



## CASE STUDY

# Volunteer Generation Fund Evaluation: VolunteerNC



## BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

The North Carolina state service commission, the Commission on Volunteerism & Community Service (VolunteerNC) participated in the AmeriCorps Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) evaluation through several phases, an interview with commission staff and a site visit with program implementers and beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The VGF grantee, VolunteerNC, also served as the primary program implementer for VGF programming and services.

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

Data Source	Participant Count	Date Collected
Grant Application	–	May 2020
Fiscal Year (FY)2021 and FY2022 Volunteer Generation Fund Progress Reports	–	November 2021 and 2022
AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplements	–	September 2017, 2019, and 2021
Commission Focus Group – VolunteerNC	2	March 2022
Program Implementer Focus Group – VolunteerNC	2	September 2022
Beneficiaries Interview – COVID-19 Response Mini-Grant	1	September 2022
Beneficiaries Interview – Service Enterprise Hub	1	September 2022
Final Commission Interview – VolunteerNC	2	June 2023

**Overview of Grant Structure and Goals**

The goal of VolunteerNC’s VGF grant was to implement three initiatives. According to the 2020 VGF grant application, the proposed initiatives included

1. Disaster volunteerism;
2. A Service Enterprise training program; and
3. Initiatives targeted at youth service and corporate partners.

Overall, VolunteerNC noted that the main initiatives outlined in the grant application had remained consistent, but some components had shifted as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. VolunteerNC shared they partnered with various organizations to deliver services based on the expertise of the organizations. A VolunteerNC staff shared:

*Typically, [VolunteerNC] is coordinating the trainings to have someone else do them, since we are not experts in those fields. We will typically lead the trainings around any VGF administration updates, so whether that’s data reporting or how we need them to complete their forms, but the actual subject area trainings we coordinate with others to lead those. That’s not something our staff typically leads.*

Across the initiatives, VolunteerNC reported in the grant application they planned in Year 1 for 20 nonprofit organizations to be certified through Service Enterprise and to leverage an additional 10,000 volunteers; 200 other nonprofits would benefit from leadership training; and they would use targeted programs to engage over 500 youth and 20 corporate partners. An overview of the status of each key intervention is included below, as described by the state service commission.

**A Note on Program Beneficiaries**

In the context of this case study, “program beneficiaries” include Long-Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs), volunteer connector organizations, and volunteer organizations that took part in VolunteerNC’s initiatives, including disaster volunteerism, Service Enterprise, and pandemic-, youth-, and cooperate-related initiatives.

**Disaster volunteerism:** Initially, VolunteerNC intended to fund five different Long-Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs) to serve counties that experienced previous disasters (e.g., hurricanes, tropical storms) through the funding of a volunteer generator position. The volunteer generator position coordinates with the different counties in the LTRGs to meet regularly and discuss ongoing needs within the community, especially those related to disaster recovery. The position also coordinates with volunteers from national, state, and local organizations/groups to support state disaster recovery.

In the first year of VGF, VolunteerNC funded one nonprofit organization to support their volunteer generator position that served three counties for approximately 6-months, covering three LTRGs. VolunteerNC staff noted during the commission interview that they did not fund additional grants and reallocated funding to support other pandemic-related initiatives.

**Service Enterprise training program:** VolunteerNC partnered with the two North Carolina state Service Enterprise Hubs to support Service Enterprise training across North Carolina by subsidizing training costs for two to three cohorts per year. VolunteerNC provides the state Service Enterprise Hubs with subgrants to provide more affordable Service Enterprise training for nonprofits. VolunteerNC shared that subsidizing Service Enterprise training was specifically helpful for small nonprofits in rural areas that would not otherwise be able to participate in the training opportunity.

Since VGF funding, Service Enterprise cohort numbers were not as large as expected, which VolunteerNC staff attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic as fewer organizations were interested in undertaking the training because they were short-staffed and stretched by the pandemic. Additionally, as a result of the pandemic, training transitioned to a virtual format. While previously, trainers from the two state hubs would go to the organizations or have the organizations come to the state hubs to provide the training, in the pandemic that was no longer feasible. VolunteerNC noted the state hubs were planning on transitioning back to in-person.

**COVID-19 Response mini-grants:** Having initially proposed to fund eight to ten mini-grants, ultimately VolunteerNC funded nine organizations focused specifically on COVID-19-related projects. VolunteerNC commission staff shared the types of projects funded through the COVID-19 mini-grant, predominantly around food insecurity and educational needs:

*During COVID we really saw a need for service around food insecurity. So, several of our VGF subgrantees are organizations that help to feed their communities, so, whether that's running a food pantry [or] feeding seniors. We saw that their volunteer base just dropped off drastically, so for a few of the organizations their funding has allowed them to hire a part-time volunteer coordinator or maybe it pays for that volunteer coordinator to be closer to full-time.*

*Besides food insecurity, education was one of the great needs that we saw. So, we have a few programs that either the volunteers were actually recruited to serve in schools and help with COVID-19 testing or actually providing tutoring and [English as a second language] services for students who are falling behind because they're virtual learning. So those are the two biggest areas that we saw for these COVID-19 subgrants—food delivery/food pantries and education.*

Additionally, VGF funding allowed mini-grantees to expand their volunteer recruitment and services to additional counties; where previously they were just serving maybe one county, mini-grantees could now serve multiple counties.

**Youth Service and Corporate Engagement:** While the pandemic shifted the initial plan of supporting youth engagement initiatives, VolunteerNC provided subgrant funding to four different organizations supporting

youth volunteerism. Initially, VGF funding was proposed to provide scholarships in support of youth programs but pivoted to using funding to help recruit and expand youth community volunteering. Subgrantees included the following:

- An organization that is providing community emergency response training to high school students and to community colleges.
- An organization that provides volunteer expos to connect youth volunteers with organizations.
- An organization that recruits high school students to mentor younger students.

## Recent Volunteerism Trends in North Carolina and Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the 2021 AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement, over one-fifth (23 percent) of North Carolina residents formally volunteered through organizations, on par with the national rate (23 percent) of individuals who formally volunteered. Additionally, one-quarter (25 percent) of residents reported belonging to an organization. Longitudinally, in North Carolina, there has been a decline in formal volunteering rates since 2017, with formal volunteering at 35 percent in 2017, 30 percent in 2019, and 23 percent in 2021. The most substantial drop occurred following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is consistent with national trends. In the state, formal volunteering contributed 139.5 million hours of service, worth an estimated \$3.9 billion. VolunteerNC described in their 2021 progress report that many of their subgrantees and programs were struggling to get volunteers back after COVID-19. Alternatively, informal volunteering declined in 2019 and remained low in 2021. Informally, almost half (48 percent) of residents noted they helped others by exchanging favors with their neighbors, compared to previous informal volunteering rates of 54 percent in 2017 and 49 percent in 2019.

Participating VolunteerNC staff described that overall volunteer recruitment and retention appeared to be the largest challenges organizations were facing during and following the pandemic, especially as organizations worked to re-engage volunteers. As reflected in the Civic Engagement and Volunteering Survey data, VolunteerNC staff noted volunteerism had not appeared to bounce back as quickly as hoped, as organizations struggled to bring in and bring back volunteers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VolunteerNC altered some initiatives and training formats, as previously noted. However, VolunteerNC staff shared they believed the pandemic helped them kick off their lunch-and-learn training series:

*Since they are lunch-and-learns and an hour long, we would probably have had them virtual regardless. But honestly, I think it was COVID that helped us to kick this series off. We saw a need that was even greater during COVID and so bringing nonprofits together twice a month to get these trainings and to learn, I think, was honestly one of the reasons we started the series.*

Additionally, VolunteerNC provided training focused on volunteerism during the pandemic, including sessions on (1) pivoting to virtual volunteerism and (2) recruiting and retaining volunteers during the pandemic.

One participant described how one of the state's Service Enterprise Hubs used the pandemic as a new marketing strategy to highlight how the training could support emerging challenges organizations may have been facing amidst the pandemic. For example, were organizations prepared to utilize remote volunteers? What existing volunteer positions could be effectively conducted virtually? The state hub described how they marketed to organizations that had "gone through this stress test of COVID" and were now poised to identify creative ideas for volunteers, especially for remote volunteering. The Service Enterprise training would provide an avenue for organizations to sit down and truly form a plan for how to innovate.

Additionally, in the 2021 progress report, commission staff shared they were able to identify how programs across the state were adapting to the pandemic, to continue to grow volunteerism while prioritizing volunteer safety.

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

VolunteerNC described providing a few trainings on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) topics, including training focused on preparedness resources for individuals with disabilities, training on diversifying volunteer programs, and training on culturally competent services for immigrant populations. A COVID-19 response mini-grantee recipient noted they participated in some trainings during which they learned about recruiting diverse volunteers, however they would like more opportunities to discuss diversity and inclusion in volunteer recruitment since it was an area in which they and their organization struggled.

As part of Service Enterprise, VolunteerNC noted they were not sure if any of the Service Enterprise training activities included a focus on DEI topics. The participating state Service Enterprise Hub described that at the time of the site visit, the hub was integrating aspects of DEI into the training; however, it was not incorporated into the existing curriculum.

## Strategies Used and/or Learned

As part of the VGF grant program, VolunteerNC provided training for all VGF subgrantees. While initially planning to provide specific training according to the subgrant type, as noted in the grant application, VolunteerNC ultimately provided a series of trainings—a lunch-and-learn series roughly twice a month—open to all nonprofits across the state, including subgrantees.

Trainings were offered virtually and recorded to ensure participants were able to obtain the material even if they were not able to attend in real time. Trainings covered topics such as helpful strategies for disaster and crisis preparedness, program valuation for “dummies,” fundraising, and tips to help improve board participation.

Participating COVID-19 mini-grant recipients noted that during the lunch-and-learn trainings they attended, everything may not have been relevant for their specific organization, but they were always able to find at least one strategy or component to apply to their context.

*I was able to learn from everything and take bits and pieces that I wanted, which [was] why I went to all the lunch-and-learns. ... Some of them, I'd be like, "Oh, this is not really what we do," but there's always something that you could get from everything. So, I just tried to grab as much as I could.*

## Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) in Service Enterprise

A participating North Carolina state Service Enterprise Hub shared the extent to which DEI was incorporated into the curriculum and trainings:

“Points of Lights realizes that’s one of the things that hasn’t really been incorporated because when they developed it, [it] was not on the forefront as it is right now. [The state hub] put in our own pieces, just making sure when [we’re] advertising for volunteers, are you also including volunteers that maybe don’t have transportation or who have other limitations that you just don’t necessarily think of? Go back through those opportunities and see could someone who needs to catch a bus to your organization—do they have a way to volunteer? Again, that’s a great opportunity to do something remotely, but then that assumes they might need a laptop. So, we kind of put our own little pieces in there as we can, but I do know Points of Light is aware of that and they are going to be adding some kind of component; I just don’t know what it’s going to look like. I don’t think it’s going to be an add-on for training. I think it’s going to be something sprinkled in throughout the training.”

The following were described by participants as strategies they learned about through their participation in the lunch-and-learn series.

**Volunteer appreciation.** Participating mini-grant recipients explained that they received training on volunteer appreciation, which one grantee noted was “how [they’ve] been able to retain so many volunteers”—through the use of virtual (e.g., emails or hand-written letters during the pandemic) or in-person recognition services.

*I learned a lot about how to frame everyone’s accomplishment, so everyone feels a part of that accomplishment, but then they also strive to do better.*

**Volunteer orientation.** Participating mini-grant recipients also described learning about volunteer orientations and how to do a better job of orienting volunteers to the organization and volunteer process.

**Nonprofit management.** Participating VolunteerNC staff noted providing several trainings focused on nonprofit management, including training on how to build a better board, contracts and legislation, fundraising, and Philanthropy 101.

## Collecting and Tracking Data

VolunteerNC collects a variety of data from the various subgrantees. As stated in the commission’s 2021 progress report, a Google form was used to collect data from VGF subrecipients. In addition to quarterly check-ins, subgrantees also provide a midyear and end-of-year report to the commission. Within the biannual reports, subgrantees report on the number of volunteers engaged, hours served, and homes repaired through a Google form. Additionally, there is an open field for subgrantees to include any additional data they collect, however no additional data is required by VolunteerNC. Additionally, VolunteerNC collects data following each training through a post-training survey.

As part of Service Enterprise, VolunteerNC received aggregate data at the end of the cohort on how many organizations reported improved capacity. As VolunteerNC was not the organization directly providing Service Enterprise training, they did not collect the regular data associated with Service Enterprise. VolunteerNC did, however, report they could reach out to the hubs if needed to get the collected data. The state hubs that implement Service Enterprise noted they collected a variety of data from participating organizations, which is standard to the program. The participating state hub also noted they internally collect data on organization perception of the training (e.g., Did organizations find it helpful? Were there any next steps they could implement right away? Would you recommend the training to someone else?) The Service Enterprise Hub reported they collect this data to understand what they were doing well to evaluate their training.

Outside of the data collected for Service Enterprise, VGF subgrantees also collect additional data beyond the standard performance measures, as noted in the commission’s 2022 progress report, such as pounds of food distributed within the community.

## Outcomes

Overall, grantee recipients who participated in the site visit reported satisfaction with the training and supports provided through the VGF grant program.

### VolunteerNC’s Outcomes

Overall, participating VolunteerNC staff noted one of their greatest successes was the ability to provide long-term support to organizations within their community. VolunteerNC staff shared that over the past 3 years, the majority of the subgrantees were the same. Through serving the same organizations over time, VolunteerNC staff said they saw organizations create positive growth within their organizations as they used grant funds to staff positions focused on volunteerism.

According to the post-training surveys, VolunteerNC staff shared they received “excellent feedback” from participants regarding their satisfaction with the trainings. Additionally, as part of the survey, training participants were also able to express other topics of interest in addition to their feedback and perceptions of the provided training. During the program implementer interview, VolunteerNC staff described that they believed their biggest success is the fact that they had kept the same set of subgrantee organizations for 3 years, which had contributed to added capacity, and ultimately greater reach of services:

*We have seen the organizations that we are subgranting funds and what these funds have done for them. Bringing on staff, being able to expand their reach, being able to expand the number of meals that they're serving to seniors. I think it's been pretty incredible to see the number of families and students served. Just the capacity that they've been able to add to their organizations.*

To support increased outcomes, VolunteerNC staff shared that from the administrative side, it would be helpful if AmeriCorps provided more resources specific to VGF, such as training examples, branded resources such as a VGF logo, and an available point of contact at AmeriCorps specific to VGF.

## Program Beneficiaries' Outcomes

As a result of their participation in the COVID-19 mini-grant and participation in the lunch-and-learn series, one grantee noted they were able to reach more individuals within their community, especially with the use of their outreach coordinator:

*We've had the opportunity to reach out to more people since we have an outreach coordinator and that has helped. What we do is we coach our chapters and chapter leaders [to] learn different methods and ways to reach out to volunteers. So, it's definitely been helpful, and it's trickled down through our organization.*

With the state Service Enterprise Hub, the biggest success of the program was attributed to its ability to greatly improve organizational use of volunteers, even with those who believe they were already effectively using volunteers. One participant mentioned organizations were “shocked at how much more they could be doing to maximize the impact of the organization.” This in turn maximizes the impact on the community.

## Conclusion

Overall, through VolunteerNC's key initiatives, Service Enterprise training, COVID-19 mini-grants, LTRGs, and Youth Service and Corporate Engagement subgrants, VolunteerNC was able to successfully support organizations in volunteer management, recruitment, and retention across the state—which VolunteerNC credited with enhanced impact on communities. VolunteerNC training was predominantly offered through the implementation of their lunch-and-learn training series. While the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a shift in VolunteerNC's approach, ultimately, they were able to leverage this

### Indicated Commission Needs from AmeriCorps

VolunteerNC staff suggested that it would be useful for AmeriCorps to provide a resource library for commission staff to reference training examples or models, adding “where if you had a specific question to make it easier for us to be able to find out specific answers a little quicker.” After AmeriCorps updated their website in 2021, VolunteerNC had not been able to find the 2023 VGF specific terms and conditions. A VolunteerNC staff mentioned “two years ago there were VGF specific terms and conditions; to us that's really helpful.” While the staff noted they were aware of AmeriCorps' state and national terms and conditions and many applied to VGF, they were not clear as to which aspects did or did not apply or who to reach out to for clarity.

challenge to increase the reach of their services and expose new organizations to Service Enterprise. VolunteerNC incorporated DEI topics and training across their initiatives, including DEI sessions within the lunch-and-learn series and a state Service Enterprise Hub's integration of DEI into the training. Even so, participating organizations still noted the need for additional training opportunities focused on recruiting diverse volunteers.



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