

Volunteer Retention



Much of the good work and services provided by community organizations and non-profits would not be possible without the time and talent contributed by unpaid volunteers. Given their importance, non-profits have devoted considerable attention to identifying, recruiting, and managing volunteers. However, far less attention has been focused on how to maintain a stable volunteer base by retaining individuals as volunteers. This is particularly unfortunate since high volunteer turnover—just as with turnover among paid employees—generally imposes considerable and predictable costs on non-profits.



*For the first time, as part of the release of the report, *Volunteering in America: 2007 State Trends and Rankings in Civic Life*, the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) is able to report the retention rate for volunteers. While the good news is that most volunteers choose to continue volunteering, in recent years we have found that roughly one out of three volunteers did not continue to volunteer the following year. As the Corporation and its partners seek to engage 75 million Americans as volunteers by 2010, this dramatic cycling of people in and out of volunteering reinforces the fact that volunteer management is critically important and that creating positive volunteer experiences is key to growing a widespread culture of service.*

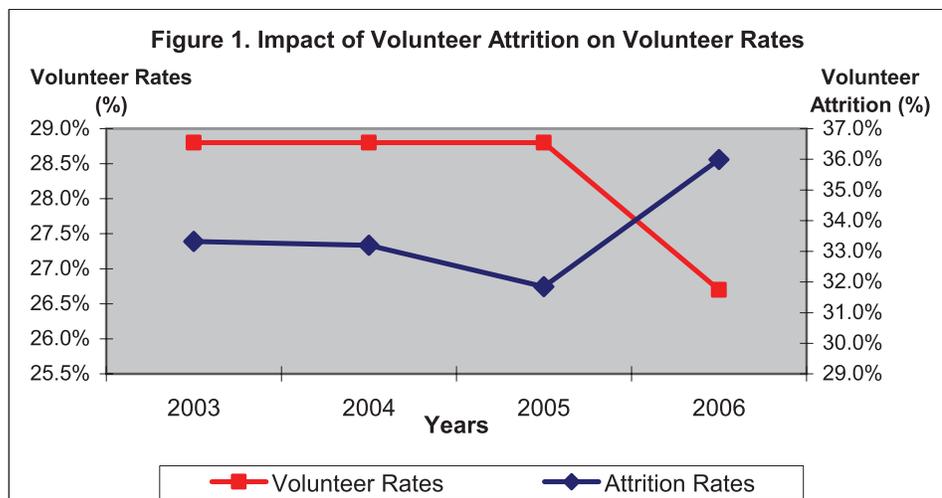


KEY FINDINGS

1 out of 3 volunteers who volunteer in one year do not volunteer the next year, a 66 percent volunteer retention rate.

Of the 65.4 million people who volunteered in 2005, 20.9 million did not con-

tinue to volunteer in 2006. This is a substantial number. As Figure 1 shows, the percent of volunteers who choose not to volunteer the following year (attrition rate) has increased significantly since 2005 and is at the highest it has been in the last four years.



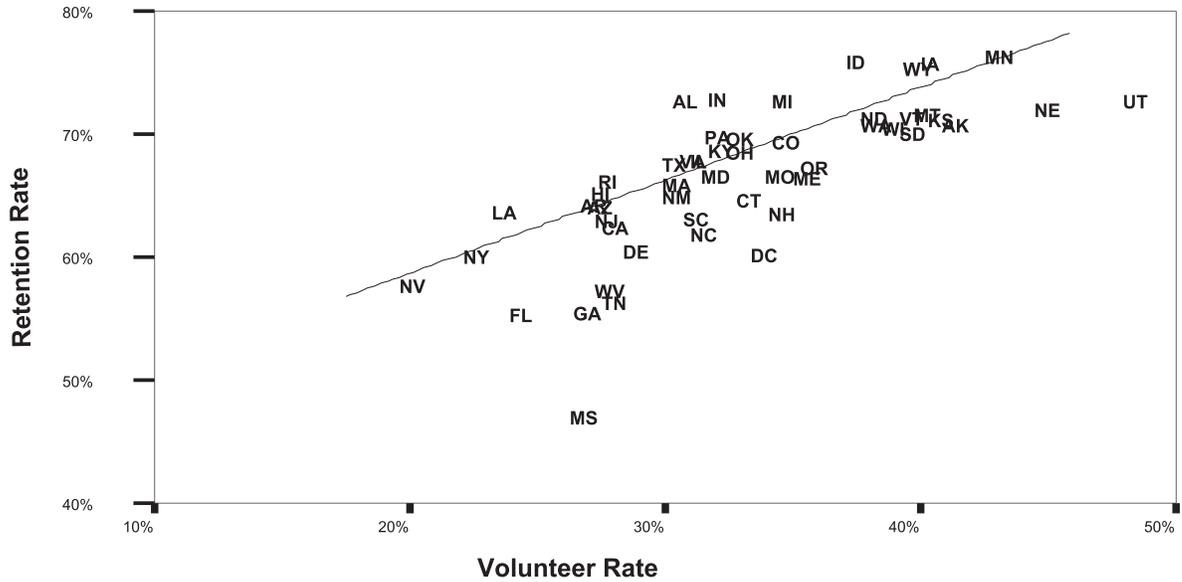
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States with high volunteer rates tend to have high rates of volunteer retention.

At the state level there is a fairly strong, positive correlation between states with high volunteer rates and states with high volunteer retention rates. States with the highest retention rates, such as Minnesota, Idaho, and Iowa, also tend to have the highest volunteer

rates. One reason why volunteer rates are high may be because these states have found ways to keep volunteer retention high. We also find that the states with the lowest volunteer rate have low volunteer retention.

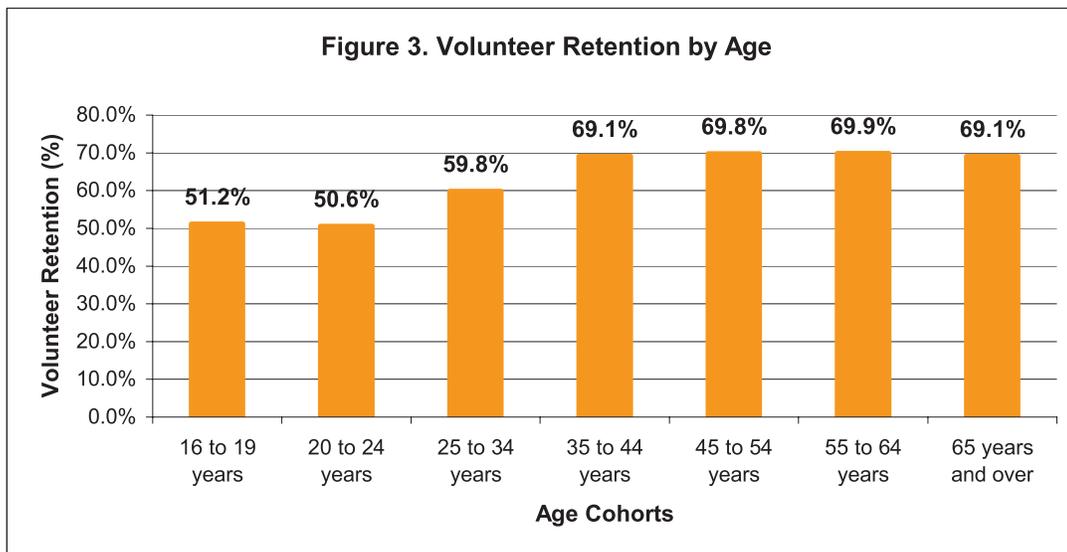
Figure 2: State Retention Rates by State Volunteer Rates, 2004-2006



Volunteer retention rates, similar to volunteer rates, increase with age. Volunteer retention rates are low for young adults and rise as individuals approach middle age. Interestingly, the rates do not decline as individuals become seniors (see figure 3). For

example, teens between 16 and 19 years of age have a 51.2 percent retention rate, while volunteer retention peaks in the mid to late forties at about 70 percent), and holds steady in older age.

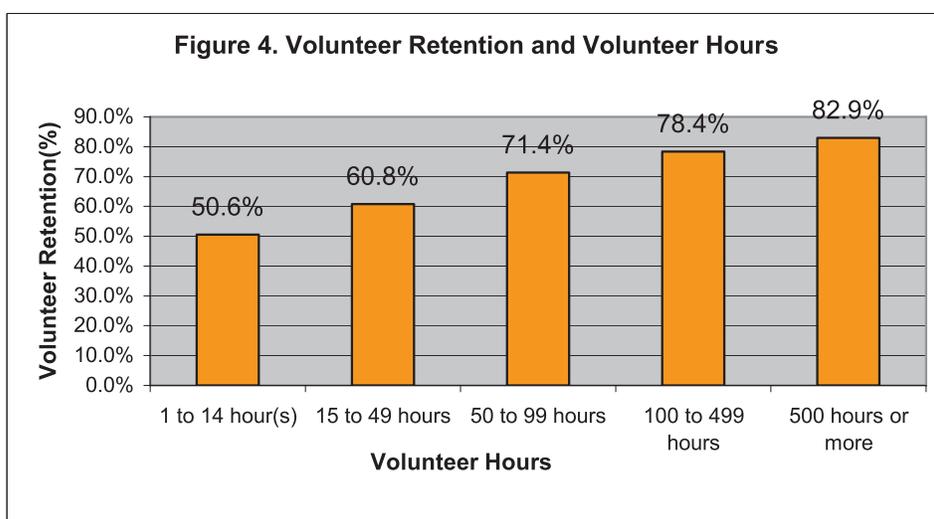
Figure 3. Volunteer Retention by Age



The higher a volunteer's level of education, the more likely the volunteer is to continue volunteering. A volunteer's level of education is closely linked to their likelihood to return to volunteer the next year. The retention rate for college graduates is 72.4%, compared to 60.2% for those with only a high school education, and 50.5% for those without a high school diploma.

Volunteers who devote more time to volunteering have the highest volunteer reten-

tion rates. Volunteers who serve a more substantial amount of time – 50 hours or more – are 40% more likely to serve one year to the next than those who serve 1-14 hours a year (71.4% versus 50.6%). (see figure 4). Moreover, volunteer retention also increases as the number of weeks a person volunteers in a year increases. For example, 76.3% of volunteers who serve 12 or more weeks per year return to serve the following year, compared to 51.2% of volunteers who serve less than 3 weeks out of the year (compared to 51.2%).

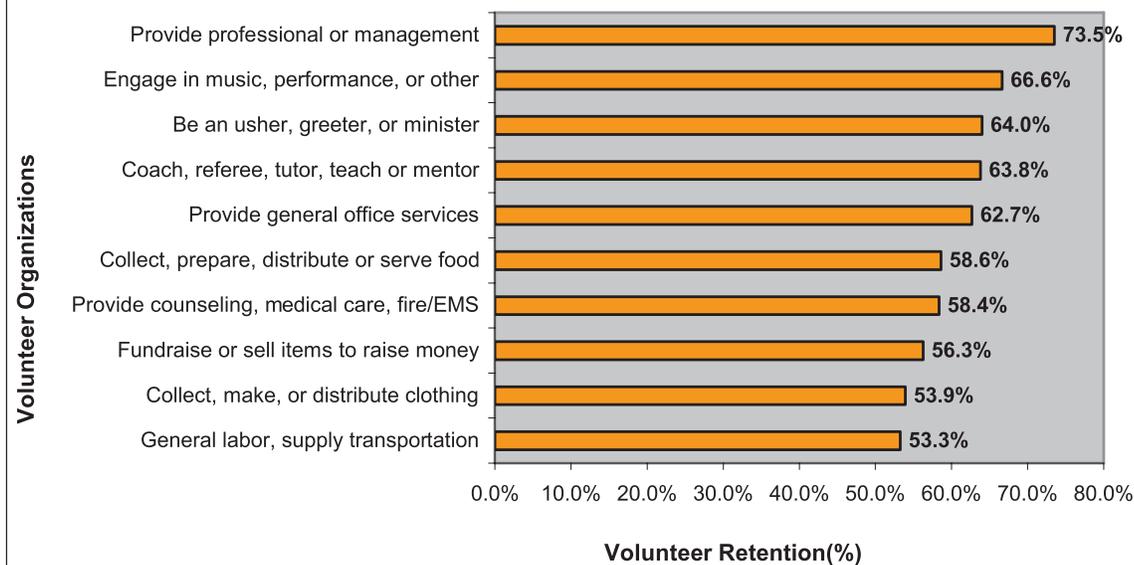


Volunteer retention is related to the type of organization where a person volunteers and to the activities that the volunteer performs. Volunteer with religious organizations are somewhat more likely to keep volunteering than individual who serve through other organizations. Almost 70 percent of people who volunteer through or with a religious organization, compared to about 60 percent of people who volunteer through or with a hospital or health organization, vol-

unteer the following year.

Additionally, it appears that volunteers who generally engage in more challenging activities tend to be more likely to volunteer the following year. Figure 5 shows that almost 74 percent of those providing professional and management assistance volunteer the next year, compared to 53 percent of volunteers who provide general labor or supply transportation.

Figure 5. Volunteer Retention and Volunteer Activities for Volunteers Who Perform Only One Volunteer Task



RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

As nonprofits across the country seek to engage more volunteers in helping communities solve their most pressing needs, such as disaster recovery, illiteracy, and poverty, it has become increasingly important to take a closer look at what we know about effective volunteer recruitment and management practices that will help retain volunteers from one year to the next. This fact sheet, along with the Volunteer Management Capacity Study (2004), and the new online guide at the Corporation's Resource Center website (which provides helpful tips, tools, and effective practices in volunteer management and retention) are all useful tools that can not only help nonprofits better understand the factors that impact volunteer retention, but can also help improve volunteer retention rates.

The following are some tips from this research:

- Since higher levels of volunteer commitment (whether increased volunteer hours or increased number of weeks contributed) have a positive impact on a volunteer's willingness to return the following year, encourage vol-

unteers to get more involved with your organizations by finding opportunities for them to serve more regularly.

- Offer volunteers more challenging opportunities or multiple activities that provide a variety of volunteer assignments (perhaps mixing popular and less popular assignments).
- Partner with religious organizations because they maintain a stable volunteer base, more so than any other type of organization.

TECHNICAL NOTE

To measure volunteer retention, we analyzed panel data from the 2004-2006 Current Population Survey (CPS). Each September 50% of all households that participated in the previous survey are selected to participate a second year. We analyzed the changes in the responses to the volunteering questions from adult respondents (age 16 and older) in the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 volunteer supplements to develop the volunteer retention rate.

To read *Volunteering in America: 2007 State Trends and Rankings in Civic Life* and other Corporation research reports visit www.nationalservice.gov.

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