

Volunteer Programs Post-Pandemic Challenges



1. Michael, you are the Volunteer Coordinator for our AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP Program. I read recently that many nonprofit organizations are still struggling to get volunteering to return to pre-pandemic levels. Is that the case for AmeriCorps Seniors and The Senior Source's RSVP Program?

Yes, in late 2019, we had so many volunteers and opportunities that we actively discussed hiring another driver. I could get 10-12 volunteers for jobs on a regular basis.

In March 2020, everything completely stopped. A few very limited opportunities restarted in 2021. Even today, the pandemic may have peaked, but for us, the carryover effects are still in play. We lost a number of our volunteer referral stations (local nonprofit/community partners) and many volunteers stopped serving.



At the 2022 Texas Senior Corps Association Conference held in Waco recently, we learned that programs across the country are all going through the same thing. We are dealing with it by trying to be creative and flexible in our efforts. We are trying to find the right formula that works for both our stations and volunteers.

2. What are some of the difficulties that you are still facing today in getting volunteers to return or recruiting new people?

What comes first, the volunteers or the stations? That is the trickiest question to answer. Our volunteers will get discouraged if we do not have any work at our community partners' locations. At the same time, volunteers need to feel comfortable coming back out to work again.

We periodically call stations that stopped their volunteer program to see if they can accept volunteers again. We try to stay in touch with these stations so they will not forget about us



when they are ready to welcome volunteers back.

Also, at the stations, one of the many problems we face is that we lost a lot of the volunteer coordinators with whom we had established relationships. They moved to other jobs and careers during the pandemic. We must start over with the replacements and educate them on the value of our partnership. They need to understand what value we add to their organization.

On the side of the volunteers, we lost some strong group leaders during the pandemic. Many of our volunteers work together in groups. Individuals, church members, or civic organizations get together to volunteer with their friends. Usually, these groups have one strong and motivational leader who is the glue that holds them together. Often, it is extremely hard to

replace a group leader because the other members are reluctant to take on the responsibility and step into those roles. Without a clear leader, it can be difficult to retain the existing volunteers and recruit new members to the group.

Another volunteer challenge is a reluctance to change their routine activities and stations. Before the pandemic, several groups and individual volunteers had standard, recurring days, times, stations, and activities for their volunteer time. When those were no longer available, we presented them with alternative options, but they were sometimes reluctant to try new things. A few of our groups are very flexible and will try anything, so they have been busy more often.

3. You said your program was recognized at the National Convention as a success story, so what are you doing that is working?

We were recognized for Project Sunshine. Our volunteers put together miniature basketball goal kits for children and families who may have had injuries or illnesses. This was a unique partnership that AmeriCorps Seniors Headquarters coordinated. Our volunteers loved the project. More generally, we were recognized for the great work that our home improvement groups do. Keeping volunteer and client safety at the forefront of their work, they temporarily halted their volunteer work during the height of the pandemic. When they resumed service, they often worked outside or with minimal close contact with clients.

The most successful efforts we make are just constant outreach to connect or reconnect with our volunteers. I try to be honest about the difficulties we are having. The volunteers understand the struggles and appreciate that you are honest with them.

It all comes down to the volunteer relationship. I try to be their cheerleader and offer a sense of purpose and self-worth. We share a common mission statement. Many of them need a reason to get up in the morning, and volunteering gives them that. They missed it when it was gone, and they continue to do it now for the service.

In addition, we make retention and recruitment work hand in hand. While working with our current volunteers, we are also actively recruiting new people.

4. Looking into the next year or two, what do you see ahead?

We are slowly ramping back up along with our volunteer stations. I am optimistic for the future. We may be looking longer term than we would like but, we will get back there and hire that new driver someday.

