

Virtual Volunteering and Other Strategies that Increase Access to Volunteering Among Older Adults

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Crittenden, PhD, MSW, University of Maine
jennifer.crittenden@maine.edu

Research literature underscores the positive health and well-being outcomes experienced by older adults who engage in volunteerism. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased health and isolation risks for older adults while also threatening the connection that older adults have with traditional on-site volunteer assignments. Amidst the pandemic, community-based programs that depend on volunteers have had to adapt to changing conditions including adopting more virtual volunteering (VV) opportunities. At the same time there is little known about the position of VV in a post-pandemic world. Along with this gap are new questions about how to make volunteering more accessible to older adults as formal volunteer ranks decrease. Drawing input from three national service programs (RSVP, Senior Companion, and Foster Grandparents), this exploratory three-year study aims to explore the range of benefits that make volunteering more accessible and attractive to older adult volunteers.

Research Aim: To examine the use of VV among older adult volunteers; Describe the benefits, opportunities, and challenges of VV from both volunteer and host program/site perspectives.

Methods: 1) An environmental scan of VV practices and other practices that increase volunteer accessibility will be carried out across the volunteer sector. 2) Semi-structured interviews with national service program directors and thought leaders in the volunteerism/civic engagement field will be used to describe VV, benefits currently offered, and those that would be most attractive to volunteers. 3) A survey of RSVP program stations to understand the use of VV within the field to complement interview findings. 4) Subsequent years of the project will entail interviewing and surveying older adult volunteers from across all three AmeriCorps Seniors service programs to identify benefits that are most attractive to volunteers and would result in the highest level of recruitment and retention for future volunteer cohorts.

Anticipated Products: 1) A compendium of volunteer placement opportunities best positioned to be configured virtually; 2) Recommendations that programs can put into place to increase access to virtual volunteer opportunities across digital disparities; 3) Technical reports and manuscripts detailing findings.

Key Year One Activities: Year one activities will focus on interviews with RSVP program directors, key informants/thought leaders, and a survey of RSVP stations. Estimated timeline:

- *January 2023:* Obtain human subjects IRB approval for key informant interviews with RSVP program directors and thought leaders
- *February-April 2023:* Conduct outreach to potential interviewees with assistance from AmeriCorps national and regional staff; Invite selected RVSP grantees/directors that currently use VV for interviews; Review administrative data and reports from RSVP program pertaining to VV.
- *April-June:* Use interview and literature review data to develop and pilot station survey
- *June-August:* Distribute survey to RSVP stations
- *August-September:* Data analysis and reporting