The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Maine Center on Aging Education and Training

Maine Center on Aging

3-2024

Current Practices and Future Use of Virtual Volunteerism Among Older Adults: Interviews with RSVP Programs and Key Informants in Technology and Volunteerism

Jennifer Crittenden

Sandra Butler

Eve Flippen

Nathan Tarbox

Leah Campbell

See next page for additional authors

Authors

Jennifer Crittenden, Sandra Butler, Eve Flippen, Nathan Tarbox, Leah Campbell, Chelsea Chapman, and Adrienna Thorne

Current Practices and Future Use of Virtual Volunteerism Among Older Adults:

Interviews with RSVP Programs and Key Informants in Technology and Volunteerism

March 2024

Research Team:

Jennifer Crittenden, PhD, MSW, Principal Investigator, UMaine School of Social Work and UMaine Center on Aging

Sandra Butler, PhD, UMaine School of Social Work

Eve Flippen, MGS, UMaine Center on Aging

Nathan Tarbox, UMaine Center on Aging

Leah Campbell, UMaine Center on Aging

Chelsea Chapman, UMaine Center on Aging

Adrienna Thorne, UMaine Center on Aging

Abstract

Participation in volunteering has been linked to positive health and well-being improvements for older adults. During the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults were at a higher risk of severe COVID-19 infections and adverse effects resulting in social isolation. Virtual volunteering began gaining momentum as a way to meaningfully engage older adults and support non-profit organizations impacted by shutdowns. However, now as the pandemic enters a new phase, questions remain about the current use of virtual volunteerism and its future within older adult volunteer programming. The goal of this study was to better understand the benefits and challenges that have come with virtual volunteering during and post-COVID. Interviews were conducted with 36 representatives from 30 organizations - 16 RSVP volunteer programs and 14 non-RSVP key informants with expertise in technology and volunteerism. Emerging themes highlight the positive and negative impacts of COVID on older adult volunteerism, the challenges and benefits of virtual volunteerism strategies, and the projected future opportunities for virtual volunteer engagement.

Background

Volunteering is an activity shown to improve health, well-being, and social connection among older adults (Hsu et al., 2023; Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019; JBS International, 2019). Research has demonstrated the positive effects that volunteering has on older adults across different stages of later adulthood and disability status. Akhter-Khan et al. (2023) found volunteering to be associated with reduced feelings of loneliness, especially for recent widows and mid-life older adults. Sellon (2021) also notes the substantial evidence of the positive effects that volunteering has on older adults' health, with a focus on older adults generally in good health and with no physical limitations. Sellon's (2021) study of older adults with limited mobility found that volunteering is a beneficial health promotion activity and increases meaningful participation and inclusion for older adults with disabilities, those individuals typically underrepresented in the research literature.

Pre-COVID, volunteerism among older adults was an effective strategy to reduce social isolation by providing opportunities to socially connect (Crittenden, 2018). Companionship volunteer opportunities in particular provide an opportunity for older adults of diverse backgrounds to meaningfully connect and build community. Through strategic recruitment and volunteer management, companionship volunteering provides the unique service opportunity for older volunteers to work with peers that may have a similar cultural or language background. This implementation of formal volunteering builds community while also providing stress-relief for both the volunteer and the service recipient. Beyond social benefits, this community building through volunteerism gave older adults access to knowledge and skills, such as learning how to use public transportation or practicing English as a second language (Cao et al., 2021). These service opportunities provided a deeper sense of purpose and meaning to older adults while they

became more physically active and learned new skills. Perhaps the most noteworthy, volunteering provides older adults the opportunity to develop personal resilience against stress, improve their mental health, and has been connected with reduced mortality (Crittenden, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic critically impacted the health and wellness of older adults and communities. As research progressed, it became clear that COVID-19 was a critical health risk for older adults in particular (Mueller et al. 2020), leading to the development of socially isolating infection control measures, like quarantining and social distancing. Some solutions began to emerge to reduce in-person transmission such as reserved grocery store hours for older adults (Xie et al. 2020). However, as physical distancing practices continued to prevent the spread of COVID-19, older adults experienced decreased social contact with others, leading to increased feelings of social isolation (Piette et al., 2020) and loneliness (Xie et al. 2020).

Those older individuals who did not use internet technologies had an even higher likelihood of experiencing social exclusion and isolation (Xie et al., 2020) as many essential and non-essential aspects of society were able to pivot to online methods as a safer alternative (Zapletal et al. 2023), including the publicizing of critical health information and services (Xie et al., 2020), compared to peers who turned to technology to mitigate social isolation during the pandemic (Haase et al., 2021; Zapletal et al., 2023). In a small study conducted in Canada, Zapletal et al. (2023) found mixed results for older adults adapting to using technology due to COVID-19 measures, with some embracing the switch and others remaining resistant. According to the authors, those that did not embrace the switch may have experienced increased social isolation and decreased access to goods, services, and recreation in comparison.

The negative health and well-being effects of COVID-19 on older adults led to a push to bring more older adults online. Based on a random sample of 400 older adults in British

Columbia, Canada, Haase et al. (2021) found over half of older adults surveyed began using a new technology during the pandemic and many of those individuals continued to use those new technologies over time. Similarly, A large study of Medicare recipients in the United States by Li et al. (2021) found that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use increased among older adults by more than 50% during the pandemic. With the surge in new online engagement fueled by the pandemic, COVID-19 was viewed as a prospect for virtual volunteering to grow.

As many aspects of society moved online, virtual volunteering provided an avenue for continued connection and community engagement among older adults. Organizations had the opportunity to transition volunteer roles to virtual spaces, create more long-term roles for virtual volunteering, and sustain a wider use of virtual volunteering into the future (Lachance, 2021). Newly learned digital skills scaled up by the pandemic offered the impetus for older adults to engage in leisure activities such as virtual volunteering (Li et al. 2021). Already, virtual forms of volunteering have greatly expanded during the online pivot that took place during COVID-19 (Kulik, 2021), and some are hesitant to return to pre-pandemic norms. In an online survey from November 2020, Holeva et al. (2022) found that older adults had the greatest hesitancy to return to pre-pandemic levels of functioning. This hesitancy may contribute to volunteers wanting to continue using physical distance measures such as virtual volunteering.

Defining Virtual Volunteering

While COVID-19 launched a great expansion of virtual volunteering opportunities, it is not a new concept in the volunteer field. First entering the research literature in the late 1990s, virtual volunteers have gone by many names including online volunteers, cyber volunteers, and ICT volunteers (Peña-López, 2007). Over the last twenty to thirty years, the concept of virtual volunteering has evolved and shifted. At the time of writing, there does not appear to be a single

universally used and accepted definition of virtual volunteering. Virtual volunteerism is defined as volunteer activity facilitated by a computer or web-based platform that takes place off-site for an organization. Such roles are often short-term in nature and provide a level of flexibility with regard to locating and timing of volunteer work that may not be found in traditional on-site volunteer activities (Lachance, 2021; Murray & Harrison, 2005; Volunteer Canada, 2020).

Furthermore, virtual volunteering can be framed conceptually across a continuum of volunteer approaches that exist across in-person and virtual contexts. Two models frame virtual volunteering in the context of traditional volunteering. In one case, volunteering is viewed as representing three configurations: consisting of activities that are both offline & online, those that are online-only, or those that are offline-only (Ackermann & Manatashal, 2018). Murray & Harrison (2005) offered an expanded look, which considered both the volunteer and the volunteer manager. In this model, the volunteer manager could utilize traditional or virtual volunteer recruitment, and the volunteer may conduct their work in a traditional or virtual manner. When both virtual recruitment and virtual volunteer work are conducted in the same program, it would be considered a complete virtual volunteer opportunity (Murray & Harrison, 2005). Virtual volunteering can also be conceptualized as a continuum, rather than a typology, of volunteer roles starting from fully online to mostly in-person roles supplemented by virtual engagement (Ihm, 2017). This view on virtual volunteering considers the types of roles that may lend themselves to online work. An early taxonomy of online volunteering proposed by Peña-López (2007) separated virtual opportunities into four categories: 1) online advocacy; 2) online assessment and consultation; 3) online volunteers for offline projects; and 4) pure online volunteering. The first two consist of advocacy activities. For example, a volunteer may write up an online petition, sign an online petition, and/or share a petition with a community online

through email or other methods of online communication. Online volunteering for offline projects refers to reconfiguring an existing in-person role so that a volunteer can work off site via ICTs. This type contrasts with pure online volunteer roles, which are intentionally created as fully online roles, such as international translation volunteer programs that utilize native speakers around the world. Within virtual volunteering, ICT volunteers are a specific subset that assists with technology support needs such as installing software and providing technology training (Peña-López, 2007).

Opportunities and Benefits

Virtual volunteering (VV) can offer many potential benefits to the volunteer. Older virtual volunteers benefit from involvement, meaningful engagement, and enhanced life satisfaction along with the flexibility of online engagement (Lachance, 2021). Cravens (2000) found that virtual volunteering is often sought by individuals that have difficulty going to a volunteer site in-person. Volunteers in Cravens' (2000) study listed time constraints, disability, home-based obligations, and general preference for online tasks as reasons for choosing virtual opportunities. Bruce et al. (2021) found that while virtual connection was no substitute for in-person interaction, innovative methods did positively impact isolation and loneliness among older adults, specifically those with health concerns. This approach also necessitates giving volunteers the tools needed to build relationships within new virtual platforms (Bruce et al., 2021). Once tools like broadband are in place, the internet may be a key factor in overcoming the barriers of decreased social contact and limited mobility (Filsinger & Freitag, 2019).

Volunteers who are highly mobile may still face geographic barriers such as prohibitively long commutes or the need to relocate to another community to complete their volunteer service. Virtual volunteering eliminates geographic factors, allowing volunteers to stay connected to their

home community (Cravens, 2000). Maintaining community connections may be a large

motivator for those wanting to volunteer in a virtual setting. Safety was another neighborhood

and volunteer site factor considered. Older adults are more likely to volunteer when they feel that

the neighborhood they live in is safe. With the onset of COVID-19 and the increased virtual

volunteer opportunities, older adults who perceive their neighborhood as unsafe could utilize

virtual volunteering as a way to get involved locally with fewer safety concerns (Grinshteyn &

Sugar, 2021). The safety of common volunteer sites like hospitals also swiftly changed during

COVID. Although volunteers were not classified as essential personnel during the COVID-19

pandemic in the US healthcare system, they provided essential services in hospitals, and

restructuring these roles to virtual roles was an innovative way to continue to provide services in

a safe manner during a healthcare crisis (Pickell et al., 2020).

Older Adults and Technology

Older adults are increasingly using the internet. Information and communication

technology (ICT) use has been rapidly growing among older adults with 96% of adults aged 50-

64 and 75% of individuals 65 and older reporting that they already use the internet (Faverio,

2022). Therefore, many older adults may already have the technologies and skills needed to

access virtual volunteering.

In general, ICT use has been linked to increased volunteerism among older adults. In a

large study across 27 European countries, Filsinger et al. (2020) found an increasingly positive

association to volunteerism with internet use starting with adults aged thirty-five and older.

Furthermore, Filsinger et al. (2020) also found that individuals who were less educated or living

in rural areas were more likely to volunteer if they use the internet. The authors suggest that

older adults may be more likely to use the internet as a tool to find information, stay connected, and communicate with others, which could explain the correlation with volunteerism.

For older adults, ICT use itself has also been associated with social-emotional benefits. Szabo et al. (2019) examined the relationship between internet use and well-being among older adults in a longitudinal observational study and found that online engagement was associated with the promotion of well-being through decreased loneliness and increased social engagement. Similarly, Kung & Steptoe (2022) found that older adults who reported barriers to internet use had a greater increase in the likelihood of depressive symptoms (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic). Both studies point to the individual benefits of remaining connected through the internet and highlight the need for access and digital services to be considered for older adults.

The use of a virtual space provides a strategic opportunity for volunteer recruitment. Volunteers can work from any location, making what were once local volunteer opportunities more available to those living far away or those that may have a disability limiting their ability to volunteer in-person (Lachance 2021; Mukherjee, 2010). Certain in-person tasks, such as mentoring and translating, can now be done remotely (Murray & Harrison, 2005). Virtual volunteering lends itself to a variety of volunteer activities, such as conducting online research, creating databases, supervising online activities like chat rooms, and creating websites and e-newsletters. Virtual volunteering broadens the scope of both volunteer opportunities and the individuals that can engage in volunteer work (Murray & Harrison, 2005).

Challenges

While technology provides an array of opportunities for expanding virtual volunteerism, it can also serve as a barrier to such volunteerism. Some older volunteers have expressed concerns that ICTs are difficult to use and, in some instances, hamper communication and be

viewed by volunteers as unnecessary tools (Cho et al. 2020). Factors such as lower education and poor health have all been identified as barriers to learning online technology (Li, et al., 2021). In a study by Anderson and Perrin (2017) through the Pew Research Center, 73% of older adults 65+ reported that they needed support setting up or learning to use new electronic devices. When technology assistance was needed, older adults typically contacted younger family members for help such as children or grandchildren, and largely had a positive outlook on those experiences of learning from younger family members. These positive experiences with family, or even technology support staff, may help combat social isolation as well as the stress and resistance to further ICT use (Francis et al., 2018).

Along with a volunteer's technical skills, access to broadband internet and ICT devices continue to be a major barrier to virtual volunteering. While virtual volunteers can engage with their program from any location, those with home internet access are more likely to participate in virtual volunteer opportunities (Piatak et al. 2019). This seemingly straightforward fact leads to complicated inequities in virtual volunteering. Even during the pandemic, low-income older adults were less likely to use technology than their high-income counterparts (Nimrod, 2020; Li et al., 2021). In addition, older adults with health challenges or those that live in rural or remote communities may experience technology-related barriers that impact the ability to engage with virtual volunteer assignments (Haase et al.,2021; Older Adults Technology Service [OATS], 2021). Both technical skill and technology access are needed to be successful in virtual volunteering, and unfortunately, that inequity may leave the older adults most in need of more opportunities unable to participate (Sun et al. 2021).

Once a program has worked through those potential access and equity issues, negative attitudes toward technology may still exist. Hesitancy, resistance, and/or negative attitudes

towards technology from the participant level through the organizational level could also be a barrier to adopting virtual volunteering methods (Sun et al., 2021; Cravens & Ellis 2014). In a recent study of online volunteer tutors, volunteers expressed concerns about the impact of technology on the volunteer experience. Volunteer training can address these concerns by building knowledge, skill, confidence, and self-efficacy in online engagement (Sun et al., 2021).

Online volunteer programs face the challenge of building a sense of community that is more readily found within traditional volunteer activities. Pre-COVID online volunteering provided fewer opportunities for volunteers to establish organizational identification and belonging. This disconnect can impact the volunteer program's role in organizing and mobilizing volunteers (Ihm, 2017). COVID-19 forced many traditional volunteer opportunities to pivot online or to end. This point is underscored by recent data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau Community Population Study Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Supplement which found that the rate of formal volunteering took its largest drop in recent history, from 30 percent in 2019 to 23 percent in 2021 (AmeriCorps, 2023).

The pandemic highlighted the great need for infrastructure and technology support at the organizational and individual levels. More research is still needed to understand the challenges and barriers volunteer managers faced during the pandemic and may be facing in a post-pandemic environment. To further explore the implications of virtual volunteerism in a post-pandemic world, one that balances the realities of COVID with the desire for social and physical re-integration, our current research explored the benefits of, challenges to, and opportunities for expansion of virtual volunteerism among older adults.

Specific sub-questions explored in this inquiry included: 1) How and to what extent are volunteer sites engaged in virtual volunteerism? Which of these were offered pre-COVID? 2)

What are the types of job assignments and host sites that lend themselves to virtual volunteering? 3) What are the challenges at the host site level in developing and deploying virtual volunteering? 4) What attracts volunteers to these types of opportunities and what factors might lead them away from virtual volunteering? 5) What resources can be brought to bear to encourage virtual volunteerism?

Methods

To explore the research questions noted above, a qualitative approach was used to collect data through semi-structured interviews with key informants. All protocols described were approved by the University of Maine Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB protocol # 2023-01-12)

Recruitment

Two groups of interviewees were recruited for this study. The first group of interviewees consisted of RSVP program directors and volunteer management staff who facilitate older adult volunteer activities and placements throughout the U.S. The RSVP program is a national older adult volunteer program, administered by AmeriCorps, that recruits and places older adults into volunteer service in local community organizations. This network, by virtue of its model, serves a vast array of volunteers across diverse volunteer activities from environmental volunteerism to health and wellness activities to literacy and intergenerational programming (AmeriCorps, n.d.). These interviews were considered the main interviews of focus for the study. These interviews were triangulated and complemented by interviews from a second group of participants which consisted of key informants who represented thought leaders, technology leaders, program managers, and volunteer coordinators with expertise on topics related to virtual volunteering and technology.

RSVP Program Directors

RSVP program directors were recruited using a database of AmeriCorps program site narratives and work plans, provided by the AmeriCorps Seniors. This database was used to identify RSVP program sites with indication that they had used or planned to use virtual volunteering based on their written program work plans that were submitted to AmeriCorps. From this list, programs were separated into AmeriCorps regions and invites were issued to ensure geographic representation across the U.S.

Technology and Volunteerism Experts

Key informant contact information for technology and volunteerism experts was collected from public resources such as organizational websites, published articles in the field, and professional contacts. Additional interviewees were also identified through snowball sampling through referral from interview participants. Key informants were asked if they knew of additional organizations or individuals that the research team should interviewing. When a potential participant was identified through this snowball sampling, an introductory email was requested as a warm hand-off to the research team. A standardized email invitation to participate in the study was then sent to the identified potential participant. Standardized email reminders were sent one week later to increase recruitment of participants.

Semi-structured interviews with were carried out via Zoom. Question sets addressed topics such as the benefits of virtual volunteering, challenges faced with virtual volunteerism, technology considerations, volunteer management practices, and identification of practices and strategies that are most and least successful when applied to virtual volunteerism. Separate but overlapping question sets were developed for each of the following stakeholder groups: those who oversee volunteers and volunteer programs outside of the RSVP network, recognized

experts in the volunteerism field who do not currently oversee volunteers, and key informants in

technology-related roles and fields (see Appendix for question sets). The RSVP program

question set was piloted with a local RSVP program director for refinement prior to

implementation of the question set across RSVP interviewees. RSVP program directors were

sent a brief Qualtrics program profile survey (see Appendix) via email prior to each interview to

gather information on the characteristics of participant sites interviewed. These data were used to

describe the range of RSVP program interviews and provide context for interview findings.

Each participant was asked to participate in a recorded Zoom interview with each

interview lasting on average from 30 to 60 minutes depending on the depth of experience and

knowledge of the interviewee(s). Notes and memos were taken by the interviewers throughout

the interview process. Recordings of the interviews were then transcribed and reviewed by

research team members.

Data analysis and coding procedures followed the framework described by Saunders et

al. (2023) with steps that consisted of readings of the transcribed text, initial code generation,

initial application and refinement, relationship analysis of codes, collaborative refinement, and

coding scheme review. For this study, the qualitative data gathered from interviews was

reviewed by the research team with close readings. The codebook was generated using an

iterative process and multiple coders. Development of initial codes were generated by a single

coder from the team. A second coder then completed a test application of the codebook and

offered refinements. The full research team then discussed the codebook for refinement and

collaboratively placed codes in relation to one another utilizing a parent-child structure to link

codes. Subsequently, each member applied the refined coding scheme to a different set of

interviews (one key informant interview and one RSVP interview each). Finally, the coding

scheme was reviewed for any discrepancies by the research team. The final codebook was formatted and loaded into the Dedoose online qualitative software platform for data preparation and coding application. Some additional refinements were made to the codebook as coding commenced and the research team maintained regular communication about the coding process.

Prior to full coding of across the transcripts, the Dedoose training feature was used to calculate a Kappa interrater reliability coefficient. This coefficient is calculated for each coder against a primary coder (J.C.). Test coding took place until the Kappa coefficient reached at least .7 for each coder indicating moderate reliability (McHugh, 2012). The final Kappa range across the coding team was 0.75 to 0.81. Once interrater reliability was established, the full set of transcripts was coded by five coders with each transcript being assigned two coders. Coding pairs participated in a consensus process which was facilitated by the lead coder assigned to each transcript. Each coding pair reviewed their respective excerpts and negotiated final code applications in the assigned transcripts. In some instances, the lead coder excerpts were retained, in other instances the lead coder excerpts were removed, and the secondary coder excerpts were retained, and, in some instances, the final coding represented a mix of relevant codes from both assigned coders.

Results

Sample

Over the course of the study, 36 representatives from 30 organizations - 16 RSVP organizations and 14 non-RSVP key informants, were interviewed. RSVP key informants consisted mainly of program directors or manager-level employees, with some respondents reporting roles that included additional responsibilities beyond RSVP (i.e., agency executive directors and a CEO). Respondents had an average length of time employed with RSVP of 8

years (SD = 8) with a range of .75 to 19 years of experience across the sample. A range of host organizations were reported including private non-profit organizations (62.5%), Area Agencies on Aging (12.5%), DHHS or government-based organizations (12.5%), United Way organizations (6.25%), and community action agencies (6.25%). Participating RSVP programs had been in operation for an average of 31.9 years (SD = 17.7). Programs hosted an average of 36 individual volunteer sites (SD = 36.3) with a range of 3 to 150. Programs also served an average of 370 volunteers (SD = 256.3) with a range from 83 to 1050 volunteers. RSVP programs represented seven of AmeriCorps' eight service regions across the United States as follows: Mid Atlantic (3 sites), Midwest (4), Mountain (1), North Central (1), Northeast (3), Southeast (2), and West (2).

Across RSVP interviewees 12 different states were represented including Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. Primary geographic areas served by participating programs were represented similarly with 38.7% of respondents reporting that they serve rural areas of their state, 32.3% reporting that they serve metropolitan areas, and 29% reporting that they serve suburban areas (see figure 1).

The majority of programs (68.75%) reported that 25% or less of their RSVP volunteers were engaged in virtual volunteering (see figure 2). Additionally, 18.75% of programs reported that 26-50% of their volunteers were engaged in virtual volunteering while the remaining 12.5% of programs reported that the majority (51-75%) of their volunteers were engaged in virtual volunteering. The majority of programs (56.25%) reported that 0-5 individual virtual volunteer opportunities were offered in their program (see figure 3). Of the remaining programs, 18.75% reported that 6-10 individual virtual volunteer opportunities were offered, 6.25% reported that

16-20 opportunities were offered, and 18.75% reported that 20 or more opportunities were offered.

A range of RSVP program focal areas were represented by programs (see figure 4). Program focal areas listed from most frequently cited to least include volunteer opportunities that focus on supporting healthy futures, education, community priorities, economic opportunities, disaster services, veterans and military families, and environmental stewardship. The community priorities category was further specified by programs, which included topics such as elder empowerment, homelessness/housing, food insecurity, arts and culture, nursing homes, museums, libraries, and community centers. These focal areas were developed by AmeriCorps, the RSVP program sponsor, to guide and standardize RSVP activities nationally.

Figure 1. Primary geographic areas served by RSVP interviewees

Primary Geographic Areas Served

Metropolitan 32.3%
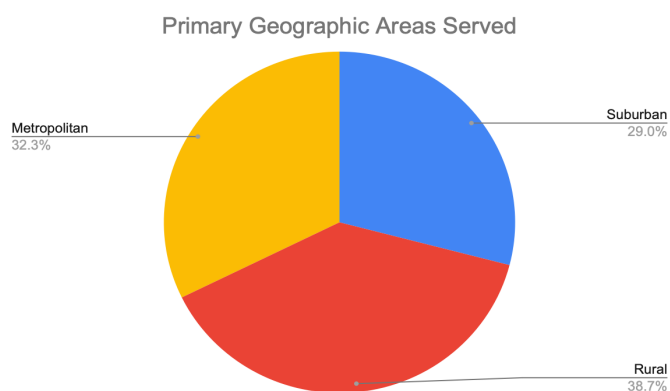
Suburban 29.0%

Rural 38.7%

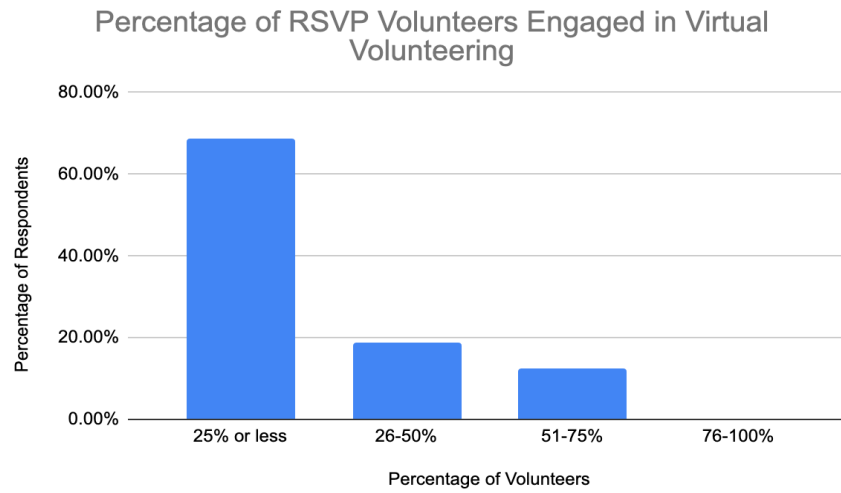Figure 2. Percentage of RSVP volunteers engaged in virtual volunteering

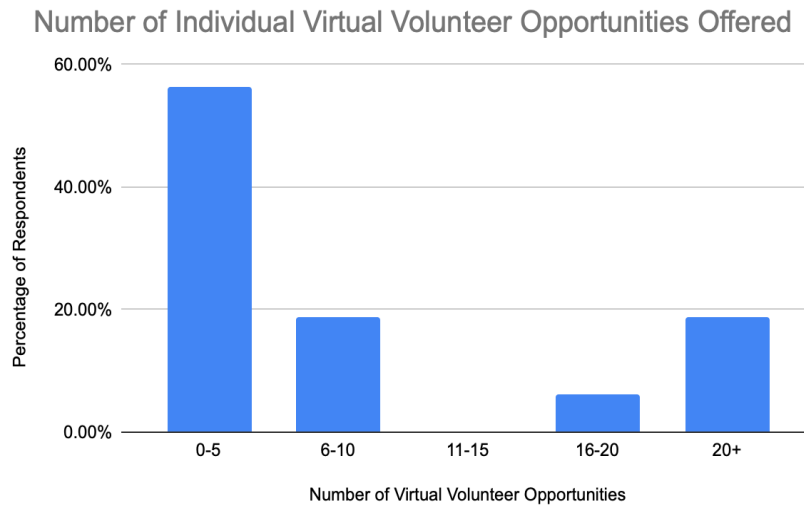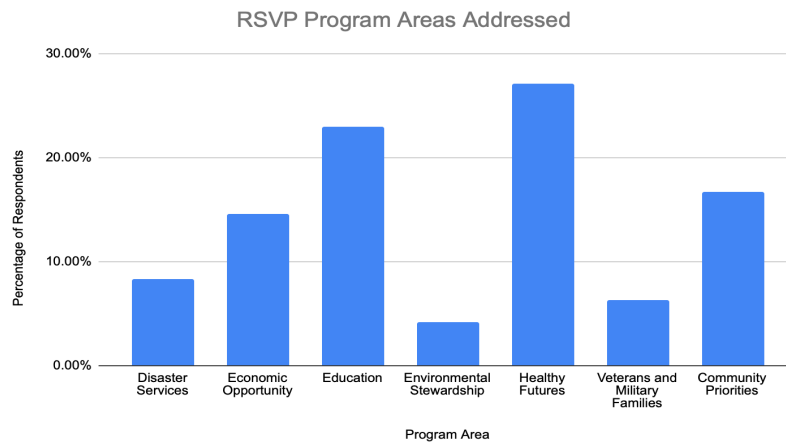Figure 3. Number of virtual volunteer opportunities offered by RSVP programs

Figure 4. RSVP program focus areas represented among interviewees

RSVP Program Areas Addressed

Some of the non-RSVP interviewees, such as CoGenerate, American Red Cross, and Adisa, represented national organizations and perspectives, some spanning a portion or all of North America, and one informant organization, GetSetUp, with global reach. The programs offered by these organizations varied widely with some offering courses (in-person and/or virtual) related to topics such as technology, wellness and fitness, business, arts, and enrichment. Non-RSVP organizations included programs involved with training, technology support, curriculum development, and consultation with partner organizations or with agencies they are contracted with. Three interviewees from non-RSVP organizations noted engagement with a Foster Grandparents Program, either as a program within their organization or a community partnership, as an intersection point with national service.

Thematic Results

Thematic results from key informant interviews underscore the organizational considerations necessary for virtual volunteerism such as recruitment and retention issues, funding and partnership gaps and opportunities, and training and support considerations along with broader equity and access issues, individual benefits experienced by volunteers, and the

impact of COVID (both positive and negative) on virtual volunteerism and volunteering in general. Below is an accounting of the themes noted within the dataset. Non-RSVP key informant interviewees are represented below with the ID of "K.I." followed by their assigned interviewee number.

Organizational Consideration Themes

Interviewees discussed concepts related to volunteerism at a programmatic level and/or related to the management of volunteers. Topics related to child codes under this umbrella category were more broadly touched on including recruitment & retention strategies, volunteer matching, training & support, volunteer appreciation, funding & resources, and organizational partnerships. Interviewees also offered advice at an organizational level that was either specific to virtual volunteering or applicable to all types of volunteering activities. Advice often included ways to set up, structure, or support a volunteer program:

"Don't underestimate the power of what volunteers can do, an unpaid person can do for your organization. The key reason why people don't do certain things is because they haven't been asked, so ask them to do it. And they'll do it and set up simple structures, to meet people where they are to help them to enable them to do the work." -K.I. # 9

"So much of the magic of [program name redacted] was how the team of volunteers came together at a site and became part of an extended family. That is very hard to create virtually, unless you're doing it incredibly intentionally, with a focus on relationship building. I think a lot of nonprofits probably will need training on how to design virtual spaces, and where they're not learning from volunteer management best practices, they're learning from virtual group dynamics, best practices, and creating community spaces." -K.I. #12

The benefits and challenges of virtual volunteering at a programmatic level were also discussed by some interviewees:

"So, diversifying the workforce is big and ultimately, it's just about increasing capacity and impact because you can access more people. I mean I know many organizations have had volunteers, particularly during the pandemic, but even before this, move away and yet remain a volunteer because they can now do so virtually. So, I think those are all very, to me very concrete things that benefit an organization. And in terms of individuals being served, continuity of services, particularly when in-person contact was limited due to safety concerns." -K.I. #5

"I think you have a challenge with the oversight, I think, because you just aren't seeing each other in person, so you just don't always have the same level of checking in with one another. So, I think that that was definitely a challenge of something different than what we had been doing before." -RSVP #1A

Organization Considerations-Recruitment and Retention

Efforts to recruit and retain volunteers were recognized as key elements to volunteer management success for both volunteering generally and for virtual volunteerism specifically. Incentives, approaches to volunteer recognition, role matching, and other tools/strategies used for recruitment or retention were topics encompassed by this theme discussing in more general terms how organizations recruit and retain volunteers. Below two key informants discuss both online and offline methods of volunteer recruitment:

"VolunteerMatch, the United Way portal. There is a [city name]-specific portal…that highlights volunteer opportunities. And I believe that's all of them."-RSVP #7

"Right now, we do in person, recruitment fairs or recruitment events, that seems to be our most productive, or our most successful recruitment efforts. When we go to senior centers or

places where seniors gather, and or active seniors gather, that's been the most successful for us."
-RSVP #3

Of note is that interviewees indicated that they did not engage in specific strategies for virtual volunteer recruitment. Instead, key informants indicated that they used their typical recruitment and retention efforts to bring people "through the door" with follow-up discussion resulting in a virtual volunteer placement.

"Our recruitment really isn't about recruiting for the virtual opportunity. It is about bringing people to us, and then finding out what it is that they're interested in, what they're passionate about, and virtual is sort of an option that's presented rather than something that we're specifically trying to recruit for. Because we have so many other opportunities that are a little, you know, more priority sometimes, or meet more immediate needs." -RSVP #1

As an intersection point with the "COVID impact" theme below, interviewees discussed ways that recognition changed due to COVID including doing birthday cards, a lunch event with a lunch pick-up or a drive-through meal and mailed or dropped off recognition items. Those interviewed also discussed how recognition is back in-person and virtual volunteers are invited to in-person events. Several respondents discussed innovative approaches to volunteer recognition in a virtual environment during the pandemic specifically:

"We did do remote virtual recognitions during the pandemic. I think one year it was via Zoom. And we did a bingo game virtually as a recognition kind of thing." -RSVP #9

"We have a nice like gala luncheon. We give them a gift, that year [during COVID] we gifted to them [brand name] tablets... And we also provided hotspots for volunteers that didn't have internet at home that we paid for on a monthly basis." -K.I. #8

Recruitment and Retention Benefits. Interviewees identified how virtual volunteering benefits their recruitment and retention efforts either by bringing in new volunteers or allowing them to retain their existing volunteer base. This theme represented a smaller group of excerpts, mostly discussing the potential or opportunity for VV to increase recruitment and retention with few responses identifying direct experience with benefits to recruitment and retention:

"I think it could enhance recruitment, just knowing that it's the option again, for somebody that's homebound or travels a lot. It could enhance just the flexibility of what they're willing to do and give." -RSVP #2

One interviewee did discuss how their organization had seen recruitment grow as a result of offering a virtual option:

"But virtual has expanded the pool. There are individuals who, you know, some of our schools are in locations that some individuals just have trouble accessing. And so, but they want to do something. And so, you know, they may live in the suburb and the school is in the city. And so, they can do it from the comfort of their suburb, and feel It'll be good for them. So, it's actually expanded the pool of volunteers." -K.I. #10

Recruitment and Retention Challenges. Interviewees recognized the challenges that virtual volunteerism presented for recruitment and retention at a programmatic level. Interviewees discussed how COVID was a barrier overall to recruitment and retention efforts. The residual effects from COVID created seemingly divergent views on volunteering with some older adults being weary of getting back out into the community and others wanting to be back in-person. These changing perspectives, due to COVID, were perceived as a barrier to recruitment and retention rather than being attributed directly to virtual volunteerism itself as a barrier.

"Yeah, like I said, we did lose like probably half of our volunteers. After COVID, bringing on the virtual aspect and not being able to be in-person and of course, health reasons and being nervous about that just kind of put a big damper on bringing volunteers on board and keeping the ones that we had." -K.I. #11

Interviewees also discussed how COVID forced people to really examine their priorities and that some older adults who were volunteers prior to the pandemic have re-examined and re-prioritized out of volunteering.

"My original thesis on that, in my own head, was well, this is the first-time people are finally able to safely do other things. And maybe their priorities are elsewhere. They're taking vacations with their family, they're seeing friends, they're not necessarily wanting to jump back into volunteering yet or, you know, their lives have changed, their jobs have changed, everyone's resettling. And so, it's interesting to see we have a huge drop in volunteer engagement" -K.I. #13

The recruitment and retention challenges subtheme intersected with digital literacy as a barrier to recruitment. Other barriers to recruitment and retention included the lack of technology and internet for individuals, lack of readiness at community sites to bring back volunteers:

"Yeah, absolutely. There was [sic] folks who didn't want to do it from the beginning, that had been long term tutors. But who didn't want to go virtual. One, because they didn't feel confident when they didn't have the training. Two, they didn't think it would work. So, there was a lot of drop because of that…" -K.I. #15

Another challenge to volunteer retention is the perception that it is easier to lose engagement in an online setting. One interviewee described this as "evaporating":

"It's easier to evaporate, you know, volunteers evaporate. They just kind of, if no one's paying attention, they just stop signing in or they just, you know, it's a very easy thing to leave a

virtual- Well it's easy to leave any, but particularly a virtual, role. If you don't feel like anybody is relying on you." -K.I. #9

Organization Considerations-Training and Support

Interviewees described the types of training and support provided for their volunteers. In general, volunteer training was specific to the nature of the volunteer roles within a program. Organizations offered their volunteer training and support online, in-person, via phone, or through a combination:

"The other thing we've been doing is we've been sending recorded videos to the volunteers. And so that way, then they can receive a recorded video and they are listening to us having conducted a training previously. So that is a tool that we've used for training those that are really going to be kind of the virtual folks." -RSVP #1A

"We give them one-on-one over the phone training. So, we'll be on the phone with them and walk them through the steps while they're online." -RSVP #3

The need for technology and digital literacy training was a common theme for virtual volunteer programs. Technology and digital literacy training included teaching the skills for using hardware and software, online etiquette, and techniques for implementing the volunteer work through a virtual mode of delivery. Some programs provided technology and digital literacy training internally with staff and others used experienced volunteers to help train other volunteers. Interviewees also discussed this type of training being outsourced through partnerships with other organizations:

"...We also provided training for people in how to work remotely. And we also had to create new protocols for how to work with clients remotely. So, we created a document for that." -RSVP #1

"We taught them the basics of how to get on Zoom, get off Zoom, mute yourself, and turn on and off their camera and microphone. We did like three or four months of Zoom training. And then [Name of technology organization] also provided ongoing support, like a lifetime support. Any volunteer could call the 1-800 number, tell them what their issue was, and then they receive an appointment and a callback." -K.I. #8

Technology and digital literacy training was discussed as a new or increasing need often in response to the shift online during COVID:

"I would say that the new needs were training in digital literacy. And so, we developed a whole training curriculum around digital literacy." -K.I. #10

"During that first year of the pandemic, we actually had a volunteer who helped us and her whole sole job was to help our experienced core tutors learn how to use Zoom and have those technology skills." -RSVP #9

Some interviewees reported challenges related to technology and digital literacy training such as accommodating a range of hardware and tech devices used by their volunteers:

"...It was a little challenging because none of them had the same concerns, none of them had the same difficulties. So, it was very much one-on-one and very personalized because some were using tablets, some were using their phones, and some were using laptops and things like that. So, it was just that everyone had something different. So, I think that was the most challenging thing to figure out. Okay, what do you have? What are you using? And how can we support that?" -RSVP #4

Organization Considerations-Partnerships

Interviewees identified organizational practices related to virtual volunteering that leveraged outside partnerships to address programmatic needs. Partners ranged from national

organizations to local entities such as libraries and churches. Organizational partnerships were forged, or anticipated, for addressing topics such as funding, technology training, technology supplies, volunteer recruitment, and facilitating or expanding volunteer programs. The most frequent themes were related to technology supplies, technology training, and funding:

"So that project was a great public/private partnership because it was the mayor's office, it was the Department for the Aging, it was [cell phone company], and then it was [technology org]. And that program was replicated in other cities after the fact. So, we're doing something similar in California now where older adults are getting iPads from their local organization, but it's funded by the Department for the Aging and we're [technology org] doing the training." -K.I. #4

"And there's a lot of other small nonprofits in our state that do tech training, digital literacy training, and connect people to refurbished computers. We try to help them connect to that affordable connectivity program, as well."-K.I. #6

"So [national tech training org] helped us do basic tablet training, email writing skills, and really just losing that, that fright." -K.I. #8

"Yes, so some of our AmeriCorps Seniors colleagues in other areas had found a place down in Florida, who were providing virtual training and education around the internet and different programs that could be utilized for seniors, so quite a few of us, contracted with them, for them to do like a workshop and things like that." -RSVP #4

An interviewee discussed a partnership with local TV networks that helped facilitate a volunteer program by broadcasting virtual classes:

"So, a lot of the local television networks helped them. The leaders would video their classes and the local television networks would air it on local access TV, so that was huge." - RSVP #4

Organization Considerations-Funding and Resources

Interviewees reported that organizational capacity for funding and staffing impacted the ability to support virtual volunteerism practices. Funding and staffing capacity was discussed in connection to acquiring hardware, software, internet, providing technology training, program development, and program/volunteer support:

"We really don't have the resources to provide a tablet, or to really work with an individual who's self-isolated, like where we deliver our device, use that for a certain period of time, and then retrieve it again. But that would be a neat way to expand the program, we just haven't been able to do that with funding." -RSVP #1A

For organizations or programs that could provide resources, it was often reported that funds were drawn from temporary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic such as federal/state grants or other temporary measures within organizations:

"We were early recipients of some good COVID grants that enabled us to provide [brand name] tablets to our volunteer database pretty quickly during the pandemic. I would say, you know, within the first six months we had, we probably had 60% of our older adult demographic Zooming with us on a regular basis." -RSVP #2

"We were able to provide the equipment for volunteers because our budget for transportation reimbursement for volunteers. It wasn't something that we were going to be using [during COVID] so we were able to channel that."-RSVP #1

Some interviewees also talked about connecting volunteers and recipients with other national, state, or local resources to provide technology or internet connection, particularly resources for low-income households, older adults, or during the pandemic:

"Then we moved on to having them make calls specifically about a government funded program where folks in low-income households could be eligible for free or discounted internet." -K.I. #14

Individual Challenges Themes

Interviewees identified challenges at the individual level for volunteers and beneficiaries that affected participation in virtual volunteering activities. Access to technology, digital literacy, equity factors, and attitudes towards technology emerged as the subthemes for volunteer-level challenges.

Individual Challenges-Attitudes Towards Technology Subtheme

Interviewees noted that older adults choose to not participate in virtual volunteering due, in part, to their attitudes towards technology. Attitudes towards technology included views such as hesitancy and resistance to using technology due to feelings of intimidation or fear of judgment, technology fatigue, or a preference for in-person experiences over virtual activities. Examples of these sentiments include:

"I would say intimidation, you know, just feeling like, oh, is it going to be too hard? Like some of our volunteers who decided to back off because they were like, 'No, I don't think I can do this.' They could have…but it's just the intimidation, the fear of it. And then the time to actually invest in learning, the time, and the patience to invest in learning." -K.I. #14

"No, a lot of them, even though they are happy to be engaged in the calling aspect, they're really Zoomed out. So, when we do offer suggestions and things like that, it doesn't get a lot of reception." -RSVP #7

"For every member that we had that bought their first computer in a pandemic, we had one that said I'm never getting a computer, I'm never getting a smartphone, I'm not going to do it."-K.I. #3

Some interviewees discussed how virtual experiences might paradoxically increase the desire for in-person experiences. In addition, beneficiaries of volunteer services themselves may prefer in-person services over virtual services due to confidentiality concerns.

"I think that comes down to access technology and user ability for our participants, not necessarily our volunteers." -RSVP #9

"But I'd say for most of your average older adult, I do think that…the virtual…it continues to fan the flame of desire to be in-person. And so, I don't know if it's a challenge, but it's just there." -K.I. #12

"But lots and lots of people have said how they were craving to go back and work in-person right? The networks, the socialization that happens, you know, the direct contact. The networks that are established are ones that, in some cases, can really only flourish in an in-person environment." -RSVP #1

Individual Challenges - Equity/Access Subtheme

Interviewees reported barriers to acquiring or accessing the technology needed to virtually volunteer on an individual level. Issues related to equity such as being low income and residing in a rural area were noted by interviewees to create the conditions for inequitable access to technology or internet connectivity.

"Well, yeah, I find more of the rural poor have a harder time with access to technology where our urban lower income folks, they are able to access libraries and use the computers there. There's also been a lot of through the schools here a lot more- and we also have, you know, they were actually arming school buses with Wi-Fi, you know, the schools during COVID, as well. So, I find more of like the lower income, rural lower income, the rural poor have is probably the more are much more limited on access to technology."-RSVP #10

Some organizations noted equity concerns due to lack of diversity among volunteers and acknowledged the ability to choose to volunteer is a privilege. One interviewee noted how that lack of diversity, and the structures that perpetuate this lack of diversity, creates challenges to virtual volunteering:

"And it's not very diverse. And as a result, some of the practices, while we need structures to support volunteers, and to do it, well, sometimes organizations are putting up barriers that are automatically causing challenges for more of a diverse volunteer core to participate… the inequalities in volunteering, and how it's been somewhat of a privileged opportunity." -K.I. #13

"As far as equity. I mean, off the top of my head, I would say 80% of our volunteers are white 80% are female. And as far as income, I suspect 80% are probably in a more comfortable retirement bracket…It's something that I have to take into account, when I promote and set these things up. I don't think it'll get any worse. As far as the diversity and inclusion issues." -RSVP #6

Another challenge in accessibility that has been reported is difficulties for people who struggle with fine motor skills, or visual or hearing impairments that may impact their use of technology.

"When you're working with a person who's an older adult, you might find that they have dexterity, you know, they don't have the fine motor skill, dexterity that they used to. So, typing on a small keyboard or on a touchscreen can be really challenging, we might look at computer access devices. So that might be alternate keyboards and alternate mice that are different shapes and sizes. So, like I have this one in front of me now is a trackball, mouse works really good for people that have carpal tunnel or wrist injuries." -K.I. #6

Individual Challenges - Digital Literacy Subtheme

Interviewees mentioned the challenge of digital literacy for older adults who have little experience with technology or are unfamiliar with certain types of software and applications. Interviewers describe fear and hesitation to use new technology or software. Interviewees noted that this may be due in part to many older adults having been exposed to technology during the course of their years in the workforce.

"We said listen, our volunteers have zero to none like technological skills. They don't even know they didn't have emails. They didn't know what Zoom was. They didn't know how to turn on the tablet." -K.I. #8

"And I would say that's not even just for like, I think if I picture the older adult who struggles with technology, we found it's also really true for people who are in their 60s and 70s have worked in the corporate sector, their whole lives, but they didn't use Google Docs, they use Microsoft Word and the transition to a collaborative way of working to share tips and tools and volunteer, you know, challenges and to document learning across a peer group in a training session is new to them." -K.I. #12

Interviewees described digital literacy challenges that clients, or the beneficiaries of volunteer service, face to be another challenge for volunteers when engaging in work with clients.

"Technology, you know how that's the biggest issue really, for the most part, internet issues, for the most part, has [sic] been the biggest issue we've experienced… It's just technology, basically, at the end of day, it's all technology is really the biggest issue that we've experienced." -RSVP #10

"Most of our homebound seniors, I'm going to just equivocate it to like people that would be eligible for Meals on Wheels, or the people that we're serving at home. Most of them do not have the technological literacy or equipment to be able to engage." -RSVP #2

Individual Benefits Themes

Interviewees identified benefits at the individual level for volunteers and/or beneficiaries who participate in virtual volunteering activities. Individual benefits of virtual volunteering include learning new technologies, creating social connections, and the accessibility it offers to those who are not able to be physically present to volunteer and the sense of meaning that volunteering can create for an individual.

"So, the reward is always bigger than the struggle, I have to say it that, you know, to see that you can make a senior feel valued, feel important, and rave about why 'I know how to use Zoom now' like and give their…lives a sense of meaning, is very rewarding."-K.I. #8

Individual Benefits - Social Connection Subtheme

Virtual volunteering offered individuals new, improved, and different ways to socially connect with others according to interviewees. Social connections were discussed as a direct benefit of virtual volunteering. Many interviewees spoke of how virtual volunteering allowed

social connection to continue during the pandemic but that it has also continued to provide this

for many older adults after emerging from quarantine. These benefits are seen for volunteers and

beneficiaries alike. Illustrative quotes include:

"We were part of a program that was able to alleviate the social isolation and give our

volunteers a form of connection."-K.I. #8

"I remember seeing those outcomes and there was a significant and improvement in

people's…feelings of being isolated and things like that."-RSVP #7

"It was to make sure that older adults could stay connected during the time when we were

quarantined. And my gosh, the testimonials that we got, you know, people just were so grateful.

And not just for that program, but for all of our virtual programming...One of the programs that I

put together was a morning stretch. And the whole thought was, you know, it's 10 o'clock

Monday through Friday just gave people a space to come to because people wake up and kind of

be like, 'Well, what do I do now?' you know, like having to be stuck at home. And that's really

what folks express, they were like, I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have this

community to come and share my time with."-K.I. #14

"They are able to feel like feel a healthy sense of community by giving back, a lot of

them talk about how they feel much more connected, you know, particularly during the

pandemic, everyone felt so isolated. And so, this is a way for them, to connected with others.

And that even that feeling continues even as we're moving out of the pandemic. And so, so

there's a feeling of connection, there's a feeling of a lot less isolation"-K.I. #10

Individual benefits - Learning Tech Skills Subtheme

Interviewees noted that virtual volunteering helped their older adult volunteers to learn

new technology skills. These new technology skills were also discussed as carrying over into an

individual's personal life outside of the virtual volunteer experience. These skills acquired during volunteering opened up new avenues of engagement and connection in volunteer's personal lives that without these skills they would not have been able to participate in.

"We then had volunteers share, like, 'oh, you know this, we have a Christmas breakfast every year. But you know, now we did it virtual and I was able to join,' some of them then took these skills beyond and like, well, now 'I'm able to join like Sunday service.' This is 'I know how to get on Zoom.' One volunteer told us that her own grandchild is struggling…she fell behind in her reading skills. So, she would get on Zoom with her with their tablet to read and help her to her grandchild."-K.I. #8

"Because you know that old dog can't learn new tricks is an easy saying to go to, but if you can motivate that person to learn something new, they're very capable of learning something new. And we have a lot, we have a lot of our volunteers now that talk about how glad they are they've learned how to use Zoom. And for not just volunteering, for other things how great it's been for them. So, it's been quite a quite an experience."-RSVP #11

Individual Benefits - Accessibility Subtheme

Virtual volunteering was viewed as a means of increasing accessibility to volunteer opportunities for individuals by eliminating geographic and physical barriers. Individuals can go online from home or when traveling to engage from anywhere there is an internet connection. Individuals with transportation challenges, health concerns, physical disabilities, or roles that require them to be at home, such as caregiving, have greater accessibility to participate in volunteer activities. Interviewees also discussed a perception that virtual volunteering offers flexibility for those who would like to complete volunteer hours on their own time and at their own convenience.

"But I think knowing that, especially during the wintertime, if you know, there's a storm or something comes up, that they have that opportunity and that option to utilize, you know, technology to be able to still volunteer and receive those services, even if it's not in-person."-RSVP #4

"It can also help to…allow for people to engage as volunteers during off hours when they're not working, as well as allow people with physical or transportation limitations." -K.I. #5

"We moved all of our tutor training for our volunteers online which allowed us to break down a lot of the barriers that we had around geography."-RSVP #15

Some attendees also spoke to how virtual options also increase accessibility for not just the volunteers but the beneficiaries themselves:

"Being that our classes are on education, health education, we've been able to reach quite a few people with it being virtual. We've reached several people who would never have been able to leave their homes, to come into a class to physically come to a class. You know, be it depression, a physical ailment, be it, you know, whatever, they're able to take it in the comfort of their home and attend the class. So, it's been it's been very beneficial in that aspect."-RSVP #13

The accessibility theme intersects with recruitment and retention as this accessibility was discussed in connection with helping to attract and retain volunteers:

"Volunteers that previously had left my program because they couldn't get to the school anymore, a lot of times whether it's mobility issues or health issues, whatever it is. So, when we switched to being completely virtual, I had volunteers who are able to come back and work with students for the first time and a few years. And I've kept them on board as a result of being able to offer that."-RSVP #9

COVID Impact Themes

The COVID-19 pandemic was discussed by interviewees as broadly affecting volunteer organizations, volunteer numbers, and the operation of volunteer programs. Interviewees reported that COVID forced changes to volunteer programs and practices. Most excerpts in this theme discussed COVID as either having a positive or negative effect on volunteerism and virtual volunteering. Other excerpts discussed the impact in more general terms.

For example, programs talked about how the pandemic forced their hand in terms of needing to go virtual. One participant said:

"...so, with the COVID, for the two years, you know, a lot of the doors were shut down, etc. Even the [agency] staff was working from home the majority of the time, but the volunteers, we still wanted volunteers to be active in the community. So, what they ended up doing was doing virtual." -RSVP #12

Others talked about how COVID broke down prior resistance to virtual activities as stated by this participant:

"Because when we first, when we worked before 2020, we kept talking about doing virtual volunteer, nobody wanted to do it like, they were like, 'no, I want to see a person in-person, I don't want to deal with a computer.' But when it became obvious, that was the only way we were going to be able to train people. People stepped up and said, 'Okay, I need to learn how to do this.' And so, we had, at that time, we had about 600 volunteers total. And about…400 went through virtual volunteering, training and did teach virtually." -RSVP #11

As an intersection point with recruitment and retention considerations, COVID-19 also changed the way programs recognized their volunteers as described in the following quote:

"...we started the [birthday recognition] cakes in the beginning, like, every month, and then after that we introduced birthday cards. I want to say though, it was probably during

COVID that we started the cards because we couldn't do you know, we met every month, but we'd eat because we have lunch and dessert at every meeting. And our dessert was this birthday cake and singing Happy Birthday. We didn't have that….We've started the birthday cards when COVID, that we couldn't do cakes. So now we do both."-K.I. #8

COVID Impact - Positive Subtheme

Interviewees viewed COVID as a catalyst for new or increased virtual volunteering opportunities. Virtual volunteering was used as an option to keep volunteers safe from exposure during COVID-19. New programs were started due to the pandemic conditions and research participants spoke about staff and volunteers becoming more flexible as they learned to think "outside of the box." They discussed how people became surprisingly tech savvy and that many of the new virtual strategies and programs continued post-pandemic, with these learned skills. One participant mentioned that by maintaining the virtual meetings they started during the pandemic, they could keep their travel costs down, post-COVID. The following two quotes demonstrate some of these positive aspects that arose out of the pandemic:

"I think it's actually made us stronger; we can actually reach more consumers. Because of COVID, like I said, we had to think outside the box and some of our many, many of our consumers, not just our volunteers, but the consumers that we're serving, may have mobility issues, may- just are not able to leave the home." -RSVP #10

"Had the pandemic not happened, [our companionship program] probably would have not been created. So that is definitely a new program that developed because of the pandemic." -RSVP #9

COVID Impact - Negative Subtheme

Interviewees reported that COVID negatively impacted organizations by shutting down programs and decreasing volunteer recruitment and retention. Volunteer numbers decreased dramatically for a number of reasons including lack of volunteer opportunities, fear of leaving the safety of home, or choosing to retire from volunteering as the pandemic set in; some participants talked about the emotional toll of losing many volunteers to COVID-related deaths. Consistently research participants reported a severe drop in their number of volunteers, as illustrated by the following quote:

"We average about 275 volunteers here. And when at the height of COVID we had 12 active volunteers out of that pool of volunteers. So, it decimated the in-person volunteering."-RSVP #3

The reasons for the loss of volunteers were multifaceted as described in the following quote:

"The ones that we had, because we lost so many, during that time frame. Not necessarily to, you know, our typical health or stuff like that. But many, many of their families, many of them, were just too nervous, and they didn't want them to be in a situation where they had to go somewhere, or they had to volunteer. And especially early on, some of them didn't even want to hear of options. You know, it was just such a scary time for them. So that was difficult. I would say, not many people were coming on board to volunteer much at all, during that time frame." -RSVP #4

Opportunities Theme

Interviewees talked about opportunities for virtual volunteering to remain, improve, and in some cases grow into the future. Some interviewees connected this growth with the trend that

future cohorts of older adults are likely to be more tech-savvy and bring with them the

expectation that there will be virtual options for volunteer engagement.

"I do see it increasing the question will be when. We, you know, as I was talking about

the, you know, as the younger set of people 55 and older age, I think we will have more people

interested in using technology to be helpful to overcome those barriers, like not wanting to put

on nice clothes to go in and not having to drive to do a brief volunteer opportunity." -RSVP #14

"I don't believe virtual volunteering will go away…now you're working from your dining

room table and you're getting stuff done so you can trust volunteers to do the same. So, I feel like

the pandemic eroded that- so I feel like that isn't going away. Plus, we have an increasingly tech

savvy aging population that are now in their 50s and 60s and early 70s, who are very tech

comfortable, tend to be more tech comfortable who are going to age, and we'll expect some of

this, so I don't think it's going away." -K.I. #5

Others spoke more generally about this potential growth but did not attribute that growth

to specific driving factors. Others discussed how views of technology were changing and how

that shift would likely permeate the volunteer space as well.

"I would like to see it [virtual volunteering] grow. And also keep it as a continuous

option. Yeah, I don't want people to fall out of it completely. I want to make sure that it kind of

stays in our regular routine of, of services and things that are offered and opportunities. I haven't

quite figured out how to do that because everyone is so excited about being in-person. So, if you

know, you all have any ideas on how to promote that, or you know, keep it, keep it on the

forefront of programming, I'd be thrilled to hear."-RSVP #4

Others discussed how this projected increase in the use of virtual volunteering was tied to

the benefits it offered them as an organization and its fit with their programming:

"I definitely think that it's something that will stick around because we've tapped into a whole new population of call receivers, and also volunteers. It's been a great way to have people in the community engaged and also get their needs met. Because even though we offer volunteer opportunities, we're at the heart, still an organization that offers a lot of other services for older adults in the community. And this even virtual volunteering has been a really good way of getting those services out there, just so people are aware, and we've actually been able to help a lot of people through that. So, I definitely think it's something that'll stick around."-RSVP #7

Virtual Volunteer Strategies Themes

Interviewees described virtual volunteer models, management strategies, and facilitators of virtual volunteering throughout the interviews, and shared examples of opportunities for virtual volunteering offered by their organizations. Both successful and less successful approaches to virtual volunteerism were discussed by interviewees:

"Yeah, so we have in-person as well as virtual technology-based classes, but they could range from discussion groups, exercise classes, tech training, to special events, like open mic night, so a wide range, because it's really, the technology truly is just a medium, it's really about bringing a community of older adults together."-K.I. #14

"It did go away for us. And I'll tell you why. We might even my colleague,[Name] she didn't want to let go of the virtual like she still wanted to have virtual meetings. But I think for her one, she has a smaller group. And so, it's a lot easier when you have 15/20 people like on a Zoom, because it's still manageable. But my Zoom meetings were 45 to 60 people on one Zoom." -K.I. #8

Virtual Volunteer Strategies - Less Successful Subtheme

Examples of volunteer models/roles that are not a good fit for virtual strategies were discussed by interviewees. Interviewees discussed both strategies they had attempted to transition to virtual or those they perceived as being less successfully done via virtual modalities. In general, interviewees discussed volunteer assignments related to transportation, food distribution, or caregiving as less successfully performed, or unable to be performed, via virtual modalities. Certain classes were thought of as less successful when taught virtually compared to when taught in-person.

"I mean, there's a lot of other programs out there that we're not doing right now that I could think of like, you can't fix a house virtually, you can't deliver a meal virtually, like that Willy Wonka, with the chocolate thing kind of flying through the sky, right? … Um, you know, there's a lot of you can't necessarily provide medical services to someone as a volunteer or take their vitals or things like that." -RSVP #8

Some interviewees describe planning for virtual volunteer strategies as more time and resource intensive than planning for in-person opportunities. Organizations consider factors such as recruitment, training, and relationship building in planning volunteer activities, and some interviewees described the impact that transitioning to a virtual space has on these areas.

"So again, the intensity of recruitment efforts to keep those numbers up and or increase them at new organizations that are providing support to their communities is by definition, not one that can be done that can be done virtually." -RSVP #1

Virtual Volunteer Strategies - Successful Subtheme

Interviewees described examples of volunteer models or roles that worked well virtually, successful virtual volunteer management strategies, and other facilitators for virtual volunteering. Within this theme were responses that touched on examples of technology, communication, and

ideal volunteer traits that contributed to the successful implementation of virtual volunteering. Virtual volunteer jobs and models perceived to be the most successful were those that centered on a documented community need, and roles that were deemed to be sustainable and desirability for volunteers and service recipients. Below are examples of virtual volunteer roles that were reported to work well:

"The second probably more interesting element…is what we call our volunteer intake processing center. This is a network of virtual volunteers that work in a coordinated manner across the entire country and what they do is they shepherd new volunteer applicants through the process to encourage people through, answer questions, and help if they get stuck. There's about 300 other people that actually virtually volunteer in this space." -K.I. #9

"The other piece that I personally was involved in here, and that we're still doing now is having the Zoom co-hosts. And that's a really important role, not just for the fitness classes, but for all of our tech classes, because sometimes there are Zoom bombers, and they're really kind of helping to keep the class safe. "-K.I. #14

Some successful models were described as a sustainable stop-gap measure during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees gave examples of successful virtual programs that were either created intentionally or were transitioned to incorporate virtual volunteering aspects from previous in-person volunteering (often due to the COVID-19 pandemic). A hybrid approach was also discussed by some interviewees as a successful strategy, often post-pandemic. The following excerpt is a demonstration of a volunteer model that was successfully transitioned during the pandemic and is now carrying a hybrid approach going forward:

"[Organization name redacted] they're an organization supporting new immigrants into the US to help them to settle into the United States. And they teach English as a second language

to help people get new jobs and everything else. Then because of the pandemic, they had to quickly shift virtually. And so, they worked hard and made that shift and started teaching all the classes by Zoom, and they're carrying that forward. I think now they might be doing a hybrid, some now back in-person, and some still virtual." -K.I. #13

Interviewees also discussed successful management strategies such as approaches for programmatic structuring, community building, volunteer support, and adjusting to the challenges/needs that arise with virtual implementation (e.g., needing a volunteer Zoom moderator role to help maintain cyber safety, creating a tech support helpline):

"…we've really learned a lot from all of this, and supporting our volunteers is to always have a real human somewhere. So, if that means having a staff member, the IT department, or whoever that someone can call if things just really go bad because as much as preparing our volunteers makes them feel successful, not having some sort of something to help support them in in the worst moments, makes them kind of, you know, fall out of that volunteer pool."-K.I. #3

Successful Technology. Within the successful strategies subtheme, interviewees described different types of technology that have been used successfully for virtual volunteering or that they would like to acquire to facilitate virtual volunteering. Specific brands of technology were detailed by interviewees as well general categories. Technology discussed for facilitating virtual volunteering included hardware, software, internet, adaptive technology/equipment, and interpreter services:

"Computers with a camera, that's important. You need a Zoom subscription, potentially, if you're trying to do anything over 40 minutes. That needs to be a paid subscription." -RSVP #8

"People love their tablets. They use them all the time, my dad included, just because they can take them places, they're easy to move around. I think one of the other things that it's

interesting and probably not as known about is there's a variety of different tools and devices that can help adapt technology to older adults. So, things like you can have a mouse that is remote that you can actually slow down. So, if you have a tremor, it can help you." -K.I. #4

A frequently cited technology that emerged was the use of video conferencing platforms, particularly Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

"Zoom is the video platform that we have chosen. It's the most user friendly, and it's the one that is most familiar to people." -RSVP #9

Ideal Virtual Volunteer Traits. Interviewees described the ideal traits of a virtual volunteer including certain personality traits, technology skills, background knowledge, availability, and level of commitment . Some personality traits sought after in virtual volunteers included being friendly, positive, open-minded, empathetic, outgoing, self-confident, proactive, and independent. Below is an excerpt of an interviewee listing ideal virtual volunteer traits that included personality traits:

"...so proactive, independent, willing to learn, willing to fail knowing that there are challenges, losing fear that nothing wrong was going to happen, and an interest to stay connected."-K.I. #8

Interviewees viewed previous technology skills and/or the willingness to learn technology skills as ideal traits for virtual volunteers:

"The perfect virtual volunteer is someone who is already familiar and proficient with Zoom, and someone who is already using a computer for regular tasks on a daily basis. I find that if there's somebody who's already using it for a little bit more than just email and social media, so that way they already know how to, or they can at least learn quickly, how to do things like

sharing a screen, using the chat feature, and use our online platforms for their time entry and their session log information. "-RSVP #9

"I think what has been most successful for us is really finding those volunteers that have a strong want and desire to do this and be involved, figure out the technology, and keep learning and growing with the technology."-K.I. #3

Some interviewees also discussed the benefit of volunteers with background skills or knowledge in a particular area such as from a previous work career:

"I would say the ideal candidate would be someone who had training. We were very fortunate that our volunteer base, not just virtually, tends to be people who were retired from the field that they were volunteering in. Like our financial classes have been taught by financial advisors and bankers, and we didn't really set it up to start that way, it's just kind of the way it happened. You know, that's who was looking for an opportunity to volunteer using the skills that they had prior. Our communications classes are taught a lot of times by former teachers or people that are in the communications industry. So those that have that type of background." - RSVP #11

Successful Communication. Interviewees acknowledged various ways that the virtual volunteering model impacted communication with volunteers and among volunteers as compared to traditional volunteering on a programmatic level. Interviewees discussed different volunteer management strategies for communication and the overall importance of communication in a virtual environment. Some interviewees also discussed accommodating different preferences for modes of communication such as email, text, video chat, phone call, or snail mail. Creating online meetings or gathering spaces was noted by interviewees as an important means of communicating with their volunteers and a strategy for virtual volunteers to engage in peer-to-

peer support, educational opportunities, leisure activities for community building, and sharing ideas:

"I think one of the things that we've done that I think our volunteers really like is we've created kind of a community environment so that they have a space to go to, to talk to each other, so that they can support each other and what they're doing. They've been able to share best practices amongst themselves, too, which also kind of helps empower them. So, the idea of- we have what's called community leaders. So, they're all leading different sessions, whether it's nutrition, movies, diabetes, whatever. But they all have a shared space that's a forum for them to talk."-K.I. #4

"It's being very intentional about bringing them together. During these [online educational] sessions, we talk about [our organization], we talk about our program, give them updates, provide moments to engage, and then we bring on the subject matter expert for whatever the topic was. And so, I think that continuing with those and ensuring that they are fun and engaging. We'll play a game, one or two just to ensure that, and we think that we've seen that it builds comfort, it builds connections."-K.I. #10

Some interviewees stressed the importance of communication with virtual volunteers to address topics such as making them feel connected to the organization and other volunteers, sharing feedback on their impact, and to communicate appreciation to the volunteers:

"Volunteers need support, they want to feel like they're part of the community. And we know what keeps volunteers engaged...they need to feel like whatever they are doing is actually making a difference in some way. It could be data entry, but it's not just handing them data entry to do, but understanding why is this data entry important? That's where that's the magic, right? That's their paycheck as I like to say. And then making sure we're supporting them and

acknowledging and recognizing the work. Making sure they're part of still the community even though they're virtual, whether that means having regular check-ins or inviting them to virtual team meetings to talk with others, so they're not isolated and just sort of over there on their own. Because the more you can make them feel like part of the organization in a legit, authentic way, the more successful you will be."-K.I. #13

Discussion

This study sought to explore the position of virtual volunteerism in a post-pandemic world and though interview prompts were mostly focused on the current state of virtual volunteerism it is clear that the pandemic and virtual volunteering is inextricably linked to the experience of COVID. Virtual volunteering, for many programs, was created out of necessity during the pandemic and it is seen to hold some value and utility in a post-pandemic world.

Previous research regarding the development and implementation of virtual volunteering programs highlighted the benefits and challenges that come with their use, many of which were discussed among the interviewees. Many informants identified the potential for building social relationships, increasing accessibility, overcoming geographic barriers, and providing opportunities for growth and education as incentives to participate in virtual volunteerism. These principles, reflected in studies by the likes of Craven (2000) and Bruce et. al (2021), should be used to inform best practice in building and maintaining opportunities that participants will be motivated to use.

While the benefits of virtual volunteerism are detailed within these findings, we also note a unique set of challenges. Informants identified numerous downfalls to the use of virtual volunteering, with many agreeing that a lack of digital literacy and negative attitudes towards technology among older adults is a key determiner in the success of its use. The benefits

identified are predicated on the assumption that the volunteer has the infrastructure available to access the service (i.e., a working computer, reliable internet access), has the knowledge on how to operate the technology, and the motivation to do so. In many ways, we noted that while virtual volunteering can work for both volunteer and the volunteer program, it relies on the resources of both to be successful.

Our interviewees discussed a desire to increase virtual volunteering within their ranks and how COVID-19 increased the urgency of this practice. This quick transition to a virtual platform during the pandemic left many in a state of uncertainty and faced with a need to quickly scale this option. After a quick adjustment to a new service model, informants reported that this pivot to a virtual platform provided opportunities for its participants to become more tech savvy, continue important work through a new modality, and give space for new opportunities to arise that may have not come about otherwise. Virtual volunteerism allowed people to combat the ever present heightened social isolation that was a hallmark of the pandemic; something that informants and previous work alike highlighted as a benefit of its use (Bruce et al., 2021; Lachance, 2021). As a point-in-time, the pandemic also brought with it the funding infusion for some, and flexibility in existing funding sources for others to transition to virtual engagement strategies. Interviewees also discussed how a return to "normal" operations has removed those funding and infrastructure supports.

Based on the interviews completed, it appears that those in the volunteer sector both value the opportunities that virtual volunteerism provides but also lack the infrastructure and capacity to sustain virtual volunteering over the long-term and at a scale that was possible during the pandemic. The future of virtual volunteerism will in large part be driven by volunteer preferences, interests, and abilities coupled with infrastructure supports that increase staff

resources, training, capacity, and technology access. Interviewees by and large saw a future for virtual volunteering and one that is likely to expand based on projected changes to the interests and technological abilities of future cohorts of older adults. Interviews also point to pervasive equity and access issues that create barriers to older adults engaging with virtual volunteerism. Investments in broadband infrastructure and public benefits programs that lower the cost of technology and internet access are likely to increase the uptake of virtual volunteerism. The use of technology can reduce physical barriers and grant access to opportunities such as the benefits of virtual volunteerism for some individuals, but for those that do not have access to the technology in the first place, virtual volunteering could contribute to a wider fracture in equity concerns. Findings from this study align with the mixed findings in the field that both demonstrate a growing use of technology among older adults at the same time as the digital divide among older adults grows wider (Mubarak et al., 2022).

On a programmatic level, interviewees offer suggestions for optimizing the success of virtual volunteerism efforts through education, training, and support. During COVID-19 many organizations developed their own technology training materials (Zoom instruction manuals, tutorials, etc.). Partnership opportunities exist that could help to standardize this training support to remove burden on sites. For example, national technology organizations have been identified by interviewees (including GetSetUp and Older Adults Technology Services [OATS]) that offer tech support services to older adults and such organizations could provide this type of support to the volunteer sector. Interestingly, virtual volunteerism can benefit from existing recruitment and retention efforts within nonprofit organizations as interviewees discussed the lack of distinction between recruitment and retention practices for traditional volunteering and virtual.

Furthermore, interviewees identified volunteer roles that were more successful and less successful as virtual opportunities. For roles that can be virtual, there are possible benefits to the organizations and programs such as costs, continuity of services, and access to a wider volunteer pool. However, management strategies for creating virtual opportunities and supporting virtual volunteers take effort and intention as reported by the interviewees. Creating virtual spaces to share ideas and learn, fostering a sense of community and social connections, and providing feedback and appreciation were successful strategy themes that emerged for supporting and retaining virtual volunteers. In this regard, transitioning to a virtual environment needs to be a thoughtful undertaking with intentional support structures (communication, training, space for human connection) for volunteers.

Though interviewees largely predict that their use of virtual volunteerism will increase in the future, its use is not likely to replace traditional on-site volunteerism. In a post-pandemic world, virtual volunteering was viewed as a strategy to supplement and expand programs and accommodate individuals who preferred to remain online for various reasons. The two ideas that virtual volunteerism will continue to increase in use and a preference for in-person activities to resume seem to exist simultaneously within the cohort of interviewees. Though opposing in thought, it may reflect a projected increase in acceptance towards using technology, particularly within the older adult population. A few interviewees discussed the theme of COVID-fatigue which related to increased screen time, virtual meetings, and use of other social-distance practices during the pandemic and may be a contributing factor to a more immediate preference for in-person activities or the aversion to virtual methods. Overall, a hybrid approach, where programs offer a mix of in-person and virtual engagement, may be a more ideal and sustainable

application of virtual volunteering to balance and accommodate the different preferences of volunteers and recipients.

Limitations

This study focused on the experience of RSVP volunteer programs with complementary interview data collected from non-RSVP key informants. The use of the RSVP program allowed the research team to reach a national group of volunteer programs that have both a consistency of structure across programs but also a diversity of volunteer activities represented within the sample. This diversity allowed for rich discussion of the applicability of virtual across contexts and states. However, this may limit the transferability of findings to programs will less defined and complex administrative structures. As our interviewees noted, the program sponsor, AmeriCorps, provided funding flexibility to allow sites to re-purpose transportation and other program funds to support virtual volunteering during COVID. As such, the experience of these programs may not transfer to those programs that lack a dedicated source of funding or COVID flexibility. This study included a purposive sampling of programs that had used virtual volunteering and thus the findings cannot address the barriers and challenges faced by programs that desired virtual but were not able to be fully launched or realized. Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insight into the programmatic experience of virtual volunteerism both during COVID and in the years since the onset of the pandemic and the changing landscape in volunteerism.

References

Ackermann, K., & Manatschal, A. (2018). Online volunteering as a means to overcome unequal participation? the profiles of online and offline volunteers compared. *New Media & Society*, *20*(12), 4453-4472. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818775698

Akhter-Khan, S. C., Hofmann, V., Warncke, M., Tamimi, N., Mayston, R., & Prina, M. A. (2023). Caregiving, volunteering, and loneliness in middle-aged and older adults: a systematic review, *Aging & Mental Health*, *27*(7), 1233–1245. https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2022.2144130

AmeriCorps. (n.d.). *How it works: AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP*. https://americorps.gov/partner/how-it-works/americorps-seniors-rsvp

AmeriCorps. (2023). *Volunteering and civic life in America: Research summary*. https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/volunteering-civic-life-america-research-summary.pdf

Anderson, M., & Perrin, A. (2017). *Tech adoption climbs among older adults*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/17/tech-adoption-climbs-among-older-adults/

Bruce, P., Pesut, B., Dunlop, R., Puurveen, G., & Duggleby, W. (2021). (Dis)connecting through COVID-19: Experiences of older persons in the context of a volunteer-client relationship. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, *40*(4), 570–580. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980821000404

Cao, Q., Dabelk-Schoeny, H., White, K., Maleku., & Sheldon, M. (2021). I wanna help, but my hands can be a little tied: The challenges and benefits of formal volunteering among low-

income diverse older adults. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 64*(4) 388-404.

> https://doi.org/0.1080/01634372.2021.1897723

Cho, J., Kim, B., Jeon, J., & Park, S. (2020). Perceived usefulness and easiness of information

> and communication technologies and volunteering among older adults. Journal of

> *Gerontological Social Work*, *63*(5), 428-446.

> https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2020.1760992

Cravens, J. (2000). Virtual volunteering: Online volunteers providing assistance to human

> service agencies. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, *17*(2-3), 119-136.

> https://doi.org/10.1300/J017v17n02_02

Cravens, J., & Ellis, S. J. (2014). *The last virtual volunteering guidebook*. Energize, Inc.

> https://www.energizeinc.com/store/virtual_volunteering_guidebook

Crittenden, J. A. (2018). Volunteering as a strategy for combating social isolation. In L. W.

> Kaye, & C. Singer (Eds.), *Social isolation of older adults: Strategies to bolster health*

> *and well-being* (pp. 119–134). Springer Publisher Company.

Faverio, M. (2022). *Share of those 65 and older who are tech users has grown in the past*

> *decade*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/01/13/share-

> of-those-65-and-older-who-are-tech-users-has-grown-in-the-past- decade/

Filsinger, M., Ackermann, K., & Freitag, M. (2020). Surfing to help? An empirical analysis of

> internet use and volunteering in 27 European societies. *European Societies*, *22*(3), 368-

> 389. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2019.1663895

Filsinger, M., & Freitag, M. (2019). Internet use and volunteering: Relationships and differences

> across age and applications. *Voluntas, 30*(1), 87-97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-

> 0045-4

Francis, J., Kadylak, T., Makki, T. W., Rikard, R. V., & Cotten, S. R. (2018). Catalyst to connection: When technical difficulties lead to social support for older adults. *The American Behavioral Scientist, 62*(9), 1167-1185. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218773829

Gil-Lacruz, M., Saz-Gil, M. I., & Gil-Lacruz, A. I. (2019). Benefits of older volunteering on wellbeing: An international comparison. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, 2647-2647. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02647

Grinshteyn, E. G., & Sugar, J. A. (2021). Active aging through volunteerism: A longitudinal assessment of perceived neighborhood safety as a predictor among older adults, 2008-2018. *BioMed Research International, 2021*, 5185264-13. https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/5185264

Haase, K. R., Cosco, T., Kervin, L., Riadi, I., & O'Connell M. E. (2021). Older adults' experiences with using technology for socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional survey study. *JMIR Aging*, *4*(2), e28010. https://doi.org/10.2196/28010

Holeva, V., Parlapani, E., Nikopoulou, V. A., Kostikidou, S., & Diakogiannis, I. (2022). Hesitancy to return to the pre-pandemic routine. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, *40*(1), 23-39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-021-00396-1

Hsu, H., Chen, K., & Belcastro, F. (2023). Types of voluntary work and influence of participation for older volunteers: A systematic review of qualitative studies. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, (ahead of print), 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2023.2205908

Ihm, J. (2017). Classifying and relating different types of online and offline volunteering. *Voluntas*, *28*, 400–419. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9826-9

JBS International. (2019). *A systematic review of Senior Corps' impact on volunteers and program beneficiaries*. https://americorps.gov

Kulik, L. (2021). Multifaceted volunteering: The volunteering experience in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in light of volunteering styles. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *21*(1) 1222-1242. https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12284

Kung, C. S. J., & Steptoe, A. (2022). Internet use and psychological wellbeing among older adults in England: A difference-in-differences analysis over the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Medicine*, 1-3. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291722003208

Lachance, E. L. (2021). COVID-19 and its impact on volunteering: Moving towards virtual volunteering. *Leisure Sciences*, *43*(1-2), 104-110. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1773990

Li, W., Ornstein, K. A., Li, Y., & Liu, B. (2021). Barriers to learning a new technology to go online among older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, *69*(11), 3051-3057. https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.17433

McHugh, M. L. (2012). Interrater reliability: The kappa statistic. *Biochemia Medica*, *22(*3), 276–282. https://doi.org/10.11613/bm.2012.031

Mubarak, F., & Suomi, R. (2022). Elderly forgotten? digital exclusion in the information age and the rising grey digital divide. *Inquiry, 59*, 469580221096272-469580221096272. https://doi.org/10.1177/00469580221096272

Mueller, A. L., McNamara, M. S., & Sinclair, D. A. (2020). Why does COVID-19 disproportionately affect older people? *Aging*, *12*(10), 9959-9981. https://doi.org/10.18632/aging.103344

Mukherjee, D. (2010). An exploratory study of older adults' engagement with virtual

    volunteerism. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, *28*(3), 188-196.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15228835.2010.508368

Murray, V., & Harrison, Y. 2005. Virtual volunteering. In J. Brudney (Ed.), *Emerging areas of*

    volunteering ARNOVA Occasional Series Volume 1 (pp. 30-48). Association for

    Researchers in Nonprofit and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA).

Nimrod, G. (2020). Changes in internet use when coping with stress: Older adults during the

    COVID-19 pandemic. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, *28*(10), 1020-1024.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2020.07.010

Older Adults Technology Service (OATS). (2021). *Aging connected: Exposing the hidden*

    connectivity crisis for older adults. https://oats.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Aging-

    Connected_Exposing-the-Hidden-Connectivity-Crisis-for-Older-Adults.pdf

Peña-López, I. (2007). Online volunteers: Knowledge managers in nonprofits. *The Journal of*

    Information Technology in Social Change, (1), 142-159.

    https://openaccess.uoc.edu/bitstream/10609/1307/4/Pena_JITSC2007_Online.pdf

Piatak, J., Dietz, N., & McKeever, B. (2019). Bridging or deepening the digital divide: Influence

    of household internet access on formal and informal volunteering. *Nonprofit and*

    Voluntary Sector Quarterly, *48*(2), 123-150. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764018794907

Pickell, Z., Gu, K., & Williams, A. M. (2020). Virtual volunteers: The importance of

    restructuring medical volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Medical Humanities*,

    46(4), 537-540. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2020-011956

Piette, J., Solway, E., Singer, D., Kirch, M., Kullgren, J., & Malani, P. (2020). *Loneliness among*

    older adults before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. University of Michigan

National Poll on Healthy Aging. https://www.healthyagingpoll.org/reports-more/report/loneliness-among-older-adults-and-during-covid-19-pandemic

Saunders, C. H., Sierpe, A., von Plessen, C., Kennedy, A. M., Leviton, L. C., Bernstein, S. L., Goldwag, J., King, J. R., Marx, C. M., Pogue, J. A., Saunders, R. K., Van Citters, A., Yen, R. W., Elwyn, G., Leyenaar, J. K., Acquilano, S. C., Doherty, J., Forcino, R. C., Foster, T., . . . Coproduction Laboratory. (2023). Practical thematic analysis: A guide for multidisciplinary health services research teams engaging in qualitative analysis. *BMJ (Online), 381*, e074256-e074256. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2022-074256

Sellon, A. M. (2021). The importance of meaningful participation: Health benefits of volunteerism for older adults with mobility-limiting disabilities. *Ageing and Society*,*43*(3) 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21000842

Sun, P. C., Morrow-Howell, N., Pawloski, E., & Helbach, A. (2021). Older adults' attitudes toward virtual volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *40*(9), 953-957. https://doi.org/10.1177/07334648211006978

Szabo, A., Allen, J., Stephens, C., & Alpass, F. (2019). Longitudinal analysis of the relationship between purposes of internet use and well-being among older adults. *The Gerontologist*, *59*(1), 58-68. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny036

Volunteer Canada. (2020). *Virtual volunteering*. https://volunteer.ca/index.php?MenuItemID=419

Xie, B., Charness, N., Fingerman, K., Kaye, J., Kim, M. T., & Khurshid, A. (2020). When going digital becomes a necessity: Ensuring older adults' needs for information, services, and social inclusion during COVID-19. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, *32*(4-5), 460-470. https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1771237

Zapletal, A., Wells, T., Russell, E., & Skinner, M. W. (2023). On the triple exclusion of older

     adults during COVID-19: Technology, digital literacy, and social isolation. *Social*

     Sciences & Humanities Open, *8*(1), 100511. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100511

Appendix Document List

- Key Informant Acknowledgements

- RSVP Program Profile Form for Interview Participants

- Interview Question Sets for RSVP Staff and Key Informants

Key Informant Acknowledgements*

The research team wishes to acknowledge AmeriCorps Seniors and AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation for assistance with accessing RSVP programs and key informants. In addition, the following organizations and programs are acknowledged for their contribution to this work as either a key informant interviewee or as a person/organization that helped us connect with potential interviewees:

<u>RSVP Organizations & AmeriCorps Seniors Service Region Represented</u>

Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc.- Midwest

Asian American Center of Frederick - Mid Atlantic

Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan – Midwest

Community Service Society of New York - Northeast

Community Teamwork - Northeast

Community Volunteer Network - West

Five County Area Agency on Aging - Mountain

Fox Cities Volunteering - North Central

Greater Cleveland Volunteers – Midwest

Lifespan of Greater Rochester, Inc. - Northeast

Literacy New Jersey - Mid Atlantic

Megiddo Dream Station - Southeast

Montgomery County - Mid Atlantic

New Hanover County RSVP - Southeast

Solid Ground - West

United Way EUP – Midwest

University of Maine RSVP Program -Northeast

Additional Key Informant Organizations/Programs

AARP Experience Corps

Adisa

Administration for Community Living

American Red Cross

CoGenerate

Connecticut Tech Act Project

Cyber-Seniors

Extension Foundation

Gateway Community Action Partnership Foster Grandparent Program

GetSetUp

Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging, Washington University

National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes at Northwestern University

Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)

Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging

VQ Volunteer Strategies

*Note: Individual excerpts in this report have been de-identified to maintain individual participant confidentiality.

RSVP Interviewee Profile Form

Thank you for your participation in this research project! We are contacting RSVP programs across the nation. To better understand our interviewees and the wide range of RSVP programs, we have a short survey for you to complete. Thank you again for your time and participation.

For the purposes of this research, we are defining virtual volunteering as volunteer work that is undertaken using telephone and/or internet-based technologies. Virtual volunteering includes activities and job assignments that can be conducted completely off-site or can be used part of the time to supplement on-site and face-to-face volunteering.

Your Name:

Title:

Your contact information:

      Phone including area code:

      E-mail:

      Name of your RSVP program:

How long have you been with RSVP, including your current role and any prior roles you have had? (fill in) _____years

How long has your RSVP program been in operation? (fill in) _____years

Approximately how many volunteers do you serve annually through your RSVP program? (fill in)_____ volunteers

Of those volunteers, roughly what percentage completed at least part of their volunteer work virtually (in online spaces or with internet-based technology)?

- 25% or less
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- 76-100%

Approximately how many individual volunteer sites (or stations) does your program host?

(fill in) _____ sites

How many individual virtual volunteer opportunities do you currently offer? Please check one.

- 0-5

- 6-10

- 11-15

- 16-20

- 20+

What are the primary geographic area(s) that your agency serves? Please check all that apply.

- Rural

- Suburban

- Metropolitan area(s)

- Other (please specify):_____

What type of organization or agency do you represent? (please check one)

- Private non-profit

- DHHS or government-based

- Area Agency on Aging

- University or college affiliated

- For-profit

- Other (please specify):_____

What state are you located in (Drop down box of state options provided)?

Which RSVP program areas does your program address? (check all that apply)

- Disaster services

- Economic opportunity

- Education

- Environmental Stewardship

- Healthy futures

- Veterans and military families

- Community priorities (Please briefly specify): _____

Is there anything else you would like to share about your RSVP program?

Questions for RSVP Directors & Key Informants Currently Overseeing Volunteers

For the purposes of this interview, we define virtual volunteering as volunteer work that is undertaken using internet-based technologies. Virtual volunteering includes activities and job assignments that can be conducted completely off-site or can be used part of the time to supplement on-site and face-to-face volunteering.

General Questions

1. RSVP: Who is the target audience of your organization's mission?

   a. ALTERNATE: What are the focus areas for your RSVP program?

   Non- RSVP: If you oversee partner organizations or volunteer sites, how many does

   your organization oversee?

   b. How many volunteers total?

   c. Of those, what percentage of your volunteer force is made up of those who participate

   in virtual volunteering.

2. What is your organization's experience with virtual volunteering?

   a. How does the work you do intersect with virtual volunteering?

   b. How long has virtual volunteering been utilized within the organization?

   c. [If offered pre-covid] How has covid impacted virtual volunteering at your

   organization?

   d. How has covid impacted in-person volunteering at your organization?

3. How has covid impacted in-person and virtual volunteering at your organization?

   a. Are there any new roles or emerging needs that have arisen at your

   organization?

   b. Are there new populations served?

Volunteer Management

4. How does your organization recruit older adults for virtual volunteering?

      a. Is it different from how you would recruit in-person volunteers?

5. Please describe your ideal older virtual volunteer.

      a. Do they have any particular skills or background?

6. How does your organization match volunteers with virtual roles?

7. What kind of training and support do you provide virtual volunteers?

8. What benefits does virtual volunteering bring to the volunteer as compared to a more traditional on-site volunteer model?

9. Does your organization measure virtual volunteering outcomes? If so, what improvements or benefits does your organization's virtual volunteering program have on organizations or individuals served?

10. Does your organization offer virtual volunteers any type of incentives, recognition, or appreciation items or events? If so, what does your organization do for virtual volunteers?

Challenges & Barriers

11. What types of challenges does virtual volunteering bring about that may be different from traditional volunteering?

12. Are there volunteer jobs that don't lend themselves to virtual volunteering or that you've seen other organizations unable to make virtual?

13. Do your virtual volunteers engage with your organization in-person?

14. What barriers to volunteer recruitment in your organization's programs do you see? How does virtual volunteering contribute or address these barriers?

Technology

15. What type of technology is needed for your virtual volunteer opportunities?

16. Who is responsible for providing that technology and how is the cost for that technology covered?

17. Do you have any partnerships you'd like to highlight around technology?

18. Are there forms of technology including applications/programs and/or devices, that you have found to be more accessible to older adults?

19. How do see equity issues playing out in regards to access and usage of technology?

Forecasting

20. What role do you see virtual volunteering opportunities playing in the future within your organization?

    a. Are there volunteer roles you would like to expand or augment with virtual volunteering strategies?

21. What advice or lessons learned would you give to another organization looking to develop and maintain a virtual volunteering program over the long term?

22. What is one surprising experience you've had doing virtual volunteering?

23. Any additional thoughts about virtual volunteering that you want to make sure we capture?

24. Who else would you recommend we interview about virtual volunteering strategies among older adults? Would you be willing to provide an e-introduction?

Questions for Thought Leaders/Experts in Volunteering Who Do Not Have Direct Involvement in Volunteer Programming

For the purposes of this interview, we define virtual volunteering as volunteer work that is undertaken using internet-based technologies. Virtual volunteering includes activities and job assignments that can be conducted completely off-site or can be used part of the time to supplement on-site and face-to-face volunteering.

General

1. What is your organization's mission?

2. What services are provided or activities completed to reach that mission?

3. Who do you serve (other organizations, older adults directly, volunteer managers, etc.)

4. What is your organization's experience with the topic of virtual volunteering?

Volunteer Management

5. What are some successful models of virtual volunteering that you have seen in the field?

    a. What factors make a virtual volunteer opportunity successful?

6. Have you seen models in the field that you would consider to be less successful? How

so?

7. In your opinion, what improvements or benefits does virtual volunteering have on

organizations or individuals served?

8. How has covid impacted in-person and virtual volunteering in the field?

    a. Are there new volunteer opportunities that were created because of an increased

    or new need? Please provide examples.

9. What are some best practices that you have seen for recruiting and matching older

adults for virtual volunteering?

    a. Is it different from how organizations might for in-person volunteers?

10. In your opinion, as you think about the volunteers who engage with your virtual

volunteering programming, what draws volunteers to this type of opportunity?

11. What kind of training and support should be provided to virtual volunteers?

12. What barriers to volunteer recruitment do you see broadly in the field? How does virtual volunteering contribute or address these barriers?

13. What benefits does virtual volunteering bring to the volunteer as compared to a more traditional on-site volunteer model?

14. Do you have some thoughts on virtual volunteering retention? (incentives, recognition, or appreciation items or events?)

15. What types of challenges does virtual volunteering bring about that may be different from traditional volunteering?

Technology

16. What type of technology might be needed for successful virtual volunteer opportunities with older adults?

17. Who should be responsible for providing that technology and how might the cost for that technology be covered?

18. Are you aware of any innovative models or examples of technology partnerships you'd like to highlight in this area?

     a. Prompt: Are there specific organizations that can be called upon to assist with virtual volunteer opportunities?

     b. Are there any training resources or programs to assist older adults with technology?

19. What do you see as barriers to older adults, or volunteers in general in using technology, broadly defined?

a. How can those barriers be overcome?

b. How do see equity issues playing out in regards to access and usage of technology?

<u>Forecasting</u>

20. What role do you see virtual volunteering opportunities playing in the future? Do you see the interest for this type of volunteering increasing or decreasing?

21. What advice would you give to another organization looking to develop and maintain a virtual volunteering program over the long term?

22. Who else would you recommend we interview about virtual volunteering strategies and/or technology use among older adults? Would you be willing to provide an e-introduction?

Questions for Thought Leaders/Experts in Technology Who Do Not Have Direct Involvement in Volunteer Programming

For the purposes of this interview, we define virtual volunteering as volunteer work that is undertaken using internet-based technologies. Virtual volunteering includes activities and job assignments that can be conducted completely off-site or can be used part of the time to supplement on-site and face-to-face volunteering.

General

1. What is your organization's mission?

   a. What services are provided or activities completed to reach that mission?

2. How would you describe the target group(s) served by your organization? For example,

do you serve other organizations, older adults directly, volunteer managers, etc.

3. What is your organization's experience with the topic of virtual volunteering?

Volunteer Management & Training

4. What are some successful models of virtual volunteering that you have seen in the field?

   a. Are there specific volunteer job roles you have seen?

   b. What factors might make a virtual volunteer opportunity successful?

5. Have you seen models or practices related to virtual volunteerism in the field that you

would consider to be less successful? How so?

6. What types of challenges does virtual volunteering bring about that may be different from

traditional volunteering?

7. In terms of onboarding and training volunteers, what special considerations need to be

addressed when onboarding older virtual volunteers?

   a. Are there any training resources or programs to assist older adults with

   technology?

Technology

8. What type of technology might be needed for successful virtual volunteer opportunities?

9. Who should be responsible for providing that technology and how might the cost of that technology be covered?

10. Are you aware of any innovative models or examples of technology partnerships you'd like to highlight in this area?

11. What do you see as barriers to older adults, or volunteers in general, in using technology, broadly defined?

    a. Are there forms of technology including applications/programs and/or devices, that you have found to be more accessible to older adults?

    b. How do see equity issues playing out in regard to access and usage of technology?

    c. How can those barriers be overcome?

12. What role do you see virtual volunteering opportunities playing in the future? Do you see the interest for this type of volunteering increasing or decreasing?

13. What advice would you give to another organization looking to develop and maintain a virtual volunteering program over the long term?

14. Who else would you recommend we interview about virtual volunteering strategies and/or technology use among older adults? Would you be willing to provide an e-introduction?