

**AARP** Foundation<sup>®</sup>

# BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

**for Virtual Volunteers**



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# Introduction

In years past, being a volunteer typically meant you had to go somewhere—places like community centers and schools, soup kitchens and women’s shelters, or hospitals and retirement homes – in order to help out those in need.

Today, however, you can volunteer for various causes and organizations right from the comfort and convenience of your own home.

• By serving as a “virtual volunteer,” you offer your time, talents and expertise remotely or online.

The need for virtual volunteers has never been greater.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic and stay-at-home orders, physical distancing is now common, and the number of people working from home in the U.S. has doubled, [Stanford University research](#) shows. Likewise, more Americans are volunteering from home too.

The COVID-19 outbreak has disproportionately impacted people over age 50, communities of color, and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

As a result, direct face-to-face outreach to these individuals and others has been drastically curtailed during the pandemic. But physical distancing doesn’t have to lead to social isolation.

The world of virtual volunteering offers exciting possibilities, for volunteers as well as the people and organizations they support.





# Getting Started

So how can you get started as a virtual volunteer and what kind of volunteering options exist?

This *AARP Foundation Best Practices Guide for Virtual Volunteers* will provide you with everything you need to know to not just become an amazing virtual volunteer – but also find a breadth of meaningful remote volunteering opportunities that align with your interests or skills.

Within this online resource, you'll also learn specific ways virtual volunteers can help older adults during this critical time, when the pandemic limits traditional, in-person volunteer opportunities.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

**Virtual volunteers are called different names by different organizations.**

**Besides “virtual volunteers,” people who perform volunteer service from home are also referred to as digital volunteers, cyber-volunteers, remote volunteers, online volunteers, micro-volunteers and even e-volunteers.**

**Regardless of the name used, virtual volunteers contribute to society's good and make an impact.**

# The Benefits of Virtual Volunteering During COVID-19

As mentioned, older adults are especially vulnerable to coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease that it causes.

Since elderly individuals, who may have pre-existing conditions, are at high risk during this public health crisis, special care must be taken to safeguard their health and well-being.

But being socially isolated from others poses its own mental and physical health hazards, such as depression, severe loneliness and even increased risk of stroke, dementia or death.

Virtual volunteers can play a key role in staving off these problems by actively engaging with or supporting older adults during COVID-19.

As a remote volunteer, the benefits of your activities aren't limited to those you help.

You benefit greatly as well by tapping into your talents in the current environment.





## **KEY BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING VS. TRADITIONAL VOLUNTEERING**

- **No geographic boundaries – so you can help out locally, nationally or globally**
- **No travel needed**
- **No physical requirements**
- **No strict time commitments**
- **No in-person appearance required**

## **IS VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING RIGHT FOR YOU?**

- ☐ Do you have a heart to help others, but it's tough to find the time in your busy schedule?
- ☐ Do you possess skills that could benefit a non-profit, but you don't know where to start?
- ☐ Do you have an interest in volunteering based on your own passions or experiences?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you could make a great virtual volunteer!





# 5 Myths and 5 Facts About Virtual Volunteering

Before we tackle how to become a virtual volunteer, let's dispel some myths and misconceptions people sometimes have about digital volunteering.

Don't let the following 5 myths prevent you from using your time, energy and skills as a virtual volunteer.

## **MYTH #1: It's not "really" volunteering.**

**FACT #1:** Volunteering your time and skills as a virtual volunteer is just as valuable and equally needed as any volunteer work you may perform in person. If one of the goals of volunteering is to make an impact, it's nice to know you can do so from anywhere, whenever you can.

## **MYTH #2: It's too impersonal.**

**FACT #2:** Virtual volunteering can be as engaging as you make it. If it's important for you to connect with people one-to-one, or in groups, you can choose specific volunteer activities (like phone calls, texting or video chatting) that create strong personal connections with others.

## **MYTH #3: It's a temporary fad during COVID-19.**

**FACT #3:** Virtual volunteering has been around, in various forms, for decades. Using the internet to volunteer emerged in the mid-1990s, and experts say virtual volunteering and performing volunteer work from home is here to stay.

## **MYTH #4: It's not as rewarding for volunteers.**

**FACT #4:** Most virtual volunteers say their work is enormously gratifying. Some volunteers even feel volunteering from home is even more rewarding because they're able to fit it into their schedules more frequently, without the hassle of travel.

## **MYTH #5: It requires lots of technical skills.**

**FACT #5:** You don't have to be a whiz at technology to make a meaningful contribution as a virtual volunteer. Even if you need to utilize certain technology or apps, they're likely to be common tools you already use, or can easily learn.

**Bottom line:** Virtual volunteering gets real-world results. No matter the cause or organization you're supporting, the work of a virtual volunteer is rewarding, engaging and impactful. Charities and non-profits need volunteers more than ever these days.

By stepping up as a virtual volunteer, you're making the world a better place!



# Best Practices for Virtual Volunteers

Our world currently looks a lot different than it did just a year ago. One of the realities of the coronavirus pandemic is that many types of in-person volunteering aren't possible right now.

But even with stay-at-home orders and physical distancing requirements, the good news is that virtual volunteering still offers a way to help others from a distance – especially older adults.

Although you won't put boots on the ground in the same way you may have volunteered before, volunteering from home can open up possibilities you may not have considered.

Virtual volunteering involves re-thinking and getting more creative about how we keep making a difference in the lives of vulnerable people who are age 50 and above.



For instance, remote volunteering offers the chance to volunteer whenever you have time, without the pressure of a strict schedule or going to a specific site. Additionally, individuals who are housebound – perhaps due to caregiving responsibilities, a lack of transportation, or physical challenges – can be active virtual volunteers. It's also worth noting that you can perform meaningful volunteer work in your pajamas, right from your sofa, armchair or even your bed!

• There are thousands of organizations nationwide, including AARP Foundation, that need virtual volunteers in this moment.

In fact, volunteers are the lifeblood of our efforts and can help us and the world in countless ways.

Here's just a brief sampling of a half-dozen activities that a virtual volunteer can do to help older adults and to give back to the larger community:

- [Raise awareness](#) about the issues facing veterans and military members
- [Help parents and teens](#) in crisis who call a family helpline
- [Fight digital fraud](#) and financial scams against the elderly
- [Teach a virtual class](#) on a topic of your choice (music, travel, history, health, science, etc.)
- [Write letters](#) to health care workers
- [Give career advice](#) to high school students online

Beyond these activities, virtual volunteers of all backgrounds can utilize their unique skills in a host of areas, ranging from fundraising and marketing to providing legal aid or tax help.

To maximize your time and abilities, here's what you need to know about becoming the best virtual volunteer you can be.

# 5 Steps to Being a Great Virtual Volunteer



There are countless charities, non-profits and other organizations all hungry for volunteers.

With so many volunteering possibilities, how do you begin?

Whether you are volunteering with AARP Foundation or elsewhere, you'll enrich your volunteer experience by having a strategy that lets you optimize all that you have to offer.

Use the following 5 steps to become a great virtual volunteer.

## STEP 1. Pick Your Top Area(s) of Interest

Most of us have various things that grab our attention. Maybe you enjoy painting or music. Perhaps you're a history buff or you're into archeology. Or maybe you feel strongly about being an advocate for social justice or racial equity.

Whatever the case, when selecting a volunteer pursuit, narrow your focus to the top 1 or 2 things about which you are most passionate and have the most interest.

Ideally, if you can identify the single most relevant subject, topic or cause that lights a fire under you, that's a good indication that you'd be a great volunteer in that general arena.

## STEP 2. Choose Your Ideal Time Commitment

When it comes to virtual volunteering, it's important to realistically consider the amount of time you will be able to devote to volunteering.

- Will you be a "frequent" volunteer (volunteering every week or maybe even daily)?
- Will you be a "regular" volunteer (volunteering on a fairly routine or consistent schedule, about two to four times a month)?
- Will you be an "occasional" volunteer (volunteering on an irregular basis, whenever you want)?

Thinking through these questions and answering them honestly is vital because your answers may influence the method in which you opt to volunteer, as well as the organizations or causes to which you will devote your efforts.

### Step 3. Decide on Your Virtual Volunteer Method

As a virtual volunteer, it may be helpful to think about your volunteer work as falling into three buckets or methods:

- **cause-oriented volunteering** – involves committing yourself to a specific cause, mission or organization. Cause-oriented volunteering is often best for “frequent” volunteers, but it may be appropriate for “regular” volunteers as well.
- **skills-based volunteering** – involves using a specific skillset you have at a given organization or even multiple organizations. Skills-based volunteering is typically best for “regular” volunteers; however, it is viable for “frequent” volunteers too.
- **micro-volunteering** – involves volunteering to perform various tasks for brief periods, lasting 5 to 30 minutes. Micro-volunteering is best for “occasional” volunteers desiring maximum flexibility and minimum time commitments.

Since these areas may have some overlap, consider the following questions as guides:

- Ask yourself what your personal goal is or what you hope to accomplish by volunteering.
- Do you want to learn something new?
- Do you want to keep yourself busy?
- Do you want to make social connections?

Of course you want to help and make an impact. But what do you hope to get out of the volunteer experience for yourself?

### IS MICRO-VOLUNTEERING IN YOUR FUTURE?

**People of all ages enjoy micro-volunteering for a host of reasons.**

- You can do micro-volunteering anytime and anywhere.
- You may not need to possess any special skills.
- You typically need not go through any time-consuming volunteer training program.
- You don't have to make a precise time commitment.
- You have a nearly unlimited number of actions you could do or try out at your leisure.
- You can help a cause or organization even if you can't commit to ongoing volunteering.
- You can serve as a micro-volunteer for local or far-flung organizations.



#### Step 4: Find the Best Opportunity in the Organization of Your Choice

Even as an AARP or AARP Foundation volunteer, you have a wide range of possibilities for virtual volunteering. So your next task is to hone in on where you can best apply your volunteer efforts, based on your interests, your time availability and your skills.

AARP can help you easily locate various volunteer projects, campaigns and cause-based initiatives, including those you can do virtually. Just go online to <https://www.aarp.org/giving-back/> and search for “virtual” volunteering, or visit <https://createthegood.aarp.org/> and filter for “home/remote opportunities.”

Outside of AARP, the following organizations can help match you with volunteer experiences too:

- [All For Good](#)
- [Idealist.org](#)
- [Points of Light Foundation](#)
- [VolunteerMatch](#)

And these groups below will help you specifically if you’re an older adult or are looking to volunteer in ways that assist elderly Americans.

- [Senior Corps](#)
- [Foster Grandparents](#)
- <https://www.telehealthforseniors.org/>

Finally, if you want to make a difference as it pertains to racial equality, or to work on racial justice issues for people of all ages and generations, you can seek out opportunities with:

- [Color of Change](#)
- [Black Lives Matter](#)
- [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#)

#### Step 5: Make Sure You Have the Right Tools

You generally need not be overly concerned with getting a ton of high-tech equipment just to do virtual volunteer work.

But once you know what functions you’ll be performing, you do need to make sure you’re all set up to fulfill your volunteer duties.

Common tools virtual volunteers use include:

- Laptop or Desktop Computer
- Tablet
- Smartphone (iPhone or Android)
- Video Conferencing Software (Zoom, Skype, GoogleMeet, GotoMeeting, Webex, etc.)
- Video Calling Apps (Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Google Duo, etc.)
- Internet Connection
- Web Camera
- Headset

Again, don’t worry about technology being a barrier. Many organizations, including AARP Foundation, will guide you through anything you need to know to successfully volunteer.





# Additional Best Practices When Working With Older Adults

As an AARP Foundation volunteer, or even a prospective volunteer, you've already demonstrated an affinity for helping older adults.

But if you're directly engaging with those who are 50 and above, you can improve the quality of your interaction with them by preparing for three main obstacles.

The non-profit group [Generations on Line](#) says access, skill, and intimidation all hinder older adults from achieving digital literacy and more fully engaging in a host of activities.

So here's what you can do as a virtual volunteer to mitigate each of those challenges and overcome these obstacles.

**Access** is about making sure that the older people you're trying to help have the same technology or tools that you do in order to facilitate connection. That could mean a good wifi connection or video conferencing if you want to create a more personal and visual face-to-face experience.

To address **skills** deficiencies, be sure to explain technical concepts in layman's terms. Go slowly, exercise patience and take things step by step.

To deal with the **intimidation** factor, let an older adult know that you're there for them, and that you'll be working through any issues together. Simply being patient and supportive goes a long way.

It may help to also pre-install applications on devices when possible, or use screen shots as instructional aids.



# Ideas to Spark Your Creativity and Personalize Volunteering

Here are some ideas to jumpstart your thinking and get you considering all the creative ways you can engage in virtual volunteering. Note that some of these activities are decidedly low-tech and don't require anything other than a telephone.

## **Call Someone in Need**

Most people welcome getting a good old-fashioned phone call from a friendly voice. You can call neighbors or elderly friends, people who are disabled or suffering an illness, or those who are house-bound. A phone call to check in on them would surely be appreciated during COVID-19. You can ask if they're doing OK, if they need anything, or just see if they'd like to chat.

## **Buy Groceries or Have Them Delivered**

Food insecurity affects a large segment of older Americans. You may be able to send food to someone in need or help them locate a local food bank or pantry that can provide free food.

## **Arrange a Personal Service**


Some older people can't do certain routine functions or things they used to be able to do, whether that's walking the dog or mowing the lawn. If you connect one-to-one with an older person, find out if they need any such service and then see if you can arrange to get it done.

- Create "get well" cards for those with COVID-19, then deliver the cards virtually
- Conduct a virtual reading program or story time with someone home-bound
- Set up a virtual music class for someone who loves music
- Schedule a virtual exercise session for a person who is able and wants to get moving indoors



## **WANT TO MAKE VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING EVEN MORE PERSONAL? TRY THESE IDEAS:**

- Write (thank you notes, personal letters and more)
- Call (texting is fine, but voice adds a more human element)
- Use video to connect (don't forget to smile!)
- Teach anything you know
- Mentor others
- Share your story
  - Non-profits and advocacy campaigns love having a real-life person to highlight an issue. Have you survived cancer, endured the loss of a loved one, or overcome a major life setback? Your personal story may inspire others or help someone else struggling with the same issue – whatever that issue might be. Your tale might also encourage potential donors to make a contribution to a worthy cause or organization.



# 6 Final Tips for Virtual Volunteering Success

No matter where you volunteer, or what you do to make an impact, keep these final tips in mind to enhance your volunteer work and make the experience a positive one for all involved.

By acting on the following 6 tips, you'll be a successful and happy virtual volunteer.

## **TIP #1: Stay in your (enthusiasm) lane.**

Volunteer for tasks or activities that you love to do and are enthusiastic about. A positive attitude and passion are important, and when you love what you do, this will automatically come out when you carry out your volunteer work.

## **TIP #2: Be reliable.**

Honor your commitments because people are depending on you. And since most charities and non-profits are under-staffed, every bit of help really does make a difference.

## **TIP #3: Know the overall mission.**

Always understand and learn about the organization you are volunteering with. Having a true appreciation and understanding of an organization's mission can help you better align your activities with what matters most.

## **TIP #4: Be open to learning.**

Strive to keep learning about the organization, the people you're volunteering with, and the people you're helping to serve. By keeping an open mind and listening to everyone's needs (instead of assuming what they need), you'll be a more effective, compassionate volunteer.



**TIP #5: Track your time.**

Even if you're only volunteering 15 or 30 minutes a month (or less), all of your volunteer time matters. Sometimes, people are surprised at how much they can accomplish in relatively short periods of volunteerism. In any case, it's gratifying to see how much your volunteer work adds up over time.

To document your progress and contributions, keep a written log of your work, tracking your hours. If you're doing micro-volunteering, track by 15-minute intervals.

**TIP #6: Don't volunteer to excess.**

Know your limits and don't tax yourself unnecessarily with an excessive amount of volunteer hours or with activities that are too draining for your personal temperament.

Volunteering is supposed to be inspiring and make you feel good. It is not supposed to make you feel stressed out or completely exhausted.





# AARP & AARP Foundation Volunteer Programs and Resources

To learn about opportunities in your community and sign up to volunteer, please visit us at: [aarp.org/giving-back/](https://aarp.org/giving-back/)

**Create the Good:** Find ways to be of help directly in your community, whether you have 5 minutes, 5 hours or 5 days to give.

**Driver Safety:** Help others get on the road to safety as an AARP Driver Safety instructor or coordinator.

**AARP In Your State:** There are a variety of volunteer opportunities in AARP state offices. Share your interests and we'll help you explore options.

**Tax Aide:** Help low-income taxpayers file their tax returns and assist them in getting the credits and deductions that they've earned.

**Experience Corps:** Learn how you can put your time, knowledge and talent to use tutoring and mentoring young people.

**Property Tax-Aide:** Help low-income older adults find property tax refund and credit programs.



# More Resources to Consider

## **The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook by Jayne Cravens**

### **Be My Eyes**

[Be My Eyes](#) is a free mobile app with one main goal: to make the world more accessible for blind and low-vision people. The app connects blind and low-vision individuals with sighted volunteers from all over the world through a live video call.

### **Catchafire**

[Catchafire](#)'s website matches professionals with non-profits based on their skills, cause interest and time availability. They help people locate numerous skills-based volunteering opportunities, including virtual volunteer roles.

### **Family Eldercare**

This organization offers [Lifetime Connections Without Walls](#), a telephone activities program that provides opportunities for older adults to connect with others. The service promotes social interaction, educational sessions, support groups, and friendly conversations, all from the comfort of home. Volunteers only need a computer, internet connection, and phone.

### **The SCORE network**

These retired small business mentors, which traditionally offered volunteer coaching during in-person sessions, now provide virtual mentoring to entrepreneurs and owners of start-up businesses, so volunteers can still contribute from home.