VOLUNTEER EFFORTS DURING COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted in partnership with the America's Service Commissions, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization representing and promoting a peer network of state service commissions across the United States.

The nation's 52 state service commissions are governor-appointed government or nonprofit organizations that support volunteerism and national volunteering programs like AmeriCorps.

This partnership began with an opportunity posted on Research4Impact by America's Service Commissions (ASC) and a state service commission. We wanted to know:

HOW HAVE VOLUNTEER EFFORTS BEEN IMPACTED BY COVID-19?

METHODS

To gain insights on the influence of the pandemic on volunteering, we piloted a survey with the state service commission. After sharing our preliminary findings with the state service commission and then members of the broader ASC network, we revised the survey to better match experiences in the field and expanded the survey to the broader network.

The final Qualtrics survey was distributed through several state service commissions to their partner organizations and through their partner volunteer centers in March 2022. A summary of the 241 responses from the partner nonprofit organizations follows.

OPERATIONS

Overall, the vast majority of the respondents described how they initially (in 2020) postponed events or services (91.3%), cancelled events or services (88.8%), transitioned to virtual events or services (78.8%), and developed new events or services (68.5%). These trends generally continued into 2021-2022.

Some positive changes, however, also occurred. Some organizations reported gaining paid personnel (16.2%, 34.4%), adding events or services (52.3%, 63.1%), and serving more clients/customers/beneficiaries (36.9%, 46.5%).

In describing the other impacts on operations, respondents described losing volunteers, moving operations online, changing the way programs and services were delivered, and financial losses (See Table 1: Operations).

Table 1: Operations (n=241)

Because of COVID-19, our organization…	Initially (2020) Yes		Later (2021-2022) Yes	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Postponed events or services	220	91.3	167	69.3
Canceled events or services	214	88.8	145	60.2
Transitioned to virtual events or services	190	78.8	177	73.4
Developed new events or services	165	68.5	174	72.2
Physically closed our offices	157	65.1	68	28.2
Added events or services	126	52.3	152	63.1
Served fewer clients/customers/beneficiaries	120	49.8	97	40.2
Restructured paid personnel	92	38.2	83	34.4
Served more clients/customers/beneficiaries	89	36.9	112	46.5
Gained paid personnel	39	16.2	83	34.4
Was unable to achieve our mission	39	16.2	39	16.2
Laid off personnel	33	13.7	13	5.4
Permanently halted operations	8	3.3	8	3.3
Other impacts on operations	62	25.7	54	22.4

FINANCES

The most common financial impacts during the pandemic (initially in 2020, and later in 2021-2022) included: purchasing personal protective equipment for employees (71.0%, 65.6%) and volunteers (66.8 %, 64.3%), experiencing unanticipated costs (68.0%, 50.2%), and investing in new technology for virtual working (65.6%, 51.0%).

The most common form of financial assistance during the pandemic was from a Paycheck Protection Loan (40.7%, 21.6%). Some organizations received an Emergency Economic Injury Disaster Grant (10.4%, 5.4%). Seven organizations received an Emergency Economic Injury Disaster Loan in 2020. Some organizations reported using cash reserves and/or lines of credits (21.2%, 15.8%) or tapping into their endowment (6.6%, 4.6%).

With respect to other financial impacts, some respondents described how donations and contributions decreased due to the inability to have in person fund raisers. Others described having more expenses or losing major revenue sources (See Table 2: Finances).

Table 2: Finances (n=241)

Because of COVID-19, our organization…	Initially (2020)		Later (2021-2022)	
	Yes		Yes	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Purchased personal protective for employees	171	71.0	158	65.6
Experienced unanticipated costs	164	68.0	121	50.2
Purchased personal protective equipment for volunteers	161	66.8	155	64.3
Invested in new technology for virtual working	158	65.6	123	51.0
Received a Paycheck Protection Loan (PPP)	98	40.7	52	21.6
Experienced unanticipated savings	95	39.4	61	25.3
Used cash reserves and/or lines of credit	51	21.2	38	15.8
Received an Emergency Economic Injury Disaster Grant	25	10.4	13	5.4
Tapped into our endowment	16	6.6	11	4.6
Received an Emergency Economic Injury Disaster Loan	7	2.9	0	0.0
Other impacts on finances	45	18.7	36	14.9

VOLUNTEERS

Throughout the pandemic, almost all of the respondents reported that their organization maintained communication with their volunteers (89.2%, 90.5%). Yet, challenges persisted relating to volunteer engagement (76.3%, 70.13%), volunteer recruitment (70.1%, 71.0%), and volunteer retention (69.3%, 62.2%). More than half of the respondents reported that they redesigned new roles and opportunities for volunteers (66.0%, 66.0%) and about half created new virtual roles and opportunities for volunteers (55.2%, 48.1%). As one respondent explained, "We looked very closely at past roles before bringing them back on board or creating new ones in order to make them effective for the departments the volunteers serve and meaningful to those volunteers" (See Table 3: Volunteers).

Table 3: Volunteers (n=241)

Because of COVID-19, our organization…	Initially (2020)		Later (2021-2022)	
	Yes		Yes	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Maintained communication with volunteers	215	89.2	218	90.5
Experienced volunteer engagement challenges	184	76.3	169	70.1
Experienced volunteer recruitment challenges	169	70.1	171	71.0
Experienced volunteer retention challenges	167	69.3	150	62.2
Redesigned new roles and opportunities for volunteers	159	66.0	159	66.0
Created new virtual roles and opportunities for volunteers	133	55.2	116	48.1
Continued the same roles and opportunities for volunteers	126	52.3	173	71.8
Relied less on volunteers	123	51.0	89	36.9
Reoriented / retrained volunteers	116	48.1	133	55.2
Created COVID-19 related roles and opportunities for volunteers	107	44.4	82	34.0
Helped volunteers with COVID-19 vaccination	68	28.2	69	28.6
Relied more on volunteers	65	27.0	79	32.8
Suspended relationships with volunteers	54	22.4	30	12.4
Ended relationships with volunteers	34	14.1	27	11.2
Other impacts on volunteers	30	12.4	29	12.0

Not surprisingly, the most frequent adjustment was to create more remote/virtual volunteer opportunities (53.1%). For example, one respondent said "We had to create virtual or in-home volunteer work. Our volunteers wrote letters to veterans, shut-ins, and healthcare providers during the height of the pandemic."

Reducing volunteer engagement (44.4%) was also common. For example, one respondent said "We temporarily suspended the program for 18 months in March 2020. After three months, we brought back a select group to help in specialized areas." Another indicated that they "created opportunities for smaller groups to engage in outdoor or socially distanced settings" (See Table 4: Adjustments).

Table 4: Adjustments (n=85)

In what ways have you adjusted your volunteer engagement strategy given current environmental, economic, and social conditions?	(n)	%
We created more remote/virtual volunteer opportunities	128	53.1
We reduced our volunteer engagement	107	44.4
We temporarily stopped our volunteer engagement	62	25.7
We created more in-person volunteer opportunities	36	14.9
Other	49	20.3
We have not made any adjustment to our volunteer strategy	29	12.0

Overall, most of the respondents indicated that the number of volunteers (63.1%) and volunteer hours (57.7%) decreased. When asked about changes among specific types of volunteers (e.g., family volunteers or unemployed volunteers), many respondents indicated that they didn't know these details (See Table 5: Shifts).

Table 5: Shifts (n=241)

How has your volunteer base shifted since COVID-19?	Decreased (n)	%	Remained Constant (n)	%	Increased (n)	%	Don't Know/NA (n)	%
Number of Volunteers	152	63.1	32	13.3	41	17.0	16	16.6
Volunteer Hours Contributed	139	57.7	31	12.9	46	19.1	25	10.4
Younger Volunteers	46	19.1	76	31.5	49	20.3	70	29.0
Older Volunteer	105	43.6	67	27.8	16	6.6	53	22.0
Unemployed/Recently Laid Off Volunteers	14	5.8	37	15.4	36	14.9	154	63.9
First Time Volunteers	45	18.7	55	22.8	75	31.1	66	27.4
Family Volunteers (versus Individuals)	33	13.7	40	16.6	21	8.7	147	61.0
Skills-based Volunteers	37	15.4	70	29.0	40	16.6	94	39.0
Episodic Volunteers	44	18.3	51	21.2	46	19.1	100	41.5

MANAGEMENT AND RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

The three most frequently used volunteer management practices were providing onboarding and orientation training for volunteers, screening volunteers through a standard process, and matching skills and interests of volunteers with opportunities.

The four volunteer management practices used less frequently were providing training to staff that work with volunteers, providing opportunities for volunteers to connect with other volunteers, allocating sufficient resources to volunteer engagement, and measuring the value of volunteers, such as tracking outputs and outcomes. In fact, 29 of the 241 respondents reported that they never measured the value of volunteers, such as tracking outputs and outcomes, and 27 never provided training to staff that work with volunteers (See Table 6: Management Practices).

Table 6: Management Practices (n=241)

To what extent does each of the following practices apply to the management of volunteers in your organization:	Never (n)	%	Sometimes (n)	%	Very Often (n)	%	Always (n)	%	Don't Know/NA (n)	%
Link volunteers to serve a core strategic function	2	0.8	38	15.8	65	27.0	83	34.4	53	22.0
Focus volunteer engagement on community needs	2	0.8	42	17.4	68	28.2	102	42.3	27	11.2
Allocate sufficient resources to volunteer engagement	7	2.9	77	32.0	66	27.4	66	27.4	25	10.4
Match skills and interests of volunteers with opportunities	2	0.8	33	13.7	87	36.1	95	39.4	24	10.0
Provide training to staff that work with volunteers	27	11.2	75	31.1	31	12.9	75	31.1	33	13.7
Recruit volunteers actively	7	2.9	57	23.7	62	25.7	99	41.1	16	6.6
Provide onboarding and orientation training for volunteers	7	2.9	33	13.7	47	19.5	135	56.0	19	7.9
Recognize volunteers through an ongoing program	19	7.9	55	22.8	47	19.5	98	40.7	22	9.1
Provide opportunities for volunteers to connect with other volunteers	18	7.5	80	33.2	70	29.0	54	22.4	19	7.9
Provide volunteers support and offer feedback	13	5.4	41	17.0	82	34.0	87	36.1	18	7.5
Screen volunteers through a standard process	18	7.5	19	7.9	38	15.8	144	59.8	22	9.1
Measure the value of volunteers, such as tracking outputs and outcomes	29	12.0	40	16.6	40	16.6	103	42.7	29	12.0

More than three quarters of the respondents reported using word of mouth / referrals, their organizational websites, social media, and email / listservs to recruit volunteers. Other strategies included recruiting from businesses and colleges, the United Way, and other groups (e.g., churches, student groups, partner organizations) (See Table 7: Recruitment).

Table 7: Recruitment (n=241)

How does your organization recruit volunteers?	Initially (2020) Yes (n)	(%)	Later (2021-2022) Yes (n)	(%)
Word of mouth / Referrals	222	92.1	218	90.5
Organization's website	209	86.7	210	87.1
Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.	184	76.3	194	80.5
Outreach and speaking engagements	175	72.6	143	59.3
Email / listserv	151	62.7	152	63.1
Booths at volunteer fairs or community events	148	61.4	116	48.1
Volunteer websites such as idealist.org, volunteermatch.org, etc.	132	54.8	134	55.6
Mass media such as ads on TV, radio, newspaper, etc.	57	23.7	62	25.7
Direct mail	35	14.5	33	13.7
Other recruitment strategies	21	8.7	19	7.9

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

The majority (59.8%) of the respondents had a paid staff member working as a volunteer coordinator. Respondents describing their arrangement as "other" indicated that volunteer management and coordination was performed by multiple staff members across the organization or within a specific department of volunteer services. About 18% (43, 17.8%) indicated that there was no volunteer coordinator position at their organization (See Table 8: Volunteer Coordinator).

Table 8: Volunteer Coordinator (n=241)

Does your organization have a volunteer coordinator?	(n)	%
Yes, a paid staff member works as the volunteer coordinator	144	59.8
Yes, a volunteer serves as the volunteer coordinator	22	9.1
No volunteer coordinator position	43	17.8
Other	25	10.4
Missing	7	2.9

DIVERSITY

The respondents were asked if they had taken actions to improve diversity within their organization. More than half of the respondents indicated that they had Incorporated diversity into the organization's core values (58.3%), modified organizational policies and procedures to be more inclusive (53.5%), or conducted diversity training for staff (52.7%).

When given the opportunity to describe other activities, some respondents explained that these activities were always included or in place. For example, one respondent wrote, "We have always tried to be inclusive and address diversity issues." That said, not all respondents were so positive. Another respondent described being embarrassed because their organization "has done absolutely nothing"(See Table 9: Diversity).

Table 9: Diversity (n=241)

Over the past year, which of the following actions has your organization taken?	(n)	%
Incorporated diversity into the organization's core values	141	58.5
Modified organizational policies and procedures to be more inclusive	129	53.5
Conducted diversity training for staff	127	52.7
Actively recruited volunteers from diverse backgrounds	112	46.5
Developed a plan of action to diversify volunteers	59	24.5
Conducted diversity training for volunteers	51	21.2
Other actions	20	8.3

RESLILIENCY

The respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed with seven statements about the resiliency of their organization. The three statements that most of the respondents agreed with pertained to: working with partners, allies, and others to help us achieve our goals; having a strong commitment to learning, improving, and adapting; and considering how external trends and the outside factors affect our work.

The statement respondents were less likely to agree with pertained to having a strong financial footing with adequate cash reserves, reliable and recurring revenue that covers the true costs of our programs and operations (See Table 10: Resiliency).

Table 10: Resiliency (n=241)

To what extent does each of the following practices apply to the management of volunteers in your organization:	Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Agree		Don't Know/NA	
	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%
Has a strong commitment to learning, improving, and adapting	8	3.3	23	9.5	204	84.6	6	2.5
Invests in the skills and talents of our personnel	15	6.2	52	21.6	164	68.0	10	4.1
Considers how external trends and the outside factors affect our work	17	7.1	37	15.4	177	73.4	10	4.1
Has clearly articulated plans, goals, and outcomes	16	6.6	46	19.1	173	71.8	6	2.5
Effectively communicates the value of what we do	19	7.9	42	17.4	175	72.6	5	2.1
Works with partners, allies, and others to help achieve our goals	7	2.9	23	9.5	206	85.5	5	2.1
Has a strong financial footing with adequate cash reserves, reliable and recurring revenue that covers the true costs of our programs and operations	51	21.2	42	17.4	128	53.1	20	8.3

SERVICE AREA

Organizations provided services in a wide range of service areas, with education and training (36.1%) being most prevalent in the sample. Other common service areas were human services (27.0%), youth services (26.1%), and food or nutrition (24.1%) (See Table 11: Service Area).

Table 11: Service Area (n= 241)

Service Area	
• 12.9% (31) Arts and culture	• 7.5% (18) Foundation or philanthropic
• 12.0% (29) Capacity building	• 21.2% (51) Health care
• 17.0% (41) Child and family services	• 4.6% (11) Higher education
• 14.1% (34) Civic participation or advocacy	• 27.0% (65) Human services
• 19.9% (48) Community development	• 13.7% (33) Housing
• 7.1% (17) Economic development	• 1.2% (3) International service
• 36.1% (87) Education or training	• 14.1% (34) Recreation
• 16.2% (39) Emergency services	• 8.3% (20)Religious or faith-based
• 24.1% (58) Food or nutrition	• 26.1% (63)Youth services
• 15.8% (38) Environmental	• 22.4% (54) Other

COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

The respondents were asked about their organization's involvement in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. More than half (62.3%) described being involved "a great deal" or "moderately" (See Table 12: Organizational Involvement in COVID-19 Response and Recovery).

Table 12: Organizational Involvement in COVID-19 Response and Recovery (n= 241)

To what extent has your organization been involved in COVID-19 response and recovery in your community?	(n)	%
A great deal	88	36.5
Moderately	56	23.2
A little	38	15.8
Not at all	51	21.2
Missing	8	3.3

When asked how much volunteers were involved in these efforts, 57.6% of those organizations indicated that volunteers were involved "a great deal" or "moderately."

When asked to describe the roles of these volunteers, the respondents described how volunteers were instrumental in direct service or frontline work, such as: feeding people in the community (e.g., working in food banks, making and delivering food and meals), helping with PPE (e.g., making masks and assembling PPE kits); assisting with COVID-19 testing and vaccine clinics; and providing services to patients, youth, and other types of clients.

Others provided administrative assistance, such as: assisting with communications and public relations, fundraising, and writing grants (See Table 13: Volunteer Involvement in COVID-19 Response and Recovery).

Table 13: Volunteer Involvement in COVID-19 Response and Recovery (n = 182)

To what extent has this response involved volunteers?	(n)	%
A great deal	59	32.2
Moderately	45	24.6
A little	50	27.3
Not at all	29	15.8

When asked to describe a top learning or shift made in the organizations recruited or managed volunteers, in response to COVID-19 or otherwise, the most common themes had to do with being more flexible with respect to volunteer management, relying more on online recruitment and communication strategies, creating more opportunities to volunteer virtually, scaling back the use of volunteers, and implementing social distancing and other COVID-19 safety measures.

REVENUES, AFFILIATION, AND AGE

More than half (57.8%) of the organizations had operating budgets of less than $1 million dollars. Almost fifteen percent (14.5%) of the respondents did not report budget information (See Table 14: Operating Budget).

Table 14: Operating Budget (n=241)

What is your operating budget for 2021?	(n)	%
Below $50,000	36	14.9
$50,000 to $250,000	46	19.1
$250,000 to $1 million	49	23.8
$1 million to $5 million	36	14.9
$5 million to $10 million	11	4.6
$10 million to $20 million	14	5.8
Above $20 million	14	5.8
Missing	35	14.5

More organizations experienced losses in revenue due to COVID-19 initially, during 2020, compared to later (2021 and 2022). That said, about twenty-three percent (55, 22.8%) of the respondents indicated that they did not know the answer to this question (See Table 15: Revenue Gains and Losses).

Table 15: Revenue Gains and Losses (n=241)

Overall, because of COVID-19, did your organization:	Initially (2020) Yes		Later (2021-2022) Yes	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Experience losses in revenue	118	49.0	87	36.1
Experience gains in revenue	69	28.6	80	33.2
Experienced gains and losses in revenue for a net gain	55	22.8	70	29.0
Experienced gains and losses in revenue for a net loss	55	22.8	40	16.6
Don't know	55	22.8	55	22.8

When asked how the organization's budget compared to last year, about half (120, 49.8%) of the respondents indicated that the budget was about the same as last year (See Table 16: Budget Compared to 2021).

Table 16: Budget Compared to 2021 (n=85)

	(n)	%
Less than last year	27	11.2
About the same as last year	120	49.8
More than last year	55	22.8
Missing	39	16.2

Twenty-nine percent (70) of the organizations were affiliated with AmeriCorps State, National, or Senior programs; 9.1% were affiliated with AmeriCorps VISTA; 9.1% were affiliated with Volunteer Centers; and 5.0% were affiliated with Volunteer Generation Fund Grantees. Other affiliations included government programs, the United Way, and other types of groups (e.g., students, veterans, and scouting groups). Forty percent (97) had no affiliations to report (See Table 17: Affiliations).

Table 17: Affiliations (n=85)

What program(s) is your organization affiliated with?	(n)	%
AmeriCorps State/National grantee	38	15.8
AmeriCorps State/National host site	18	7.5
AmeriCorps VISTA grantee	8	3.3
AmeriCorps VISTA host site	14	5.8
Volunteer center	22	9.1
Volunteer generation fund grantee	12	5.0
AmeriCorps senior grantee	14	5.8
Other	49	20.3
None	97	40.2

About one quarter (25.7%) of the organizations in the study were founded since the year 2000 (See Table 18: Organizational Age).

Table 18: Organizational Age (n=241)

What year was your organization founded?	(n)	%
Before 1900	13	5.4%
1900 to 1950	27	11.2%
1951 to 2000	102	42.3%
2000 to 2022	62	25.7%
Missing	37	15.4%