



CASE STUDY

Volunteer Generation Fund Evaluation: NJ Commission



BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

The New Jersey Commission on National and Community Service (NJ Commission) participated in the AmeriCorps Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) evaluation through several different phases, including focus groups/interviews with commission staff, 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, the NJ Commission, also 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 67 percent response rate with a total of 6 individual respondents representing 6 unique organizations. Across survey participants, there was substantial variation in reported average number of volunteers recruited and total average number of volunteers per month; 17 percent reported recruiting fewer than 10 volunteers per month; 17 percent reported recruiting 10–20 volunteers; 33 percent reported recruiting 30–50 volunteers; 17 percent reported recruiting 50–100 volunteers; and 17 percent reported recruiting 100 or more volunteers. On average two-fifths (40 percent) of respondents reported their recruited volunteers served fewer than 10 hours per month.

EXHIBIT 1.—Overview of data sources

Data Source	Participant Count	Date Collected
Grant Application	–	May 2020
FY2020, FY2021, and FY2022 VGF Progress Reports	–	December 2020 and 2021, November 2022
AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplements	–	September 2017, 2019, and 2021
Commission Interview – NJ Commission	1	March 2022
Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey	6	April 2023
Final Commission Interview – NJ Commission	1	September 2023

Overview of Grant Structure and Goals

The NJ Commission VGF grant sought to support four key elements, with tweaks implemented in Years 2 and 3 in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic:

- Support community-based entities that recruit, manage, and support volunteers refocusing their missions to COVID-19 response and safety protocols.
- Deploy skilled-based volunteers to strengthen the capacity of nonprofits in responding to COVID-19.
- Expand the capacity of connector organizations to recruit, manage, support, and retain volunteers in high quality assignments
- Assist in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

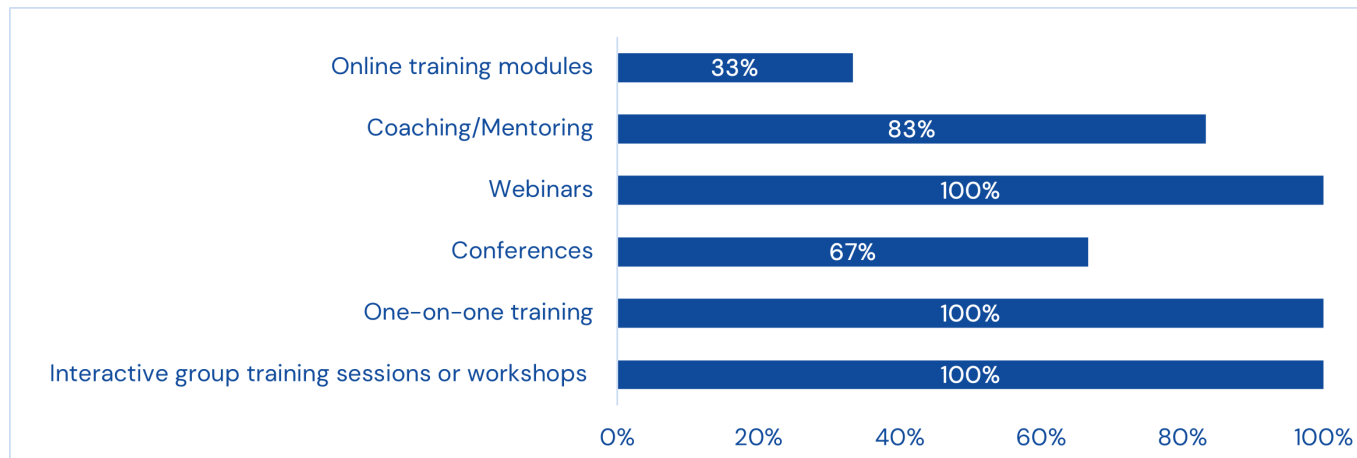
Through the implementation of the VGF grant, the NJ Commission piloted training and capacity building initiatives with five organizations that served various regions. Within the 5 pilot organizations, 1 served New Jersey statewide, 2 covered regions spanning 5–7 counties, 1 served multiple colleges across 7 urban regions, and 1 served the largest county in the state. Therefore, across the indicated strategies the NJ Commission reported in the grant application, the grant would support the recruitment of 5,000 new volunteers and over 150,000 hours of direct service each year—goals that were ultimately surpassed as of September 2023. Additionally, using VGF funds the NJ Commission developed a media strategy, “Jersey Strong: I Am a Volunteer,” to increase potential volunteers’ use of the Volunteer NJ! volunteer portal. The plan outlined by the NJ Commission was in response to the findings from the Volunteering in America survey, which are outlined later in the report. Following the annual review of the Volunteering in America survey, directors of New Jersey volunteer centers and connector organizations believed volunteers were not considering their service as “volunteerism,” but saw it more as family- or faith-based service. The Jersey Strong media strategy sought to address this concern and increase statewide volunteerism.

A Note on Program Beneficiaries

In the context of this case study, “program beneficiaries” include organizations and participants that took part in the NJ Commission’s initiatives, including subgrants, training and technical assistance, and the volunteerism conference.

In April 2023, the NJ Commission training participants took part in a Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey.³ The most frequently reported volunteer training and capacity building activities were interactive group training sessions or workshops, one-on-one training, and webinars, which all respondents reported were available to their organization through VGF grant activities. Survey respondents also noted six different organizations who provided training, with the most common entity being New Jersey Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.⁴ 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 (n=6)



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

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

Jersey Strong: I Am a Volunteer. Through the development of a media strategy, the NJ Commission sought to not only encourage individuals to volunteer, but also to identify their existing service as volunteerism. For example, as part of the media strategy statements included, “I am a coach for my daughter’s soccer team—I am a volunteer.” As shared by the project director, the program is “encouraging people to understand that they are volunteers and not just a coach ... getting the definition of volunteerism out there and letting them know that they are volunteers and they’re part of this huge family in New Jersey of volunteers.”

The NJ Commission noted they would assess the success of the new media strategy by comparing registration levels on Volunteer NJ! prior to the launch of the new media strategy and subsequently each year of the program cycle. As of the September 2023 interview with the commission’s director, the commission was still actively pursuing this media strategy in various avenues such as through social media, exhibitions at fairs, and volunteer manager forum meetings.

Subgrants. While the commission had intended to fund 11 subgrantees, 5 of which received support through the commission’s previous subgrants, only 10 were funded in Year 1. In Year 2, 10 were funded. In Year 3, 10 were initially funded, but 1 dropped out due to them completing their mission a year head of their goal. In addition to one-on-one training, subgrantees also participate in monthly training and monthly conference

³ Of the organizations to participate in the Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey, two-fifths reported on average their organization had 21–30 volunteers (40 percent) and individually those volunteers served 10–20 hours each month (40 percent).

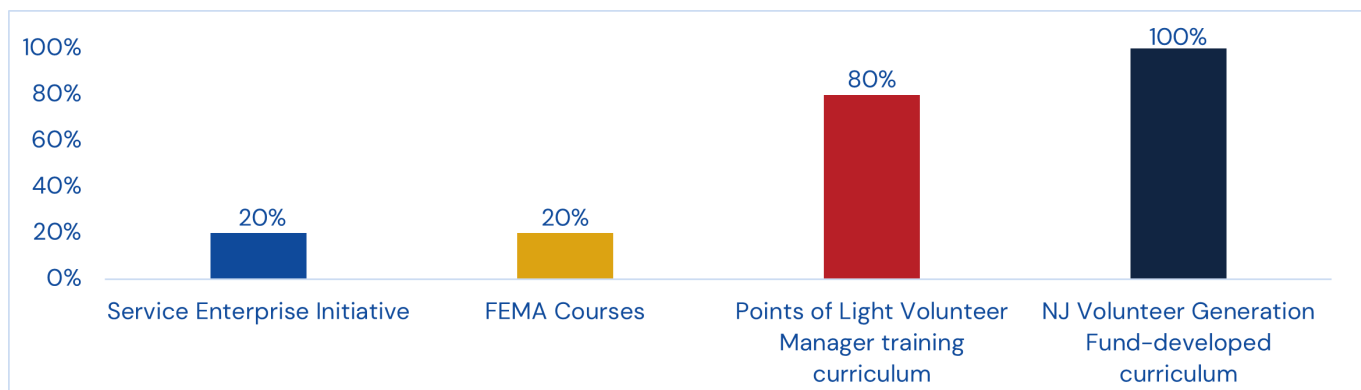
⁴ Survey respondents noted the following organizations provided training: Bergen Volunteers, New Jersey Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, Governor’s Office on Volunteerism, AmeriCorps, and The Center for Research and Evaluation on Education and Human Services Montclair State University.

calls with the NJ Commission and Center for Research and Evaluation on Education and Human Services (CREEHS).

Volunteerism Conference. As the VGF grant is also connected with the Governor’s Office of Volunteerism, the VGF grant supports the Volunteerism Conference to provide training and technical assistance to volunteers, volunteer managers, and volunteer agencies within the state. Due to the pandemic, the conference had transitioned to virtual in April 2021 and served over 800 participants. In 2022, the conference remained virtual with over 600 participants, and, as of September 2023, the conference had paused for a year, and was set to resume in person in April 2024.

As seen in exhibit 3, all of the survey respondents reported they participated in training that utilized a NJ VGF–developed curriculum and four-fifths (80 percent) noted the training they received used the Points of Light Volunteer Manager training curriculum. A few participants also noted they participated in other training curricula, such as Service Enterprise Initiative and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) courses.

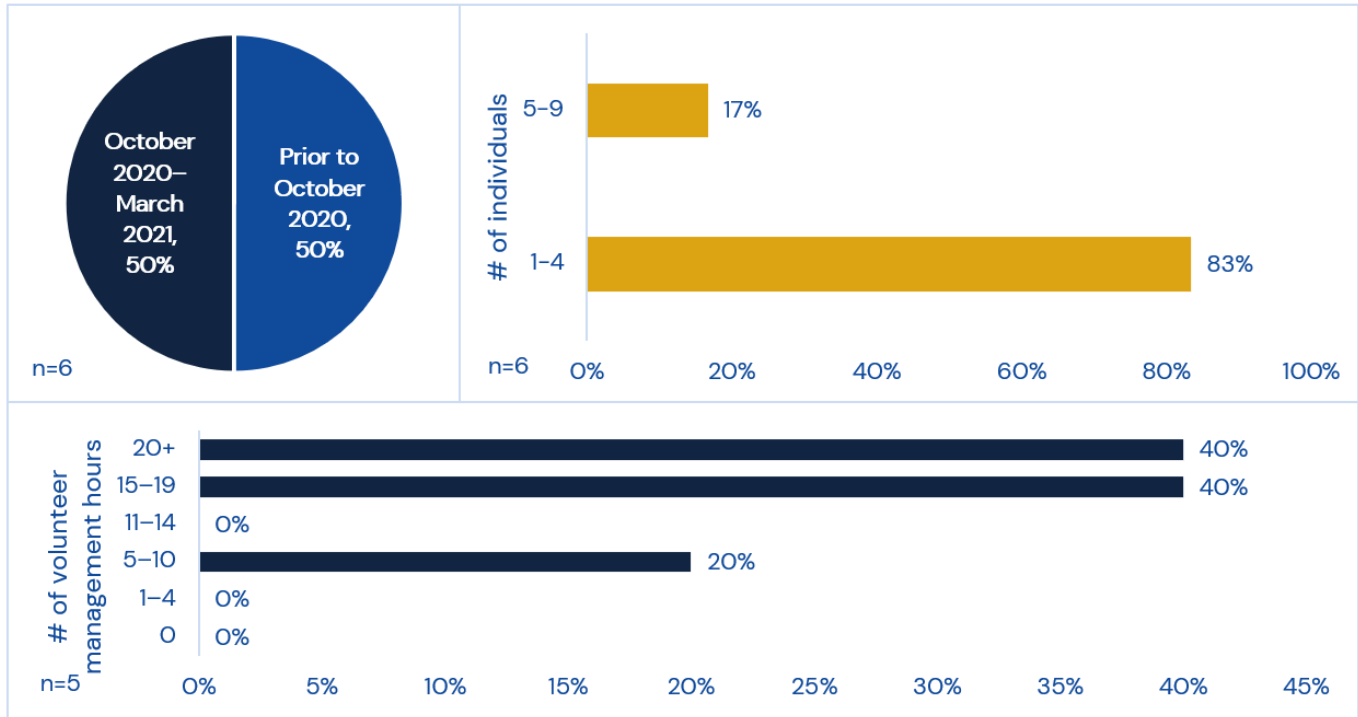
EXHIBIT 3.—Types of curriculum used (n=5)



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

The time in which survey respondents reported first participating in a VGF training varied; half (50 percent) of respondents noted their organization first participated prior to October 2020, while the other half (50 percent) noted they did not first participate until October 2020–March 2021. Since October 2020, the majority (83 percent) of survey respondents noted that 1–4 individuals from their organization participated in a training or capacity building activity through NJ VGF grant and fewer than a fifth (17 percent) noted 5–9 individuals participated. The majority (80 percent) of respondents participated in 15 or more volunteer management hours. Exhibit 4 provides an overview of the time frame in which organizations reported they first participated in training, the range of individuals who participated, and an estimate of hours of training received.

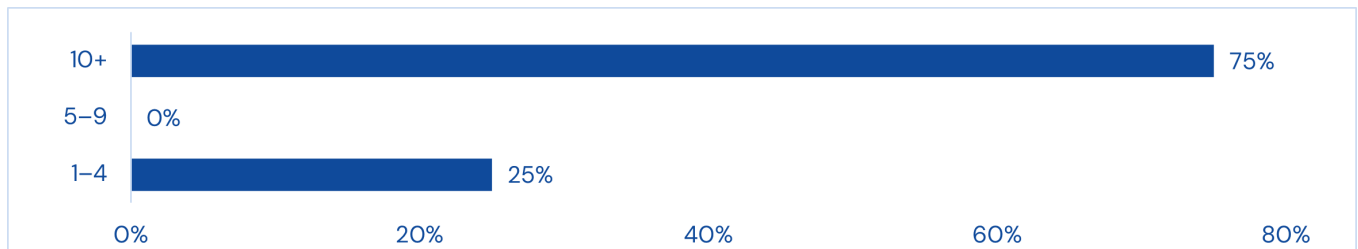
EXHIBIT 4.—Organization’s participation time frame, range and number of hours



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

As grant programming continued following the data collection, survey participants were also asked to report on their organization’s plans for additional training. Overall, half (50 percent) of survey respondents noted their organization intended to complete additional training, while the other half reported that they were unsure. Of those who reported planning to complete additional training, exhibit 5 reports the number of additional training hours they intended to complete, with three-fourths (75 percent) indicating they planned to complete 10 or more additional training hours.

EXHIBIT 5.—Additional planned training hours (n=3)



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

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

According to the 2021 AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement, two-fifths (20 percent) of New Jersey residents formally volunteered through organizations, slightly less than the national rate (23 percent) of individuals who formally volunteered. However, in New Jersey, this was a decline compared to the 2017 and 2019 rate of 26 percent. In the state, formal volunteering contributed \$3.4 billion in economic value. Alternatively, informal volunteering has declined slightly across the

3 surveyed years. Informally, over two-fifths (47 percent) of residents noted they helped others by exchanging favors with their neighbors, compared to 49 percent in 2017 and 2019.

As previously noted, some of the initiatives were modified due to the pandemic, including the conference transitioning to virtual. Additionally, subgrantee monitoring visits were transitioned to virtual “desk audits” or virtual conference calls. While the pandemic reduced some organization’s abilities to recruit volunteers, it also forced organizations to pivot their services to virtual formats.

So, a lot of the agencies lost volunteers, where some agencies ended up recruiting more volunteers like [New Jersey Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster] because those volunteers wanted to work in the emergency preparedness field. It was a little bit of a catch-22 for both of them, for all the grantees. While it was more difficult for them to provide training, they pivoted, and started providing training online.

One of our agencies ... they would do volunteer fairs for the volunteers in their county. The volunteer fairs were held in person at the local library. Partnering organizations would set up tables. In COVID the governor had shut us down, nobody could do anything. So, what was developed was an online Zoom volunteer fair and they have continued with this, because they realized that everyone was basically stuck at home in front of a computer. They had to find ways for their volunteers to still feel as though they were doing something and making a difference.

Partway through their VGF grant, the NJ Commission secured additional COVID-19 relief funds from sources outside of AmeriCorps for their grantees to enhance VGF programming, with the caveat that they continued the same mission.

Additionally, based on the emerging needs of communities during the pandemic, organizations utilized volunteers in new methods to address those needs. For example, one program realized there was no food delivery system in place in their community for senior citizens who were at high risk during the pandemic. To address this need within the community, the organization created one using their VGF funds. This program still exists as of September 2023, even as most pandemic-related restrictions have expired.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

At the time of the second program director interview, the NJ Commission reported multiple diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts that were either being implemented or were in development.

In partnership with CREEHS, the commission planned a one-time training focused on diversity and inclusion in volunteer management. The commission had also developed a DEI committee, which grantees and program managers are invited to attend on a monthly basis. Guest speakers are invited by this committee to speak on a range of rotating topics.

The commission also, at the time of their September 2023 interview, was working with various Chambers of Commerce within their state government to see if they could connect volunteer opportunities, explaining:

We're currently working with different Chambers of Commerce ... the LGBTQA+ Chamber of Commerce, the African American Chamber of Commerce in New Jersey, and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey ... different types of groups within New Jersey, to see if there [are] connections that they can formulate with the grantees and with the volunteer centers.

While qualitative data regarding subgrantees inclusion of DEI in their training offerings was not collected, staff overseeing the VGF grant shared that of the 10 subgrantees, there were aware of 1 organization that had reported to the commission that they included DEI components in their training.

Strategies Used and/or Learned

The NJ Commission reported subgrantees were provided with an initial orientation and monthly meetings that incorporated various training components. During the initial orientation, the NJ Commission provided information on data collection, quality, and reporting, as reported in the fiscal year (FY)2020 progress report. Training topics included training on volunteer recruitment, volunteer retention, volunteer promotion, volunteer marketing, and evaluation. As noted, training was provided in combination from the NJ Commission and CREEHS for VGF subgrantees, with participation from additional guest speakers from different agencies.

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 practice included volunteer recognition (67 percent), followed by System for Administering Grants Electronically (SAGE), social media marketing, volunteer development, and measuring outcomes and evaluating the process, all of which a third (33 percent) of respondents reported. Exhibit 6 provides additional details on the types of practices reported by respondents.

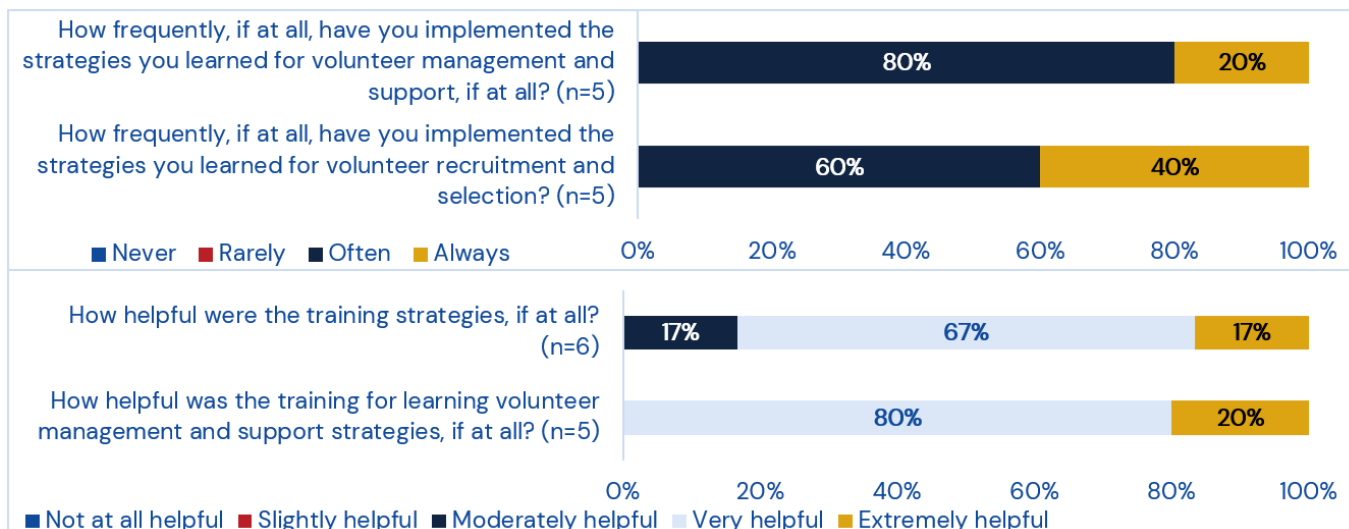
EXHIBIT 6.—Volunteer management practices learned about in trainings (n=6)



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

Across survey participants, all respondents reported they Often or Always implemented the strategies learned for volunteer management and support and volunteer recruitment and selection. Overall, over four-fifths (84 percent) of survey respondents noted the training strategies were Very helpful or Extremely helpful. More specifically, all survey respondents reported the training for learning volunteer management and support strategies were Very helpful of Extremely helpful, as seen in exhibit 7.

EXHIBIT 7.—Reported helpfulness of training and frequency of strategy implementation



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

Collecting and Tracking Data

The NJ Commission in partnership with CREEHS developed pre- and post-assessments to collect data from subgrantees to assess performance measures. In 2023, the NJ Commission did not end up administering a pre-test, but they had administered a post-test and were planning on administering both for their next round of subgrantees. The following data was collected from subgrantees:

- **Demographic Data.** Subgrantees report on volunteer recruitment activities, volunteer service hours, and partnership activities (e.g., schools, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations), and gender data.
- **Training Held by the VGF Grantee.** The number of events, whether it’s a service event or a training event, and the number of people who have attended the events.
- **Narrative Data.** Subgrantees include narrative descriptions on their progress, accomplishments, primary challenges, solutions identified, and needs from the commission.

The noted data is reported through quarterly reports, as described by participating VGF staff.

Volunteer Platform

The NJ Commission partnered with their United Ways and Volunteer Centers to link the individual platforms with the larger state portal. With this connection between the local and state sites, no additional maintenance was needed and everything is populated based on the inputs from the partner agencies. As of September of 2023, the website is live and connects to volunteer centers that all have the same portal.

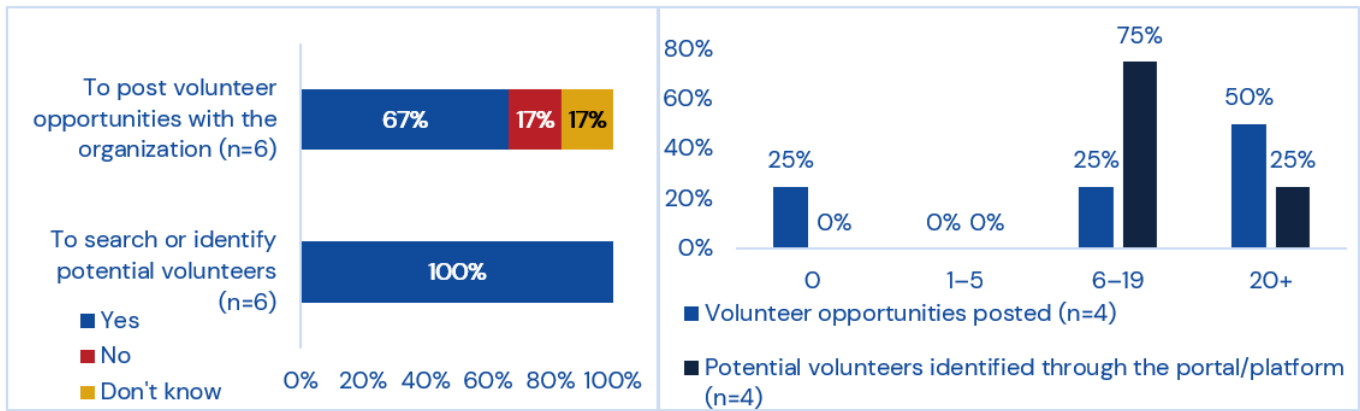
As part of the VGF grant, two United Ways were able to have their own local platform. VGF staff explained the implications of this for one United Way, saying:

The United Way of [a state county], because of their VGF grant, was able to start a platform. ... They were able to utilize this as a way to recruit volunteers within their United Way programming, which they love. So, it’s just been a way to connect all 21 counties. We have a page on our Get Connected site that actually has a map of the State of New Jersey and all

the counties. If you click on one of the counties and it doesn't have a Galaxy Digital program, it'll go directly to the Volunteer Center in that county. It actually works both ways for us, where it can direct you to volunteer opportunities within that county or we can direct you to the Volunteer Center in that county. It's been great for us, so when we get to use it again it'll be even better!

As seen in exhibit 8, all of the survey respondents reported using the platform to search or identify potential volunteers and over two-thirds (67 percent) used the platform to post volunteer opportunities. Exhibit 8 also shows the range of volunteer opportunities posted by survey respondents and the range of volunteers identified through the platform. Half (50 percent) of survey respondents noted they posted 20 or more volunteer opportunities on the platform, with four-quarters (75 percent) identifying 6–19 volunteers were identified through the platform.

EXHIBIT 8.—Use of state service commission portal/platform

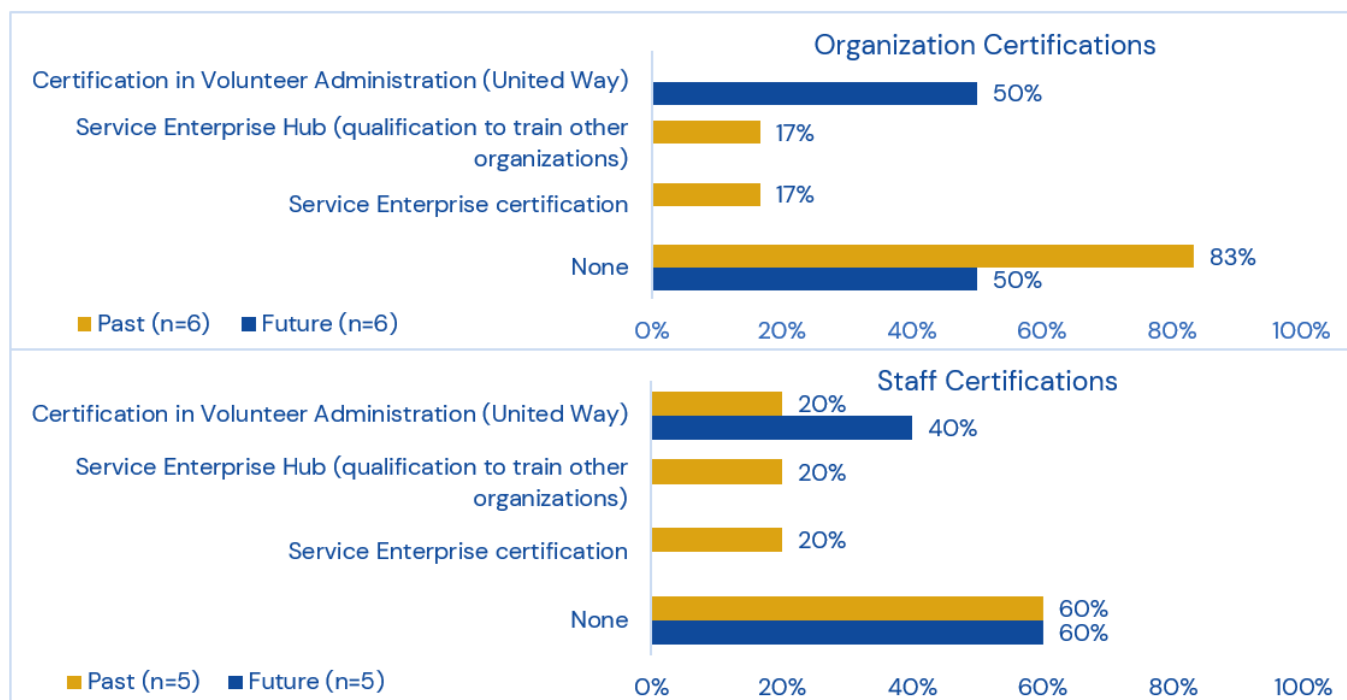


Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in April 2023.

Outcomes

As seen in exhibit 9, 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, over four-fifths (83 percent) of respondents had not received any certifications at the organizational level and three-fifths (60 percent) had also not received any at the staff level. The most frequently reported certification organizations and staff noted they planned to receive by September 2023 was the United Way Certification in Volunteer Administration, for which 50 percent of organizations and 40 percent of staff reported.

EXHIBIT 9.—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 April 2023.

NJ Commission’s Outcomes

In the FY2021 progress report, the NJ Commission described the key outcomes from the 10 subgrantees. Across the 10 grantees, over 500 training and technical assistance sessions/webinars were held with over 12,000 participants collectively. Even though the commission had anticipated the pandemic would create great challenges to reaching their goals, VGF grantees were still able to collectively meet and surpass the goal of offering at least 500 trainings.

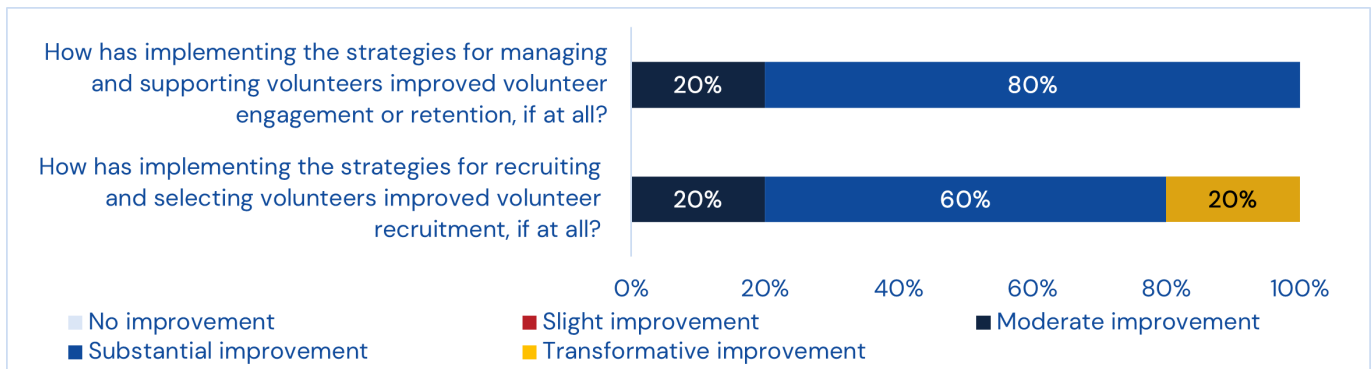
In a September 2023 interview, NJ Commission staff shared their latest data from 2022 to early 2023. As of early 2023, the 10 VGF subgrantees have held 534 training and technical assistance sessions/webinars to recruit, retain, and train volunteers and volunteer agencies in their communities. A total of 6,307 participants received trainings, 1,446 of which were volunteers. With these 534 trainings, subgrantees provided capacity building services to 1,009 agencies.

The 10 VGF grantees overall recruited 8,066 volunteers, 2,278 of whom have contributed over 30 hours of service to their communities. VGF also provided services to 5,567 at-risk youth and 4,139 senior citizens.

Program Beneficiaries’ Outcomes

Regarding the outcomes of implementation, the overwhelming majority (80 percent) of survey respondents shared that the implementation of the strategies for managing and supporting volunteers had a Substantial improvement on volunteer engagement or retention. Additionally, the majority (80 percent) of respondents noted the implementation of strategies for recruiting and selecting volunteers had a Substantial or Transformative improvement, as seen in exhibit 10.

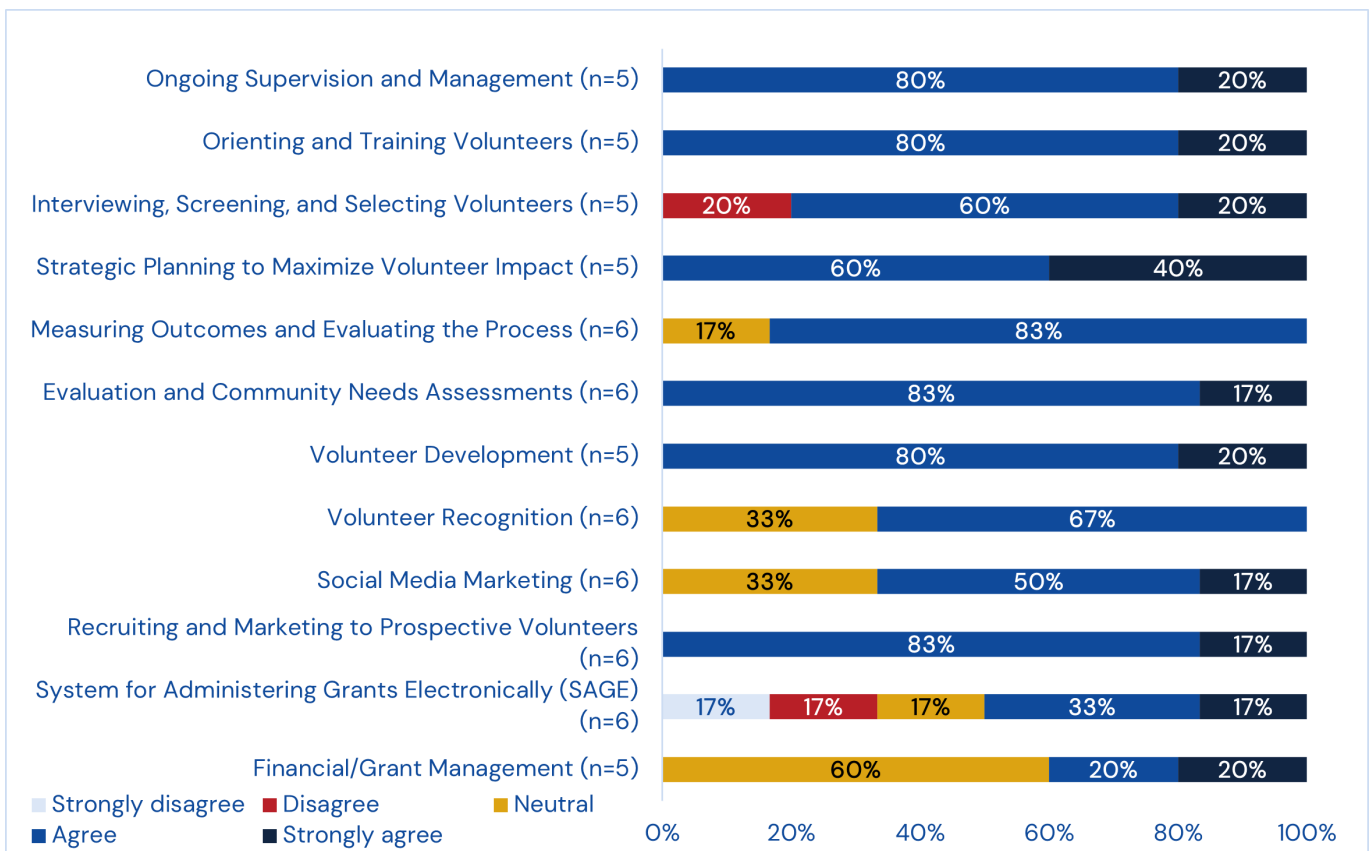
EXHIBIT 10.—Frequency of implementation & improvement in recruitment, engagement, and retention (n=5)



Source: Volunteer Management Training & Capacity Building Survey collected in April 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 11, the topics with the highest agreement on need were (1) Ongoing Supervision and Management, (2) Orienting and Training Volunteers, (3) Strategic Planning to Maximize Volunteer Impact, (4) Evaluation and Community Needs Assessments, (5) Volunteer Development, and (6) Recruiting and Marketing to Prospective Volunteers, all of which all respondents Agreed or Strongly Agreed their organization needed additional training on. Alternatively, the topics in which respondents noted the lowest needs were (1) Financial/Grants Management and (2) System for Administering Grants Electronically (SAGE), of which 40 percent and 50 percent of respondents Agreed or Strongly Agreed their organization needed additional training, respectively.

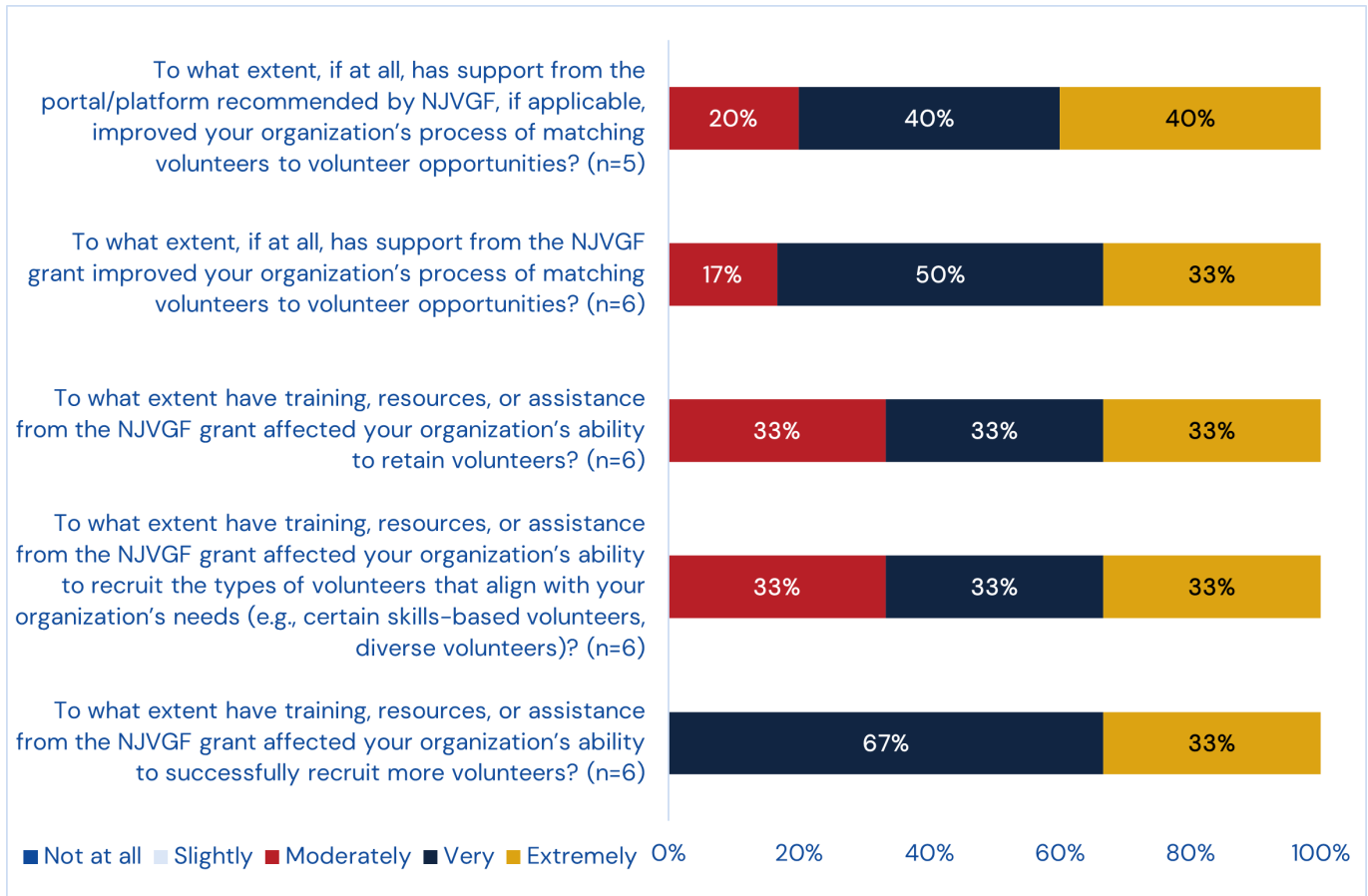
EXHIBIT 11.—Agreement with organizational need for additional training by topic



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

Lastly, survey respondents shared their perspectives on the effect of the VGF grant on various volunteer outcomes, presented in exhibit 12. As reported by survey respondents, the outcomes with the greatest effect were the organizations’ ability to recruit more volunteers and improve the process of matching volunteers to volunteer opportunities, both from New Jersey VGF grant support and the portal/platform recommended by New Jersey VGF.

EXHIBIT 12.—Effect of VGF grant on volunteer outcomes



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

Conclusion

Overall, through the NJ Commissions key initiatives and VGF’s support of the subgrantees, statewide volunteerism conference, and media campaign, the NJ Commission was able to successfully support organizations’ volunteer management, recruitment, and retention across the state. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in some modifications, such as the transition to virtual training and services and the removal of monitoring visits with subgrantees, the NJ Commission and program beneficiary organizations were able to continue to provide training and support amid the pandemic. Beneficiary subgrantee organizations in particular were able to greatly support volunteers and volunteerism with significant amounts of direct work and volunteer connection. Based on the emerging needs of the state and communities, the commission and subgrantees successfully pivoted to provide additional support wherever needed.

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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