

AN OVERVIEW Of Older Adult Virtual Volunteering

Tips for Managers and Directors of Volunteer Programs



Virtual volunteering leverages remote technology to modernize program delivery, sharpening volunteer skills while improving their quality of life. To succeed, program managers must proactively address technical requirements and potential hurdles before launch.

Research shows that volunteering significantly boosts the health and wellbeing of older adults. By participating, volunteers reduce social isolation, foster a deeper sense of community, and gain valuable new skills.

Virtual volunteering, which gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, is an off-site volunteer activity that is typically facilitated by computer and web-based platforms. With thoughtful planning, a range of volunteer opportunities can be carried out virtually including mentoring and tutoring, online education and classes, and companionship-based programs. While virtual volunteering does not replace traditional, in-person operations, it can help supplement programs and allow more people to participate. Virtual volunteering exists on a continuum from completely online to hybrid opportunities that mix in-person and remote volunteer activities.

BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING FOR VOLUNTEERS

Social Connection	Older adults who participate in virtual volunteering often expand their social network and build meaningful connections with others. Participants report decreased feelings of social isolation and an increased sense of community when involved in virtual volunteering.
New Skills	Older adult virtual volunteers learn new tech skills that transfer into other aspects of their lives. These new skills, such as mastering Zoom, can enable older adult volunteers to better navigate the workplace, access telehealth, and stay connected with loved ones.
Increased Accessibility and Flexibility	Older adults who cannot participate in in-person volunteering due to certain barriers such as health constraints or a lack of transportation can be involved in meaningful opportunities with virtual volunteering. Since virtual volunteers are not limited by geographical location or specific working hours, virtual volunteering makes volunteering more accessible.

BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING FOR ORGANIZATIONS




Cost-Savings	Virtual volunteerism reduces an organization's reliance on a physical workspace and reduces costs associated with in-person activities, such as travel reimbursement. This, in turn, creates budgetary savings that can be applied toward other necessary costs.
Continuity of Services	By offering a virtual volunteer program, organizations are able to mitigate interruptions to their services related to weather, travel, or other barriers.
Wider Volunteer Pool	Virtual volunteerism eliminates the need to recruit volunteers from a specific area or location. Organizations are able to recruit from a larger pool of potential volunteers.

"You know, we were happy to put it [a tablet] in their hands, and we were happy that they would use it outside of even our program, that they would use it to download books, to Facebook with their friends and their family."
 Senior Companion Program Director

VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Volunteer organizations may encounter some challenges when developing and implementing a virtual volunteer program:



-  **Technology:** Access may be impacted by a program's limited financial resources. If program funds are limited, partner with schools or libraries to share technology resources or apply for tech-specific grants.
-  **Bridge the Digital Divide:** Devices aren't enough as many volunteers lack home internet. To tackle this, programs should budget for mobile hotspots, leverage discounted internet programs, or partner with local hotspot lending libraries.
-  **Digital Support:** Be ready to onboard volunteers with varying tech skills. Support should range from basic troubleshooting (like password resets) to coaching those hesitant to use new platforms.



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The University of Maine is an equal opportunity institution committed to nondiscrimination. This tip sheet is based on research by the University of Maine Center on Aging, which surveyed and interviewed technology experts, volunteerism specialists, and AmeriCorps Seniors staff and volunteers across the U.S.

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