for digital literacy training was a common theme.

Funding was cited as a barrier to virtual volunteerism which limited hardware, software, internet, technology training, program development, and general program support needed for virtual volunteer assignments.

Flexible funding and new funding sources during COVID were noted as helping to fill these gaps temporarily and catalyze the development of virtual opportunities.



Figure 3. Word cloud of training and support key terms

#### *"...We also provided training for people in how to work"* remotely and we also had to create new protocols for how to work with clients remotely. So, we created a document for that." -RSVP #1

# Discussion

 Interviews with RSVP program directors and key informants have made it clear that virtual volunteering became a more attractive option for volunteer programs and older adult volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

• The most successful volunteer opportunities to go virtual were community health education, financial services, and companionship volunteer assignments.

• The success of virtual volunteerism was discussed in relation to the resources and partnerships available to volunteer programs, as well as the resources necessary to train and support older adult volunteers

• Virtual volunteering requires programs to have additional and more highly tailored resources compared to traditional volunteering strategies, including specialized partnerships, funding, and program development resources.

• Supports and resources for virtual volunteers include access to the technology and internet required for virtual volunteering, as well as training in the virtual assignments.

### Key References

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