



# The Value of Volunteering

Habitat for Humanity, like many other nonprofit organizations, relies on volunteers to achieve its mission. Volunteers play key roles across the scope of nonprofit operations, from working in offices to supporting programming in communities.

Volunteering can also take many different forms. Long-term volunteering is a more traditional form of volunteering, while episodic volunteering has recently grown in popularity, accounting for up to 60% of all formal volunteering. Virtual volunteering has existed for years but has grown in popularity thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic; 51% of organizations surveyed on VolunteerMatch, a third-party volunteer matching site, offered virtual volunteering tasks in 2020, and 29% of survey respondents indicated that they participated in virtual volunteering. Microvolunteering is a form of virtual volunteering, while skills-based and professional volunteering leverage highly skilled individuals who provide technical skills or professional services for free. Finally, strategic leadership volunteering includes board and committee members who help to establish policy and guide organizations to achieve their mission.

The value of volunteering to the organizations served is well-known, but volunteering also generates benefits for the volunteers themselves, such as increased longevity and improved physical and mental health. It also benefits the communities in which the volunteers live and serve.

## This evidence brief:

- Explores behaviors and trends in volunteers and types of volunteering.
- Features the benefits of volunteering to individuals.
- Illustrates how volunteering benefits local communities.
- Highlights how volunteers help Habitat.



**Long-term volunteering:** Regular, recurring volunteering with one organization.

**Episodic volunteering:** Volunteering for one instance or event (for instance, spending a few hours making phone calls to Habitat supporters as part of an annual fundraising appeal).

**Virtual volunteering:** Volunteer tasks performed remotely online.

**Microvolunteering:** A low-commitment, singular instance of volunteering by performing “microtasks.”

**Skilled and professional volunteering:** Skilled volunteering is performed by individuals who perform tasks that require more technical skills, based on experience and expertise, than the average volunteer possesses. Professional volunteering is performed by individuals or companies that donate their time in a professional capacity, performing professional services, often where a certification, accreditation or license is required.

**Strategic leadership volunteering:** Volunteering on a board, committee or other such entity to help guide an organization’s work, including establishing policy.

## Who volunteers, and how?

**Over a quarter of U.S. adults engage in formal volunteering of some sort, and the age of a volunteer tends to influence how much they volunteer.<sup>1,2</sup>**

- Younger adults (ages 35-64) volunteer at higher rates than those who are 65 and older, although older volunteers spend more time volunteering per year than younger individuals.<sup>3</sup>
- Engaging and encouraging youth volunteers can have lasting impacts, as volunteering in youth can encourage volunteering later in life. Individuals who reported participating in community service during high school were more likely to report volunteering in college and beyond. Furthermore, individuals who volunteered during high school and college were three times more likely to volunteer after college than individuals who did no volunteer work in high school or college.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Volunteering habits and motivations differ across age groups, as different generations seek different experiences and outcomes through volunteering.**

- **Baby boomer volunteers** – those born between 1945 and 1963 – are attracted to opportunities in which they can provide their expertise or apply their skills. They want to make a significant contribution over a short period, and they value understanding the impact of their volunteer time.<sup>6</sup>
- **Millennials** – those born between 1980 and 1998 – are typified as having a strong social conscience, and 90% say they believe someone like them can make a difference in the world. A cause more likely motivates them than a specific organization, which means they prefer flexible volunteer opportunities over long-term commitments.<sup>7</sup>

## Why volunteer?

**Although many volunteers are motivated by a sense of altruism, individual benefits accrue through volunteering. Research has shown that volunteering is associated with improved health and well-being, including increased longevity, adoption of healthy lifestyles, and reduction in depression and stress.<sup>8</sup>**

- Volunteering during college is correlated with personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life and life satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> The relationship between regular volunteering and life satisfaction is strongest among those volunteers who reported lower initial levels of well-being.<sup>10</sup>
- The health and well-being impacts of volunteering are particularly notable within the elderly population (those 51 and older). In one study, 20% of elderly volunteers reported that their health was better since joining a volunteer program, while 50% of volunteers reported that they were overall “better off” since joining a program.<sup>11</sup>

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**Volunteering also benefits workforce and career development, both for individuals and for employers who support volunteering. Volunteering can provide opportunities for skill development and to explore new fields of work and has been associated with increased success in job searching.**

- Individuals who volunteer while out of work have a 27% higher chance of finding employment after being out of work than nonvolunteers.<sup>12</sup>
- In one study, 82% of hiring managers reported they were “more likely” to choose a job applicant with volunteer experience, and 85% reported that they were willing to overlook other résumé flaws if a candidate includes volunteer experience on their résumé.<sup>13</sup>
- There is also a link between volunteering and perception of skill-building; research found that for every 100 hours of volunteering, the number of reported skills acquired increased by 17%.<sup>14</sup>
- Employers further benefit from their employees’ volunteering through improved workplace behaviors. Employees who volunteer and find high levels of meaning in their volunteer work exhibit higher levels of occupational citizenship behaviors (workplace behaviors that favorably contribute to work outcomes and environment).<sup>15</sup>
- Corporate-sponsored volunteerism is also associated with improved firm reputation, profitability and stakeholder engagement.<sup>16</sup> A study by Deloitte found that 89% of respondents believe that companies that sponsor volunteer activities offer a better overall working environment than those that do not, and 77% of respondents said that corporate-sponsored volunteer opportunities are essential to well-being.<sup>17</sup>

**In particular, volunteering helps grow key leadership skills and traits, such as communication and management, and can support career advancement. Skilled volunteering can provide even further leadership and development opportunities.**

- One survey found that 80% of hiring managers agree that active volunteers advance into leadership roles more easily, while 85% report that skills-based volunteering improves communication skills and 88% believe skills-based volunteering helps develop strong character traits.<sup>18</sup>

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- Additionally, 67% of volunteers surveyed report an increase in their leadership skills, while 80% report both an increase in their communication skills and an increase in their influencing abilities.<sup>19</sup>

**One specific form of volunteering that greatly benefits both organizations and the volunteers is volunteer board leadership. Nonprofit board membership offers an opportunity to both benefit an organization and cultivate key skill areas that can improve performance in the workplace.**

- Chief executives of nonprofit organizations across the U.S. overwhelmingly cited their boards as positive contributors to defining strategic priorities for their organizations (76%) and influencing their organizations’ overall performance (79%).<sup>20</sup>
- Meanwhile, 80% of employees who serve on a nonprofit board report that they feel as though they are better leaders at work thanks to their board experience, with 77% reporting they are more confident and 60% reporting they feel more qualified for promotion. Respondents rated the value of their board experience in helping to develop professional skills as a 72 out of 100.<sup>21</sup>
- Board experience also greatly contributes to employee behaviors in advancing diversity, equity and inclusion within the workplace. Because of their board experience, 78% of survey respondents report that they listen more carefully to different views at work, while 63% report that their experience has contributed to their creating more inclusive teams.<sup>22</sup>

**Specific populations can also accrue distinct benefits from volunteering; women, veterans and the elderly each see distinct returns from deciding to volunteer.**

- Women who volunteer see an increase in future wages. An additional year of volunteer experience is associated with an increase in wages of 8.3% for part-time work and 2.4% for full-time work.<sup>23</sup>
- For post-9/11 veterans, volunteering provides mental, physical and social benefits. Those who participated in a formal volunteering engagement saw improvements in overall health, purpose in life, self-efficacy and perceived social support, and reductions in post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.<sup>24</sup>
- In adults who are 60 and older, volunteering is associated with lower risks of cognitive decline over time.<sup>25</sup>

### How do volunteers impact the community?

**Volunteers can also play important roles in their communities by strengthening social networks.**

- Individuals who formally volunteer through a nonprofit are more likely to volunteer informally (i.e., helping neighbors and friends outside of an organizational setting).<sup>26</sup>
- Additionally, although not conclusive, exploratory research has suggested that volunteering may function as a way to foster a greater sense of connection and identity for a community as a whole; research also suggests that volunteering can help strengthen low-income and under-resourced communities by building social networks.<sup>27,28</sup>
- A robust local volunteer base contributes to the resiliency of a community after a crisis and can greatly benefit a community in times of need.<sup>29</sup>

### How volunteers help Habitat

- Annually, more than 500,000 Habitat volunteers help build, advocate and raise awareness about the global need for shelter.
- Volunteers are essential contributors to the Habitat mission. Volunteers support work in Habitat offices, participate in Habitat builds, serve in Habitat ReStores and advocate for policies to advance affordable housing. No matter the task – whether working on a build site or in an office, raising money, or generating awareness for Habitat's mission – volunteers' efforts are helping to build a world where everyone has a decent place to live.

- Habitat offers volunteer programs targeted to specific audiences.
  - » The RV Care-A-Vanner program engages individuals who own recreational vehicles and can travel to an affiliate to provide volunteer services over a one- to two-week period. The RV Care-A-Vanner program has grown to over 2,000 volunteers who travel to more than 140 locations in the United States and Canada each year.
  - » Disaster Corps volunteers are skilled and experienced professionals who support Habitat for Humanity's disaster relief services across the United States. Disaster Corps was started in 2005 and has been deployed more than 250 times, providing over 35,000 hours of volunteer services to provide field and technical support in pre- and post-disaster settings. Core members help affiliates through tasks such as logistics management, volunteer coordination, community outreach and construction management.
  - » Habitat also hosts long-term volunteers through AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps volunteers play key roles at Habitat for Humanity International and at Habitat affiliates. In fiscal year 2020, the Habitat network hosted 345 AmeriCorps members, who engaged 77,116 volunteers across 120 affiliates.



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# everyone

needs a place to call home

A Habitat for Humanity U.S. Research and Measurement Team evidence brief



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