University of Maine

The Future of Virtual Volunteerism Among Older Adults in a Post-Pandemic World: Is the Volunteer Sector Ready?

What is the background for this study?

This study explores the opportunities and challenges of virtual volunteering (VV) strategies that developed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic from both volunteer and host program/site perspectives. It aims to promote a better understanding of the future of VV as well as how to bridge gaps in accessibility for older adult volunteers.

What are the research questions?

The project examines both volunteer and program-level experiences with virtual volunteering.

Programmatic perspective questions include:

1. How and to what extent are volunteer sites engaged in VV? Which of these were offered pre-COVID?
2. What are the types of job assignments, and which host sites lend themselves to VV?
3. What are the challenges at the host site level in developing and deploying VV?
4. What attracts volunteers to these opportunities, and what factors might lead them away from VV?
5. What resources can be brought to bear to encourage VV?

Volunteer perspective questions include:

1. What are the perceived challenges and opportunities inherent in VV assignments?
2. What are the benefits of VV from the volunteer perspective?
3. What is the participation gap between those volunteers who desire VV and those who can access those opportunities? What are the perceived solutions to bridging this participation gap?

What data and methods are used in this study?

The study involves collection and analysis of survey and interview data. Firstly, the researchers send Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) program directors a descriptive program profile survey via Qualtrics prior to each interview to understand the virtual volunteerism environment. The survey aims to identify the extent to which program sites use VV opportunities, the types of in-person activities that successfully transitioned to online platforms, and whether those strategies existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. The sampling frame is developed with the help of AmeriCorps staff and contractors and includes program director contacts for all RSVP programs currently operating. Analyses include descriptive statistics for program profiling data, thematic

Study At-A-Glance
Study Title
The Future of Virtual Volunteerism Among Older Adults in a Post-Pandemic World: Is the Volunteer Sector Ready?
Researchers
Jennifer Crittenden, PhD
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Timeline 2022–2025
Study Location Orono, Maine
Study Topic Area(s)
Health and Social Wellbeing
Older Adult Civic Engagement
Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service

content analysis, and inductive coding.

Study researchers then recruit one group of interviewees consisting of RSVP program directors and volunteer management staff throughout the US, the primary focus of the study, and a second group consisting of key informants representing thought leaders, technology leaders, program managers, and volunteer coordinators with expertise on topics related to VV and technology. Researchers separate programs by AmeriCorps region and issue invites to ensure representation from programs across the country. Following the semi-structured interviews, the researchers transcribe, review, and code the interview text using an iterative process and multiple coders.

To complement interview findings, this study also includes a broader survey of all RSVP program directors across all AmeriCorps Seniors service regions to understand current engagement with VV across RSVP sites and the potential opportunities for such volunteer placements into the future. Finally, the researchers conduct a second survey of RSVP program volunteers to identify opportunities, challenges, and access gaps. The researchers develop the sampling frame in consultation with AmeriCorps and recruit survey participants in partnership with local sites.

What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

Because VV provides access to volunteerism for a growing population of older adults, the study's findings can help identify drivers or barriers to participation for those who may be interested. The findings can be used by organizations to understand how to connect potential volunteers with opportunities and make volunteering more accessible.

For more information on the study:				
Study Website	https://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/vvstudy/			
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