

SETTING UP

An Older Adult Virtual Volunteering Program

Tips for Managers and Directors of Volunteer Programs



Developing virtual volunteering roles and programs for older adults involves unique planning, resources, and ongoing support. Virtual volunteer programs or roles should incorporate a strong foundation of communication, identification of resources to sustain efforts, online spaces for connection, and adequate support for prospective and existing volunteers.

Designing virtual volunteer programs requires creative thinking and a distinct set of priorities compared to traditional in-person roles. Managers must first establish a technical foundation for engaging volunteers by addressing hardware, software, and connectivity, while providing necessary digital training and communication with volunteers. Whether adapting existing roles or creating new ones, organizations should consider the extent to which roles will be completely virtual or a mix of in-person and virtual activities. Volunteer organizations can ensure the virtual volunteering program's success by planning for long-term structural support for training and troubleshooting technical issues.

“Having a couple veteran volunteers champion the [virtual volunteer role] is good and empower[s] the volunteers to be involved in the leadership and the design aspects early on.”
RSVP Program Director

EXTRA TIPS FOR SETTING UP A VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING PROGRAM

- ✔ **Try piloting a new virtual volunteer program or role** to inform best practices going forward and reduce risks later.
- ✔ **Cultivate partnerships** with national, state, and local entities that can provide both funding and training for your new virtual volunteer role or program.
- ✔ **Integrating Technology:** If you aren't ready to launch virtual volunteering options, consider how to integrate technology into existing roles to increase access. Current older adult volunteers report using e-mail, texting, video calling, and social media, even in their fully in-person volunteer roles.



TIPS FOR SETTING UP A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

“The advice I generally give to any organization that's looking to develop anything is pilot it, make sure you have really good reason, do it small-scale with departments or staff and volunteers who are interested in trying it out and willing to make mistakes and learn from the mistakes.”

National Volunteerism Expert & Consultant



Creative Roles Addressing Community Need	<p>Successful virtual volunteer programs are intentional about creating roles that creatively meet an identified community need. Sample virtual volunteer opportunities include intergenerational tutoring/mentoring, providing administrative support or serving on boards, community education, exercise instruction, and companionship.</p>
Funding and Resources	<p>Many organizations creatively repurpose existing budgets, such as shifting mileage reimbursements toward technology and internet costs, or securing grants for staffing and infrastructure. Program managers must determine whether to provide hardware (computers, hotspots) or implement a 'bring your own device' policy. To help volunteers overcome digital barriers, consider offering hotspots or facilitating enrollment in discounted internet programs for eligible volunteers.</p>
Provide Technology Training	<p>While some volunteers are tech-savvy, others require training in both basic digital literacy and role-specific tools. Programs should determine the most effective delivery method, whether online, in-person, or hybrid, and leverage IT staff, peer mentors, or external tech training specialists to provide this support.</p>
Communication Strategies	<p>Maintaining clear communication with virtual volunteers is key to their success. Establish preferred methods of communication with volunteers, including texting and e-mail. Program staff may need to assist volunteers to setup an e-mail address through which they can send and receive program communications.</p>
Creating Community for Virtual Volunteers	<p>To combat the isolation inherent in remote work, programs should use online strategies to keep volunteers connected, such as online Facebook groups, group chats, or regular videoconferences. These spaces allow for a blend of formal updates, peer-to-peer education, and informal social networking.</p>
Appreciation, Recognition, and Impact	<p>Appreciating, recognizing, and communicating the impact of volunteers are essential best practices in volunteer management. For virtual volunteers, in addition to traditional methods of appreciation and recognition, consider sharing kudos in an online community, offering personal check-ins, or hosting virtual team meetings to celebrate contributions.</p>



To learn more and view study findings, visit www.mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/vvstudy

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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