

TRAINING & SUPPORT for Older Adult Virtual Volunteering

Tips for Managers and Directors of Volunteer Programs



Successful virtual volunteering requires intentional training and support that mirrors the rigor of in-person programs while specifically addressing digital literacy and remote communication. To maximize accessibility, organizations should offer diverse training formats, such as online modules, in-person sessions, or phone guidance, and consider providing necessary hardware, like tablets or hotspots, through partnerships with libraries or grant funding. Utilizing "Technology Ambassadors" and external partners can help fill training gaps, but programs must ensure that access to ongoing troubleshooting is available.

The onboarding and training process for any volunteer program typically involves training on specific skills necessary to perform volunteer duties.

While training methods are similar for virtual and in-person volunteering, virtual volunteering may require additional training for skills related to hardware, software, and remote communication. Additionally, training may be delivered fully online, in-person, or both. This mirrors virtual volunteering itself: some virtual volunteers may never interact in-person with an organization, while others may perform some tasks in-person.

VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING TRAINING AND SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

When building training and support components of a virtual volunteer program, volunteer organizations should consider that:

✓ **Lack of access** to reliable internet or up-to-date devices may prevent some volunteers from participating fully in virtual volunteer efforts. Assess needs and explore solutions, such as providing hotspots or devices or applying for grant funds for devices. Hotspots may be available via local libraries or by partnering with a local internet service provider for discounted access. Assistive Technology Act Programs, found in each state, may be able to supply specialized technology for those with disabilities.

✓ **Training Format Matters:** One-on-one training provides personalized support but may not be feasible for large groups; group sessions or standardized modules can help reach more volunteers efficiently. Consider sharing training resources with partnering organizations.

✓ **Learning Preferences Drive Participation:** Volunteers may have different comfort levels with technology and modes of learning (e.g., written guides, videos, live sessions). Offering multiple training options increases accessibility. Consider collaborating with a local community college or school to build technology training materials for older adult learners.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

Create Basic Training for Digital Literacy	Older volunteers have varying levels of tech experience, often learned through paid work, family, or community programs. Program managers should assess their skills early. Providing foundational digital literacy training ensures all volunteers share a common knowledge base before starting their roles.
Diversify Mode of Delivery	Training may be provided online (e.g., via Zoom, videos, online training modules), in-person (e.g., one-on-one instruction, printed instruction manuals, live group training), via phone, or a mix. For prospective virtual volunteers who lack digital literacy, it may be more challenging to facilitate online training due to limited resources. One possible solution is over-the-phone guidance through the online process.
Identify Technology Ambassadors	Staff or volunteers with existing technology skills can help create and conduct training for virtual programs and provide ongoing guidance and support to virtual volunteers. Some programs have developed a volunteer technology ambassador role for older volunteers who are skilled and interested in technology and want to share those skills in a peer-to-peer exchange.
Utilize Partner Organizations	To complement in-house training, partnerships with external organizations can provide training for online skill development for volunteers. Partnerships range from national organizations to local entities, including libraries, local schools, and national older adult technology training organizations.
Offer Ongoing Volunteer Support	Virtual volunteers benefit from ongoing help with technology questions or concerns. Support can be provided by an in-house affiliated IT department, a staff member who serves as a technology champion, or even a dedicated volunteer role created specifically to assist other volunteers (such as a Technology Ambassador).

"We've really learned a lot from all of this, and supporting our volunteers [means] always [having] a real human somewhere. So, that means having a staff member, the IT department, or whoever that someone can call. Because as much as preparing our volunteers makes them feel successful, not having something to help support them makes them fall out of that volunteer pool."

National Tech & Volunteerism Technical Assistance Provider



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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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