Volunteer Generation Fund Evaluation: ServeMN

BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

The Minnesota state service commission, the Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service (ServeMN) with partner Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement (MAVA), participated in the AmeriCorps Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) evaluation through several different phases, including focus groups/interviews with commission staff, program implementers, program beneficiaries; and a program beneficiaries survey.[1,2] In addition to the evaluation data collection activities noted, the following case study brief incorporates additional data sources from VGF grant applications and progress reports and longitudinal data from the AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement. Exhibit 1 provides an overview of each of the data sources that were used to inform the following brief.

---

[1] The VGF grantee, ServeMN, partnered with MAVA who served as the primary program implementer for VGF programming and services.

[2] For the Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey, the state service commission had a 9 percent response rate with a total of 78 individual respondents representing 63 unique organizations. Across survey participants, there was substantial variation in reported average number of volunteers; 8 percent reported fewer than 10 volunteers; 8 percent reported 10–20 volunteers; 10 percent reported 21–30 volunteers; 13 percent reported 31–50 volunteers; 25 percent reported 51–100 volunteers; and 38 percent reported 100 or more volunteers.

EXHIBIT 1.—Overview of data sources

Data Source	Participant Count	Date Collected
Grant Application	–	May 2020
Fiscal Year (FY)2020, FY2021, and FY2022 Volunteer Generation Fund Progress Reports	–	December 2020, and 2021, November 2022
AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplements	–	September 2017, 2019, and 2021
Project Director Focus Group – MAVA	2	February 2022
Project Director Focus Group – ServeMN	1	February 2022
Program Implementer Focus Group – ServeMN and MAVA	5	September 2022
Beneficiary Focus Group – Volunteer Connector Grant Recipients	3	September 2022
Beneficiary Focus Group – Training Recipients	4	September 2022
Volunteer Focus Group	3	September 2022
Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey	78	January 2022
Final Commission Focus Group – MAVA	1	May 2023
Volunteer Impact Leadership Training (VILT) Overview	–	March 2022

Overview of Grant Structure and Goals

ServeMN is a nonprofit commission (not housed within the governor's office or a government entity). The Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement (MAVA) is a key VGF program partner and Service Enterprise Hub. To this end, ServeMN is primarily the funding entity/organization while MAVA is the primary implementer of VGF-related training and activities. They began working together in 2014 to integrate Service Enterprise into services and have been partners since. As a ServeMN representative said:

> [T]he way that we [ServeMN] administer VGF is to partner with a solid partner like MAVA who has the capabilities to really amplify that great work to deliver a multitude of trainings … that's where the skill set lies. [We are] more [focused on] compliance and working on the NSSC [National Science and Service Collaborative] and budgets. [We] don't get to do as much fun stuff, but [we] do get to hear all about it and celebrate it!

ServeMN is working with MAVA to continue to expand Service Enterprise to Minnesota organizations. Their grant application notes the use of new virtual Service Enterprise modules to expand to rural areas of Minnesota. As their application notes, "[In] the coming year, 200 organizations will be trained; increasing their capacity to recruit, connect and retain 40,000 volunteers who will contribute 500,000 service hours. Combining community and skills-based volunteer efforts, this project will result in an estimated value of over $14 million."

ServeMN's VGF grant application identifies three primary interventions to support volunteer management training and capacity building:

1. **Tiered training**. In this grant cycle, MAVA has developed a set of tiered trainings to make volunteer capacity training more accessible to more people. Both those new to the field "and experienced

volunteer engagement professionals" can participate in the Volunteer Impact Leadership Training (VILT) series, which provides a basic foundation of volunteer management practices. This training is targeted to individual volunteer managers and is intended, in part, to be portable and usable for individuals even if they may move to other organizations. Whole organizations, by contrast, can participate in Service Enterprise training, a popular model across multiple states. This training series is much more intense and involves much deeper and lengthier participation from whole organizations, the goal of which is organization change management, as opposed to individual upskilling for staff members. Additionally, between these two trainings, MAVA has developed a series of "pipeline" trainings meant to bridge the gap in needs—for example, for organizations that have trained staff but are currently unwilling or unable to commit to Service Enterprise.

> **A Note on Program Beneficiaries**
>
> In the context of this case study, "program beneficiaries" include volunteer organizations and volunteer connector organizations that took part in MAVA's initiatives, including the Volunteer Impact Leadership Training series, Service Enterprise program, connector innovation grants, topic-specific and tiered trainings, and conferences.

2. **Topic-based training and annual conferences.** MAVA's staff works with volunteers serving on its Professional Development Committee to create individual topic-based trainings based on data from their annual membership survey and feedback on new developments members see emerging in the field. This includes topics such as engaging volunteers with disabilities. MAVA also has an annual conference attended by 300 volunteer engagement professionals—often reporting it as the only professional conference they attend each year. In 2020, MAVA added an additional annual conference focused on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion to its calendar; this virtual conference provides learning and networking opportunities aimed at dismantling inequity in volunteerism.

3. **Connector innovation grants.** ServeMN and MAVA award 2–3 grants to volunteer connector organizations across greater Minnesota to "[e]nable connectors to work with community organizations to increase numbers of volunteers connected in their communities, and implement new methods to recruit volunteers for solving critical problems."

MAVA describes the target for VILT training as "… people new to providing leadership to volunteers and those who have been in the field for many years and wish to increase their knowledge," though most participants are typically those new to the field or to the role of managing volunteers generally. VILT training consists of eight modules:

- Capturing Volunteer Motivation and Conducting Effective Interviews
- Designing Volunteer Positions
- Managing Risk
- Recruiting Volunteers
- Supervising Volunteers
- Positioning Your Volunteer Program for Success
- Singing Your Praises … Measuring Your Impact
- Recognizing and Retaining Volunteers

Following the completion of all eight modules, participants receive a Certificate in Volunteer Impact Leadership from MAVA.

"Pipeline" trainings, or those for groups between VILT and Service Enterprise, are wide ranging in topics. Many topics are developed by MAVA's Professional Development committee, a group made up of participants responsible for bringing up needs they hear from their peers. These trainings have included:

- Cutting Edge Strategies: Engaging Volunteers in the New Year – A 2 hour workshop in January 2023 about how to make programs innovative and become more adaptable
- Now What? – A similar workshop based on survey feedback based on new research and recommendations from post-pandemic volunteerism
- Interrupting Racism in Mostly White Communities
- No One Right Way – About trending away from commonly understood best practices in volunteerism if they may promote white supremacy
- Gaining staff buy-in for engaging volunteers
- Engaging volunteers in skills-based and higher responsibility roles

Finally, MAVA heavily and individually recruits Service Enterprise organizational participants as well as setting up information sessions and sharing application information on their website. Many organizations are recruited from the previous VILT trainings and topical trainings; messaging to these organizations is focused on "taking the next step" with their volunteer engagement. "The organizations that do well with [Service Enterprise] are those that have a fairly strong volunteer engagement component and we tend to know a lot of those organizations already because of our work with them …" one MAVA member said. "We wouldn't want somebody that just has a new volunteer coordinator or is just starting a program." This broad recruitment is followed by a vetting process, which ensures organizations are ready for the financial and time commitment from their teams as the training, coaching and certification process lasts an entire year. Vetting also ensures organizations that participate already have a fairly strong volunteer engagement component, with readiness and buy-in from leadership and volunteer coordinators having a good deal of experience.

Service Enterprise cohorts typically consist of 3–6 organizations. Each organization receives a diagnostic evaluation conducted by MAVA to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, followed by 16 total hours of training and 10 hours of individualized coaching focused on developing an action plan for organizational change and improvement aimed at demonstrating that the organization has met the criteria to be considered a Service Enterprise organization.

MAVA's target number of organizations to serve annually through training and conferences is 200, though they usually exceed that goal. In 2022 they served 366 organizations and in 2023, halfway through their grant year, they had served 194. Beyond just measuring how many organizations they serve, MAVA also has a goal of administering more significant data collection with160 organizations annually to measure if capacity has been built; 108 have been surveyed so far, a number they generally push up by requiring VILT training participants to take pre- and post-tests in order to receive their certificate.

Many types of organizations participate in MAVA trainings:

- Multiservice organization
- Mentorship organizations
- Girl Scouts of the USA staff
- Healthcare organizations
- Basic needs organizations addressing food insecurity, homelessness, housing, and transportation
- Museums and fine arts organizations
- VISTA members
- Governmental groups such as libraries, cities, county park systems, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
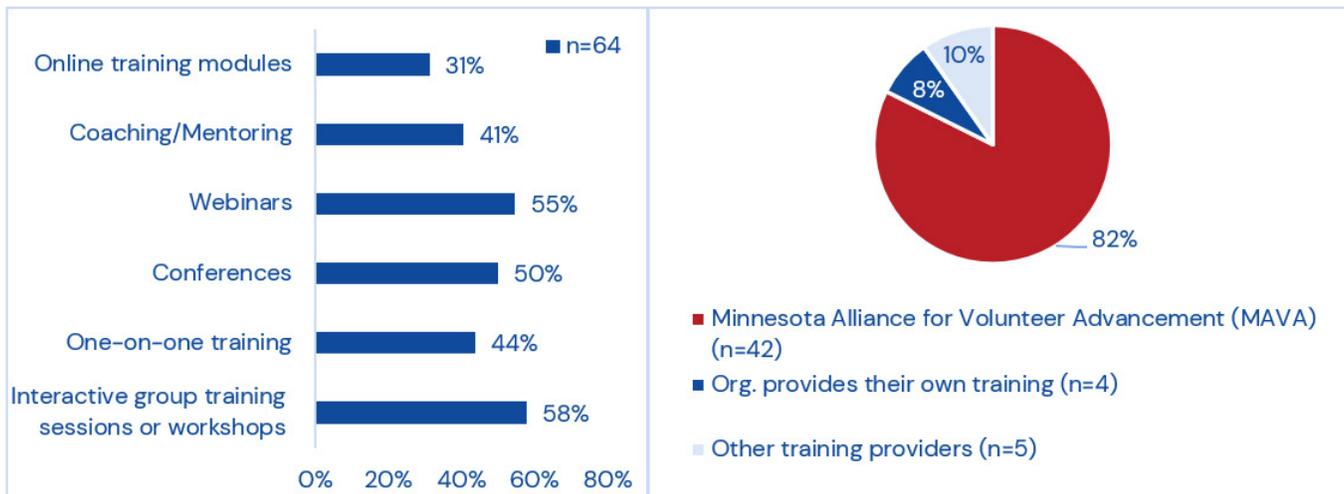
- Veteran service organizations

Additionally, MAVA has seen an increase in training participants from people outside of Minnesota during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. One MAVA staff member said:

> *One of the things that we've seen since the pandemic is that because we have services available virtually anywhere, maybe from 15 to 20 percent of the folks at a lot of trainings are from beyond Minnesota. … [Additionally], we have a lot of AmeriCorps members that come to our training. For some reason, we have fans in Wyoming and Montana [in particular], so we're seeing a lot of their AmeriCorps members show up in our VILT training or our entry-level trainings.*

In terms of levels of participation, beneficiaries reported a variety of activities and trainings in which they had taken part. Most reported participating in the VILT training as well as regional one-off trainings, webinars, and multiday conferences. Some attended MAVA trainings as often as once a month. A few also reported participating in Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and white allies affinity groups and professional development networking sessions. Multiple also were Service Enterprise-certified or in the process of achieving certification.

Based on the survey data from training participants, the most frequently reported volunteer training and capacity building activities were interactive group training sessions or workshops, webinars, and coaching/mentoring, with the majority (82 percent) of reported training provided by MAVA. Exhibit 2 provides additional details on the types of activities respondents noted were available to their organization through VGF grant activities.
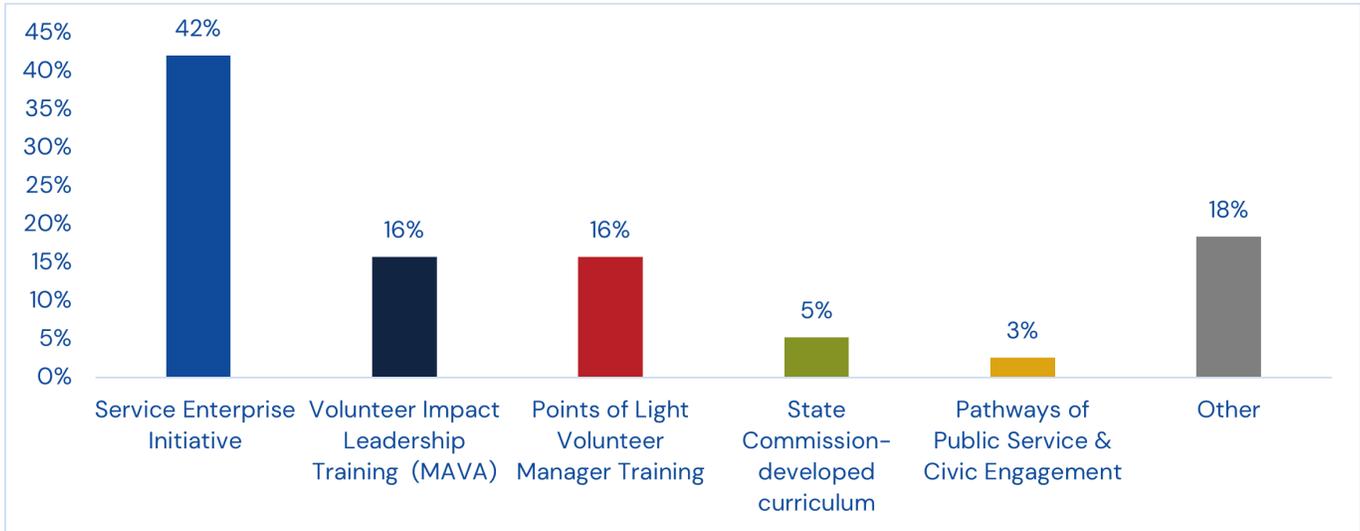
EXHIBIT 2.—Volunteer training and capacity building activities and providers

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey administered in January 2023.

In January 2023, MAVA training participants participated in a Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey. As seen in exhibit 3, three-quarters (75 percent) of the survey respondents reported they participated in training that utilized the Service Enterprise curriculum and 18 percent reported participating in a training that used the Points of Light Volunteer Manager Training. A few participants also reported they participated in other training curriculums, noting miscellaneous professional development offerings and Volunteer Management Training series recorded sessions.
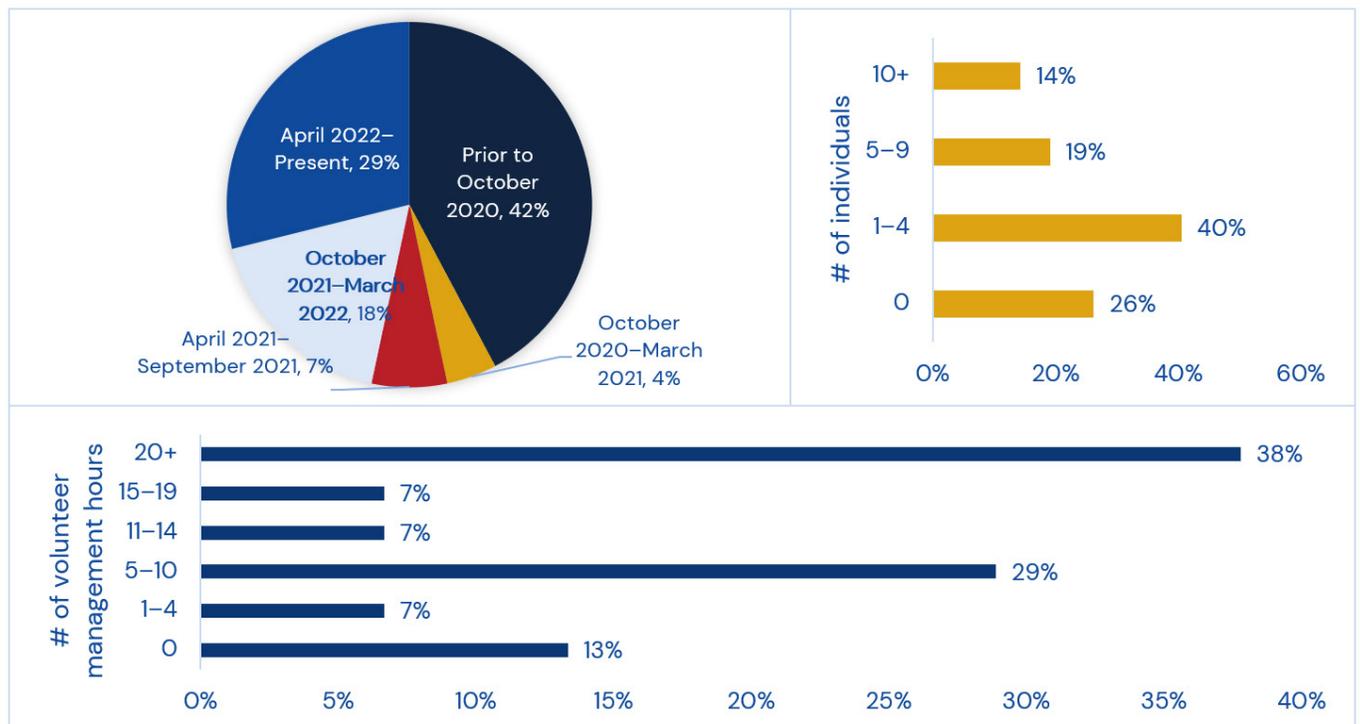
EXHIBIT 3.—Types of curriculum used (n=38)

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey administered in January 2023.

The time in which survey respondents reported first participating in a MAVA training varied; 42 percent of respondents noted their organization first participated prior to October 2020, while 29 percent noted they did not first participate until more recently (April 2022–Present). Since October 2020, the plurality (40 percent) of survey respondents noted that 1–4 individuals from their organization participated in a training or capacity building activity through VGF and 26 percent noted no individuals participated. Over a third (37 percent) of respondents participated in 20 or more volunteer management hours. Exhibit 4 provides an overview of the time frame in which participating organizations reported they first participated in training and the range of individuals who participated.
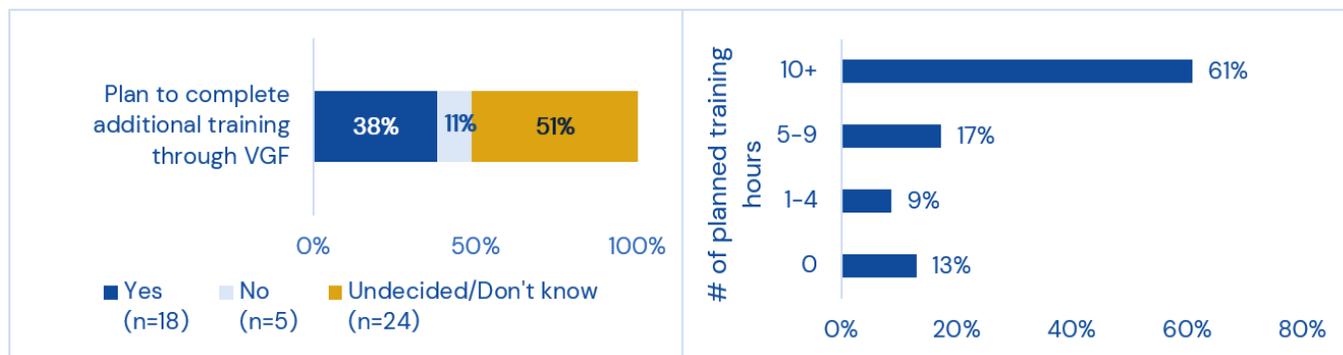
EXHIBIT 4—Organization's participation time frame, range, and number of hours (n=45)

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey administered in January 2023.

As grant programming continued following the data collection, survey participants were also asked to report on the organization's plans for additional training. Exhibit 5 displays the percentage of participants who reported they intended to complete additional training through VGF-funded activities, with 38 percent noting *Yes* and 51 percent noting they were *Undecided*. The majority of survey respondents indicated they planned to complete 10 or more hours (61 percent).

EXHIBIT 5.—Organizational plans for additional training and planned hours

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey administered in January 2023.

Recent Volunteerism Trends in Minnesota and Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the 2021 AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement, more than 1.5 million residents volunteered through an organization, contributing $3.5 billion in economic value. In 2021, 35.5 percent of residents formally volunteered through an organization. This was 12.3 percentage points higher than the national rate of 23.2 percent, but also 4.6 percentage points lower than Minnesota's pre-pandemic rate of 40.1 percent in 2019, and 9.6 percentage points lower than its 2017 rate of 45.5 percent.

Both program implementers and beneficiaries noticed large shifts in approach after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to its 2020 program implementation update report to AmeriCorps, MAVA cited responding to COVID-19 as its primary focus during this first grant year. MAVA employees reported a number of changes in how and to whom training was offered, including a comprehensive shift to web-based programming using platforms such as Zoom. Over 100 people registered for a webinar early in the pandemic entitled Options for Keeping Volunteers Engaged and Reconnecting with Volunteers. Recognizing this large interest, MAVA undertook field research to understand how the pandemic had been altering volunteer patterns, including conducting a survey of leaders in Minnesota and beyond about volunteer options and any reduced levels of volunteering.

MAVA noticed a shift in training participation once they transitioned to virtual offerings. The absolute number of trainings conducted increased in a virtual environment, while the sizes of groups attending training sessions tended to decrease and less interaction occurred across different organizations—though MAVA reported many organizations who remained within small groups found benefits, such as more personalized support and closer peer relationships. The format of Service Enterprise training shifted away from one 2-day long training, and became seven 2-hour long sessions, and breakout rooms became integrated in the structure of trainings to increase participation. MAVA reported cofacilitating some training through partner organizations in the past but lost some of those connections upon moving training online. Since the pandemic began, 15–20 percent of

organizations who participated in training were located outside Minnesota. Many participants in Service Enterprise also had trouble completing their certification process due to large amounts of internal staff turnover and burnout.

MAVA reported that they helped to reframe training participants' understanding about the importance of volunteer management at the height of the pandemic. Many organizations at the time, such as food pantries and homeless shelters, noticed volunteerism levels decreasing at the same time as their need for volunteers was increasing. During a Service Enterprise training session, organization representatives noted there was little use for Service Enterprise when they had so few volunteers. However, the MAVA training facilitator "[w]as really thoughtful about how 'this is actually the perfect time, because you NEED to innovate'" and consider more creative ways to keep their organizations functional with the challenges presented to them.

Program beneficiaries reported multiple ways that MAVA offered support during the pandemic within their VGF grant programs. Volunteer managers recalled MAVA organizing several online networking sessions early on during the pandemic where volunteer organizations could share COVID-19 practices and policies. This included collaborating on how to shift volunteer activities online, how to create and run Zoom rooms, identifying affordable online platforms for volunteering, and what to bring back as in-person and what to leave when restrictions were lifted. One volunteer manager recalled a particular appreciation for larger organizations in their networking group providing the language for their policies regarding COVID-19 rules for volunteers and staff. "Since our organization is so small, there were parts we had to pull up from other people. We don't have a staff person who was able to specifically look into [how to word COVID-19 safety] policies … being able to adapt somebody else's was a huge saver of time and money and resources."

Another volunteer manager who attended a VILT session on risk management, which before the pandemic would touch on topics such as how to ensure safety while using power tools, noted its content shifting toward how to figure out best practices and accessibility in volunteering during the pandemic.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Overall, both program implementers and program beneficiaries reported a strong and comprehensive effort on MAVA's part to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in their capacity building activities.

MAVA reported an effort on their part to expand DEI efforts over the past 5 years, beginning in earnest in 2017. At the time of interview, this included recruiting a DEI lead, who reported working on an initiative to recruit BIPOC-led organizations into MAVA's capacity building activities. Other specific focuses included creating and updating a series of standalone trainings under the VGF umbrella; this included Interrupting Racism in Mostly White Communities, a refined version of their earlier Racism 101 training. Beyond these specific efforts mentioned, MAVA reported continuous efforts to include diverse perspectives in their work, with one member describing their strategy as "[not] a DEI lens, it's DEI Lasix. It's not something you can take off and put on." Staff lay down vocabulary about diversity early on for participants in VILT training, and expand out from there. A recent focus for MAVA has also been on how to integrate DEI topics in communities in greater Minnesota who may not see these topics as an issue.

Program beneficiaries reported a wide variety of strategies they learned from MAVA-led programs. Training topics included Diversity in Mostly White Areas, the "hustle and grind" culture of white supremacy, simplifying language, and pronoun usage. One beneficiary rethought their interview process after participating in a MAVA training, including adjusting background checks to eliminate mandatory submission of Social Security numbers as well as simplifying language to support those with a less complex command of English. Another participant reported making several changes, including rewriting volunteer descriptions to a sixth-grade reading level, helping develop descriptions for screen readers, changing language from asking for "preferred"

pronouns to just pronouns, updating their database to include pronouns, and retooling positions to see if some might be able to waive background checks.

Strategies Used and/or Learned

Representatives from MAVA shared what they viewed as the four main needs of organizations:

Recruitment levels. Volunteerism is still rebounding from low levels during the pandemic.

Assistance with online volunteering. Many organizations tried to shift volunteering activities online, but many were still struggling to do so.

Recruiting volunteers who reflect the communities they serve. Many organizations' volunteer populations were not made up of those they served with their efforts.

Generational shifts. More elderly people shifted away from volunteering due to risks from the pandemic and their need in other areas, such as childcare.

To address these needs, MAVA worked to build the capacity of organizations through the use of a variety of strategies. Across survey respondents, there was a wide variation in the types of practices respondents noted receiving training on through the VGF grant. The most frequently reported training practices included recognition and volunteer development (26 percent) and recruiting and marketing to prospective volunteers (25 percent). Exhibit 6 provides additional details on the types of practices survey respondents reported learning about in VGF-sponsored trainings.

EXHIBIT 6.—Volunteer management practices learned about in trainings (n=26)

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

Volunteer organizations who participated in the site visit also shared strategies they learned about through trainings to increase recruitment and retention.

Volunteer recognition. Many participants recalled learning about the value of recognizing volunteers' efforts to increase retention. Methods of doing so included implementing explicit awards valuing volunteers in events and on social media and demonstrating how much money or time volunteers saved staff. Participants also learned to ask volunteers how they individually liked to be recognized. One participant said, "I thought MAVA was really good at laying out the different motivations people might have [for volunteering] and how you can have conversations around that with them, as well as a variety of appreciation strategies to fit budget, position, and motivation."

Volunteer position descriptions. Participants learned how to create position descriptions for volunteer roles to facilitate recruitment. These position descriptions would demonstrate the value for volunteers even though they don't receive compensation and guide interested volunteers to specific roles.

> *Our team is currently redoing all of our position descriptions. We had gotten rid of a few positions, so just using the example position descriptions that we were provided as part of that training. And it was great because [MAVA] had examples of what not to do. Having those to reference was very helpful. [MAVA] also explained how you want potential volunteers to see what they stand to benefit. Even though it's not a salary or pay, what do they get from this position? I think that specifically was really useful for our team as we were trying to think about why would people want volunteer with [our organization], and we put that in our new position description.*

Skills-based volunteers. Service Enterprise in particular has a focus on recruiting volunteers with specific skillsets, which participants cited learning more about through these trainings.

Regular communication. One participant recalled learning the value of regular communication with their volunteer population as a method to increase retention:

> *I learned through one of the webinars that it's okay to reach out to volunteers and be like, "Hey, we're still here!" Even if there isn't an ask of volunteers in that message, it's a "Llet's keep this relationship going." That's probably been the best recruitment and retention strategy.*
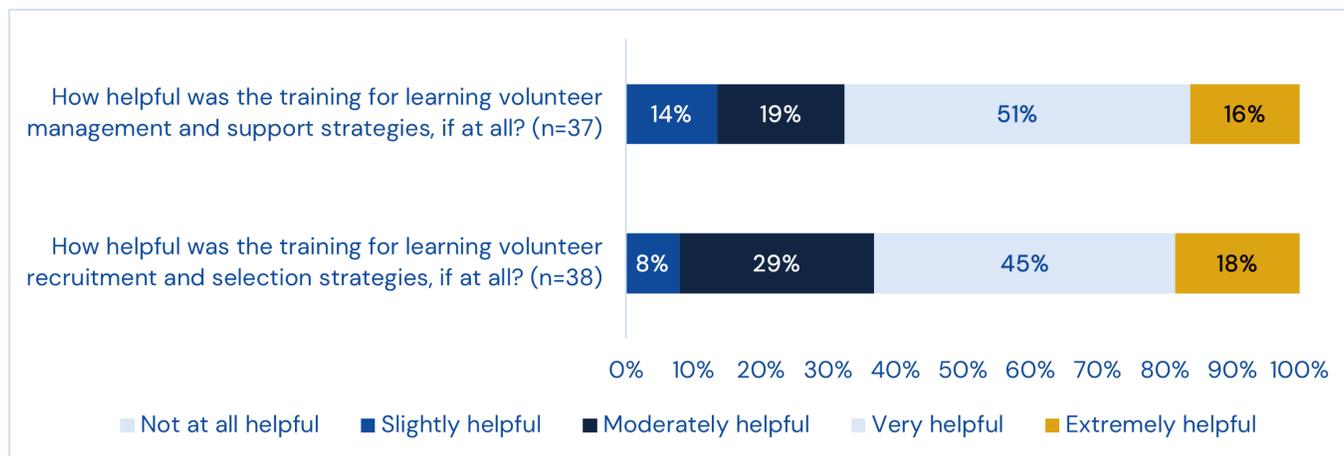
Diversifying communication methods. One participant found value in getting recruitment and other volunteerism information out to the public through a variety of methods, including online as well as in-person events such as attending recruitment fairs and setting up booths at restaurants.

Recruiting multiple generations. Participants described learning different methods to recruit Generation Z–aged volunteers as opposed to ones to recruit Millennial volunteers.

Public policy. MAVA provided strategies to help organizations participate in the political process to elevate volunteerism within their local communities.

Across survey participants, over four-fifths noted that the training for learning volunteer management and support strategies (67 percent), and recruitment and selection strategies (63 percent) were *Very helpful* or *Extremely helpful*, as seen in exhibit 7.

EXHIBIT 7.—Reported helpfulness of training

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

Collecting and Tracking Data

Historically, ServeMN has conducted site visits and risks assessments, but has not engaged in that this year because they do not see VGF as a "high risk" program that requires additional supervision. Their VGF program officer is interested in doing a wider observation/evaluation at least once in a 3-year grant cycle.

Within their own work, MAVA noted a number of data points they collect. Firstly, MAVA administers a survey every year of its 700-plus members, requesting their training and general needs. For their VILT program participants, MAVA collects a data survey asking about participants' organizations, including information about their volunteer numbers and hours—all of which MAVA sends to AmeriCorps. MAVA also collects a matching pre- and post-test for VILT trainings, where participants rate themselves using a 1–5 scale on 19 different practices of volunteer engagement. For the Service Enterprise program, participating organizations complete an assessment that mirrors the same pre- and post-test survey but is focused on organizational level practices. Finally, for their conference and for their one-off trainings, participants complete a post-test survey, which asks them to name 1–2 ideas, practices, and/or strategies learned that they plan to implement in their work with volunteers.

Program beneficiaries reported a variety of types of data they collect from volunteers. Some beneficiaries collected relatively little data, such as one participant describing their data collection as a "work in progress" and another collecting hours worked from volunteers but little else, for now. Others collect much more data. One participant identified their organization as "a data-heavy group traditionally," collecting volunteer hours, turnover levels, numbers of *pro bono* volunteers, and more. Another participant collected which trainings and background checks volunteers have collected. A third did not track hours, noting that this sometimes frustrated volunteers, but did collect years of service, numbers of volunteers, and overall satisfaction.

Volunteer Platform

While MAVA does not support a central volunteer network or platform, two volunteer connectors it supports through its Volunteer Connector grant do. For one United Way organization interviewed, the main goal of their grant from MAVA was to build usership for their existing volunteer portal, Hands-On Connect. Launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, this United Way's adoption of this portal was in direct response to many agencies near them reporting a drop off in volunteer numbers, parallel to those same agencies suddenly lacking capacity to find more volunteers themselves, due to the stresses of the pandemic. Now, this United Way recruits, performs background checks on, and sends volunteers to organizations, taking this effort off their shoulders entirely. The only way the United Way can devote this much staff time to this project is due to the money from their Volunteer Connector grant.

Volunteer Perspective

Three volunteers of a food bank that had received MAVA training and capacity building services shared their perspective as volunteers. All three had been involved with this organization for at least 2 years at the time of interview. All had become involved with the organization through word-of-mouth or seeing how innovative the organization was at delivering services. When asked for what they looked for generally in a volunteer opportunity and why they had remained working with this organization, participants identified efficiency, visible impact, and ease of volunteering as aspects they appreciated. Another highlighted how staff members remember volunteers' names, and that their task—food packing—was very easy cognitively, so they could turn off their brain after a workday and do something good for the world. Another volunteer is a healthcare consultant during their day job and found that they could leverage skills from their paid career in certain tasks for the organization.

Volunteers reported receiving simple training and very little onboarding overall. Volunteers generally work 2–hour shifts, with one volunteer doing one shift per week, one doing more sporadic volunteering with their company, and the healthcare consultant doing weekly *pro bono* work for the organization in addition to some random packing shifts.

Volunteers found staff to be very receptive to any feedback provided. Interview participants found their volunteer work to be very social as they met other volunteers and got to know staff members. The food bank also scheduled networking opportunities for volunteers. Beyond this networking, no other professional or emotional support was provided, but the organization did acknowledge difficulty in participation during the pandemic.

Volunteers felt very appreciated in their roles. Volunteers reported the organization to be very intentional in sharing how their work could not be done without volunteers. After each packing shift, volunteers were informed of their direct impact, including the boxes of food they had packed or the number of meals they had helped ship out. Organization staff sent personalized emails to volunteers thanking them for their service, and displayed trackers on screens within their packing center showing how many employees volunteers had replaced over the past year.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for a period, the organization did not accept volunteers, and numbers dropped significantly overall. The three volunteers interviewed did continue volunteering and described themselves as part of an increasingly critical group of committed, long-term volunteers, which helped the organization through especially tough times.

In terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), volunteers described what they considered as a good level of diversity of staff members, and some diversity among volunteers, including a variety in age and ability. One volunteer did note that most volunteers were white, but added that non-white volunteers may face additional economic pressures due to income inequality.

Overall, volunteers reported being very satisfied in their experience, and anticipated continuing to volunteer as long as they were able.

Volunteer Connector Grant Recipients

Three program beneficiaries who were interviewed were recipients of MAVA's Volunteer Connector grant. All three organizations were local United Way nonprofits and volunteer connectors.

One United Way heard from their organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic that their volunteer organizations needed help with recruitment, so they decided to create a volunteer portal using grant funds. This portal recruits and processes volunteers for their partner nonprofits to use immediately and train in whatever role is needed. This portal may not continue to operate after the grant is complete.

Another United Way is using the grant to build out the usership of their existing volunteer portal. They heard from their community that there was a lack of volunteer coordinators available for their use; therefore, the United Way used grant funds to build out training and webinars to help coordinators use their connector more effectively.
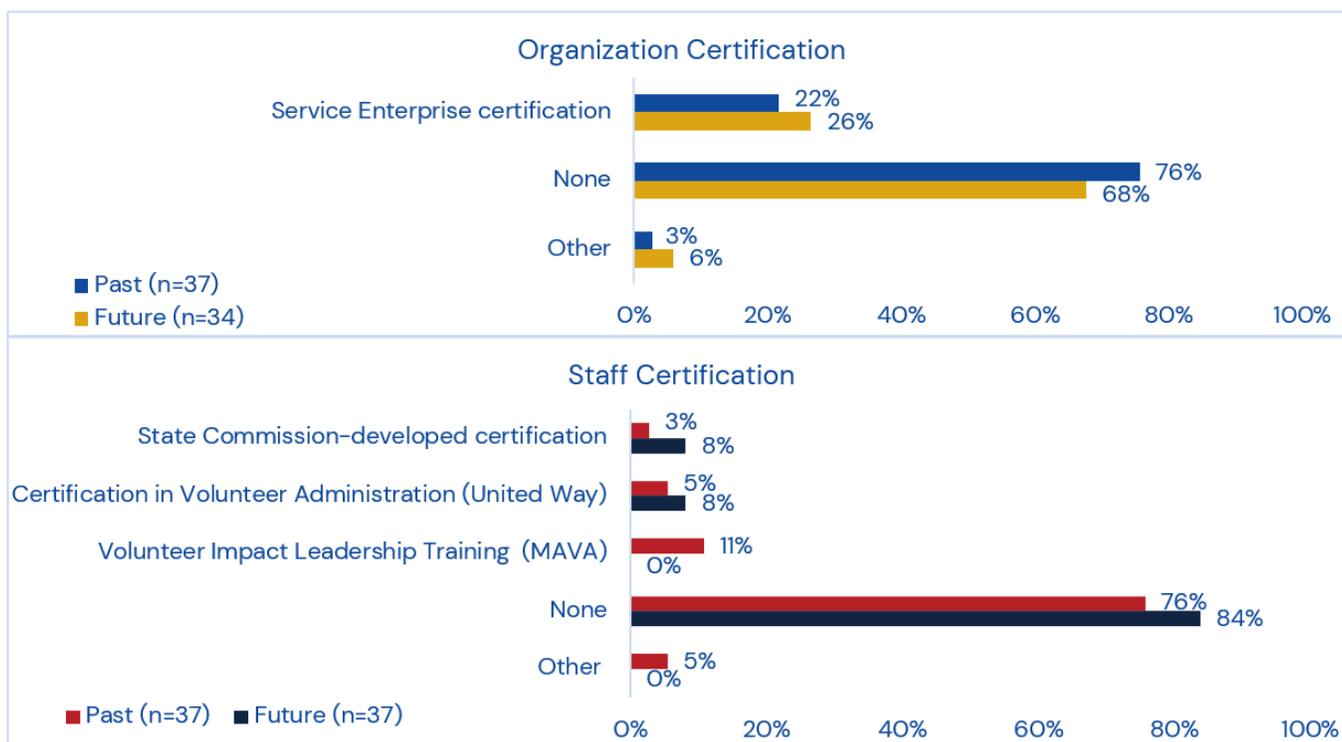
The third United Way used their grant to expand from covering just one Minnesota county to covering three, and to identify more volunteer recruitment methods.

Outcomes

MAVA's Outcomes

Overall, both MAVA and training recipients reported high satisfaction with the training and capacity building provided through the VGF grant program. As seen in exhibit 8, survey respondents indicated the certifications their organizations had received since October 2020 and/or were planning to receive by September 2023. As of October 2020, slightly under one-quarter (22 percent) of respondents had received the Service Enterprise certification and more than three-quarters (76 percent) received none. Another one-quarter (26 percent) noted their organization might receive a Service Enterprise certification by September 2023.

EXHIBIT 8.—**Certifications organizations and staff received as of October 2020 and/or planned to receive by September 2023**

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

MAVA cited a number of **key successes** achieved through the use of their VGF grant:
Online transition. MAVA has been broadly successful in transitioning services to an online environment during the pandemic and, as COVID-19 restrictions have lifted, staff members are evaluating what elements should remain online and what should return to in person. For example, for an upcoming conference in 2023, MAVA is using a hybrid structure as some participants still want the option to attend virtually. Service Enterprise trainings will likely remain online for a while longer as well, and may not transition back to an entirely in-person structure in the future; for example, some cohorts may remain online and some in-person. A ServeMN staffer celebrated MAVA's great success in pivoting rapidly to meet organizational needs online during the pandemic:

> *We've all survived a national disaster. [The Federal Emergency Management Agency]
> declared COVID a national disaster at one point, and we are all disaster survivors. Being able
> to come out of that situation successfully—I feel like that's a huge triumph.*

Creation of training event coordinator position. As a result of the most recent grant cycle, MAVA established a position that coordinates trainings and other meetings, offloading logistical work traditionally given to training facilitators:

> *We were able to use VGF funds to create my position. Originally, I was a part-time, 15-hour a week, contracted employee. And luckily, we moved some things around and my original supervisor left, so we recrafted some positions. The one thing I think my position has allowed MAVA to flourish in is that I take a lot of the minute, little things off people's plates. A year and half ago, [training facilitators] would not only have to think of the bigger picture and what trainings are we doing next, [but they] also would have to set up all the meetings, and then make sure that they're properly run on the Zoom, and then follow up with participants afterwards. Now that we have that extra capacity, I get to take a lot of that off of people's plates.*

Paying attention to members. MAVA stayed active and responsive to their members' needs, continuing to conduct their annual member survey each year and using findings to determine trainings needed in the immediate future. This evaluation was stepped up even further in response to the onset of the pandemic—for example, MAVA created two COVID toolkits very early in the crisis to help organizations transition into the new, virtual environment.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion. MAVA has been a leader in the volunteer management sector in approaching DEI strategies, including encouraging DEI efforts in areas with different levels of openness to these conversations. MAVA has developed robust affinity groups for BIPOC professionals as well as for white allies. Upwards of 25–30 percent of these affinity groups are made up of out-of-state participants who are unable to find equivalents within their state. As one MAVA staff member said:

> *MAVA's niche in the field of volunteer engagement training [is] that we focus on DEI. Since 2020, so many organizations have woken up to the fact that they were woefully unable to respond to understanding that our systems are based on white supremacy and are affecting so many community members. We've done a lot of work to incorporate DEI. I think MAVA has been sensitive, thoughtful about approaching people from all over Minnesota about DEI and knowing that all of that is contextual within communities, and I think we've moved the conversation along in our field, which is really exciting. I'd call that a success.*

MAVA also cited **two major challenges** they have been experiencing in their grant.

Reduced participant numbers. The number of participants in trainings is down overall. This may have to do with organizational budget concerns, as all trainings require a fee to participate, and with staffing issues, as

---

Removing Barriers to Access

MAVA shared a success story for how one of their beneficiaries expanded access to their trainings:

"I spoke with someone from Duluth who came in person to our June hybrid volunteer engagement conference. It's hard to put on a hybrid conference. And as staff, we were so enmeshed in the running of it, that it was hard to experience people's reactions. But I was speaking with this [Duluth participant] afterwards, and he said he was blown away. He was so excited. And the thing I'll never forget, he's like, 'I knew I wanted to shake things up at my organization and look at how to make it easier to volunteer with us.' He said he had this training curriculum onboarding for volunteers, and he cut it from 2 hours down to 1 hour because he knew that [additional] hour could be a barrier for people. I think it was super exciting to hear that example from someone that he had a lot of thoughts about how to shake it up and how to be a disrupter and innovator."

almost all Service Enterprise–certified organizations have had major staff changes over the past year. Service Enterprise is a long commitment from organizations and staff turnover makes it difficult to convince organizations to initially acquire Service Enterprise certifications, or to recertify their organizations every 3 years.

Burnt out participants. The participants who do show up to trainings are stretched thin and burnt out and are therefore often not able to participate in training to a high degree. According to one representative from MAVA:

> *When we look at lower numbers that might be coming to a training, we start thinking, "Is it us, is it them? Are we not giving people what they need? Or are people burned out and not able to spend the money." They can't add one more thing to their calendar. That's why we try to have those conversations with people about how they're doing. Even the things that we offer that are no cost that are more open spaces for networking, we're seeing some smaller numbers there.*

Program Beneficiaries' Outcomes

Program beneficiaries were asked to share outcomes achieved as a result of trainings and capacity building activities they participated in through ServeMN and MAVA. Key outcomes are as follows:

Volunteer manager confidence. Volunteer managers felt equipped to become leaders within their wider organizations and to advocate for using volunteers. One manager didn't know until beginning in their position that volunteer management is a profession, and they appreciated MAVA's efforts to support that profession.

Leader in their county. As a result of training, a United Way described themselves as becoming the go-to organization within their county for recruiting volunteers.

Organizational inclusion. Another United Way expanded the types of organizations to which they send volunteers.

Making tasks virtual. Participants used new techniques to do virtual volunteering and maintain volunteer efforts within their organizations.

Public policy changes. One organization used strategies learned from MAVA to advocate successfully for the mileage reimbursement rate being increased statewide to the current corporate rate, financially supporting volunteers.

Creating networks. MAVA facilitates networks of volunteer managers that allow staff who are often the only people in their organizations that work with volunteers to get ideas and stay relevant in the field.

Challenges

Program beneficiaries also cited challenges they experienced through their trainings and/or their ongoing needs:
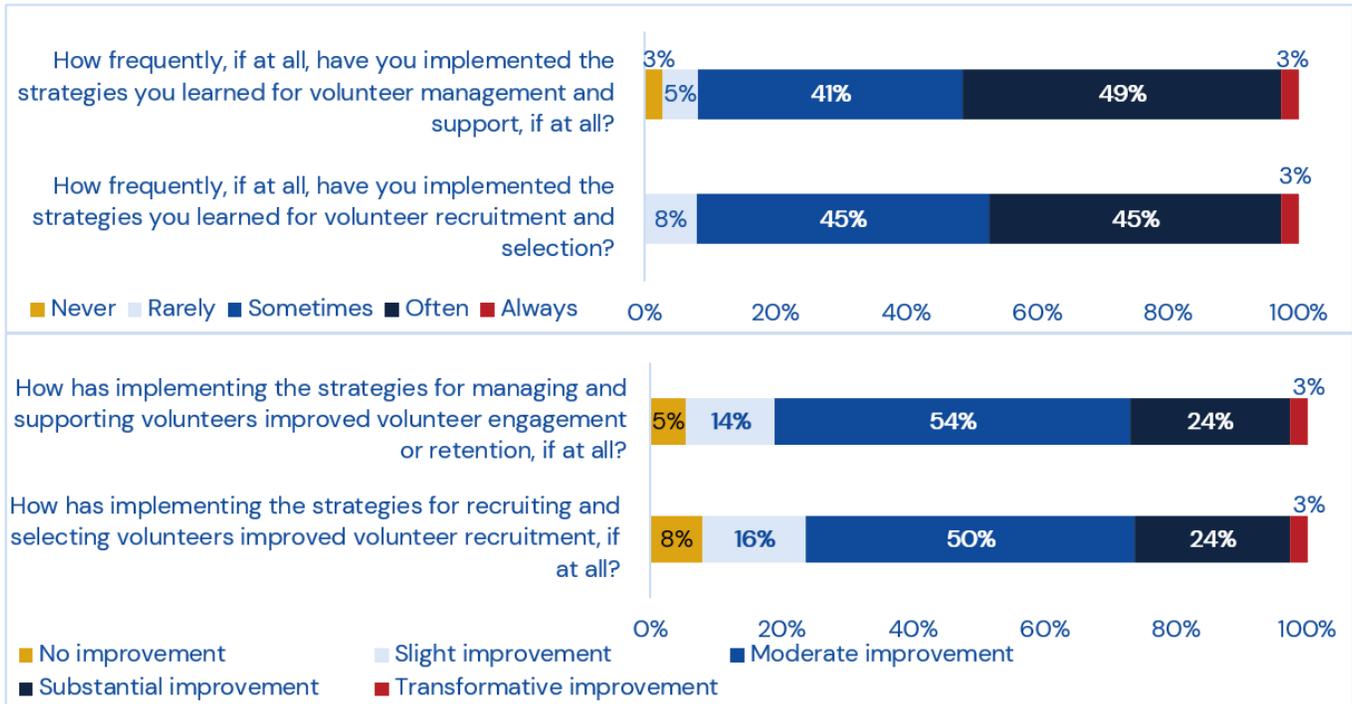
More specific affinity groups. An organization cited a lack of fellow large organizations in their cohort.

Continued technical assistance. Organizations still wanted help updating their websites as well as collecting data efficiently and inexpensively.

The majority (53 percent) of survey respondents shared that they *Often* or *Always* implement the strategies they learned for volunteer management and support. Additionally, 48 percent of respondents noted they implemented volunteer recruitment and selection strategies *Often* or *Always*, as seen in exhibit 9. Regarding the outcomes of implementation, the majority of respondents noted that the implementation of the strategies

led to moderate, substantial, or transformative improvement in volunteer management and support (81 percent) and volunteer recruitment (77 percent).
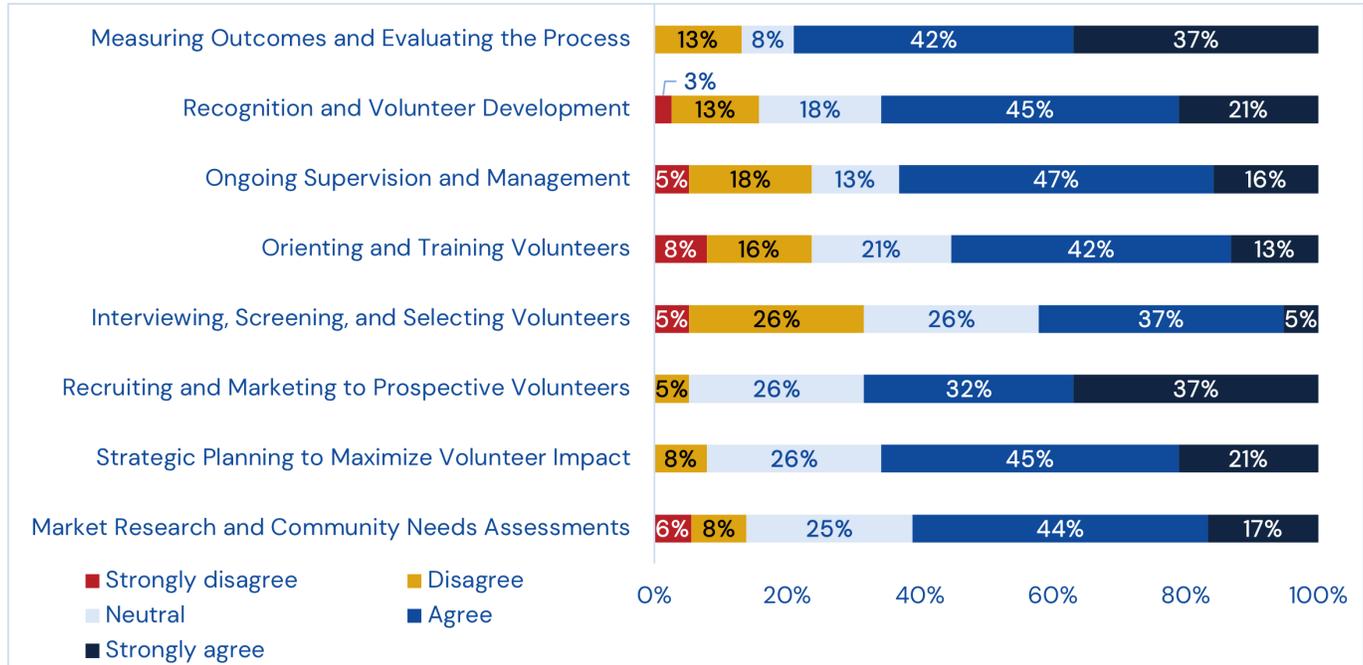
EXHIBIT 9.—Frequency of implementation & improvement in recruitment, engagement, and retention (n=38)

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

Survey respondents were also asked to share their agreement regarding their and/or their organization's need for additional training or support on various topics, as seen in exhibit 10. The topics with the highest agreement on need were measuring outcomes and evaluating the process (79 percent) and recruiting and marketing to prospective volunteers (69 percent). The topics with the lowest agreement were orienting and training volunteers (55 percent) and interviewing, training, and screening volunteers (42 percent).

EXHIBIT 10.—Agreement with organizational need for additional training by topic (n=38)

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

Lastly, survey respondents shared their perspectives on the effect of VGF grants on various volunteer outcomes, presented in exhibit 11. Respondents perceived that VGF–sponsored activities had the greatest effects on their organization's ability to recruit volunteers who align with the organization's needs.

EXHIBIT 11.—Effect of VGF grant on volunteer outcomes

Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

Conclusion

Overall, ServeMN and MAVA have continued to provide highly praised and effective volunteer capacity building to organizations within their state and beyond. As is the case across sectors, MAVA has struggled

with the lingering effects of the pandemic, including low participation levels within their VILT and Service Enterprise trainings and burnout among those who do attend. However, MAVA has found success in delivering capacity building services in spite of these barriers, emerging from the pandemic as leaders within the space—particularly on issues of DEI—and the majority of participants have reported finding training and grants received to be effective at increasing their capacity to recruit and retain volunteers.

About AmeriCorps
AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. Learn more at AmeriCorps.gov.

About the Office of Research and Evaluation
The AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

This report was commissioned by AmeriCorps' Office of Research and Evaluation under Contract #GS00Q14OADU209 and Order #95332A20F0075. Information in this report is in the public domain.

Photo Credit
AmeriCorps

About ICF
ICF (NASDAQ:ICFI) is a global consulting and digital services company with over 7,000 full- and part-time employees, but we are not your typical consultants. At ICF, business analysts and policy specialists work together with digital strategists, data scientists and creatives. We combine unmatched industry expertise with cutting-edge engagement capabilities to help organizations solve their most complex challenges. Since 1969, public and private sector clients have worked with ICF to navigate change and shape the future. Learn more at icf.com. For additional information about ICF, please contact:

ICF
1902 Reston Metro Plaza, Reston, VA 20190
Phone: 703-934-3603 or 1-800-532-4783
Fax: 703-934-3740   Email: info@icf.com

linkedin.com/company/icf-international

facebook.com/ThisIsICF

#thisisicf

Produced and published at U.S. taxpayer expense.