

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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Northeast Ohio nonprofits face challenges in engaging volunteers during pandemic

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Greater Cleveland Food Bank

Volunteers at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank pack food boxes to be distributed to seniors, for kids' backpacks or for emergency use.

Social distancing requirements and other protocols to mitigate risk of COVID-19 spread have meant working with far fewer volunteers. Some organizations have been able bring them back at a fraction of previous capacity in new or vastly modified ways, while others are still largely unable to put their volunteers to work again.

After the pandemic put many volunteer opportunities on hold, nonprofits have spent the summer working to safely bring back volunteers, who are a vital component to the work of many organizations.

But social distancing requirements and other protocols to mitigate risk of COVID-19 spread have meant working with far fewer volunteers. Some organizations have been able to bring them back at a fraction of previous capacity in new or modified ways, while others are still largely unable to put their volunteers to work again, including many nonprofits that are heavily reliant on their volunteer workforce.

At the same time, 33% of nonprofits reported an increased demand for their services, according to a July survey by [Business Volunteers Unlimited \(BVU\)](#), which works to connect businesses and nonprofits to solve community issues in the region.

Organizations are doing more with less, asking themselves daily how to best serve the community, said Nancy Dzurnak, program manager at [Greater Cleveland Volunteers](#), an organization that connects volunteers with about 100 nonprofits each year.

"I think everyone is reassessing," she said. "Everyone's looking at how do we move forward?"

During the pandemic, 35 nonprofits in Greater Cleveland reported nearly 130,000 volunteer hours lost, according to [WeCareForCLE](#), a website created by [Social Venture Partners Cleveland](#) and community partners to help the area's nonprofit community track and respond to COVID-19. According to their data, those lost volunteer hours are valued at more than \$3 million.

Nonprofits are working to find new ways for volunteers to contribute, including outdoor and remote opportunities. From home, volunteers have been baking, stuffing stacks of envelopes with donor thank you letters, phone banking, connecting with clients virtually, sewing masks for staff and community members, and more.

And for the volunteers whom nonprofits can't immediately put to work, organizations are getting creative in finding ways to continue to engage with them. To help fight social isolation and maintain a sense of community among volunteers, organizations are hosting virtual book clubs, sending birthday grams and organizing video chat meet-ups for volunteers to catch up with one another or playing bingo. [The City Mission](#), which helps those in crisis overcome homelessness, invited volunteers to put on a parade in July at its Laura's Home Women's Crisis Center. Thirty cars drove by, tossing out candy.

"The real hard thing is so many volunteers — especially those that are retired — are doing this for the socialization," Dzurnak said. "They're doing this to have a purpose, to give back to the community."

Many organizations' volunteers skew older, putting them in the high-risk category for COVID-19. That's the case at Southeast Clergy Meals on Wheels, where most volunteers are at least 60 years old, and a few are in their 90s, said Dinah Mouat, treasurer and administrator for the nonprofit.

Meal delivery to people who can't fix themselves nutritious meals has always been a critical service, but the stakes are now higher than ever. And organizations are hamstrung by limitations in engaging volunteers.

Unable to risk exposing volunteers to the virus, Meals on Wheels focused on about 25 of its relatively younger volunteers, who shifted from daily hot meal deliveries to weekly deliveries of several frozen meals to last clients through the week. Those who couldn't drive meal

delivery routes baked goodies that could be added to the meals or began calling the clients on their route to check in.

"They're involved in any way we can get them involved," Mouat said.

After the [Greater Cleveland Food Bank](#) sent volunteers home, the National Guard began helping with distribution and packing boxes and backpacks in the warehouse. The workforce was critical as the organization faced a huge demand.

Knowing that the guard would eventually leave, the food bank began thinking about how to bring back volunteers safely and was able to start doing so in early June with requirements for mask wearing, temperature checks, gloves, social distancing and handwashing, said Mary LaVigne-Butler, vice president of external affairs for the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. In June and July, 454 volunteers worked 4,029 hours at the food bank, compared with 3,893 volunteers and 15,877 hours for the corresponding two-month period last year.

[Kids Book Bank](#), a nonprofit that provides free books to children in need, has also been able to bring some volunteers back to its warehouse. After temporarily closing its doors, Kids Book Bank launched a delivery program using 23 volunteers to deliver 4,370 books in May to partners that distribute the free books, said Colleen Watt, volunteer coordinator for the organization.

Since reopening in June with a completely new arrangement in their warehouse, 358 volunteers have helped to sort and pack books. Although this is a little more than half of the number of volunteers seen during the same time last year, the organization has been able to nearly keep pace with the number of boxes packed.

At the City Mission, staff members rely on volunteers working with kids while their mothers engage in programming. Without volunteers, the staff can't take care of all of the children at once, which has created a "domino effect" of necessary adjustments to continue access to other programs, said Jaime Buxton, community engagement manager for the organization.

They have been able to bring back some volunteers — including for meal services, landscaping and sorting donated clothing — but at a fraction of what they'd typically have. In July, the organization logged 318 volunteer hours, compared with 2,173 in the same month last year.

In working to ensure safe volunteer opportunities, Buxton recognizes that decisions to return will be personal.

"Their heart says, 'Yes, I want to be there. I want to come back, and I miss the opportunity,' but there's still a lot of hesitation in the community, and rightfully so," Buxton said. "Every person's decision is unique to their family circumstances."

Though they've been growing, virtual volunteer opportunities are not as simple as setting up a Zoom call between a mentor and a young person, for instance. There's a lot more to consider. Initially, most of the virtual volunteer options were those that had previously existed. Nonprofits have created more in the past few months, though the demand for these opportunities far outpaces organizations' ability to create them, said Heather Englander, BVU's director of business and community engagement.

[The American Red Cross of Northern Ohio](#) has been able to successfully set up remote volunteering. Those who typically respond to a disaster site (in Northern Ohio, typically home fires) have been doing so by phone, connecting with clients to assess needs and verifying damage with the local fire department. Financial assistance via a debit card is dropped off in a socially distant manner.

Barb Prociak, ombudsman specialist and volunteer coordinator for the office of the [State Long-Term Care Ombudsman](#), was also able to shift volunteer opportunities to remote work as the hundreds of nursing homes, assisted living facilities and residential facilities they work within were closed to outside visits. There are currently 30 volunteers following up on complaints in these facilities in Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain and Medina counties. After going through 12 hours of virtual training, the volunteers connect with residents and families over the phone, with some video chats, too.

Continuing the work remotely was important "to assure residents and families that we really are watching, and we do care what's going on inside the facilities," Prociak said.

In addition to direct service experiences, volunteers lending business expertise or creative solutions to some of the challenges nonprofits are facing can also be incredibly valuable. Recognizing nonprofits' need for information and guidance, BVU waived fees for its webinars and consulting services and quickly saw requests for its pro bono consultants increase.

"Volunteers bring in an outside perspective and fresh ideas," Englander said. "Lend your brains to the nonprofits, because, again, I think it's always helpful when you can get an outside perspective."

[Holden Forests and Gardens](#) has more than 1,500 volunteers who work at the Cleveland Botanical Garden and the Holden Arboretum, said Jill Koski, president and CEO of Holden

Forests and Gardens. Because the organization has so much outdoor space, it's been able to bring back 120 volunteers in positions that lend themselves to distancing and safety protocols, including bluebird monitors, gardening assistants and trail monitors, who monitor wildlife issues at the arboretum's 3,500-acre campus.

"They truly are the base of who we are, and we look forward to bringing them all back, because they're a part of our family and a part of our community," Koski said.

Inline Play

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