



VolunteerMatch



# 2020 in Review

The Impact of COVID-19 on  
Volunteering & The Social Sector



# Introduction

Faced with an unexpected global pandemic, nonprofits experienced a massive drop in resources. Many nonprofit leaders, whose budgets were already stretched to the max, had to reinvent the way they serve constituents in a time of “stay-at-home” orders. Meanwhile, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) leaders reckoned with a similar challenge: how to keep employees engaged and active in community service, often while working at home, and often through modalities that were new to them, like virtual volunteering.

At VolunteerMatch, we focused on building new solutions to help CSR professionals, nonprofit leaders, and volunteers weather the pandemic. We launched a dedicated COVID-19 [Resource Hub](#) and helped augment nonprofit capacity through new in-product tools and systems that enabled them to more easily pivot to include virtual volunteering in their programs. We lent our national voice and advocacy platform to help share the stories of our member organizations in as many media outlets as possible.

We took up the challenge to field a research series to thousands of nonprofits, volunteers, and businesses to help understand, from their point of view, what the experience was really like day-to-day during COVID-19. We published the results to a national audience to raise awareness of how the social sector was doing throughout the crisis and help ensure needed funding and support would continue to flow.

This eBook is the final volume in our 2020 research study, and seeks to take both a look back and make some suggestions to help the sector prepare for a fresh start in 2021.

# Volunteering During COVID-19

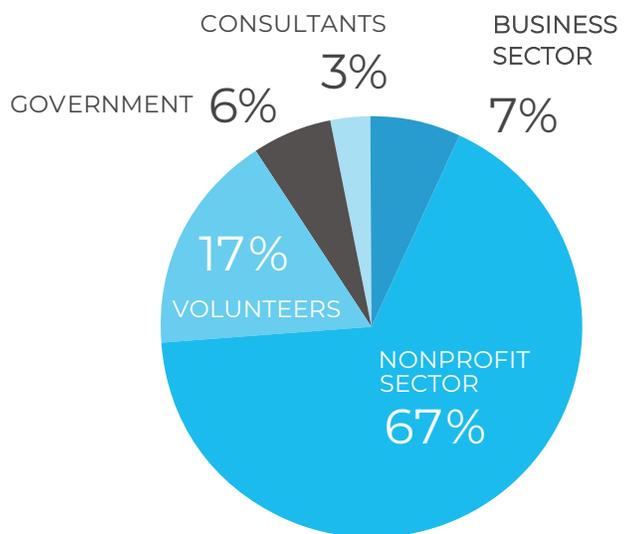
## Study Participants

Beginning in March, VolunteerMatch conducted four surveys to track how individuals across sectors were witnessing the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering. In March, May, July, and October, participants from nonprofits, businesses, government organizations, and volunteers answered the same questions around volunteerism during the pandemic. In this eBook, we will delve into our latest data as well as summarize trends from the year. Altogether, the four surveys garnered nearly 5,600 submissions. The demographic breakdown below ( Fig 1 ), shows they were most popular with nonprofit respondents (67%) followed by volunteers (17%). The business sector, government sector, and consultants number nearly 1,000 voices.

### How would you best describe yourself?

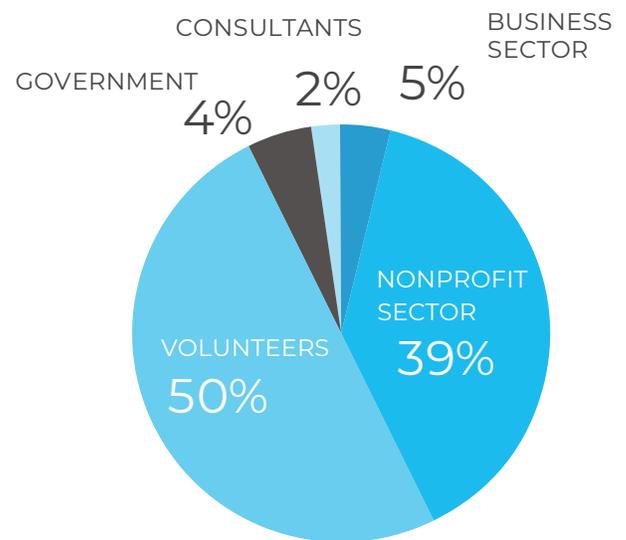
In October, there were around 1,400 responses, making it our second most active survey of the year. Of note: volunteers made up half of the respondents in this survey, an increase of 11 percentage points from July ( Fig 2 ).

Fig 1



2020 SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Fig 2



OCTOBER

# A Look Back at 2020 Findings



## Concerns About Budget and Resources Persist

It's troubling, albeit unsurprising, that nonprofits are operating consistently with reduced resources as compared to before the pandemic. Even with the high number of philanthropic dollars given in 2020, there is a record need for nonprofit services. Food banks, hospices, and other critical need areas are among the nonprofits still struggling to get the resources they require.

In October, 65% of nonprofits said they were working with reduced resources as compared to before the pandemic and 10% answered their operations were "temporarily halted" ( Fig 3 ). The sliver of nonprofits responding they had "permanently halted" is small (1%), but with 75% operating with less, there is cause for concern. Given the line graph below ( Fig 4 ), it is clear that the trend of reduced resources is on an upwards trajectory.

### What is the current status of your organization?

Fig 3

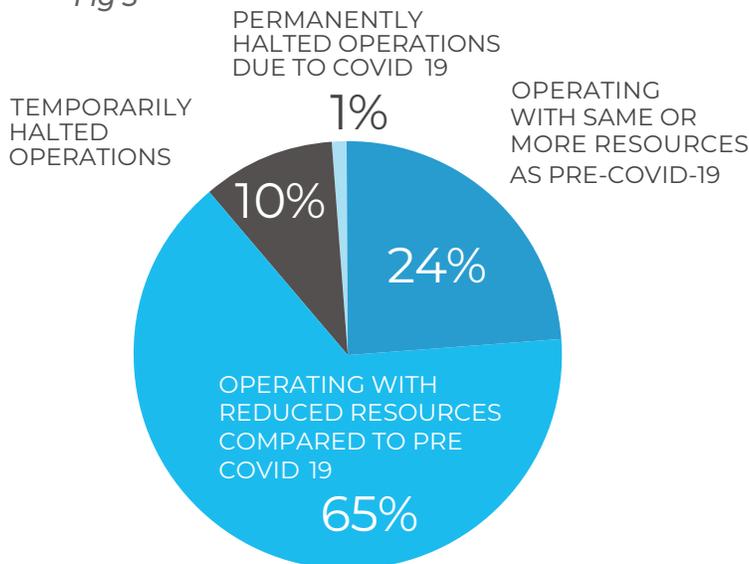
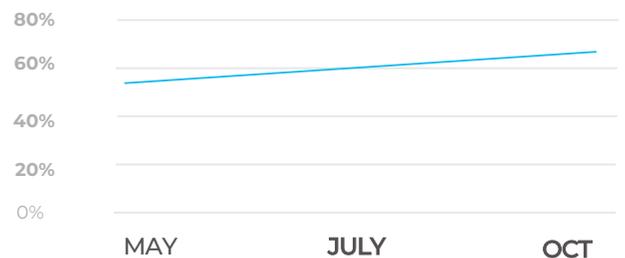


Fig 4

### Operating with reduced resources compared to pre COVID-19



Furthermore, budget pressures have not abated. We asked nonprofits about concerns for executing against their current budgets, and for much of the year the response “very concerned” was trending downwards while “somewhat concerned” trended up. In October, nonprofits trended up in the “very” and “somewhat” concerned responses, and the number saying they were “not concerned” went down. It’s

possible that continuing uncertainty around the (at that time impending) elections and spike in recent COVID-19 cases this fall combined with overall ongoing uncertainty produced these responses. No matter what, as we head into 2021, it will be incumbent on leaders seeking to improve the conditions in the social sector to keep a sharp eye on funding and ensure nonprofits have the operating capital they need to do their work.

**Question: What do you need the most help with right now?**

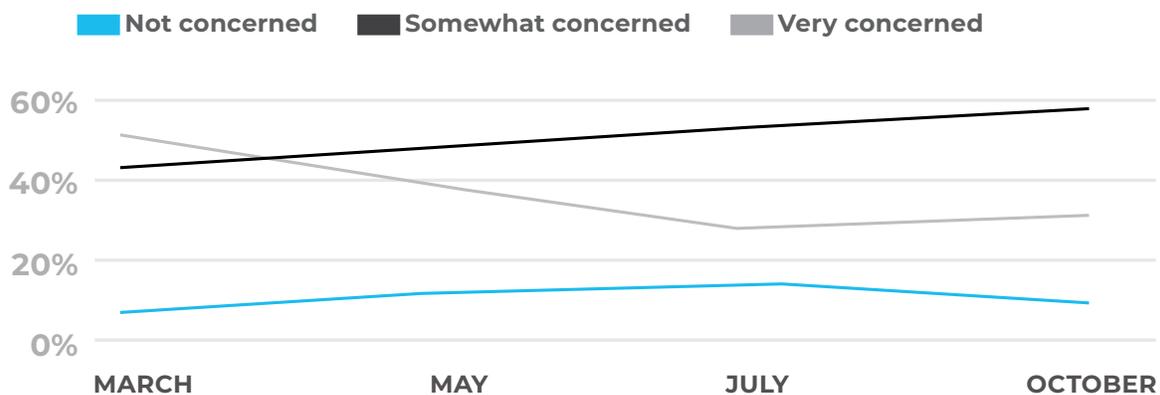
**“Raising funds for next year’s budget, so we can stay in business and continue our mission.”**

— Nonprofit Respondent

**How concerned are you about your ability to execute against your current budget in the context of the current environmental, economic, and social conditions?**

Fig 5

**Not concerned, Somewhat concerned and Very concerned**





## Volunteer Attendance Grows with Virtual Opportunities

Throughout the year, we asked nonprofits if the current conditions were affecting volunteer attendance, and in October saw “some cancellations” (41%) neck and neck with “heavy cancellations” (40%) ( Fig 6 ). From July to October, “some cancellations” jumped 9 percentage points while “heavy cancellations” dropped 8 percentage points.

We’re choosing to hope this is a bright spot for the volunteering landscape, it could also represent that more nonprofits responding to our research questions are now engaging volunteers with more virtual opportunities. We asked how they’ve adjusted their engagement strategies given current conditions, and “creating more virtual volunteer opportunities” did grow as a response from 46% in July to 51% in October ( Fig 7 ).

Virtual volunteering allows those sheltered-in-place, or in a high-risk group, to continue to serve their communities, and could be a

**“One of my volunteer jobs is on hold because of Covid. For the other job, volunteers have been working virtually. Although it’s been a bit of an adjustment, it has been working well.”**

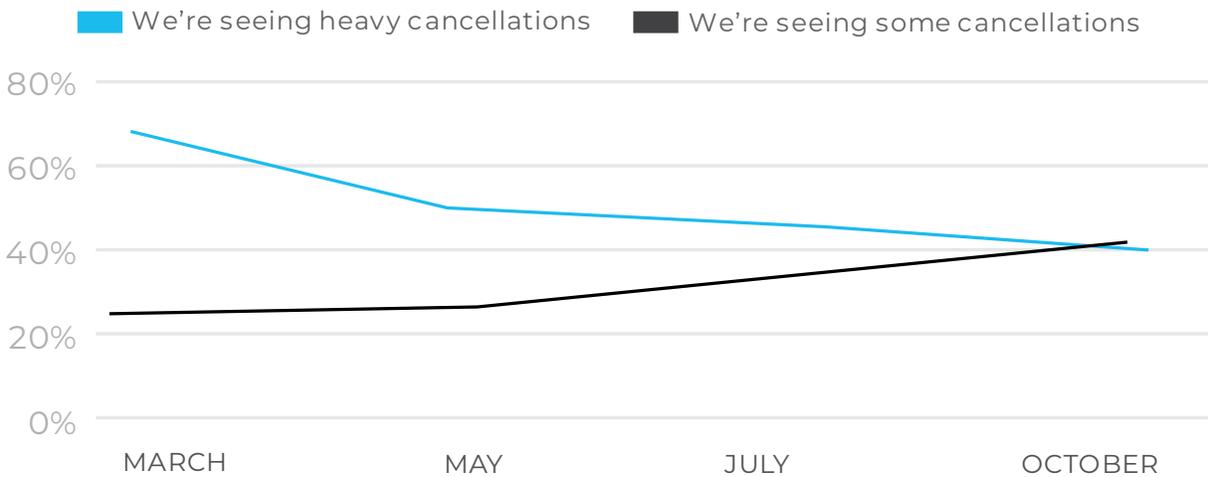
—Volunteer Respondent

good option for those organizations who can employ it to augment program and mission delivery as we head into 2021.

Of note: the increase in virtual volunteer opportunities correlates with increased interest from volunteers. In just three months, the participation of volunteers in virtual opportunities grew 12 points from 17% to 29% ( Fig 8 ), indicating that volunteers are beginning to adapt their behaviors to map to the current conditions.

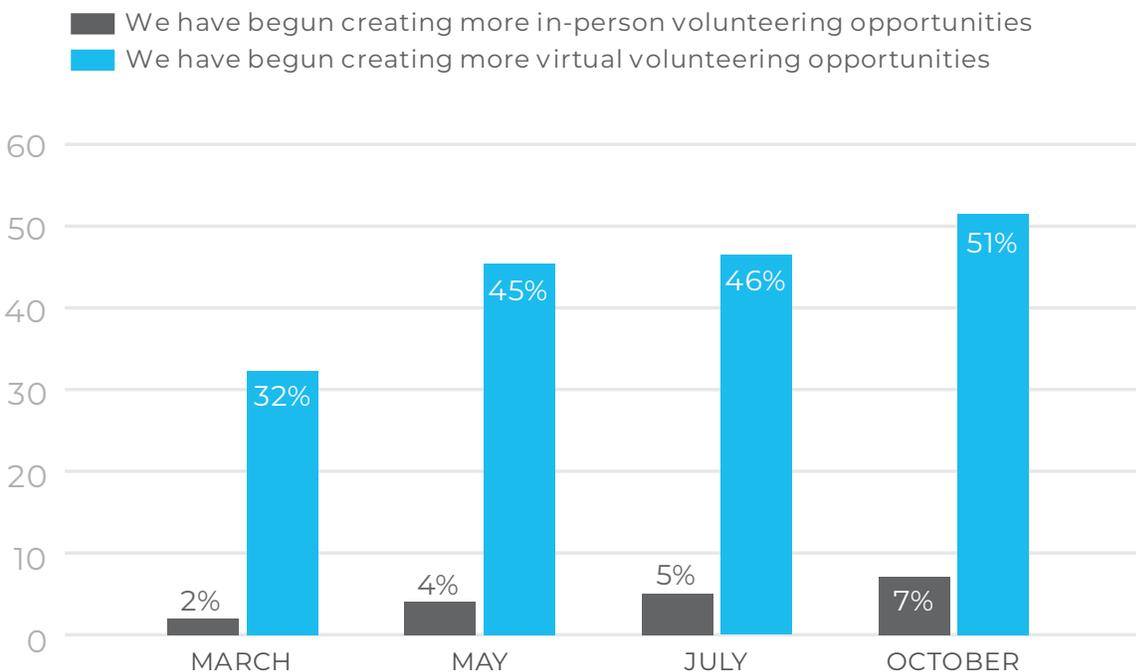
## How have the current environmental, economic, and social conditions impacted your volunteer attendance?

Fig 6



## In what ways have you adjusted your volunteer engagement strategy given current environmental, economic, and social conditions?

Fig 7



## Have you been participating in virtual volunteering opportunities since the COVID-19 crisis began?

Fig 8

	July	October
Yes	17%	29%
No	83%	71%

Growth of virtual volunteer opportunities is a significant success for the social sector and shows its ability to adapt. Some volunteer causes, however, simply do not work well in today's current virtual models. Alongside virtual growth, in-person opportunities are growing, albeit at a slower rate ( Fig 7 ).

It is likely that nonprofits will continue to open and close with pandemic regulations well into the next year. If you are contemplating running or evolving a virtual or hybrid program, check out our recommendation sheets on the topic at the end of this book for tips to prepare for 2021.



**“I really enjoyed participating in the AARP Meal Pack challenge. Being a longtime local food bank volunteer but not able to volunteer at this time, I’m glad I was still able to help a food bank in another city in a contactless and safe way. I’m so happy to have found virtual volunteer activities during COVID that I can do from home!”**

—Volunteer Respondent



## Volunteer Attendance Grows with Workplace Volunteerism

One of the most positive trends emerging from our year of data collection is from the Corporate Social Responsibility space.

We asked how businesses were thinking about employee engagement. In March, 46% responded that they were “uncertain – looking for ideas or waiting for more information before making a decision.” In October, that number dropped to 36%. We can gather from the other response options a bit about what decisions are being made. The response “moving all volunteer engagement to virtual opportunities” decreased from 38% in March to 28% in October.

For businesses, a hybrid approach is a priority: 38% of respondents are creating more virtual and continuing to engage

employees with in-person opportunities. Also, “canceling all scheduled group activities” has decreased. This means that businesses are finding creative solutions for both in-person and group service.

Perhaps the most reassuring statistic is that of “putting workplace volunteerism on hold” – that number has decreased from 38% in March to 13% in October.

**“As logical and tempting as it is to put giving, time or money on hold because of COVID-19 uncertainty, the non-profits we support need our support more than ever right now.”**

— Corporate Respondent

## How are you thinking about volunteering and employee engagement in the current context?

Respondents were able to select more than 1 answer.

Fig 9

	March	May	July	October
Uncertain – looking for ideas or waiting for more information before making a decision	46%	35%	41%	36%
Moving all volunteer engagement to virtual opportunities	38%	17%	16%	28%
Moving some volunteer engagement to virtual opportunities and also finding ways to continue to engage in in-person opportunities	33%	39%	36%	38%
Canceling all scheduled group volunteering activities for now	49%	43%	28%	13%
Putting workplace volunteerism program on hold for the time being	38%	25%	17%	13%
Other	3%	11%	19%	13%

**“We have continued to have volunteers engaged and wanting to volunteer, some are back with patients and some are doing virtual opportunities. We are looking for and implementing creative ideas for volunteer opportunities as well. I am very grateful for Zoom, we have been able to stay connected using this platform!”**

— Corporate Respondent

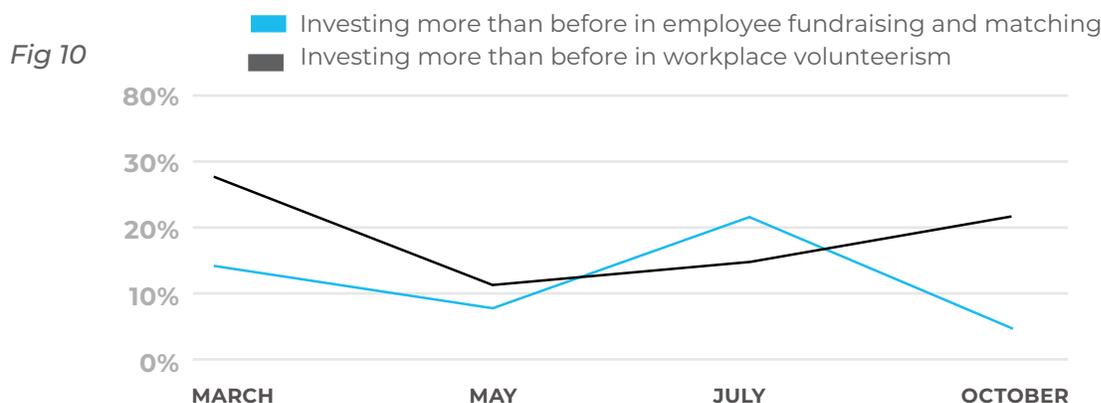
Employee fundraising trends downwards in their influence on CSR decision making while workplace volunteerism trends up ( Fig 10 ). Businesses are recognizing the essential value of volunteers in helping nonprofits survive the pandemic. In the bar chart below ( Fig 11 ) there are three focus areas, “Corporate donations and charitable contributions,” “Employee fundraising and matching,” and “workplace volunteerism.” When asked how current conditions were impacting decisions and investments in each, the response “Have not – and do not plan to – make change” was the dominant answer for the first two categories.

With workplace volunteerism, the greatest response was “we have made changes.”

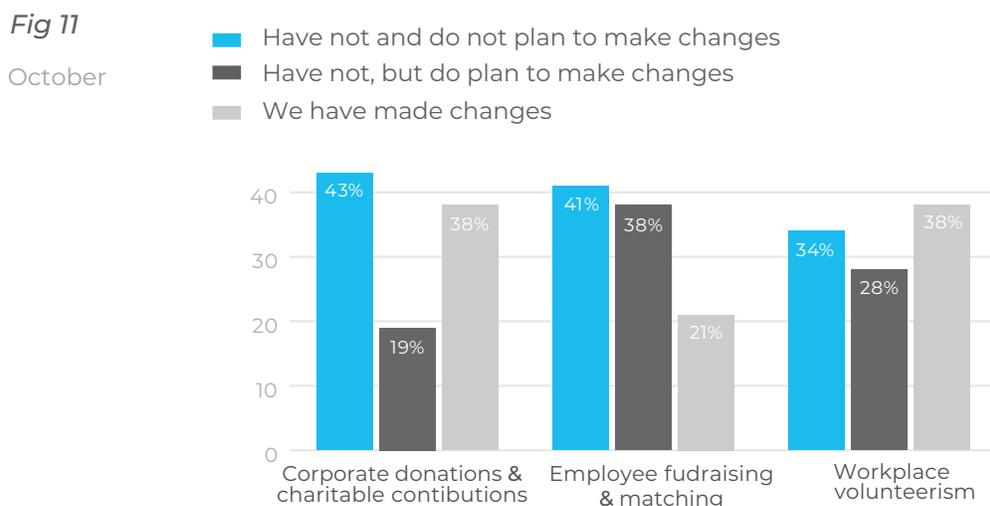
If we are to address this volunteering gap, program managers will need to continue to pivot and think differently about volunteering both in the nonprofit sector requesting volunteers, and in the for-profit organizations who seek to support them.

Unfortunately, the trend of spending less on CSR initiatives overall comes at a time when our communities are experiencing a higher demand for many of the services that nonprofits provide.

### How are the current environmental, economic, and social conditions impacting how you make decisions around investments in workplace volunteerism or other CSR initiatives?



### How are the current environmental, economic, and social conditions impacting the focus and/or strategy of your CSR initiatives?





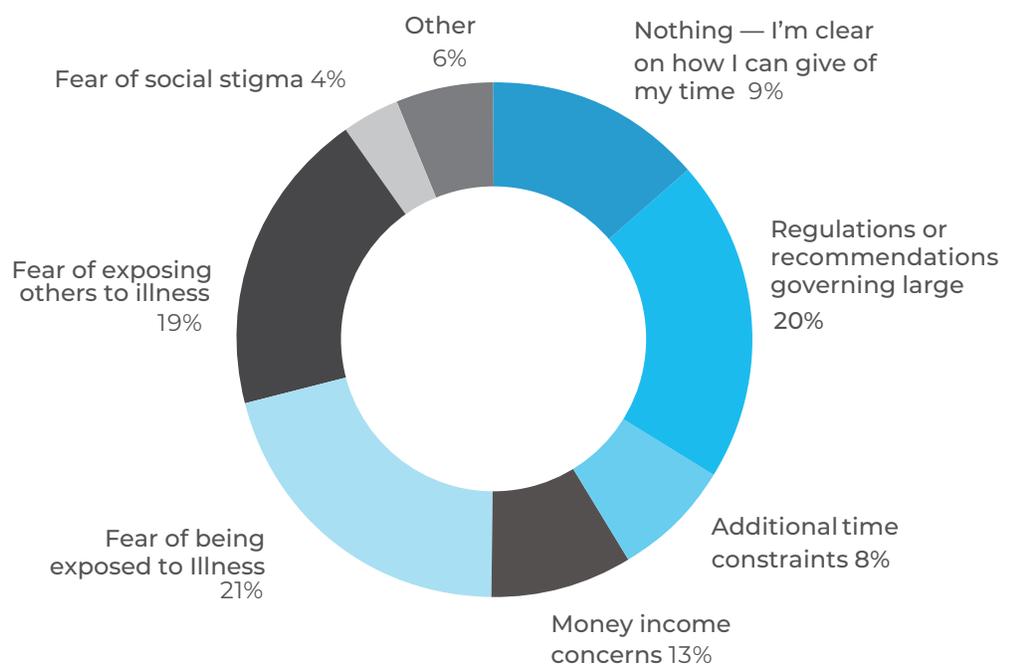
## Barriers to Volunteering Commitment

It is heartening to see the ways nonprofits, volunteers, and businesses are adapting volunteer strategies to meet present circumstances. There are still barriers to volunteering we hope we can help address. In the donut chart below ( Fig 12 ) are the major barriers to volunteering throughout the year. For the larger factors regarding fear of exposure, we seek to help increase virtual volunteer opportunities on our site and offer training to volunteer managers on how to create engaging activities and programs for their volunteers even during difficult times.

Fig 12

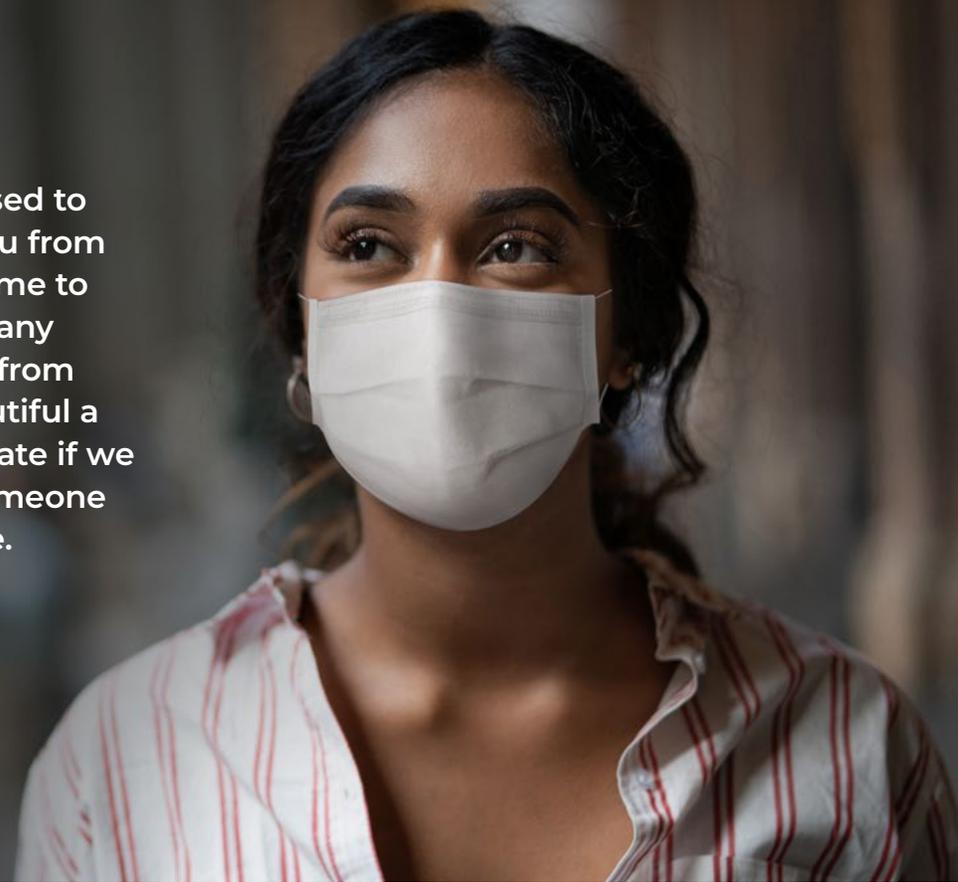
**What barriers might get in the way of your volunteering commitment during this time?**

Percentages calculated from the response totals of the four 2020 surveys.



**“If the fear of being exposed to the coronavirus keeps you from wanting to leave your home to volunteer, there are so many other ways you can help from home. Imagine how beautiful a community we could create if we all just reached out to someone during such a trying time. Kindness is contagious.”**

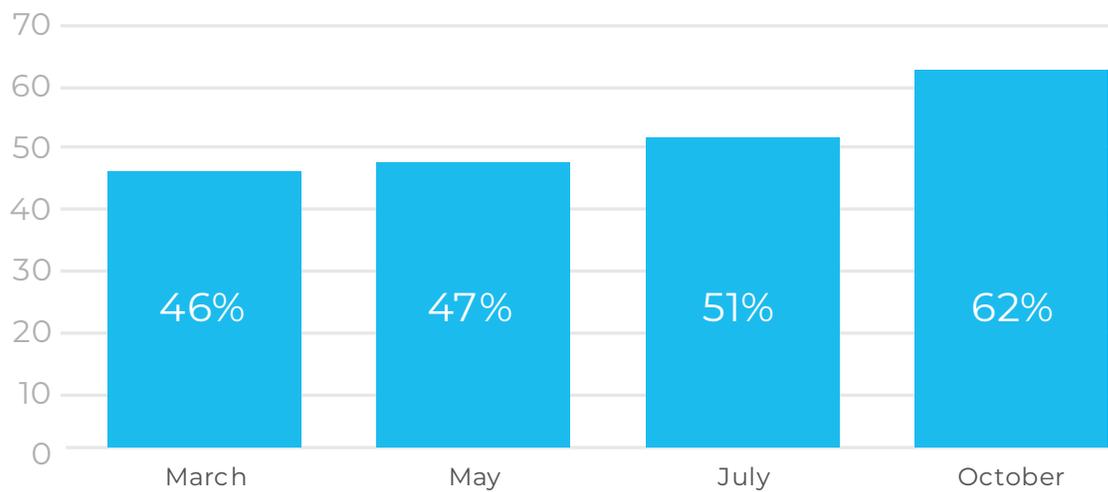
— Volunteer Respondent



### Response: Fear of being exposed to illness

Respondents were able to select more than 1 answer.

Fig 13



## Conclusion

2020 has tested all of our limits. As of now, more than 300,000 people in the U.S. have lost their lives to Coronavirus. Thousands of people have lost their jobs. For-profit and nonprofit organizations have shuttered. This pandemic has shown us how truly fragile the tissue of our communities is. We face myriad social, economic, and political hurdles, and for many of us, the future feels uncertain.

At the same time, we have seen the best of our humanity during this pandemic. We have seen deep interest in VolunteerMatch from national and local media who want to help uncover stories of kindness, and inspire others to give back. We have seen companies and local governments step up in new ways to tap into the power of their employees and citizens as volunteers. And we know individuals remain committed to finding ways to lend their time and talent to their communities. In fact, at VolunteerMatch we passed our 16 millionth volunteer connection this year.

As we round out this difficult year, we feel encouraged by the glimmers of hope within the research we've conducted, and by the consistent spirit that weaves through the communities we serve. It's a spirit of collaboration and of kindness.

On behalf of the VolunteerMatch team, thank you so much to all our study participants. Thank you to the journalists and universities that have featured and contributed to our work. May 2021 be a year of new opportunities to care for one another and uplift our communities through the spirit of service.



**“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”**

— Desmond Tutu



**“We are creative and resilient! New best practices will come out of our experience navigating this pandemic and we will find new ways to serve our communities. Kindness is contagious.”**

— Nonprofit Respondent

## Resources to Help You Plan for 2021

Based on the cross-sector lessons we’ve learned since March of 2020, we designed a few resources to help with 2021 planning for businesses, nonprofits, and volunteers.

[For Nonprofits:](#) [Hybrid Volunteering: Drive Social Impact for Your Nonprofit in 2021](#)

[For Volunteers:](#) [Tap into Your Power of Kindness in 2021](#)

[For Businesses:](#) [Drive Employee Engagement in 2021 with Hybrid Volunteering](#)

## Hybrid Volunteering: Drive Social Impact for Your Nonprofit in 2021

Hybridized volunteering programs will drive more volunteer engagement and social impact, and give you the ability to respond to shifting needs and restrictions of your communities. As you make plans for 2021, incorporating a hybrid structured approach with in-person and virtual opportunities will provide you with the most flexibility.

### **Make in-person volunteers feel safe**

- Educate your volunteers on how your organization's rules have changed with regards to the COVID-19 guidelines in your jurisdiction
- Enforce the rules you have in place and have a plan for how you will manage someone who does not comply

### **Make virtual feel as meaningful as in-person**

- Emphasize to virtual volunteers how their work connects with the mission and impact of your organization
- Share their success stories on social media or in your newsletter

### **Marketing the different types of opportunities**

- Share the impact that your hybrid volunteering program is making
- Market for the right volunteers. Who's the right volunteer for your in-person opportunities? How about your remote ones? Do they require different skills?

### **Integrate your hybrid volunteers with each other**

- Start a shared Slack channel, Facebook group, or host an online mixer
- Communicate to all how the efforts of both virtual and in-person volunteers are furthering the organization's mission

### **Continue your hybrid program beyond COVID-19**

- Continue to create virtual opportunities beyond the vaccine roll-out as it expands who gets to volunteer with your organization





## Tap into Your Power of Kindness in 2021

For many of us, how we serve our communities has changed, and we may be seeking out new ways to give back. Maximize your community impact in 2021 with these tips:

### Focus on causes and opportunities that fuel your energy and excite you

- You will bring joy to yourself and others by doing what you love
- Determine what impact you want to make

### Decide how you will volunteer

- **In-person:** You can practice safer volunteering by following the [CDC guidelines](#).
  - Communicate with the nonprofit prior to volunteering to see what practices and guidelines they have in place
- **Virtually:** Virtual volunteering provides more flexibility and the ability to volunteer from home
- **Hybrid:** You can do both: virtually and in-person giving you the freedom to focus on how to best utilize your passion and talent

### Identify how much you time you can give

- Think about if you want to give back by volunteering 15-30 minutes or hour increments
- Schedule it on your calendar

**TIP:** You may want to start small and see how it fits into your schedule and build from there, so that it feels easy to do on a regular basis.

### Think about what you want to get out of volunteering

- Time spent on volunteering is your time —time to develop and follow your life's true passions while helping others
- It could be something that is related to your hobbies, skills, or where you would like to grow your knowledge
- Look at projects you want to accomplish rather than the overall hours you want to volunteer

### Invite others to join you

- Think of ways to encourage your friends to give back
- Support each other along the way
- Create a friendly competition to make it even more fun
- Find ways to connect virtually about what you are doing

### Celebrate your accomplishments

- Reward yourself for making progress along the way
- Create a group of supporters and share your accomplishments and encourage each other



**“The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention.”**

— Oscar Wilde

# Drive Employee Engagement and Social Impact in 2021 with Hybrid Volunteering

Hybrid programs — combining elements of virtual volunteering with in-person volunteering — allow for the greatest flexibility and employee choice and will produce solid results in terms of engagement and social impact. Tapping into ways to make hybridized volunteering programs easy and accessible so that they can be fit into busy schedules and offer some semblance of normalcy will be key to recruiting and engaging volunteers.

- Identify the key 1-3 behaviors you hope to see volunteers do.
- Develop 3-5 goals that will help you know when your program is successful.
- Use a simple tool, like a spreadsheet, to track progress against goals.
- Build a program based on your organization's values. It can help to time your volunteering around a year-round calendar or accessible themes.
- Empower employees with choices. With millions of volunteers needed on [VolunteerMatch](#), whether virtually or in-person, we're one resource that can help your team get started.
- Create a set of basic guidelines for your virtual and in-person volunteering programs.

**TIP:** Refer to [CDC guidelines](#) for safer volunteering practices.

- Determine what personal protective equipment will be provided for in-person volunteering.
- Get leadership support.
- Consider supporting one cause or action at a launch.
- Adapt your program based on urgent community needs, such as natural disasters like hurricanes, wildfires, flooding, or other unplanned events.
- Evaluate your program to see what worked and what didn't. Apply this knowledge to the current program or as you build a new one.

