



Nutrition and Aging Resource Center

Volunteer Utilization: Thinking Outside the Box

Volunteers play an essential role in ensuring older adults and adults with disabilities receive the services and supports funded by the Older Americans Act. They give their time, energy, and skills in ways that are too numerous to count. To maximize their impact, carefully consider volunteers' unique knowledge, skills, diverse backgrounds, and availability and how you can make those factors work to your program's advantage.

Scheduling Your Volunteers

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, formal volunteering rates dropped between 2019–2021 in every demographic group.¹ As our nation continues to work to rebound to pre-pandemic levels of volunteer engagement, it's essential to think about when your volunteers are available to give their time. In recent years, Generation X (born between 1965–1980) had the highest rate of formal volunteering of all generations.² Many in this generation are still in the workforce and some are still raising children. Thus, providing volunteer opportunities outside of traditional business hours (e.g., early mornings, evenings, and weekends) can help open your doors to more volunteers. Additionally, providing services and supports during these nontraditional times may help you reach more people in need.

Creative Roles for Volunteers

Your volunteers have differing and unique skills and personalities. One volunteer may be a retired CEO of a major corporation, while another may be a young college student with a keen understanding of current tech trends. It's important to tailor your volunteer opportunities so that they are mutually beneficial; you receive the assistance you need in delivering your services and supports, and volunteers get to use their skills to benefit the community. Some examples of nontraditional roles are photographer, social media manager, meal packer, scheduler, and event planner.

¹ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/01/volunteering-and-civic-life-in-america.html>

² <https://americorps.gov/about/our-impact/volunteering-civic-life/demographics>

Youth Volunteers

Now is a great time to engage youth (school-age or college-age) in your organization. Providing an opportunity for these young volunteers to learn new skills, connect to your organization, and contribute to the community is a win-win-win. Think in terms of time-limited or project-based opportunities, and be open to their needs (e.g., volunteer hours for school) and schedules.

Tasks and Timing

The sample table below can help you start thinking about your program's nontraditional tasks, the times at which they could be performed, and whether they would be a good fit for a youth volunteer.

Example: A recently widowed administrative assistant, Mary, is interested in volunteering for your organization, but she still works full time. You need someone to organize all the materials for your chronic disease self-management workshops. Mary is happy to use her skills and agrees to volunteer in the evenings after work.

Task/Role	Mornings	Evenings	Weekends	Virtual	Youth
<i>Social media</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Photographer/videographer</i>	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Research recipes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Organize materials</i>	✓	✓	X	X	✓
<i>Grab-and-Go meal handler</i>	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
<i>Meal packer</i>	✓	✓	X	X	✓
<i>Scheduler</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
<i>Social outreach</i>	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Data collector</i>	X	✓	X	✓	✓
<i>Event planner/organizer</i>	X	✓	✓	✓	X
<i>Health/community fair table host</i>	X	X	✓	X	✓
<i>Graphic designer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Tech assistance</i>	X	✓	✓	✓	✓