



Almost Half Of Leaders Say Volunteering Has “Big Problem”

By Eric Obernauer

Volunteer engagement has always been critical for advancing the work of nonprofits. Limited resources and reduced staffing capacity during the pandemic has greatly impacted volunteering. This challenge is exacerbated by what nearly half (46.8%) of nonprofit CEOs say is a “big problem” — securing volunteers — with 38.4% reporting particular difficulty finding volunteers who are available to help during the traditional workday and 35.4% citing a dearth of volunteers with the right skills.

But despite the 72.2% of nonprofit leaders who say volunteers improve the quality of services and programs, only 25.2% of funders agree.

That’s some of the data in “The State of Volunteer Engagement,” which a team of researchers at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy’s Do Good Institute compiled from the responses of more than 1,200 nonprofit leaders and more than 100 grantmakers and donors. The 39-page report was released in tandem with a companion study on philanthropic motivations for supporting volunteerism.

The Do Good Institute and Independent Sector last year pegged the estimated national hourly value of a volunteer at \$29.95, a 4.9% increase from 2020 to 2021.

The lack of shared understanding between funders and nonprofit managers about the importance of unpaid volunteers is problematic since investment in volunteer engagement and support is vital to helping attract and retain more volunteers, the authors wrote. Nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of respondents reported facing increased

demand for services in the pandemic's aftermath and the nearly half (48.5%) had to increase staff workloads.

"Nonprofits will likely face staff burnout or service delivery issues if this continues," said Nathan Dietz, a senior researcher at the Do Good Institute and co-author of the report. "Many of these organizations offer critical services and support to some of the most vulnerable people in our society, so this is something we should all be concerned about."

Many within the shrinking pool of volunteers are also now performing mission-critical services alongside organizations' paid staff, which leaves even fewer volunteers available to engage with ancillary activities such as fundraising, Dietz told The NonProfit Times. This compounds the challenge faced at the 28.7% of nonprofits that the researchers found are operating with less funding today than before the pandemic.

The falloff in volunteers, though it accelerated during the pandemic, actually predates it by several years and is a troubling reversal from 20 years ago when many nonprofit leaders worried about accommodating an increase in volunteers following President George W. Bush's call to service in response to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the authors wrote.

"Twenty years after 9/11, the concern expressed by many is not how the nonprofit sector can handle a surge of volunteers, but how organizations can find volunteers," according to the authors. "The COVID-19 pandemic may have disrupted the normal flow of activity for volunteers and the places where they work, but the decline in civic behaviors seems to have begun a few years before then."

The "triple whammy" of greater demand for services, fewer volunteers, and few funders with a track record of supporting volunteerism amplifies these concerns, said Robert Grimm, director of the Do Good Institute, who also worked on the report. It also places the concerns in a new context: "If nonprofits had challenges engaging

volunteers before the pandemic, how different – and, potentially, how much worse – might these challenges be today?" wrote the authors.

The Do Good Institute is partnering with the Initiative for Strategic Volunteer Engagement, a grantmaking organization, to continue work on this topic. Further research is planned, including a possible look into how the volunteer shortage is impacting specific types of organizations and what organizations can do to diversify the pool of volunteers from communities of color and others that have previously been overlooked in volunteer recruitment.

Further information on this project can be found at <https://bit.ly/3lqUKIZ>.

To download the full report, go to <https://bit.ly/3JWmBeA>.

<https://www.thenonprofittimes.com/hr/almost-half-of-leaders-say-volunteering-has-big-problem/>