



FOOD BANK
of **ALASKA**

Navigating Volunteer Shortages

Updated September 2025



Special thank you to Feeding America and the Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement for helping with this resource!

Navigating Volunteer Shortages Workbook

How to use this workbook: This workbook is designed so that you do not need to be a volunteer management expert to use. We recommend that agency partner leaders use this workbook with key staff, volunteers and board members to facilitate conversations to think about your current program, community and volunteers to explore solutions that address volunteer shortages.

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Part 1: Getting Curious

**Why are curious questions important to navigating volunteer shortage?
How can this resource help build volunteer capacity?**

What is going well with volunteers, and where do we want to improve?

What patterns have we been seeing with our volunteers lately?

Generally, what have we noticed about who is volunteering at our organization?
What have we noticed about who is NOT volunteering?

Part 1: Getting Curious

If you want to prompt conversations about volunteer engagement, start from a neutral place. Additional suggested questions are below.

What is currently working to recruit volunteers? What used to work that doesn't seem to working anymore?

What do our volunteers think about what's working and not working? (*This frames volunteers as experts and valuable collaborators.*)

What direction do we want to go with our volunteer engagement efforts?

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Volunteer Recruitment – what are we really talking about?

A natural question that comes up when we talk about volunteers is: “What can we do to recruit more volunteers?” But this phrasing undermines the complexity of volunteer recruitment. There are so many facets of volunteer recruitment to consider, and you want to identify – **what’s most helpful to focus on?**



Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Marketing Channels

In many cases, this is what people are referring to as “volunteer recruitment.” As in, “we need to post more about our volunteer opportunities – more social media posts, more online ads, more ads in newspapers.”

Marketing
Channels

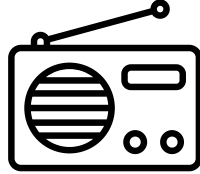
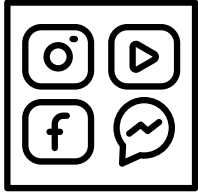
Where are you currently posting about volunteer opportunities? Which are effective?

Do we ask new volunteers how they found out about you?

What ideas do our volunteers have for reaching more people?

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Marketing Channels



Marketing
Channels

What audiences or demographics are we trying to reach?

What online spaces or community spaces do current and prospective volunteers frequent or use?

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Recruitment Messaging

What does recent research say about the types of messaging that are effective in recruiting volunteers?

Recruitment
Messaging

When we post about your volunteer opportunities, how many words do we use? Are you using 100 words or less? (TIP: Shorter posts are ideal; people do not want to read a lot of text.)

Which action words do we use? (i.e. join the cause, join the fight against hunger, service your neighbors, etc.)

TIP: *Avoid the sentiment of we need you, even if it's true. People are commitment phobic. **Most people don't want to be needed. They want to be wanted. They want to be invited.***

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Recruitment Messaging



Recruitment
Messaging

What is our call to action? Once we've got them excited, what's the action we want them to take?

Have we tried any of these calls to action? Which of these would work best for our organization?

- ☐ Come to an info session for new volunteers?
- ☐ Sign up to learn more at a one-hour training.
- ☐ Come and check out a shift.
- ☐ Allow them to schedule themselves (some volunteers love self-scheduling).

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Community Partners Multiply Recruitment Efforts

How can we connect with new audiences? Where can we go to find people who may not see themselves as volunteers yet?

Community
Partner
Multipliers

☐ **Peer to peer recruitment** is incredibly effective. Can we try a **bring-a-friend or date night event** where current volunteers invite their friends and family to check it out?

☐ What **local businesses** have we reached out to see if they are interested in partnering to volunteer, donate or spread the word about hunger in our community?

☐ Have we established **local media contact** to ask "Would you do a story about us?"

☐ **Other nonprofits can be great resources.** Can we partner for a volunteer recognition event or a volunteer fair for seniors? How can we share referrals when we or they have abundant volunteers?

☐ **Faith organizations, churches, and clubs** often invite nonprofits to share about their missions. Have we asked about getting on their schedules? Can we offer a tour to their group?

☐ **Schools** are often looking for ways to get their students involved. Who can we talk to at our local college or high school to explore ways we could partner with students?

What other ideas do we have for who you could partner with in our community?

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Onboarding New Volunteers

Think about the concept of a pipeline - from an interested person to a volunteer at your organization.

Onboarding
New
Volunteers

Processes (from screening, training, to onboarding volunteers) should help bring qualified people in as volunteers, not hinder.

How easy is it for people to find information about volunteer opportunities? (TIP: If you need an outside perspective ask a friend to review your website, Facebook page or other platforms you use to share volunteer opportunities.)

What are the steps between a person expressing interest and volunteering for the first time? What is the average amount of time it takes to complete those steps?

Where do we tend to lose people along the way?

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Roles

An often-overlooked part of volunteer recruitment is evaluating volunteer roles.

For agencies who are struggling with recruitment, perhaps the problem isn't the recruitment message or marketing, but rather the attractiveness of the volunteer roles.

What have we done to increase options for volunteers? People love options.

Roles

Flexibility and variety are what today's volunteers are looking for. Here are some specific questions to evaluations roles.

Which of our volunteer roles....

- ☐ Can be done virtually/remotely?
- ☐ Take place outside normal business hours?
- ☐ Allow volunteers to choose their own schedule?
- ☐ Do not require ongoing commitment?
- ☐ Allow volunteers to bring children/grandchildren?
- ☐ Allow volunteers to use workplace skills?

TIP: Consider creating a committee to spread out the work of role restructuring.

Part 2: Volunteer Recruitment

Roles

Restructuring burdensome roles is often helpful, especially when existing roles were designed many years ago, with heavily invested volunteers in mind.

Roles

Those backbone volunteers are often difficult to replace when they age out of their role, and sometimes it takes multiple new volunteers to make up the gap.

Here are some questions to review about role restructuring:

- ☐ What responsibilities or jobs within a current standing volunteer who role could be split out?
- ☐ What roles could be segmented into short-term opportunities?
- ☐ Could members of a team who fill assignments seasonally be rotated?
- ☐ Which functions could be specialized, and which could be remote?

TIP: *Try giving prospective volunteers a chance to try out a new role or do job shadowing to see if they are interested first. You can also try this with existing volunteers interested new responsibilities.*

Suggested Volunteer Role Activity: Compile the job description and standard operating procedures (SOP) of a “burdensome” or responsibility-heavy role and review with an eye on the questions above and on the previous page. This exercise can be especially helpful when needing to fill roles in volunteer-led organizations.

If you don’t have job descriptions or SOPs written out, brainstorm together with the person in that role, other volunteers or board members to think through these questions and new ideas.

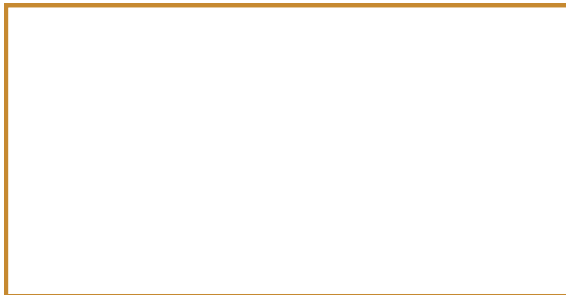
Part 3: Volunteer Retention

Volunteer Retention - how do you keep the volunteers you have?

Retaining volunteers can be just as complex as the effort to recruit new ones. In addition to questions about recruiting volunteers, invite agency partners to get curious about their current volunteers.

We go wrong when we assume they will stay forever.

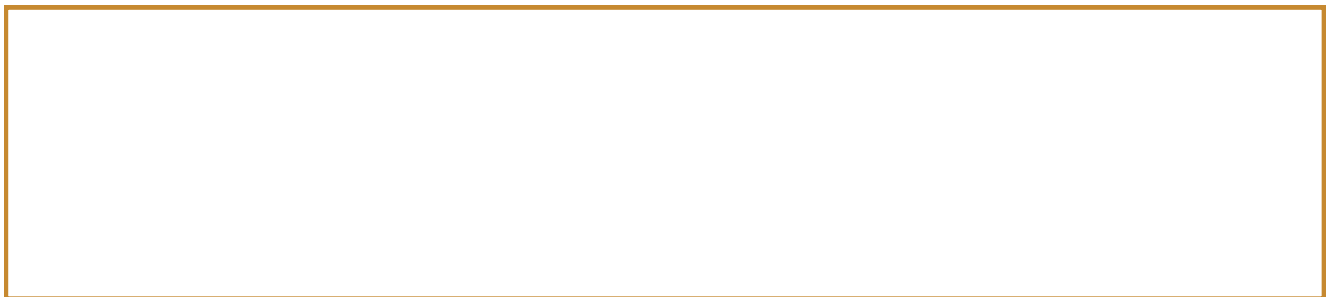
When are checking in with new volunteers to ask how their experience has been?



TIP: To retain new volunteers, it's pivotal to check in with them 4-6 weeks after they start. At that point they will express either enthusiasm about the role or hesitation. And then you can ask them:

- Would you like to try a different role?
- How can we better utilize your skills?

Why do our volunteers keep coming back? (If you don't know, ask them!)



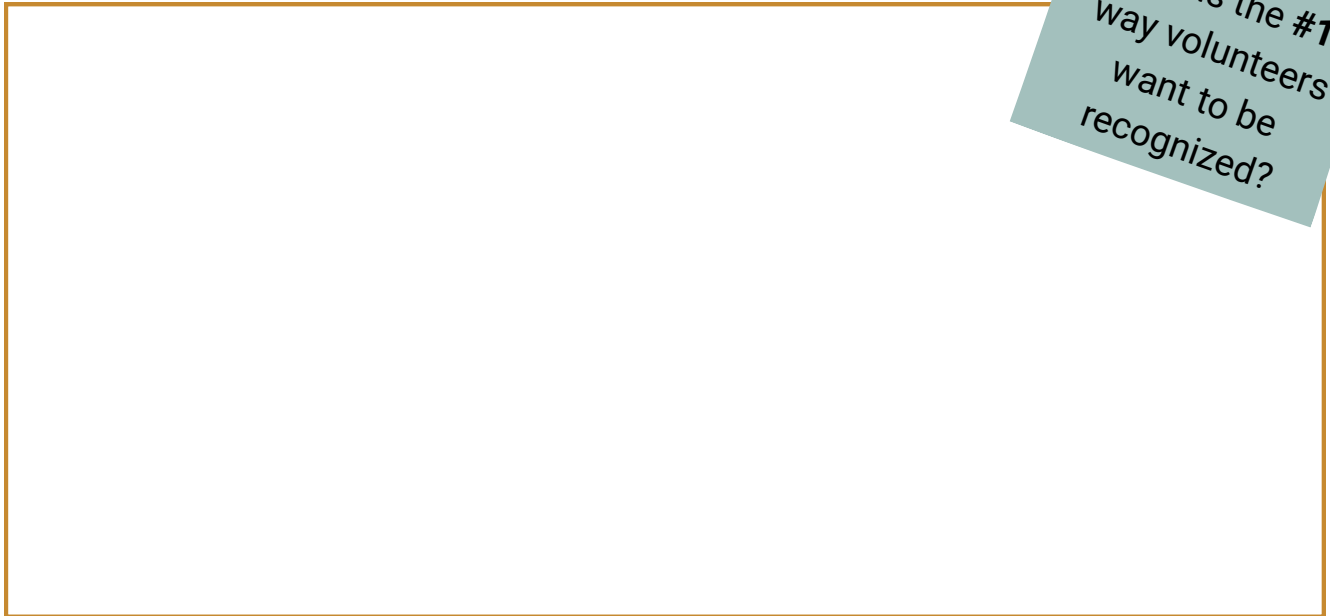
What are volunteers' ideas for how we can improve our program?



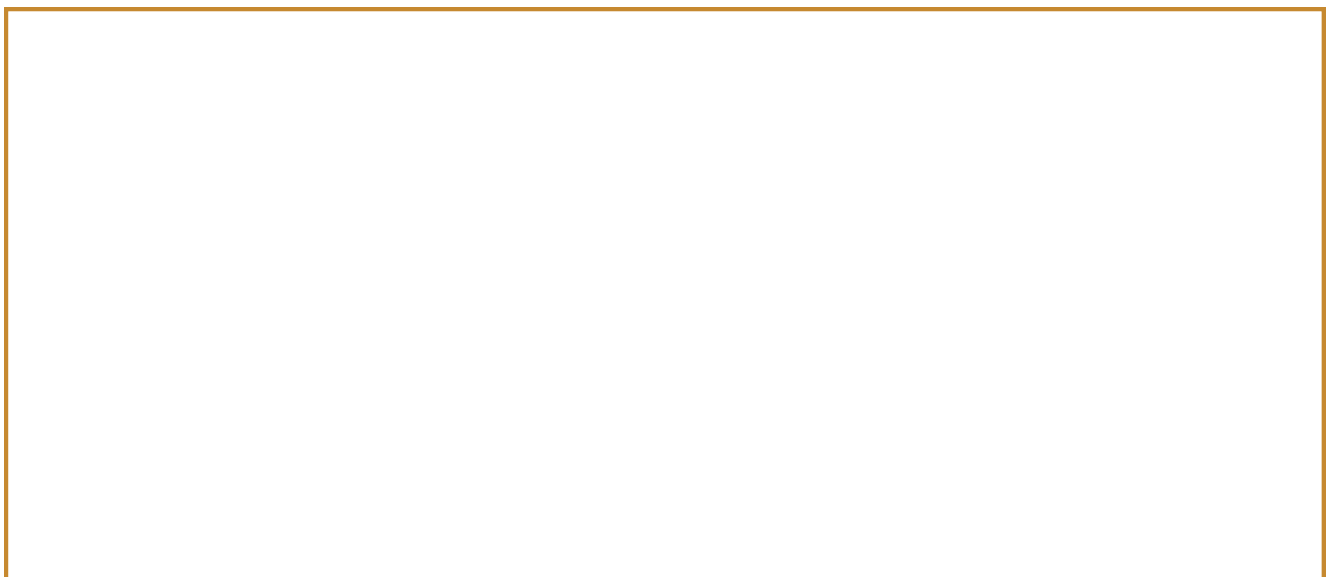
Part 3: Volunteer Retention

Volunteer Retention - how do you keep the volunteers you have?

How do we help volunteers understand their impact?



How often do we ask volunteers if they need a break? Do we have a break room or space for volunteers to take a rest? How can we normalize taking breaks?



Part 4: Wrap Up & Next Steps

To close out the conversation, use these next questions to help narrow down the next steps needed to put the ideas you've discovered into action.

What do you want to remember from these conversations?

After exploring volunteer engagement, what's one idea that stands out?

What are we most curious about?

What do we feel the most energy or excitement about after this conversation?

In a year, what would we like to be doing differently?

Appendix

Recruitment Sources: Use this inventory to break out ways that volunteers find out about your opportunities or get referred to your organization and sources you would like to explore using.

Source/Type	Frequent source of volunteer referrals	Occasional source of volunteer referrals	Would like to use this source more
Online referral services such as VolunteerMatch, All for Good, Galaxy Digital, Catchafire			
Local volunteer center/ United Way listings			
Organization's website			
Organization's social media accounts (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, others)			
Presentations by organizational staff			
Volunteer fairs			
Other events – community festivals, health fairs, cultural celebrations, job fairs			
Partnerships with local businesses			
Days of Service			
Academic institutions – including internship placements, service-learning, course-related			
Court-referred service			
Community centers/ neighborhood groups			
Places of worship/ faith-based groups			
Professional networks			
Public Service Announcements			
News stories			
Advertising			
Individual Outreach			
Word of mouth/Other			