



**VOLUNTEER  
MANAGEMENT FOR  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS  
DURING COVID-19**

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## Introduction

Studies have shown managing volunteers effectively can help an organization achieve its' goals, result in positive environmental outcomes, and improve the health and wellbeing of participants. COVID-19 is a new coronavirus outbreak that has caused the U.S. to declare a national public health emergency to slow the spread of this disease. Without strong action being taken on the part of nonprofit leadership, COVID-19 is an event that threatens many organizations with extinction.

Numerous environmental organizations have already experienced disruptions to normal business operations and will, undoubtedly, experience far more in the months to come. For some organizations, this may mean suspending in-classroom education opportunities, events, or closing buildings to visitors. Environmental organizations in the human services arena will likely see an increased demand for services beyond their normal work such as food pantries and food waste collection, along with requests to conduct environmental health research.

Regardless of the approach your organization takes to survive the pandemic, volunteers who are already engaged with your organization remain a fundamental resource as you navigate these unusual circumstances. Therefore, your organization needs to strategize how to utilize volunteer skills while protecting them at the same time. Between staff arrangements, adjusting planned events, dealing with impacts on budgets, and following regulations many organizations are overwhelmed. Furthermore, very few resources discussing the impact of COVID-19 on environmental organizations and their response exist.

This manual is a collection of strategies based on research designed to assist environmental organizations with managing volunteers during the pandemic, in order to achieve your long term and short term organizational goals. In addition to this information, examples are provided to illustrate how some environmental organizations have put the strategies into practice. A variety of on-line resources are also provided at the end of this manual.



## **COVID-19**

According to the CDC, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. It spreads between people who are in close contact with one another and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, local governments around the nation have enacted stay at home orders for residents. Stay at home directives encourage people to leave home as needed and only continue the operation of essential businesses to protect the health and wellbeing of citizens. To protect volunteers and employees, organizations have explored teleworking and staggered work shifts.

### **Economic effect**

For many environmental nonprofit organizations, spring and summer are the busiest time of year. During this time, organizations rely on events for fundraising, education, and volunteer recruitment. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced organizations to rethink typical revenue generating activities that may endanger the health and wellbeing of the general public. As a result of limited operations, the future of nonprofits and their employees are in jeopardy. A study revealed 60% of environmental nonprofit organizations surveyed experienced revenue loss. This reported revenue loss contributed to the more than 1.64 million nonprofit workers in the United States that lost their jobs during the first three months of the pandemic.

### **Environmental Effect**

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to indirectly effect the environment in positive and negative ways. In the early months of the pandemic, widespread shutdowns caused a reduction in carbon emissions from travel and consumption. Global carbon emissions decreased 17% compared to last year. As carbon emissions decreased, the nation's largest cities saw a drastic improvement in air quality. Although emission levels experienced a nationwide decrease, not all consequences of the pandemic have been positive. Local waste levels have heightened due to the suspension of recycling activities and reduction of consumption. Additionally, food retailers have gone back to using plastic bags to address health concerns with the reuse of paper bags. While the nation slowly begins to reopen, the health of the environment will be at risk. According to a report by BloombergNEF in June, governments have committed \$12 trillion to reinvigorating economies, with around 5% earmarked for climate-friendly initiatives. As businesses push to make up for pandemic times, there is a chance pollution levels will surpass where they were before the pandemic.

## Pandemic Volunteer Management

Organizational leadership managing volunteers throughout COVID-19 will play a major role in achieving your organizations mission during and after the pandemic.

Environmental nonprofit organizations should have a volunteer management strategy that aims to retain and motivate volunteers during the pandemic. Managing volunteers during the pandemic requires reviewing your mission, setting goals, establishing frequent communication, considering funding, protecting volunteers, and measuring success.

### Mission

COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted organizations ability to achieve their mission, it has in many cases shifted the needs of their target populations. Long-term missions will be difficult to achieve by nonprofit organizations unless they are able to survive the current impact of the shift in short term operations. Managing volunteers effectively can help an organization revise their mission, achieve goals, and provide relief to the community during the pandemic.

Nonprofits that measure and make strategic decisions based on volunteer impact have a greater potential to adjust and maximize the organizations ability to succeed. In order to make decisions on the organizations mission during this time, one must first decide what type of organization they will have become in response to COVID-19. The three common categories of organizational responses are hibernators, responders, and hybrids.

***Hibernators*** are completely unable to offer services during the pandemic. Hibernators include organizations whose buildings are closed, staff are laid off or furloughed, and who typically work with school-based education programs. These organizations need to reduce their monthly cash burn-rate to the absolute minimum and postpone all activity with hopes of surviving until restart is possible.

***Responders*** have seen the demand for their services go up because of COVID-19. While there is a demand, they face increased difficulty and cost in delivering essential programs safely. Responders include food distribution and virtual education programs. The challenge for responders is having the funding to maintain services. Federal, state, and local governments are typically a funding source for responders, but inconsistency and timing of funds can be an issue.

***Hybrids*** offer programs that can be provided with alterations despite the COVID-19 pandemic, but programs are not directly related to reducing its spread or mitigating its short-term impact. These programs might include volunteer training and development, advocacy, education etc. If an organization is not able to assist with immediate COVID-19 efforts, they may decide to maintain focus on their core services while making necessary adaptations. Hybrid organizations face many decisions centered around the health and safety of volunteers, staff, and the public. They also face uncertainty surrounding public participation in programming offered, and how funders will view the importance of their programming during the pandemic.

## Volunteer Engagement

A large number of organization's volunteer programs have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some organizations have had to reduce volunteer opportunities, limit volunteer hours, or put programs on hold completely. There is still uncertainty surrounding how long COVID-19 is going to impact organization's ability to host in-person volunteer opportunities the way they were prior to the pandemic. Because of this unknown, it is crucial to ensure volunteer engagement in the present is preparing the organization for long-term impact.

### Setting Goals

Goals help provide a nonprofit with steps needed to achieve its mission. Setting tangible goals enable organizations to maximize the potential of their volunteer group.

Utilizing the SMART goals framework can help create the best goals for nonprofit organization. The breakdown for smart is:

- **S-** specific organizational goals should be clear to all stakeholders involved in obtaining them. Specific goals should also include in-depth details about what your nonprofit is hoping to achieve, why, and how the goal will help achieve your mission.
- **M-** measurable goals allow volunteers to understand where you are in the goal attainability process and how they can be involved.
- **A-** attainability ensures your organization has the access to resources and time to achieve goals. Additionally, goals align with the organization's mission in the end.
- **R-** relevant goals
- **T-** time bound



Prior to the pandemic, the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) goals were to lead research on conservation of forest and marine systems, develop resources for workshops and conferences, lead and implement citizen science projects, and educate the general public. The pandemic caused SERC to assess what services they could still provide and how volunteers will be utilized. Since COVID-19, the Smithsonian's new goals have been to provide virtual research and education opportunities, keep volunteers engaged in the education process, and provide program resources for other educators.

## Communication

A decrease in activity at many non-profit organizations due to COVID-19 has caused volunteers to become restless. Organizations have had to consider how they can maximize the ability of their volunteer program to help the organization achieve its' goals. Communication serves as a critical reminder to volunteers that their contribution to the organization is key to reaching their goals. Communication also helps volunteers of hibernating organizations still feel connected to the organization. Being transparent during this time of uncertainty is one way to build trust and reassure volunteers that they are part of a community. Strengthening relationships with volunteers through communication will keep the momentum going when the pandemic has concluded. Here are a few tips on how to communicate with volunteers:

- Provide a clear and concise call to action.
- Be responsive.
- Communicate across multiple channels.
- Share key resources.

The information being provided to volunteers should clearly detail:

- How will COVID-19 impact programs and services be provided immediately and in the future?
- How can volunteers help during this time?
- If there are no volunteer opportunities currently available, in what other ways can they give?
- What new guidelines are volunteers required to follow to keep themselves and others safe?

The Smithsonian Environmental Research Center has kept their volunteers engaged by communicating through weekly newsletters. Volunteers receive a weekly email that includes information such as updates on reopening, opportunities, and various resources to keep them informed. In addition to the newsletter, every Wednesday at noon, SERC has been holding a virtual lunch and learn. Lunch and Learn gives volunteers an opportunity to engage with one another while learning about an educational topic from an outside expert.



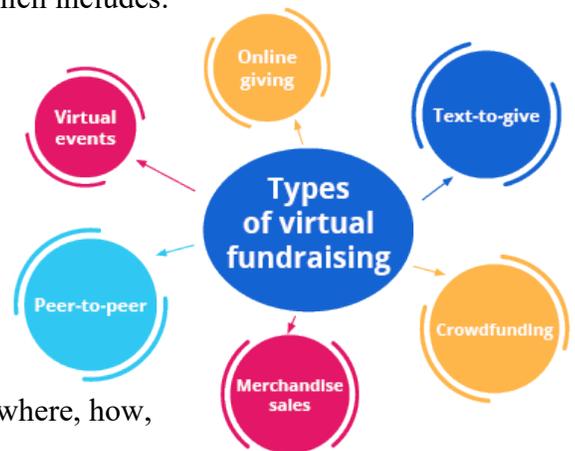
## Funding

COVID-19 is changing the way nonprofit organizations connect with donors, engage fundraising prospects, and reach program goals. As nonprofits continue to grapple with the economic impact of the pandemic, volunteers are a great resource to help navigate grants, hardship relief, and loan programs. In addition to volunteers providing resources for fundraising efforts, now is the perfect time to convert volunteers into donors. Research performed by Fidelity Charitable found that 79% of financial donors also volunteer. With COVID-19 lockdowns and regulations hindering volunteer programs, nonprofits should use fundraising events to keep volunteers engaged and provide them with an avenue to give. A few strategies to convert donors to volunteers are:

- Communicate volunteer opportunities and how volunteerism impacts the organization positively.
- Integrate donation requests and volunteer opportunity promotion.
- Ask donors if they would be interested in learning about volunteer opportunities.
- Share volunteerism impact stories with financial donors.

Virtual fundraising events have also picked up steam since the pandemic. There is a wide variety of virtual fundraising event types including live stream events, webinars, virtual race, virtual scavenger hunt, virtual hike, virtual luncheon. For organizations considering virtual events, it is important to have a strategic plan which includes:

- **Vision-** The vision details the why and the process you will use to achieve it.
- **The right technology partners-** The technology used should create a convenient experience for donors.
- **A process for converting volunteers to donors-** Focus on how to integrate the relationship between volunteers and donors.
- **A communication strategy-** Virtual fundraising events need to communicate when, where, how, and why.



The Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education has made it easy for potential donors to contribute. You can support MAEOE by shopping on AmazonSmile. The AmazonSmile Foundation donates 0.5% of the price of all eligible products to registered charitable organizations. Visit <https://org.amazon.com/> to learn how to register your organization.

## Protecting Volunteers

It is imperative nonprofit organizations protect volunteers who provide services during the pandemic. While a lack of resources at some organizations will force them to temporarily pause volunteer activities, others will need to adjust opportunities moving forward to protect volunteers. Putting proper protocols in place will not only protect the health of volunteers, but also that of staff and the community being serviced. Three tips organizations can follow for the health and safety of the volunteer community is:

- Encourage volunteers to stay home if they are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 including fever, cough, shortness of breath.
- Encourage volunteers to practice social distancing during all in person activities.
- Encourage frequent handwashing and use of hand sanitizer when that is not possible.
- Explore staggered work shifts and virtual opportunities as much as possible.

The Smithsonian Environmental Research Center has prohibited any volunteers from entering their campus at this time. SERC has organized Google Classrooms for their volunteers as an alternative. Google Classrooms enables volunteers to share content that will help the organization with curriculum development of virtual programs. Volunteers who work on citizen science research have begun engaging in research projects that don't require in person field work.

## SAFE VOLUNTEERING DURING COVID-19

### How can managers and agencies adapt?



**Follow safety and social distancing guidelines**



**Technology is your friend**



**Don't lose sight of your goals!**

## **Measuring Volunteer Impact**

Understanding volunteer motivation, quantifying the work performed by volunteers, and assessing how those activities impact outcomes is necessary for organizations to grow and or maintain a successful volunteer base. Various volunteer management software exist to aid with volunteer management. The three most common methods used to measure volunteer impact are direct observation, volunteer satisfaction surveys, and data collection.

### ***Direct observation***

Direct observation entails organization staff thoroughly examining volunteer activity and the effect it has on the individuals involved. This method is often used because testimonials are what donors are most interested in reading and can increase the likelihood that they will make more than one donation. Some questions to answer during direct observation are:

1. Does the volunteer activity produce high participation numbers?
2. Are volunteers gaining positive outcomes from the activities they are involved in?
3. Is the community volunteers are servicing gaining positive outcomes?
4. What barriers need to be addressed to improve the volunteer experience?

### ***Volunteer Satisfaction Survey***

Creating a strategic volunteer satisfaction survey is a great way to assess areas of your nonprofit's program that are strong, areas that could use improvement, and the impact of volunteers on organizational goals. Surveys should be no longer than 15 questions and each question should relate to the organizational goals. Using a scale of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", common questions to ask on a volunteer survey are:

1. How long have you been a volunteer with this organization?
2. What made you volunteer with this organization?
3. I received new volunteer training.
4. I understand my role as a volunteer in regard to the organizations mission.
5. Volunteer opportunities are communicated effectively.;
6. I have received enough training to be successful in my role.
7. I receive a fair amount of recognition for my work.
8. I sometimes feel my volunteer work is meaningless.
9. My supervisor and or governing board shows interest in my feelings.
10. My efforts to do a good job are seldom blocked.
11. Many of the rules and procedures make doing a good job difficult.
12. I like the things I do during my volunteer experience.
13. I enjoy the volunteers I work with.
14. I would recommend friends or family volunteer with this organization.
15. How can the volunteer experience with your organization be improved?

## Data Collection

Data collection is frequently used as proof of progress towards meeting the organizations goals. It also measures the impact of volunteers on achieving goals. Spreadsheets on applications such as Microsoft Excel and Google Spreadsheets are a popular choice for organizations because they are affordable, easy to use, and most effective at measuring impact. Some examples of impact measures are:

1. The number of virtual program participants.
2. How much food is being harvested and or collected for distribution.
3. The number of donors participating in fundraising events

## Reopening

Discussions surrounding reopening businesses differ nationwide. For specific details on what phase of reopening your area is in, please visit your local government webpage. As reopening begins in some areas, non-profit organizations will need to answer what should volunteer engagement look like as we move forward with the next phase of COVID-19 response. Before inviting volunteers to return to action, the following things should be considered:

- **What Do Your Volunteers Think?-** Administering a survey, facilitating conversation, or focus groups are a great way to identify volunteer concerns or needs before returning.
- **Update Organizational Policies-** Update your policies to ensure that volunteers are included in the organization's reopening plans. What policies will apply to volunteers? How will you handle a volunteer that can't or won't adhere to policies? If a volunteer comes in with a fever or cough how will you respond? Can you provide easy access to personal protective equipment?
- **Build on the Progress-** Now is the time to evaluate what worked, what didn't, and build onto volunteer opportunities and engagement strategies. Can you continue virtual trainings, meetings, other activities?
- **Respect Boundaries-** How can volunteers in high risk populations still contribute to the volunteer community? Do you give these groups priority over safer volunteering opportunities?



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As a public health precaution, the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center remains temporarily closed to the public until further notice, including buildings, trails and other parts of the campus. Due to the rapidly changing nature of the situation, we are not announcing a reopening date at this time and will provide updates on our website and social media.



## Conclusion

Many environmental nonprofits are currently facing significant disruptions to the services they provide and funding streams due to COVID-19. The answer for how to respond will be different for every organization based on multiple factors. Regardless of the approach each organization takes to survive the pandemic, the volunteers who are already engaged with your organization should remain at the forefront of your solution. The work each individual environmental organization is doing is very important in the grand scheme of achieving environmental sustainability. It is my hopes that you feel motivated and confident in your organizations efforts to tackle this pandemic head on. Below you will find a Volunteer Engagement Response Plan worksheet to help you reflect on your current volunteer management plan and brainstorm ways to plan to respond to specific needs of your organization, staff and volunteers.

Special thank you to Jillie Drutz, public engagement program specialist at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, for her contribution to this research.



# Thank You!

# Volunteer Engagement Response Plan

Using the information provided in the manual, reflect on your organizations current volunteer engagement response plan for COVID-19 and brainstorm ways it can be improved.

## **Mission**

Briefly describe your organization's mission and how volunteers contribute to that during your organization's "normal state". How has your mission changed? How has the role of volunteers changed? How can volunteer's best help your organization achieve its new mission?

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## **Setting goals**

What goals have you set to help your organization achieve its mission? What roles do volunteers play in achieving your goals? Utilize the *SMART* goals framework.

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**Communication**

What is the communication plan for your volunteers? What information is being communicated to your volunteers?

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**Funding**

How is your organization keeping funders engaged? How are volunteers being utilized in your fundraising strategy?

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**Measuring Volunteer Impact**

How will your organization measure volunteer impact?

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**Challenges**

What challenges have your organization faced with volunteer engagement during COVID-19? Will implementing any improvements to your response plan cause new challenges?

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**Notes**

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