

# Volunteering and COVID-19: Time to Connect the Informal with the Formal

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In every corner of the world, people are responding to the serious problems caused by COVID-19 through what our profession calls "informal volunteering."

Informal volunteering is defined as *"unpaid volunteering not coordinated by an organization or institution. It is evident in helping individuals outside one's household, informal political participation, informal religious activity and membership in informal mutual assistance groups."*<sup>1</sup> It has also been defined as: *"People providing community, family and individual support to others in an 'unstructured' or 'unmanaged' but nevertheless committed way."*<sup>2</sup>

According to *TIME Magazine*, a new type of self-directed volunteer emerged in Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis. *"Their acts are personal, like a young woman who handed out masks to street cleaners and a mom who hired a helicopter to fly in supplies. They involve networks, like those built across social media to purchase and deliver menstrual products to medical workers working round the clock. And in some cases, the efforts are more widespread, as friend and alumni networks worldwide create logistics supply chains for donations of masks, eyeglasses, protective suits and other needed equipment to hospitals in need."*<sup>3</sup>

People are also leveraging their own social media platforms and digital media to organize their volunteer efforts such as arranging temporary homes for medical professionals coming to help in hospitals, or delivering food and supplies for those unable to leave their homes, or making phone calls and sending cards to residents of nursing homes and others who are isolated.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, informal volunteering has risen to a new level as neighbors improvise creative new ways to help the community they call home.

However, while some of these efforts are unique, it is important to recognize that even before the COVID crisis, the majority of volunteerism in the world was informal. According to the United Nations' "State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2018: The Thread that Binds, 70 percent of the world's volunteerism is conducted informally.

These numbers present a new reality to those of us who work to engage volunteers. It is time to recognize that we have much to learn from informal volunteers. And it is time to recognize the vital role informal volunteers have long played in meeting the diverse needs of our communities.

## Two types of informal volunteering

There are two types of informal volunteering: person-oriented and task-oriented. Person-oriented means directly helping a known person or group of people who are in need; it may include neighbors helping neighbors. Task-oriented volunteering may include yard work, shopping, animal care or errands assistance, activities that involve little direct contact with people or that are more anonymous in nature.<sup>4</sup>

Given that many previously available and organized formal opportunities for volunteers have been reduced due to 'shelter in place' orders and health and safety concerns, many people are turning to informal volunteering. In fact, according to a working paper completed by Volunteer Scotland, "Scotland's volunteering response to COVID-19, 2nd April 2020," there is a massive increase in available volunteers during the COVID-19 crisis. *"This is due to increased time and availability for people to*

*volunteer - many of whom are on furlough/working from home on reduced hours and are looking for some meaningful engagement in society during the 'staying at home' directive.”*<sup>5</sup>

For many Black, Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and those from non-English speaking backgrounds, informal volunteering has often been more prevalent than formal volunteer efforts. Informally helping out and pitching in is very much a part of the lives of people from BIPOC communities. More formal volunteer programs are often less available or less visible within these communities.

Research identifies that informal volunteering plays just as an important a role in building social capital as does 'formal', 'managed' or more structured forms of volunteering. The non-remunerated activity is no less important if it is carried out by an unmanaged volunteer outside of a formal organizational structure. Volunteer activity is no less an economic and social contribution whether taking place within a formal organizational setting or an informal community context.<sup>6</sup> The benefit to both the volunteer and to the community are essentially the same.

How volunteerism has been formally defined has long been open to debate in Anglo-Celtic cultures.<sup>7</sup> *“In its early surveys of voluntary work, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1989 & 1995) defined volunteers as: ”individuals who freely contribute their services, without remuneration (other than reimbursement of expenses occurred while working) to a variety of community activities. These voluntary services can be provided through organizations and/or outside of organizations. Volunteers outside of organizations provide regular voluntary services to neighbors, friends or other persons (who were not members of their own family) (1989 p.16).”*<sup>8</sup>

## Why volunteer-engaging organizations should care about informal volunteering

There is a good deal to understand from the informal volunteering that is on the rise in our communities.

### ***Formal volunteering and unintentional barriers***

First, we need to recognize that the drive to help others during a crisis comes from a basic desire to exercise a very personal sense of responsibility to our neighbors and our communities. People may prefer to respond in their own way and on their own time to address what they feel is wrong.

As volunteer engagement professionals, we must recognize that our formal approaches to volunteer engagement may unintentionally create barriers for the majority of people who wish to volunteer. We have set up systems and processes for engaging volunteers: a volunteer application, formal screening and interviewing of candidates, a comprehensive orientation, background checks, job descriptions, a volunteer handbook and a clearly communicated chain of command. These are all best practices, right? We may learn the answer to that question by again

recognizing that 70 percent of the world's population volunteer outside of an organizational structure.

People flock towards informal volunteering because they can reach people in ways that organizations cannot. Where there are systems and processes, people can fall through the cracks. In informal volunteering, people see that others need support and they simply and quickly jump right in. When we have connections with neighbors or community members, we reach out to provide assistance. We may not even call this volunteering. The support provided is more personal and directly connected to the particular needs of a community.

## ***Informal volunteering spotlights desire for more flexible options***

Second, informal volunteering teaches us that there are vast resources and a compelling desire to help in our communities - people want to care for and support others. Community members may balk at helping out under an inflexible, rule- and process-heavy structure. Volunteer engagement professionals and the organizations they come from would benefit from working toward being more flexible, innovative, open and adaptable. Some "best practices" may need to be relaxed. For example, do we need an extensive application, interview and background check for a volunteer who wants to shop and drop off groceries or do yard work for those who need it? Run errands? Paint houses? Stock shelves or sort food when no shoppers are around? Spontaneity is another characteristic of informal volunteering that the volunteer engagement field can learn from. People who step up to teach, feed, drive, clean etc., on a volunteer basis, do so because they are driven by passion and desire to address inequities. Passion doesn't always fit neatly into an organization's schedule. We can learn from informal volunteering that signing up in advance, volunteering during normal work hours or keeping a set schedule can be significant barriers to volunteer engagement. If we stored rakes, shovels, brooms and other supplies in a secure location, gave people the lock box code and told them to shovel, rake or clean the yard of designated homes at any time, would we tap into some previously hidden volunteers? If we allowed reading tutors to set up their own tutoring schedule with students, would access to literacy support increase? If we eased up on some liability and risk management processes and concerns could we trust volunteers to come into file, paint, reorganize, clean, sort, repair, on their own schedule instead of our schedule, would we find new volunteer resources? Who are we shutting out when we only have volunteer shifts during business hours? We truly miss out on maximum mission fulfillment when we expect volunteers to follow the inflexible structures and policies we have set up.

## ***A new opportunity for volunteer engagement leaders***

Informal volunteerism may be the foundation of a new type of volunteer engagement. From this new wave of volunteers comes an opportunity for organizational volunteer engagement leaders to support and learn from citizen volunteers.

Perhaps now is the time for leaders of volunteers to step out of their comfort zone to engage with and learn from informal volunteers. For example, Volunteer Ireland has already reached out to informal volunteers and created guidelines around what to consider when engaging volunteers informally. This includes best ways to introduce yourself to the people you would like to help and health and safety precautions to follow. The guidelines also include prompts to help think through including others in your volunteer efforts. <sup>9</sup>

After the June 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis - and the civil unrest that ensued - thousands of informal volunteers showed up with brooms, shovels and garbage bags, ready to clean up and restore some hard-hit neighborhoods. What if volunteer engagement professionals had spontaneously shown up to provide guidance, coordination and support? The informal volunteers may have appreciated the structure and direction of an experienced volunteer engagement professional. Leaders of volunteers could have not only helped but learned from the thousands of volunteers who took to the streets. We have skills to provide and we also have lessons to learn from the informal volunteers.

Risk management looms big in the professional life of a volunteer engagement professional and is a necessary and important consideration in how we operate. Consider what happened to so many volunteers as soon as the pandemic hit: volunteers were furloughed. In my opinion, letting so many volunteers go when the pandemic hit was short sighted. (See a poignant comment about the lack of volunteers in nursing homes during the pandemic in this issue's *Points of View*.) Many people wanted to volunteer and still do even though the pandemic is still a major threat. Volunteers continue to want to make the world a better place. If they are no longer welcome in an organization, volunteers will form informal groups or start their own movements. Many volunteers are willing and able to assume the risks of volunteering during the pandemic. If we cut them off, will they come back? If they do come back, what lessons from informal volunteering have we learned and what changes in organizational volunteer engagement are we now compelled to make? The current uptick in informal volunteer engagement means a significant number of people new to volunteering may now transition into established volunteerism. This might result in a long-term benefit for society. Volunteer Scotland concludes that *“there are many more people wanting to volunteer compared to the number of available opportunities. This imbalance may reduce over time as the coordination and recruitment of people into formal volunteering roles in health, social care and other welfare roles increases and as the demand for such roles also increases towards the peak of the pandemic.”* <sup>10</sup>

The hope is that informal volunteers may turn into formal volunteers - that is, if we collaborate effectively with them. On the other hand, converting informal volunteers to formal volunteers should not be our end goal. After all, what attracts people to informal volunteering is the lack of structure and formality. Perhaps instead of looking to convert informal volunteers, volunteer engagement professionals should join the efforts of the informal volunteers - get out there and see how change is being made and needs being addressed by people who are doing the work on their own terms. Then perhaps volunteer engagement professionals may consider easing up on some of our practices as we open the door to a new kind of volunteerism.

The opportunity that surfaces for organizations is to collaborate with informal volunteers in order to assure maximum service to all communities in need. Yes, informal volunteering carries some risks. There is a risk of abuse given the vulnerable individuals and groups that are often served informally. However, are we sure that informal volunteers are more likely to steal money from vulnerable people? Will they really take advantage of people in need? Are they likely to be getting involved for the wrong reasons? Is the risk as great as we think it is?

## Connecting the formal with the informal

Groups are springing up to support older people, those with existing health issues and the self-isolating. According to *The Guardian* newspaper: *“In the space of a few weeks of coronavirus lockdown, England has acquired a million-strong network of social volunteers - surpassing demand and prompting speculation. Is this a new sign of social solidarity, and can the newly acquired community spirit survive? A lot of the popularity of volunteering is about people trying to get a degree of agency and control in their life when they feel so helpless. Somehow, staying at home, even though that is the main thing you can do to help, does not feel enough,”* said Jackie Rosenberg, the chief executive of One Westminster community action in London. <sup>11</sup> Volunteer engagement professionals should be proactive and reach out to these groups now. It is a good idea to check in with them to see how your organization and its staff can be of assistance. Provide them with a copy of [MAVA’s Second Edition COVID-19 Response Guide and Tool Kit](#). See if you can join forces. Most organizations already collaborate and partner with formal organizations such as nonprofits, educational institutions, government entities, etc. This is a call to reach out to the informal ones as well.

Both Facebook and Nextdoor.com have new tools that let users offer or request help from their neighbors during the coronavirus pandemic. The Facebook tool is called “Community Help” <sup>12</sup> where people can volunteer to pick up groceries, ask someone to run an errand or donate to fundraisers. This is a concept similar to what’s already occurring on Nextdoor, a social network for local communities and neighborhoods. Nextdoor users access the platform to share local coronavirus updates, pick up medical supplies for others and trade goods like toilet paper and hand sanitizer.

### ***Sampling of informal groups created to assist during the pandemic***

The pandemic is lasting longer than any of us would have imagined. The opportunity is here for us to learn from and reach out to informal volunteers who are caring for those in need now more than ever. Informal volunteers may do their own work or they may form or join informal volunteer groups. Since the beginning of the pandemic, groups like those described below have emerged to address vast unmet needs in our communities. How are we going to connect with and learn from these groups? How are we going to work together to create a new era of volunteerism?

### **MN COVIDsitters** <sup>13</sup>

When the clinical rotations got canceled for spring semester, a group of medical students from the University of Minnesota formed the MN COVIDsitters. The students organized to offer free childcare, pet sitting, or run errands for the medical professionals, many of whom were their teachers and rotation supervisors while in school. They felt compelled to help the people that were dedicating their time to helping them learn weeks earlier. These efforts took off and caught the attention of the national news media. The group is now open to any college age student who wants to help and is offering services to anyone who works in a health care facility. They built out their internal capacity to organize by utilizing campus-wide software and expanding their leadership board. They have been able to mentor other college students through starting similar efforts in their states. *“We as students want to offer a helping hand wherever we can, during this coronavirus crisis as well as afterwards. More than ever before has the coronavirus crisis made us students aware that we are an integral part of society, to which we can and want to contribute. The vulnerable will always be there, the students will always be there, and so will our willingness to contribute. #StudentsCare.”*

### **Students against Corona** <sup>14</sup>

Students against Corona is a campaign set up by students at Oxford University who want to help deliver food parcels, carry out errands or be available to speak to anyone feeling lonely. The group is the first in a rapidly growing network of university students across the world who are pledging to do the same under a united banner. Other early groups have been set up in Loughborough (England), Dublin and Utrecht (Netherlands), with more in Canada, the USA and Uruguay expected to follow suit.

### **St. Louis Quarantine Support** <sup>15</sup>

St. Louis Quarantine Support is committed to aiding those who are currently sick and those who are immunocompromised, 65 or older, have disabilities and caregivers of those people, according to their Facebook page. Since the group was formed in March, volunteers have made more than 340 deliveries with more than 300 of those deliveries consisting of donated food.

**COVID-19 Mutual Aid** <sup>16</sup> is an online group which inspires and empowers autonomous Indigenous relief organizing in response to COVID-19. They have a list of local groups on its website. Groups are being added all the time. These groups are autonomous and communicate online, through social media and email, and each will have its local priorities and focus.

**9+6 - Seattle** <sup>17</sup> provides a forum for exchange of ideas and action in response to COVID-19. It is defined as calling for collective well-being through class solidarity, disability justice, anti-racism and abolition.

Since emerging after spring 2020, informal groups like these demonstrate that people looking to help out during a pandemic are not always inclined to volunteer formally at an organization. Those wanting to help are out there and we need to remove the barriers that have prevented them from volunteering formally. Our standard definitions and measures of what constitutes volunteer activity do not adequately account for the freely given time and effort which, in a more inclusive framework of understanding would be regarded as volunteering. Volunteer activity is no less

important and no less an economic and social contribution whether taking place within a formal organizational setting or an informal community context.

## Conclusion: Call to Action

The acts often associated with informal volunteering (visiting an elderly neighbor, giving advice, looking after a property or looking after the domestic pet of a friend) are more likely to be happen without realizing that the activity registers as volunteering. Digital volunteerism - resulting from greater accessibility and sophistication of information and communication technologies - also reflects changing preferences for a more informal kind of volunteering. In addition, it is important to recognize that informal volunteerism is a way of life for many communities of color and immigrant communities, who incorporate volunteerism into their way of life; but they don't call it "volunteering."

Less rigid definitions of volunteerism are needed to fully recognize and value contributions of all kinds. Particular attention should be given to the cultural and legal liability that are often identified as key barriers to organizational outreach to informal volunteers. More adaptive and inclusive models of volunteerism are needed to harness the capacities and resilience that exist within and across communities. Our current practices and structure may be counterproductive. Given increasing needs caused by the pandemic and other challenges (climate change, racial injustice for example), it is likely that 'informal' volunteers will provide much of the additional surge capacity required to respond to more frequent emergencies and disasters in the future.

If 70 percent of volunteerism in the world is done informally, now is the time for volunteer engagement leaders to connect with those who are volunteering informally. There is a reason that most people choose informal over formal volunteering. Get curious and see what they have to teach us. Improvisation and innovation are key features of informal volunteerism. The sampling of some of informal groups that have been created to assist during the pandemic is a place to begin. Consider reaching out to organized informal groups and loosely connected informal groups. As we learn from these groups. How can we adapt and change our volunteer engagement practices? Can we offer to collaborate and share some of our organizational resources?

Now might be a good time to connect the informal with the formal.

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations, by David Horton Smith, Robert A Stebbins, Jürgen Grotz.

<sup>2</sup> Experiences and perceptions of volunteering in Indigenous and non-English speaking background Communities. Lorraine Kerr Harry Savelsberg Syd Sparrow Deirdre Tedmanson. A joint project of the Department of State Aboriginal Affairs, the South

Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission, Volunteering SA, the Unaipon School University of South Australia) and the Social Policy Research Group (University of South Australia) May 2001.

<sup>3</sup> <https://time.com/5789530/wuhan-volunteers-coronavirus-COVID-19-china/>.

<sup>4</sup> See the Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations, by David Horton Smith, Robert A Stebbins, Jurgen Grotz).

<sup>5</sup> Scotland's volunteering response to COVID-19, 2nd April 2020

<sup>6</sup> Lorraine Kerr Harry Savelsberg Syd Sparrow Deirdre Tedmanson.

<sup>7</sup> (Sheier 1980; Sheard 1986; Baldock 1988; Noble 1991, 2000; Volunteering SA 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.volunteer.ie/about-us/COVID-19/COVID-19-resources/>.

See also .

<sup>10</sup> Scotland's volunteering response to COVID-19, 2nd April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/13/a-million-volunteer-to-help-nhs-and-others-during-COVID-19-lockdown> (no longer available)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/community\\_help/](https://www.facebook.com/community_help/)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mnCOVIDsitters.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://studentsagainstcorona.co.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/STLQuarantineSupport/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://itsgoingdown.org/c19-mutual-aid/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/COVID19mutualaid/>

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