

**CASE STUDY** 

# Volunteer Generation Fund Evaluation: Volunteer NH



# BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

The New Hampshire state service commission, Volunteer NH, participated in the AmeriCorps Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) evaluation through several different phases, including interviews with commission staff and program implementers, and a program beneficiaries survey.<sup>12</sup> This survey was sent to all VGF program grantees only, who may have had a wide range of experiences with the grant, with their participation in the grant being as little as 2 weeks, and as much as 1, 2, or 3 years spent in the cohort; participants may have also had members of their organization take grant activities that they themselves did not participate in, and therefore did not record in this survey.

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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>The VGF grantee, Volunteer NH, also served as the primary program implementer for VGF programing and services.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For the Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey, the state service commission had a 23% response rate with a total of seven individual respondents representing seven unique organizations.

#### EXHIBIT 1.—Overview of data sources

Data Source	Participant Count	Date Collected
Grant Application	-	May 2020
Fiscal Year (FY)2021 and FY2022 VGF Progress Reports	-	December 2021 and November 2022
AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement	-	September 2017, 2019, and 2021
Commission Focus Group – Volunteer NH	2	February 2022
Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey	8	January 2023
Final Commission Focus Group – Volunteer NH	2	June 2023

## Overview of Grant Structure and Goals

The initial focus of Volunteer NH's VGF grant was to "conduct a multi-approach statewide campaign to increase volunteer engagement and to expand volunteer opportunities," according to their 2020 VGF grant application. Volunteer NH sought to achieve their goal through the expansion of the state's volunteer opportunity database and by developing the capacity of nonprofits to work with skilled volunteers. They planned to pursue the two following initiatives.

- 1. Expand New Hampshire's volunteer database, Get Connected, through increasing engagement
  - from nonprofits across the state. To increase the number of nonprofits using Get Connected to list volunteer opportunities, Volunteer NH proposed to hire a full-time VGF program officer to conduct outreach activities. To inform nonprofits and potential volunteers of the Get Connected platform, the VGF program officer planned to develop a public service announcement to broadcast on local television and radio outlets.
- Increase the capacity of nonprofit organizations to recruit, manage, and retain skilled volunteers. Based on a previous VGF grant initiative named High Impact Volunteer Engagement (HIVE), Volunteer NH planned to create a cohort of 10–15 organizations in need of skilled volunteers

### A Note on Program Beneficiaries

In the context of this case study, "program beneficiaries" include volunteer organizations that took part in Volunteer NH's initiatives, including subgrantee and minigrants recipients and participants in conferences and the New Hampshire Volunteer Engagement Network.

to provide training on volunteer management. Since the original grant application, this cohort structure has changed to operate for up to 3 years, with 5 organizations per year (totaling 15). Based on participant feedback from the previous VGF initiative, Volunteer NH proposed to provide subgrants (\$10,000–\$30,000) to the selected organizations to ensure the organizations' projects could be implemented.

Based on the survey data from VGF cohort participants, the most frequently reported volunteer training and capacity building activities were interactive group training sessions or workshops, webinars, and conferences, with the majority (83 percent) of reported training provided by Volunteer NH. Exhibit 2 provides additional details on the types of activities respondents noted were available to their organization through VGF grant activities.



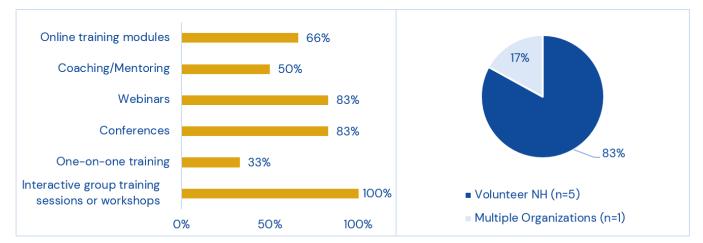


EXHIBIT 2.—Volunteer training and capacity building activities and providers (n=6)

An overview of the status of each key initiative is included below, as described by the state service commission.

VGF Program Officer: In 2020, Volunteer NH transitioned an existing staff member to work on VGF grant efforts full-time. This position is supported entirely by the VGF grant. This employee's time is spent primarily on the cohort of nonprofit organizations to which Volunteer NH provides subgrants. For this program, the role includes getting the word out to organizations potentially interested in funding, collecting application materials and facilitating the review process to determine the organizations to take on, supporting organizations in their grant through individual assistance, and developing regular trainings and check-ins for this cohort. The VGF program officer has also developed an online volunteer resource center hosted on the Volunteer NH website, which includes content session recordings from conferences, toolkits, and other resources.

**Subgrantee Cohort**: In 2021, 13 subgrantees received training led by VQ Volunteer Strategies with consultation from the VGF program officer to customize the volunteer management content. The subgrantees received the training through monthly meetings and were given the opportunity to share any best practices or challenges during the meetings. In 2022, the training and technical assistance activities continued, with 8 of the previous subgrantees receiving a second subgrant among the 11 organizations that were awarded VGF funds in 2022. Additionally, Volunteer NH responded to subgrantee feedback in this year by decreasing the frequency and structure of their meetings, shifting from monthly trainings to quarterly meetings with multiple elements, including training presentations, as well as time for organizations to network, help, and cooperate with each other over issues they have with the grant or with volunteerism generally.

Mini-Grants: In addition to their main annual cohort of subgrantees, Volunteer NH identified many organizations that are unable to accept large grants with potentially strenuous federal funding requirements, and they have developed smaller mini-grants that are spread across many more organizations. This program was proposed as a continuation change in their Year 2 application and approved prior to implementation. Ranging from \$1,000 to \$4,000, these grants often go to organizations for one-time needs, such as purchasing volunteer management software or hosting a training session. Noted the VGF program manager, "[The minigrant] will be focused around increasing the capacity of their volunteer program ... but simpler to apply for, simpler to manage, simpler to report on. We're hoping it'll be a stepping block for organizations that are not in a place to manage a larger grant."



**Get Connected**: Volunteer NH is also expanding use of Get Connected, New Hampshire's virtual volunteer connector. Efforts to do so have included airing advertisements for over 2 years on the local WMUR TV station for the service, holding a virtual volunteerism fair in partnership with New Hampshire Business for Social Responsibility, and directing organizations and individuals to the website.

Volunteer NH has changed and expanded their activities conducted through the grant significantly since their initial application. At the beginning of services, the cohort met regularly for training and received informal training from staff. Volunteer NH then received feedback from their cohort that the meetings were too frequent and too structured for their needs. Participants said they wanted more time to network with one another and support each other through common challenges. Many were volunteer managers or other staff who were working within small organizations and who had to perform many roles, and they wanted to compare notes and experiences. These both led to the development of the New Hampshire Volunteer Engagement Network, and Online Resource Center.

We get a lot of phone calls from people who are looking to volunteer and don't know where to start. ... [We point] them to that database as a resource to search for active opportunities in their area or nonprofits in their area that they might want to reach out to and see if they might have something that's not listed there.

VGF Program Manager

Governor's Conference: Volunteer NH hosts an annual volunteer management conference for organizations across the state, including but not limited to members of their subgrantee cohort for that year. This event is not significantly funded through the VGF grant, other than supporting the VGF program manager's time there. As of 2022, Volunteer NH has operated the conference entirely online, and in summer 2023, the conference will take place in a hybrid format, with one day in–person, and one day virtual. The 2023 conference will also be the first one to include in–person elements since 2019. Volunteer NH staff noted that one advantage of maintaining the virtual setting includes being able to record conferences to share afterwards.

**New Hampshire Volunteer Engagement Network**: This network connects the volunteer manager population in New Hampshire, including all VGF grantees. Run by volunteer managers, it holds quarterly meetings where managers can share strategies they have learned and ask each other for support. Much of the activity of this network is run through the Basecamp program.

Online Resource Center: Volunteer NH has developed a free and freely accessible online resource center for volunteer managers with a wide range of resources. For example, program implementers shared materials for supporting volunteers during the pandemic when all activities were shifted online. All virtual Governor's Conference sessions were recorded and posted on this center to share widely. There are a large number of accessible trainings for anyone to choose from and participate in at any time.

Based on a January 2023 survey of program beneficiaries who had received training and capacity building services from Volunteer NH, the time at which respondents reported first participating in a Volunteer NH training varied. Specifically, 67 percent of respondents noted their organization first participated between October 2020 and March 2021, while 17 percent noted they did not first participate until more recently (April 2022–Present) and 17 percent first participated prior to October 2020. Since October 2020, the majority (66 percent) of survey respondents reported that 1–4 individuals from their organization participated in a training or capacity building activity through VGF, 17 percent reported that 5–9 individuals participated, and 17 percent reported that 10–plus participated. One–third of participants reported 20–plus volunteer management training hours. Exhibit 3 provides an overview of the time frame in which participating organizations reported they first participated in training as well as the range of individuals who participated.



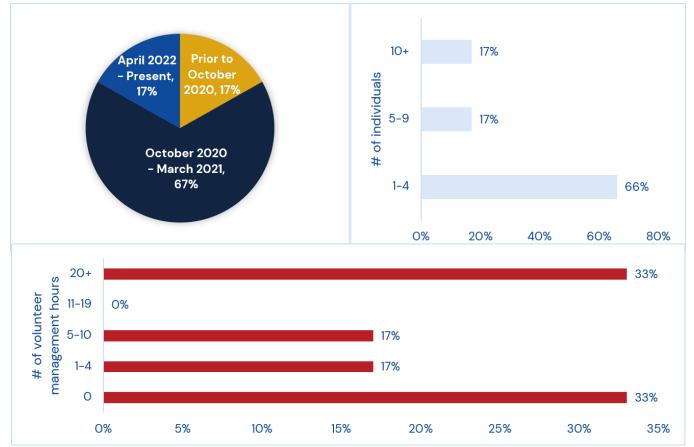


EXHIBIT 3.—Organization's participation time frame, range and number of hours (n=6)

Survey respondents were also asked to report on their organization's plans for additional training beyond January 2023. Exhibit 4 reports the percentage of participants who said they intended to complete additional training through VGF, with 83 percent noting Yes and 17 percent noting No. The majority of survey respondents indicated they planned to complete 10-plus additional training hours.

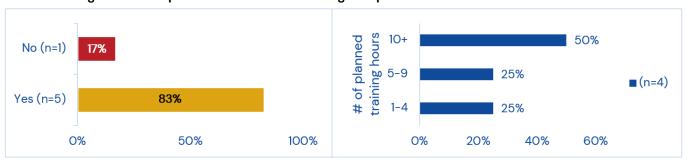


EXHIBIT 4.—Organizational plans for additional training and planned hours

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

# Recent Volunteerism Trends in New Hampshire and Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the 2021 AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement, over two-fifths (27.9 percent) of New Hampshire residents formally volunteered through



organizations, exceeding the national rate (23.2 percent) of individuals who formally volunteered. However, in New Hampshire, this was a decline compared to the rates in 2017 and 2019 of 35.7 percent and 32.2 percent, respectively. The rate of formal volunteering has declined since 2017, however the largest drop occurred between 2019 and 2021, following the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In the state, formal volunteering contributed \$692 million in economic value in 2021. Informally, over half (52.4 percent) of residents noted they helped others by exchanging favors with their neighbors, which is comparable to 2017 and 2019 rates of 54.3 percent and 58.5 percent, respectively.

Volunteer NH identified a significant shift in the needs of volunteer organizations during the pandemic. For many organizations, the ability to focus on volunteer programs was significantly reduced, and some organizations that had a primary volunteer population made of vulnerable populations, such as seniors, were not able to use their old model of volunteerism at all. However, according to the VGF program manager, this was a symptom of a larger issue:

The pandemic only served to highlight what was already an underlying issue with a lot of nonprofits. That is, after collecting data and seeing how organizations participate in the HIVE project, we've learned that nonprofits prioritize their volunteer programs below other organizational projects. It seems that year after year, nonprofits join the HIVE program with great goals and then—due to staff turnover, internal issues, or a pandemic—have to leave them off to go handle other issues, even when they report that the project has increased their capacity.

To support volunteerism despite the pandemic, Volunteer NH has offered several resources to organizations within the state, including subgrantees, to pay for organizational staff time to work on volunteer-related projects, an online resource center regarding virtual volunteer management, and peer support time through their Volunteer Engagement Network.

Volunteer NH identified a major benefit in the shift to virtual activities during the pandemic. For the Volunteer NH cohort, trainings were conducted virtually, and as a result, many were recorded and are now available for more groups to use, hosted on Volunteer NH's Online Resource Center. Additionally, the Volunteer NH conference grew exponentially after it became a virtual event; over 500 participants attended in 2021, which was a much higher count than in previous years.

# Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Volunteer NH staff reported issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to be very important to their organization and their board. At the time of ICF's second project director interview in June of 2023, Volunteer NH staff were working with a contractor to perform a complete analysis of how to make their work more accessible. They also developed a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) committee within their organization, that has expanded programming within the Governor's Conference and is currently evaluating their grantmaking process. The committee's members have diverse lived experiences that contribute to their work, and the committee has multiple grantee members present.

Volunteer NH's Governor's Conference has a large number of sessions on issues of diversity. For example, in 2021, their keynote speaker's address was focused on community and inclusion, and during the main conference section, multiple sessions on diversity and inclusion were the only sessions offered at specific times, and were therefore highly attended and praised by participants. Additionally, all members of their subgrantee cohort receive diversity training by attending sessions at the conference.



# Strategies Used and/or Learned

Volunteer NH grantees have accessed trainings in multiple ways. This has included regular monthly trainings in past cohorts as well as through their online resource center and during conferences. Trainings are available to VGF grantees through a menu of options, some of which from the past 3 years have included:

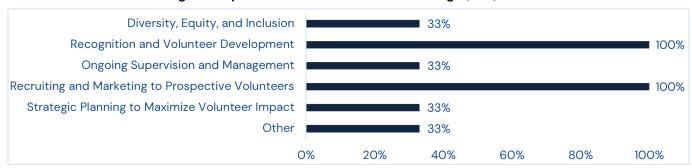
- · Volunteer appreciation and recognition
- · Accessible, inclusive volunteer management
- Recruitment
- Volunteer engagement
- Providing feedback to volunteers
- Strategic planning for volunteer programs
- Volunteer management software (resource sharing)
- Federal grants management (provided to all subgrantees at startup)

This menu is developed annually based on feedback received from midyear and final progress reports taken by grantees. This list does not include topics covered at the Governor's Conference, which typically include a host of specific topics under more general categories, including volunteer management, professional development, organizational management, and DEI. The Volunteer Resource Center also has a large number of trainings available.

Volunteer NH also highlighted the value of the networking time provided by their cohort program to help organizations learn new strategies. "There are tons of small nonprofits where there's one volunteer director entirely responsible for the volunteer program," a Volunteer NH staff member said. "They have no experience or people to ask questions [of] within their organization ... so [the cohort members have] gotten support from one another. Getting feedback, learning about each other's program models. I think they're very thirsty for more education about how a small nonprofit runs."

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 (100 percent) and Recruiting and Marketing to Prospective Volunteers (100 percent). Exhibit 5 provides additional details on the types of practices reported by respondents.

EXHIBIT 5.—Volunteer management practices learned about in trainings (n=3)

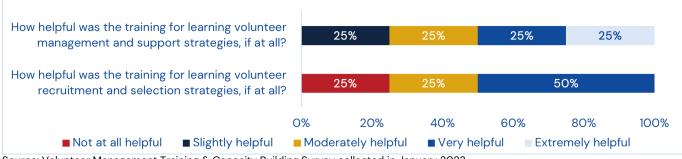


Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in January 2023.

Across survey participants, half (50 percent) noted the training for learning volunteer management and support strategies and recruitment and selection strategies were very helpful or extremely helpful, as seen in exhibit 6.







# **Collecting and Tracking Data**

Cohort members take pre- and post-tests, rating their organization's competencies in all areas of volunteer management, answer questions on how the grant increased their capacity, as well as report the organization's volunteer numbers and hours. As mentioned above, members also suggest trainings they would like to have available to them in the next year. According to these metrics, all cohort members reported having either a Good or Excellent experience this year as a recipient of their subgrant, though this result does not necessarily speak to an objective increase in their competencies.

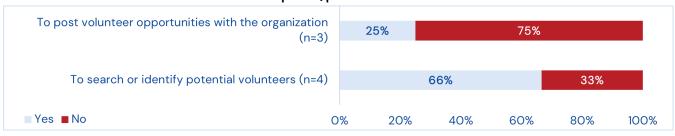
Grantees also take separate progress and final reports to track their own internal benchmarks, including data such as numbers of volunteers and volunteer hours, as well as unique indicators such as pounds of food collected or new volunteers retained, depending on their own targets. These targets allow grantees to increase competency in their specific organizational contexts.

# Volunteer Platform

Volunteer NH reported experiencing a large increase in users on their volunteer connector platform, Get Connected, since the onset of the pandemic. In the spring of 2020, the governor of New Hampshire made a public announcement advertising the website, during a period in which many people had been laid off and therefore had time available to volunteer and either use or develop employable skills. From the time of the grant application to the project director interview date in February 2022, the number of registered users on Get Connected had risen from 14,000 to approximately 16,000 users, surpassing the grant's goal of increasing the number of users by 1,000. In that time, 525 active opportunities had been posted to the website, and 80 percent of opportunities were responded to in the previous year. Although Volunteer NH staff noted they had not conducted a survey with users on the effectiveness of Get Connected, they planned to do so in the future.

As seen in exhibit 7, while three-quarters (75 percent) of survey respondents reported that they did not use the platform to post volunteer opportunities, two-thirds (66 percent) did use the platform to search or identify potential volunteers.

EXHIBIT 7.—Use of state service commission portal/platform



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



# **Outcomes**

#### Volunteer NH's Outcomes

Volunteer NH staff noted VGF supports volunteer organizations in the state who have several ongoing challenges. Organizations in the state were generally under-resourced and under-staffed, particularly following the pandemic, so it was a challenge for cohort members to stick to their training schedules. In the first year, many cohort subgrantees were unable to draw funds for the first quarter due to the AmeriCorps required National Service Criminal History Checks taking a long time. Since, Volunteer NH has updated the model so that first year subgrantees receive funds for nine months, they can use those pre-award months to complete the checks compliantly. Finally, while Volunteer NH has a stated goal of supporting under-resourced organizations, it has been difficult to identify these groups and support them through a long, cohort-based model.

Volunteer NH staff has reported the use of their VGF grant to be a success overall. Staff noted that the challenges are actively being addressed by the VGF grant, which has allowed Volunteer NH and their cohort organizations to grow capacity in a way that hasn't been possible before, "like an oasis," where challenges have become opportunities. For example, while organizations face the challenge of being under-resourced in many ways, the VGF grant has helped create awareness within these groups about the power of leveraging skills within their volunteer base to cover weak spots and meet their missions. Based on a priority focus from their JEDI committee to reduce the barrier to entry for organizations to access grant monies, Volunteer NH also addressed the difficulty of supporting organizations through a long, large cohort model by creating their minigrants. In their 2021 and 2022 reports to AmeriCorps, Volunteer NH cited combined across the two years, over 11,000 volunteers were recruited or managed, with those volunteers serving over 600,000 hours total.

Additionally, Volunteer NH staff reported less quantifiable successes, including their development into a major volunteer connector across the state. Staff celebrated the ability the grant gives them to partner with smaller nonprofits that wouldn't be able to traditionally receive AmeriCorps funds because they wouldn't have the infrastructure. Funds are flexible, and Volunteer NH is more easily able to meet organizations where they are. As two Volunteer NH staff said:

The funds have been so incredibly elevating for our whole state. And I don't know how we evaluate that. And that's one of the things that I am challenged with is how do we really show the impact, because it is a tremendous impact. It's just hard to get our hands around exactly how we do that.

We have conversations with United Way, with the Center for Nonprofits, with the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, with New Hampshire Business for Social Responsibility—the key players who work with volunteers and volunteer organizations. And we can be a convener of conversations across those groups to see where the gaps are.

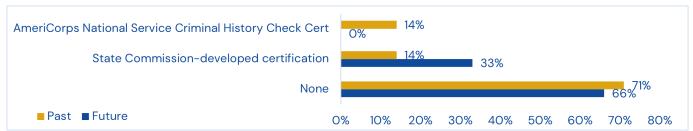
# **Program Beneficiaries' Outcomes**

Overall, both Volunteer NH 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, nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of respondents had not received any certifications, while 14 percent had received an AmeriCorps criminal history certification and 14 percent had received a state service commission-developed certification, though program staff noted they do not currently award certifications, and these organizations may be referring to one they received from HIVE, an earlier grant model. All survey participants were from the VGF cohort, all of which are required to take the



AmeriCorps criminal history certification, so this reported data is likely inaccurate as well. One-third (33 percent) of survey respondents reported intending to acquire a state service commission-developed certification in the future. In terms of individual staff, only one staff member reported receiving a certification, created by the state service commission.

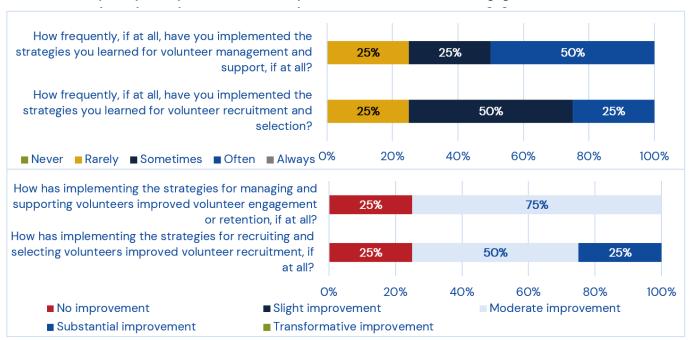
EXHIBIT 8.—Certifications organizations received as of October 2020 and/or planned to receive by September 2023 (n=7)



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

Half (50 percent) of survey respondents shared that they Often implement the strategies they learned for volunteer management and support. Additionally, 25 percent of respondents noted they implemented volunteer recruitment and selection strategies Often or Always, as seen in exhibit 9. Regarding the outcomes of implementation, three-quarters of respondents noted that the implementation of the strategies led to a moderate or substantial improvement in volunteer management and support (75 percent) and volunteer recruitment (75 percent).

EXHIBIT 9.—Frequency of implementation & improvement in recruitment, engagement, and retention (n=4)



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

VGF participants also shared specific personal experiences with grant activities with program implementers, which were shared with ICF. One participant reporting using VGF funds to revive their volunteer program, enhance training offerings, invest in tracking software, and grow recruitment efforts—especially efforts to build a more diverse volunteer pool. Multiple participants echoed this sentiment, sharing how they were able to hire



more staff, recruit more volunteers, and establish skilled volunteer positions. Participants also appreciated the opportunity to network with each other. See below for illustrative quotes from participants.

Over the past 3 years, VGF funds have helped us recruit hundreds of new volunteers who have given thousands of hours to our organization, and we have established new skilled volunteer positions, which has further enhanced our capacity to accomplish our mission of reducing food waste and increasing food security in the Upper Valley.

I think the most important takeaway is that there is a network or resources out there and we ... do not need to reinvent the wheel. What we are learning is that what we need to do better is to look for the wheel that will best fit our need and use it, inflating the tire pressure as needed to get the job done.

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 (75 percent) and Strategic Planning to Maximize Volunteer Impact (75 percent). Alternatively, the topics in which respondents noted the lowest needs were Recognition and Volunteer Development (33 percent), Orienting and Training Volunteers (33 percent), and Ongoing Supervision and Management (33 percent).

Measuring Outcomes and Evaluating the Process 50% Recognition and Volunteer Development 33% 33% Ongoing Supervision and Management 33% Orienting and Training Volunteers Interviewing, Screening, and Selecting Volunteers 33% 66% Recruiting and Marketing to Prospective Volunteers 25% 50% Strategic Planning to Maximize Volunteer Impact 75% Market Research and Community Needs Assessments 33% 66% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100% ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree Neutral Strongly agree Agree

EXHIBIT 10.—Agreement with organizational need for additional training by topic (n=4)

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

Lastly, survey respondents shared their perspectives on the effect of the VGF grant on various volunteer outcomes, presented in exhibit 11. As reported by survey respondents, the outcomes with the greatest effects were improving the process for recruiting the types of volunteers that aligned with organizational needs and recruiting one or more volunteers.



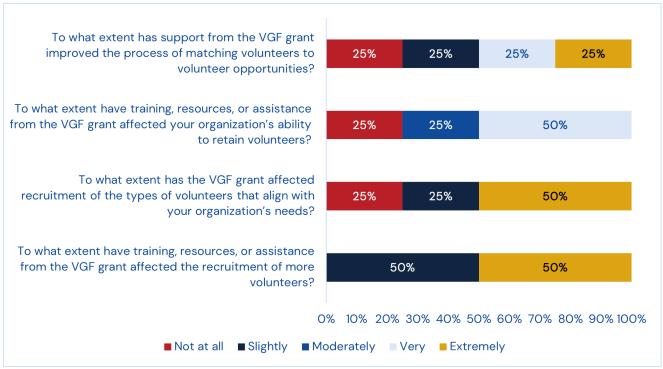


EXHIBIT 11.—Effect of VGF grant on volunteer outcomes (n=4)

# Conclusion

Volunteer NH is well on its way to achieving success in both of its primary goals for the VGF grant—expanding the use of its volunteer connector platform, Get Connected, and increasing capacity of volunteer organizations to recruit and retain skilled volunteers. Volunteer NH has had to navigate the many challenges the volunteer connector organizations they serve have had to face in the pandemic, including high levels of staff turnover among subgrantees and a de-prioritization of volunteer programs at nonprofits. Nevertheless, the pandemic presented an opportunity for Volunteer NH to reach more volunteer organizations through its conference by pivoting to a virtual format. Overall, the VGF grant has impacted Volunteer NH's capacity to connect volunteers to volunteer opportunities through Get Connected and to support volunteer organizations in recruiting volunteers.



#### Acknowledgements

The ICF evaluation team would like to acknowledge the many members of the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) and the participating state service commissions that contributed to the evaluation of the Volunteer Generation Fund. They provided valuable information and feedback to ensure the ICF evaluation team was able to fully capture the unique Volunteer Generation Fund-supported programming and how this programming was able to leverage AmeriCorps support to tackle a critical priority. The evaluation team looks forward to continued collaboration with ORE on high-quality evaluation work that can inform policy and practice regarding how national service may be used to address national priorities. Finally, we would like to thank the esteemed members of the Technical Working Group—Rachel Bruns, Dr. Leslie Goodyear, Dr. Kathryn Newcomer, Gabriel Rhoads, Dr. Herbert Turner, Dr. Abraham Wandersman—who advised and provided feedback to improve the quality and clarity of this evaluation.

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The <u>AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation</u> assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

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#### **Photo Credit**

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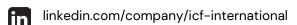
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