



## SNAPSHOT REPORT

# AmeriCorps Volunteer Generation Fund Program Evaluation



## BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

Volunteering brings out the best of America (AmeriCorps, 2021). In a polarized, post-pandemic America, volunteers have been described as playing a key role in reestablishing trust and human interaction—critical activities for strengthening American civil society (Hager & Brudney, 2021).

According to the most recent federal data, 23.2 percent of Americans, or 60.7 million people, formally volunteered (i.e., volunteered with an organization) between September 2020 and 2021, serving an estimated 4.1 billion hours with an economic value of \$122.9 billion (AmeriCorps, 2023). In addition, nearly 51 percent of Americans, or 124.7 million people, informally volunteered by helping others (e.g., by exchanging favors with their neighbors) during that same period (AmeriCorps, 2023). These data show that service to others continues to be a priority for millions of Americans and organizations need to be ready to engage those who want to give back (AmeriCorps, 2021).

In the context of formal volunteering, **volunteer engagement** traditionally refers to a broader strategy to leverage volunteers to accomplish an organization’s mission. **Volunteer management** traditionally refers to organizational practices used to recruit and retain volunteers. Volunteer engagement spans many contexts in

which volunteers mobilize, from large volunteer mobilization organizations (i.e., volunteer connector organizations such as Points of Light or United Ways), to nonprofit organizations, faith-based or community-based entities, and institutes of higher education. Volunteer management can also require vastly different practices depending on whether volunteers are episodic (e.g., volunteering to respond to a crisis or for an event) compared to those who are continuing or permanent.

AmeriCorps,<sup>1</sup> 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. As an independent federal agency, AmeriCorps plays a vital role in supporting the American culture of citizenship, service, and responsibility, and is the nation's largest grantmaker in support of many forms of service and volunteering. AmeriCorps engages more than 5 million Americans in service through its AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps Seniors, and Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) programs.

The VGF program, which was authorized by the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act in 2009, invests in volunteer management practices that strengthen nonprofit organizations and other entities' ability to increase recruitment and retention of volunteers to meet critical community needs through service.<sup>2</sup> AmeriCorps seeks to fund effective approaches that expand volunteering, strengthen the capacity of volunteer connector organizations to recruit and retain skill-based volunteers, and develop strategies to use volunteers effectively to solve community problems.

To learn more about how VGF grants have been implemented and the outcomes of those grants in improving volunteer recruitment and retention, the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation contracted with ICF to conduct an evaluation of the VGF grant program based on the work of participating grantees awarded in Fiscal Year (FY)2020. This contract also included delivering evaluation capacity building sessions to participating grantees. By simultaneously growing the evidence base on volunteer engagement and management practices and incorporating capacity building and dissemination activities, this project seeks to enable AmeriCorps to more effectively support organizations in enhancing the impact of volunteers on critical community needs.

## About the VGF Evaluation and Capacity Building Project

The evaluation assessed how FY2020 VGF grantees implemented their grants to develop and/or support community-based entities to recruit, manage, and support volunteers within their states as well as the outcomes of VGF grantees' efforts. In FY2020, 14 state service commissions were awarded VGF grants. State service commissions, the state partners of AmeriCorps, are charged with administering AmeriCorps State, VGF, and related programs to address critical community needs and engage citizens in service (America's Service Commissions, 2023). These governor-appointed public agencies or private nonprofit organizations serve at the state level to regrant federal national service funds; support other community service agencies at the local, regional, or state levels; and work to support local communities. In total, 9 of the 14 VGF grantees elected to participate in the evaluation, as shown in exhibit 1.

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<sup>1</sup> AmeriCorps is the operating name of the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS.

<sup>2</sup> According to VGF statute, grantees can fund state commissions and nonprofit organizations to (1) directly carry out volunteer programs or develop and support community-based entities that recruit, manage, or support volunteers; or (2) through subgrants to community-based entities, carry out volunteer programs or develop and support such entities that recruit, manage, or support volunteers. See [National and Community Service Act of 1990](#) for more information.

## EXHIBIT 1.—FY2020 VGF grantees

State	Commission	Federal Funding Amount	Evaluation Participant
Florida	Volunteer Florida	\$658,401	✓
Illinois	Serve Illinois Commission	\$378,522	
Iowa	Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service (Volunteer Iowa)	\$331,976	✓
Kansas	Kansas Volunteer Commission	\$172,176	
Maine	Maine Commission for Community Service	\$132,958	
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Service Alliance	\$352,173	✓
Michigan	Michigan Community Service Commission	\$740,937	
Minnesota	Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service (ServeMN) with partner Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement (MAVA)	\$266,000	✓
Nevada	Nevada Volunteers	\$216,810	✓
New Hampshire	Volunteer NH	\$360,109	✓
New Jersey	New Jersey Commission on National Community Service (NJ Commission)	\$250,860	✓
North Carolina	North Carolina Commission on Volunteerism & Community Service (VolunteerNC)	\$270,875	✓
Utah	Utah Commission on Service & Volunteerism (UServeUtah)	\$185,000	✓
Wisconsin	Wisconsin National and Community Service Board	\$235,917	

Note. Although 12 commissions initially agreed to participate in the evaluation, 9 followed through in conducting one or both of the major data collection activities (i.e., site visits and/or the program beneficiary survey) and are therefore considered evaluation participants in this table. ServeMN is the fiscal agent of the VGF grant and responsible for grant compliance, though subgranted all aspects of VGF grant implementation to MAVA. ServeMN and MAVA consider themselves as grant partners. Given MAVA's role in grant implementation, MAVA is therefore referenced as a VGF grantee along with the other state service commissions grantees throughout this report.

As a framework to guide the study, a logic model was developed based on a document review of nine participating VGF grantees included in the study. The logic model outlines the relationships between VGF inputs (AmeriCorps, state service commissions, program implementer partners, and subgrantees) and activities; expected outputs; and their desired short-, and long-term outcomes. Rather than representing strategies from any specific grantee or VGF program, the model is comprehensive, covering a broad list of activities across all related VGF programs. The logic model also depicts key contextual factors (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic; natural disasters; political and economic climate; diversity, equity, and inclusion) that may have influenced grantee implementation and programming.

In acknowledgement of the unique configurations in which state service commissions designed and implemented their VGF grant programs, the evaluation team used a mixed-method case study design—with each VGF grantee considered a case—to fully depict implementation and outcomes for each grantee. An in-depth cross-case analysis was also conducted to understand cross-cutting trends in VGF grant implementation and outcomes among the grantees. The three major objectives that guided the research questions are as follows:

- Describe the state service commissions' approaches for utilizing VGF funds to improve volunteer recruitment, retention, and support of volunteers within their states and among volunteer organizations.
- Describe promising practices and challenges in implementing these approaches.
- Analyze preliminary outputs and outcomes of these approaches on volunteer organizations.

## Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources for the evaluation included **grant applications** from VGF grant recipients in FY2020; **annual progress reports** submitted by grantees in 2020, 2021, and 2022; two **project director interviews** (in spring 2022 and summer 2023); virtual site visits with **VGF grantees/program implementers** and **program beneficiaries** (fall 2022); and a survey of organizations receiving VGF-funded training and capacity building services (i.e., program beneficiaries) within each of the grantee states (spring 2023).<sup>3</sup> Given the variety of program implementation models and types of program beneficiaries (e.g., subgrant and mini-grant recipients, volunteer organizations, regional volunteer centers), VGF grantees were provided an opportunity to customize their surveys accordingly. Additional supplemental data from U.S. Census Bureau and previous state- or VGF-specific research from grantees was used to provide additional context for the case studies and larger cross-case analysis. An overview of the data sources are as follows:

### Terminology

The term “program implementer” refers to the state service commission and/or key partner entity that is primarily responsible for implementing the VGF grant. Since in FY2020, all VGF grant awards were provided to state service commissions.

“VGF grantee” is operationalized as the state service commission and/or program implementer.

“Program beneficiaries” refer to the organizations that ultimately have received VGF grant-funded training and capacity building services. They may be subgrant and mini-grant recipients, volunteer organizations, regional volunteer centers, youth who participated in youth initiatives, and other entities.

<sup>3</sup> For virtual site visits and the program beneficiary survey, the VGF program director and additional VGF staff recruited and selected the program beneficiaries to participate in the data collection activities.

### Program Documents

- State Service Commission FY2020 VGF Grant Application
- State Service Commission VGF Progress Reports from FY2020, FY2021, and FY2022
- AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement from 2017, 2019, and 2021
- Additional Data and Evaluation Documentation Provided by the Commission

### Interviews and Focus Groups

- Project Directors Interviews at the start and conclusion of the study (fall 2021 and summer 2023)
- Program Implementers Interviews
- Program Beneficiaries (i.e., Volunteer Organizations) Focus Groups
- Program Beneficiaries (i.e., Volunteers) Focus Groups

### Surveys

- Beneficiary Survey of Volunteer Organizations that participated in volunteer management training/capacity building

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. All qualitative data was indexed and coded for descriptive and thematic analyses using priori codes (informed by the logic model, key evaluation questions, and literature review), as well as emergent codes that were identified through the transcript review. Qualitative data was analyzed for each case independently. Observation notes and program documents were reviewed to help inform the description of VGF activities, successes, and challenges, as applicable. Descriptive and thematic analyses were conducted using the coded qualitative data and observation notes to help provide in-depth information related to how the VGF-funded activities were working within the state, and/or how stakeholders perceived preliminary program impacts on beneficiaries. Beneficiary survey responses were analyzed with basic descriptive statistics (e.g., means, medians, and frequencies) to address the evaluation questions. Survey data was analyzed for each case independently. By triangulating findings from the interviews, focus groups, observations, surveys, and program documents, robust and dynamic depictions of the program approaches and implementation were developed into case studies for each respective grantee. In summer 2023 project director interviews, VGF staff reviewed their respective case study to provide feedback, clarification, or corrections. Variations across the grantees were highlighted through individual case studies and a cross-case analysis. Any contextual factors that emerged, including operating during the pandemic and the focus on/incorporation of diversity, equity and inclusion were also included in the case studies.



## Strengthening Evaluation Capacity

As noted, evaluation capacity building was provided to VGF grantee evaluation participants as a strategy for strengthening evidence building. In particular, the evaluation capacity building helped participants stay engaged with the bundled evaluation through 1-hour long monthly capacity building sessions spanning 12 months from December 2021 to November 2022. Across the 12 sessions, a total of 25 VGF grantee representatives (e.g., project directors, grantee staff, partners) from the participating grantees, attended at least one of the evaluation capacity building sessions, with an average of 12 participants attending each session. In addition to providing technical assistance on evaluation planning, implementation, and reporting, evaluation capacity building included dedicated sessions to provide updates about and seek feedback on key evaluation activities. In this way, the evaluation capacity building strengthened the bundle evaluation and the evidence it produced.

## COVID-19 Pandemic

One important contextual note is that many evaluation activities occurred in 2021 and 2022—at the height of the coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As has been broadly documented, the COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on all aspects of American life—interrupting in-person participation across social sectors—which greatly impacted volunteerism. Meanwhile, despite declines in formal volunteering in the height of the pandemic, there was simultaneously an increase in demand for services. In 2022, nearly two-thirds (64.4 percent) of nonprofits reported an increase in demand for their organizational services (Dietz & Grimm, 2023). Nearly half (46.8 percent) of nonprofit CEOs reported that recruiting sufficient volunteers was a “big problem” for their organization (Dietz & Grimm, 2023). It is within this context that the evaluation was conducted and findings should be interpreted accordingly. Even so, many state service commissions and the volunteer organizations they serve must be agile and adaptive to address the emerging needs of their communities during periods of crisis, such as natural disasters or pandemics. While evaluation activities and findings are framed in the COVID-19 pandemic, they may have relevance to the continued work of volunteer engagement and management in a post-pandemic climate.

## Summary of Findings

The following summary provides a high-level overview of the cross-case analysis findings related to program models, emergent issues, strategies and outcomes, and challenges and needs. Additionally, findings from the evaluation capacity building project component are also discussed.

### Evaluation Feedback Loop

Evaluation capacity building sessions established an important feedback loop on the evaluation and likely helped facilitate greater communication and feedback from VGF grantees to the evaluation team. In January 2023, based on feedback received from VGF grantees, the evaluation design pivoted from a program-level evaluation to using a case study approach (with cross-case analysis). As part of this shift, grantees were also provided opportunities to customize a beneficiary survey instrument to better align with the unique characteristics of their program model. In addition, grantees were given the opportunity to review a draft of their case study and weigh in with any corrections or additions. These key changes helped to ensure that the evaluation yielded authentic and valid findings regarding the VGF program.

## Program Models, Training Structures and Key Activities

Grantees used a combination of program models to implement training and key activities. Seven of the nine grantees cited using an external model—Service Enterprise, Human Resources Management (HRM), or Stanford University’s Pathways of Public Service and Civic Engagement. Additionally, grantees’ models varied in how training and/or capacity building services were provided:

- Eight grantees reported independently providing training and/or capacity building services ranging from directly providing training and technical assistance to providing subgrants to local organizations.
- Seven grantees noted they collaborated with external partners to implement training and capacity building services to varying extents ranging from entrusting nearly all VGF grant implementation to a partner organization to collaborating with an external company to help train subgrantee cohorts.

Overall, six of the nine grantees utilized a combination of these two approaches.

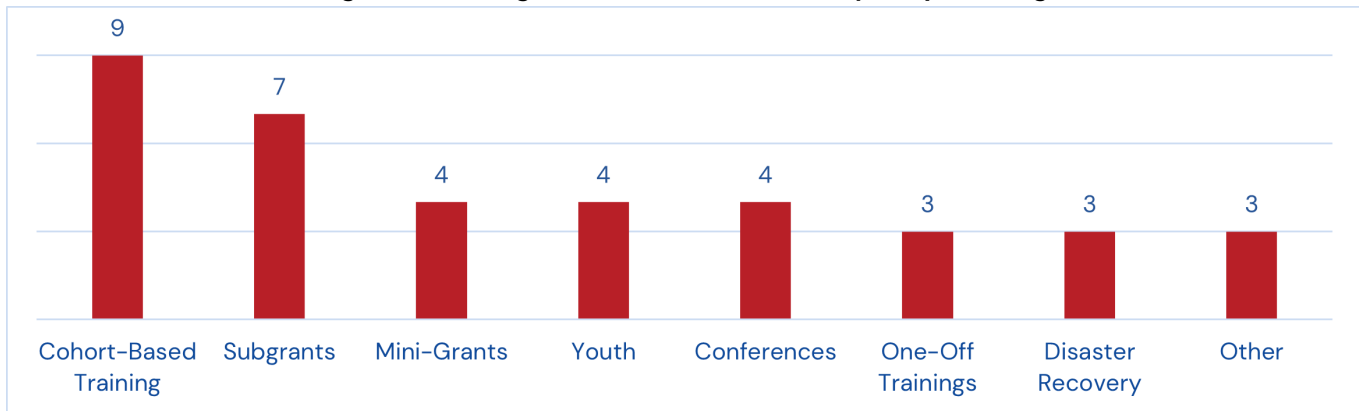
All of the participating grantees incorporated some component of training into their VGF grant programming, with two key associated promising practices:

- Developing a structured sequence of trainings—functioning as a pipeline in which individuals or organizations can move from a more basic training to a more advanced training—was a promising practice for building capacity and preparing for greater civic engagement.
- Incorporating a cohort model in trainings or facilitating other peer learning opportunities—such as those offered through Service Enterprise—was also a promising practice for building capacity among program beneficiaries.

In addition to training, the majority of grantees provided subgrants and/or mini-grants. Grantee training and capacity building activities also included youth initiatives and disaster recovery and just under half of the participating grantees developed or supported state-wide conferences. (See exhibit 2 for a breakdown of capacity building activities by number of VGF grantees.)

### Service Enterprise

Six of the participating VGF grantees offered the Service Enterprise volunteer engagement training program at some point during their FY2020 VGF grant. Service Enterprise is a program that seeks to strengthen nonprofit capacity through the fundamental and strategic use of volunteers (ALIVE, 2022). In the Service Enterprise model, training, support, and resources to nonprofits are either provided through local training hubs or national trainers. Beneficiaries shared high praise regarding the comprehensive, systematic, and organization-wide change it was able to achieve. VGF grantees were either designated as Service Enterprise Hubs—conducting the program themselves—or funded organizations who were hubs or on their way to become hubs. Training was delivered in a cohort model, which beneficiaries also greatly valued.

**EXHIBIT 2.—Number of VGF grantees using different VGF-funded capacity building activities**

Beyond the training and capacity building activities, six VGF grantees also used their grant to develop or support the use of state volunteer portals/platforms intended to link volunteers to volunteer opportunities. All VGF grantees and many program beneficiaries also reported collecting a variety of data to inform VGF grant progress reporting and to support continuous quality improvement of services.

Throughout the evaluation, two key challenges emerged among VGF grantees related to aspects of their program:

- First, while six participating grantees had a volunteer platform or network, they were not universally used by volunteer organizations or volunteers. Platforms or networks were online websites or tools that provided access for volunteer organizations to post available volunteer positions and potential volunteers to search for volunteer opportunities in their local community or broader state. The majority of grantees with a volunteer platform or network reported actively working to build awareness of their programs—through advertising and marketing or training.
- Second, the data collected and tracked by grantees was relatively inconsistent with varying ways of measuring of constructs, except for the two required national performance measures in the annual VGF Progress Report.<sup>4</sup> When given the opportunity to weigh in on any requested changes to the progress report metrics, grantees emphasized the need for qualitative data in the progress report, given the diversity of program activities and outcomes across and within grant programs, as well as the option to break out existing measures into subgroups based on demographic categories. Among program beneficiaries, there were also reported inconsistencies in how to measure key volunteering outcomes, such as retention.

## Emergent Issues in Volunteer Management and Engagement

Emergent issues in volunteer management and engagement included recent volunteerism trends; the COVID-19 pandemic; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).<sup>5</sup> Each of these issues had some influence on VGF grantees.

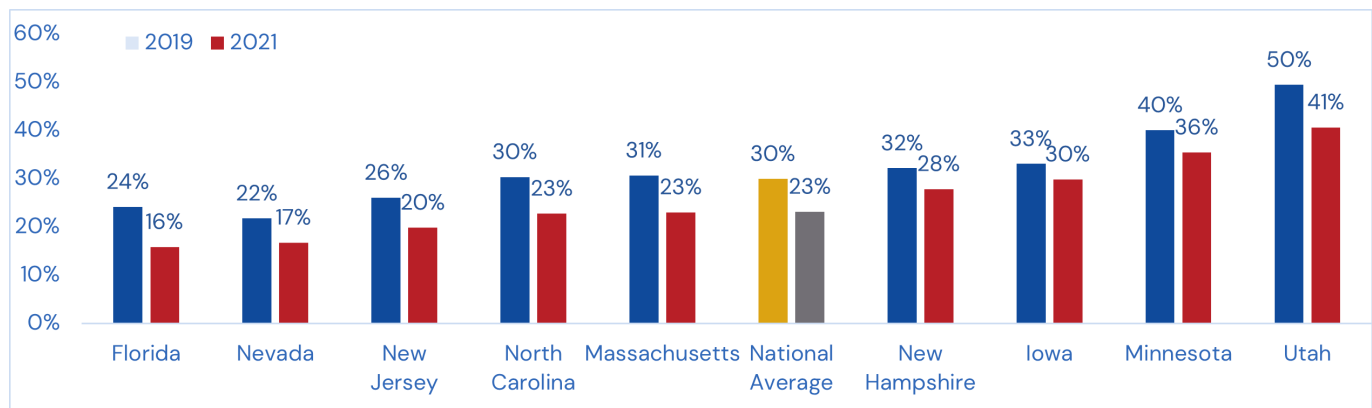
<sup>4</sup> Grantees collected two national performance measures on number of organizations receiving capacity building services and the number of organizations that increased their effectiveness, efficiency and/or program scale/reach. All grantees were also required to report the number of volunteers recruited or managed and the number of those served by those volunteers.

<sup>5</sup> In the context of this study, findings related to DEI include both internal practices of VGF grantees (i.e., considerations of subgrantees, diverse staff/trainers) and external services provided to program beneficiaries (i.e., training on inclusive volunteer recruitment practices and diversifying volunteers).



**Recent Volunteerism Trends.** Formal volunteering rates across all grantees declined during the COVID-19 pandemic according to the AmeriCorps Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement (see exhibit 3). Most grantees also had declines, while slightly smaller, in informal volunteering.

**EXHIBIT 3.—Formal volunteerism levels from 2019 and 2021: state and national levels**



**COVID-19 Pandemic.** Since the participating VGF grantees began their programs during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were significant disruptions to grant programming and services, such as shifting to virtual platforms and adjusting training content to help support the emerging challenges organizations faced in the pandemic. Multiple grantees found the virtual format of programming had higher viewership than previous in-person trainings, with one grantee noting it decreased cross-organization interactions as fewer organizations participated. Even so, participants valued the offerings, suggesting the smaller groups provided more tailored support. By the end of the evaluation in 2023, a few participating grantees and organizations noted their participant rates had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

**DEI.** Eight of the nine VGF grantees incorporated DEI into volunteer management and engagement. Across grantees, the framework and depth of DEI training and capacity building varied greatly and included topics such as:

- Recruiting diverse volunteers
- Preparedness resources for individuals with disabilities
- Diversifying volunteer programs
- Culturally competent services for immigrant populations
- Reducing economic barriers to volunteer retention
- Disrupting white supremacy within volunteerism best practices

These topics were addressed through trainings, conferences, the use of affinity groups, and other initiatives. The grantees that were most actively engaged in DEI were not just doing one-off DEI trainings but implementing DEI principles in their own work as an organization. For example, beyond incorporating DEI into volunteer management and engagement training and capacity building services, two grantees described prioritizing DEI in staffing and the process for awarding subgrants. VGF grantees and program beneficiaries noted the desire for the Service Enterprise curriculum to better incorporate strategies on how to ensure volunteer opportunities were inclusive and accounted for volunteer access to transportation and technology. This feedback had been provided to the Service Enterprise program implementer, which was reportedly working to address the

*A lot of the agencies lost volunteers, where some agencies ended up recruiting more volunteers [who] wanted to work in the emergency preparedness field. It was a little bit of a catch-22 for all the grantees. While it was more difficult for them to provide training, they pivoted, and started providing training online.*

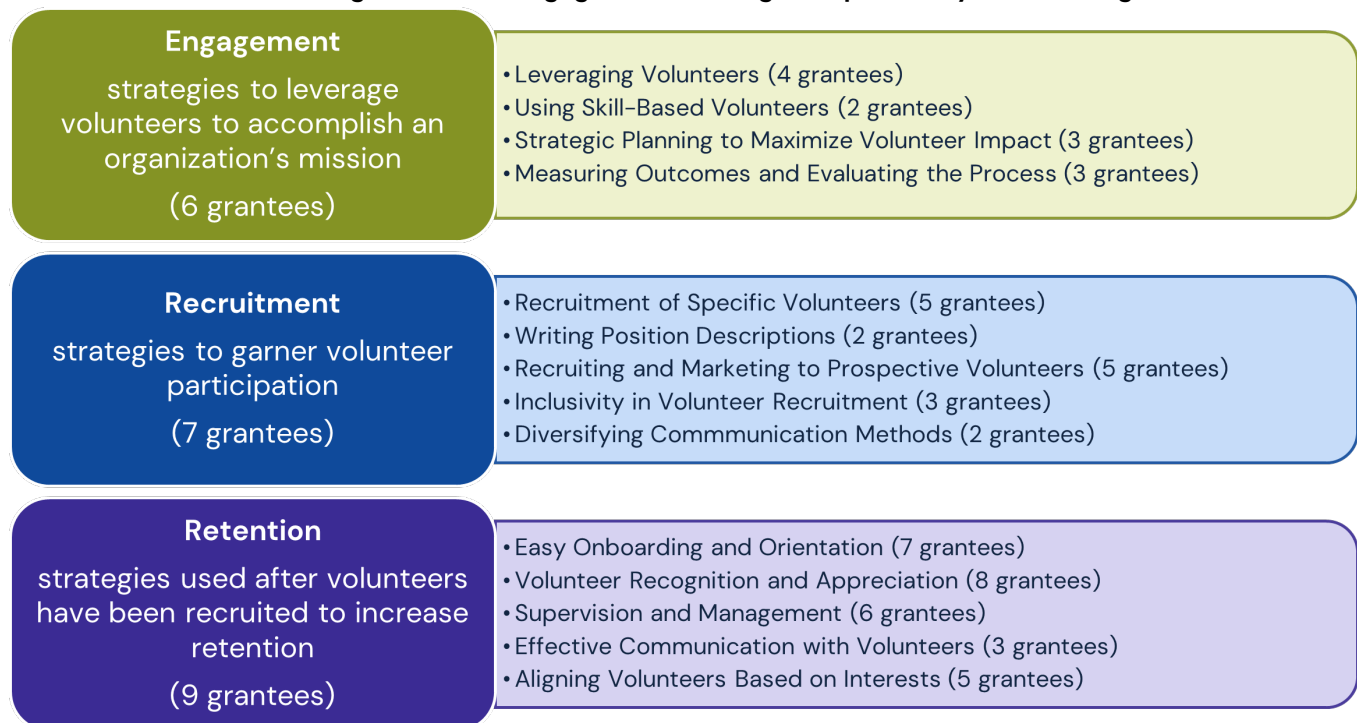
NJ Commission staff member

feedback. Several grantees also noted challenges pertaining to DEI, as this topic was heavily politicized at the state level, appearing to be a barrier for some of the grantees.

## Volunteer Management and Engagement Strategies and Outcomes

Participating program beneficiaries reported **strategies** they used and/or learned through their participation in VGF-supported training and capacity building activities, which centered on improving volunteer engagement, recruitment, and retention (see exhibit 4). All nine VGF grantees reported strategies and management practices focused on volunteer retention. Many of the prominent retention strategies described aligned with the findings from the prior research on volunteer engagement and management, such as the importance of volunteer recognition and appreciation (Cho et al., 2020; Huynh et al., 2012); aligning volunteers to tasks based on their interests (McBride & Lee, 2012); and easy and clear volunteer onboarding and orientation processes (Tang et al., 2010; Huynh et al., 2012; Newton et al., 2014). Seven of the grantees reported strategies related to volunteer recruitment, such as the recruitment of specific volunteers and recruiting and marketing to prospective volunteers—both of which echoed previous research that suggested explicitly signifying a desire to recruit from specific populations (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008) and matching recruitment messages to potential volunteers’ motives (Einolf, 2018) improved recruitment of volunteers. Lastly, six of the grantees reported strategies related to volunteer engagement, most frequently noting strategies related to leveraging volunteers to accomplish an organization’s mission and gaining staff buy-in on the use of volunteers.

**EXHIBIT 4.—Volunteer management and engagement strategies reported by number of grantees**



## In terms of outcomes, VGF grantees played a crucial role in supporting volunteer engagement and volunteer management.

According to the 2021 VGF progress reports, the nine participating VGF grantees were able to provide over 2,000 organizations with capacity building services, with over 1,900 organizations increasing their effectiveness, efficiency, and/or program scale/reach. At the volunteer level, VGF grantees reported over 130,000 volunteers were recruited or managed, then serving over one million hours. Additionally, VGF grantee staff shared in interviews the biggest successes and outcomes they had achieved through their grant. These outcomes were centered around increased reach and recognition and improved services for beneficiaries:

- **Increased Reach and Recognition.** Four grantees shared they had successfully transitioned to online or virtual services and/or increased their access to new organizations.
- **Improved Services for Beneficiaries.** Two VGF grantees shared that they provided long-term support to organizations served, paid attention to member needs, and created new volunteer management staff positions.
- **Program Beneficiary outcomes** aligned with key focus areas of improved engagement, recruitment, retention, and increased organizational and/or individual staff capacity.
- **Volunteer Engagement.** Program beneficiaries of all nine grantees noted volunteer engagement outcomes from generally better leveraging of volunteers to the promotion of organizational change through Service Enterprise.
- **Volunteer Recruitment.** Program beneficiaries from eight of the grantees noted increased and/or improved volunteer recruitment. Several grantees reported increased reach due to the VGF grant, either because of increased recruitment of volunteers or increased partnership with organizations. A volunteer connector subgrantee reported they expanded the types of organizations to which they sent volunteers, while another grantee hired an outreach coordinator, funded through their mini-grant, to reach more people in the community.
- **Volunteer Retention.** Program beneficiaries from six grantees reported improved volunteer retention. Among six of the eight VGF grantees that administered the beneficiary survey, one third or more respondents from each grantee indicated the VGF grant had a substantial or transformative improvement on their organization's ability to engage and retain volunteers.
- **Increased Capacity.** Program beneficiaries from seven grantees reported increased capacity occurring on various scales. Individual outcomes included increased confidence and networking among volunteer managers and organizational outcomes included increased recognition in the community or state. Obtaining certifications was noted to be achieved on both scales, depending on the scope of the program as either a national certification like Service Enterprise or a state-specific certification developed by the grantee. Across commissions and program beneficiaries alike, a shared outcome noted was the importance of being recognized as a thought and/or planning leader in the field of volunteer management/engagement.

*We've all survived a national disaster. FEMA [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.*

MAVA staff member

## Volunteer Management and Engagement Challenges and Needs

Looking towards the future, VGF grantees shared needs centered on the request for more resources and support in managing and sustaining their VGF grant. Beneficiaries' needs centered on requests for more support on measuring outcomes, recruiting diverse volunteers, and increasing volunteer engagement and

impact. For example, program beneficiaries shared challenges tracking and managing volunteer data, expressing a need for additional support on how to manage and track volunteer data and how to streamline the data collected. Organizations who participated in Service Enterprise expressed the need for more opportunities to discuss how to diversify their organization's volunteer base. Finally, staff from one grantee emphasized they needed sustainable funding to allow them to continue offering programs that had already been implemented. Staff noted that impactful initiatives took time to build, and many of the programs were beginning to gain traction three years after they were initially awarded. But without sustained funding, they would be sunset at the grant's conclusion.

## Strengthening Evaluation Capacity to Build Evidence on Volunteer Management and Engagement

Evaluation capacity building was provided over the course of 12 hour-long technical assistance sessions delivered on a monthly basis delivered between December 2021 and November 2022. Designed to enhance participants' capacity as educated consumers of evaluation, these sessions were divided into three modules: (1) Planning Evaluation; (2) Implementing Evaluation; and (3) Reporting and Using Evaluation. The curriculum was based on the AmeriCorps evaluation capacity building core curriculum with extensive tailoring to the volunteer management and state service commission context, especially through examples and discussion prompts that invited participants to apply evaluation concepts to their experiences.

In total, 25 VGF grantee representatives (e.g., project directors, grantee staff, partners) participated in at least one of the evaluation capacity building sessions, ranging from 1 to 2 representatives from each of 12 grantee organizations that had initially agreed to participate in the evaluation as of spring 2022.

BCT Partners, subcontractor to ICF, conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of the evaluation capacity building sessions to achieve two primary objectives: (1) to provide formative feedback to help enhance the curriculum and delivery of the sessions to better align with grantees' needs, and (2) to provide summative feedback regarding the degree to which the sessions led to changes in participants' knowledge of and attitudes toward evaluation. Data sources for the evaluation included the following:

- A session-specific post-survey administered at the conclusion of each presentation. Results from these surveys were used to calculate a composite satisfaction rating on a 1–5 scale for each session and assess participant knowledge of session content. The post-session surveys also included open-ended opportunities for participants to describe what they liked and what could be improved in the session's content or delivery.
- Direct observations of all sessions.
- A pre- and post-survey that assessed participants' knowledge of and attitudes toward evaluation topics at the beginning and conclusion of the entire curriculum.

For the evaluation capacity building sessions, perceived knowledge of evaluation topics increased across all topics, measured on the pre-post surveys. The topics in which participants' perceived knowledge increased the most were recognizing how quantitative and qualitative analysis was performed; identifying common data analysis terms; and recognizing who in their organization should collect data. Even so, participants shared mixed feedback on the sessions. The highest reported satisfaction was for the sessions on Data Collection Techniques, Data Analysis, and Using Evaluation for Program Improvement, as they provided the most tangible content that could immediately be applied and provided opportunities to get colleagues' feedback on challenges or approaches. Early in the evaluation capacity building sessions, some participants shared they felt the materials were not relevant to their duties, were too basic, and did not sufficiently address complex evaluation challenges in their field. For subsequent sessions, additional time was allotted for discussion and

more tailored examples included, with generally higher satisfaction scores. Nevertheless, feedback on the sessions being too general persisted with a few participants.

## Recommendations

Based on evaluation findings, the following recommendations for AmeriCorps and VGF grantees were provided for consideration in future VGF grant implementation and implementation of similar programming outside of VGF.

### Recommendations for AmeriCorps

- **Continue to offer flexibility in use of VGF grant funds.** VGF grantee staff expressed gratitude regarding the flexibility of the VGF funds and grant and suggested that flexible funding opportunities continue to be provided to support volunteer engagement, recruitment, and retention.
- **Collaborate with commissions to identify how volunteer engagement and management practices can be sustained with grant changes.** With AmeriCorps's recent shift to expand VGF grant awards to nonprofit organizations, beyond state service commissions, commissions have expressed concerns for their future and ability to sustain services. AmeriCorps may wish to engage with FY2020 grantees that were not funded again in FY2023 to discuss strategies for sustainability, support long-term benefits to statewide volunteer engagement and management practices, and maintain rapport with the state service commissions that are critical partners to AmeriCorps.
- **Consider the future directions for supporting volunteer engagement and volunteer management programming.** The pandemic highlighted a shift in volunteering and for many state service commissions and program beneficiaries the traditional model of volunteer engagement and management was no longer feasible. As AmeriCorps seeks to use VGF to support the next chapter in volunteer management and engagement, state service commissions—state partners of AmeriCorps responsible for engaging citizens in service—should be key contributors to the discussion about the future of VGF.
- **Consider more qualitative measures in VGF progress reports and use of optional demographic subgroups for key performance metrics.** VGF grantees emphasized the need for AmeriCorps to collect qualitative data in progress reports on grant accomplishments. While there may be too many varied differences in VGF grantee program models and activities for one or two measures to fully capture the impact of VGF across grantees, there are still several similarities in programming and measures broken out by subgroups or program strategies is an alternate approach but would require the VGF grant to be more prescriptive and less flexible and may be challenging or costly for state service commissions to implement. Volunteer retention is a key outcome of interest for volunteer organizations, but caution should be urged against standardizing this metric in progress reports as retention may have different meanings and different desired outcomes in different contexts.
- **Consider using a participatory approach for future studies involving state service commissions.** VGF grantees had a lot of feedback regarding the appropriateness and relevancy of various evaluation methodological approaches as well as the evaluation capacity building sessions content. AmeriCorps may wish to consider using a participatory process to engage commission staff earlier in project planning—and throughout the life of the project—to ensure their perspectives are reflected, various program models are considered, and ultimately, the evaluation is more nuanced and authentic.



### Recommendations for VGF Grantees

- **Incorporate opportunities for volunteer organizations to network and collaborate with other organizations.** Cohort-based peer learning training and capacity building opportunities were valued among training participants which allowed VGF grantees to not only educate and support smaller nonprofits on volunteer engagement and management practices, but also to create communities of practice to support increased competency across the state.
- **Diversify offerings to incorporate a multi-faceted approach to provide training and capacity building at the organization level and individual level.** VGF grantees that diversified their training and capacity building to account for both organizational level change (volunteer engagement) and practices of volunteer coordinators (volunteer management) appeared to not only better serve participants, but also were able to continue to offer ongoing support as organizations grew in their own capacity.
- **Consider identifying new metrics to track use of volunteer platforms, not only in site traction but meaningful use and matching between volunteers and organizations.** During periods of high need, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or natural disasters, the quick mobilization of volunteers is crucial. Collecting relevant data on the use or success of volunteer platforms in matching potential volunteers to organizations will provide VGF grantees with actionable data to inform planning.
- **Incorporate DEI into training and capacity building practices.** Going beyond offering trainings focused on inclusivity in volunteerism, diversifying volunteer organization's volunteer base, and understanding the how increase the inclusivity of the language used, VGF grantees should consider how they can incorporate DEI practices and principles into their own work, such as how subgrants are awarded.

## Limitations

This study provides important information for understanding VGF AmeriCorps grantees and the services they provided to program beneficiaries. However, several limitations were identified that readers should be aware of when interpreting the findings.

**Due to staff turnover and availability, there was high attrition among participating VGF grantees.** The initial study design invited all 14 of the active FY2020 VGF grants, with ultimately 9 grantees agreeing to participate in the evaluation due to challenges with staff turnover and availability.

**The survey sample for the beneficiary survey was low.** Due to the variations in VGF program service models, the sample size of survey administered varied substantially. Participating grantees identified the program beneficiaries among whom they would like to administer the beneficiary survey. Some grantees administered the survey to only their subgrantees—whom may be very familiar with volunteer management topics—while others sent it all individuals who had ever participated in any VGF-funded or partially-funded activity. Given this variation, comparative survey findings across states should be considered with caution.

**While some grantees customized their surveys, not all chose to do so.** Grantees were given the opportunity to customize their program beneficiary survey according to their program model. However, not all grantees opted for customizations. Therefore comparison of some survey findings across participating grantees is not feasible.

**Data collection was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.** The data collection included in the evaluation was collected from January 2022 to July 2023. Due to the pandemic, all of the participating sites opted for the site visit to be conducted virtually. For some grantees it was difficult to connect with program implementers, beneficiaries, and/or volunteers virtually.

**Unable to ascertain distinguishable differences in outcomes between grantees who funded positions to support VGF programming and those who did not.** VGF grantees were not explicitly asked if funds were used to support staffing full- or part-time positions that supported VGF programming and activities. Use of funding for positions was determined based on VGF grant applications and any relevant information shared incidentally during site visits. Without intentional data collection on funded staff positions, the evaluation was not able to answer the question of how VGF funded positions influenced grantee outcomes.

**The study is not causal.** This study describes the implementation of the VGF grant by AmeriCorps grantees and the self-reported outcomes of program participants. It does not examine the impact of the VGF grant, meaning that it does not answer the question of whether participant outcomes were the result of the training and capacity building from the VGF grant.

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### 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](https://www.americorps.gov).

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