



Engaging Volunteers from Diverse and Immigrant Communities

**8 Strategies
for Creating a More
Inclusive Volunteer Program**

January 2018



This Report

Engaging Volunteers from Diverse and Immigrant Communities: 8 Strategies for Creating a More Inclusive Volunteer Program is published by the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) in January of 2018, based upon research completed between January 1 and December 31, 2017.

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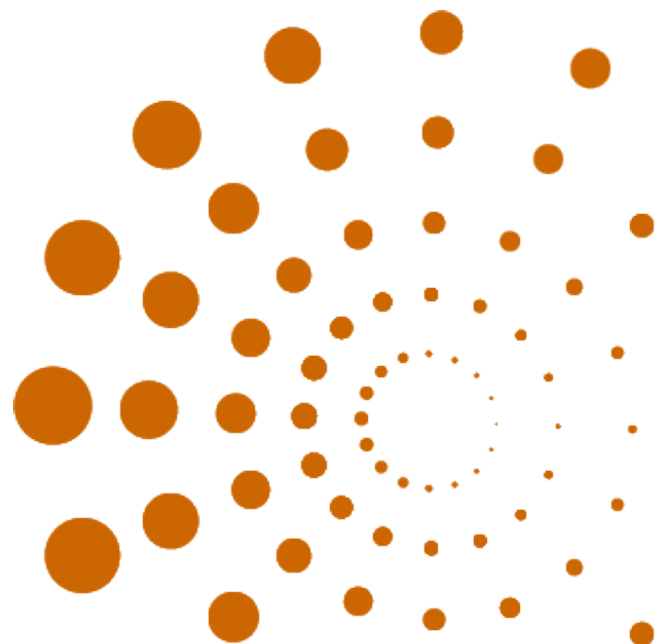
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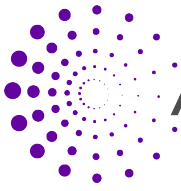
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Mission

MAVA connects, educates, strengthens and advocates for volunteer engagement leaders and their organizations to positively impact communities.





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Thank you to the Saint Paul Foundation for funding MAVA’s Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Initiative.

Task Force

Thank you to members of MAVA’s Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Task Force for contributing their insights and experiences to this project:

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Government and Nonprofit Agencies

Thank you to the following government and nonprofit agencies for contributing their experiences to this initiative through meetings, interviews, trainings, resources, and ongoing partnerships, including grant recipients (indicated with an *):

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|---|--|------------------------------|
| African Economic Development Solutions* | City of Saint Anthony | League of Minnesota Cities |
| City of Apple Valley | City of Saint Paul | LIFT to End Poverty* |
| City of Burnsville | City of South Saint Paul | Minnesota Women’s Consortium |
| City of Eagan | City of West Saint Paul | Nexus Community Partners |
| City of Edina | Como Park Zoo and Conservatory | Ramsey County |
| City of Inver Grove Heights | Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES) | Ramsey County Library |
| City of Lauderdale | Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage | Saint Paul Public Library |
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INTRODUCTION

Do your volunteers represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the community you serve?

The answer for most government and nonprofit organizations is “no.”

But this can change.

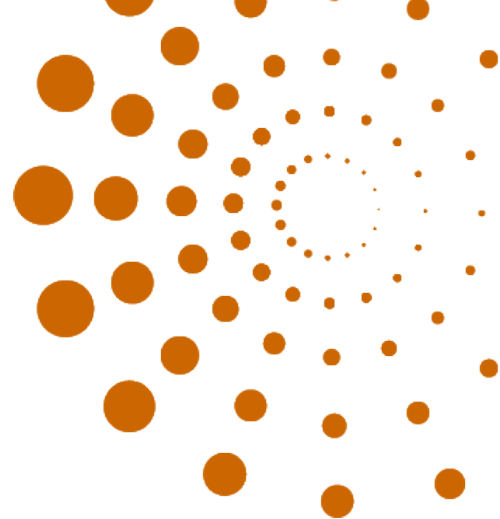
The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) spent a year researching the challenges, barriers, and best practices for engaging volunteers from immigrant and diverse communities in city and county governments. While this project – the Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Initiative – focused on government organizations, the findings can largely be applied across both government and nonprofit entities. To reach these findings, MAVA built on several previous initiatives and conducted new research to more deeply explore questions such as:

- How is the concept of volunteerism understood and perceived in racially and ethnically diverse communities?
- What barriers currently exist to engaging diverse and immigrant populations as volunteers with government organizations and how can these barriers be overcome?
- What outreach or recruitment strategies are most effective in immigrant and diverse communities?
- Are there particular volunteer roles that are more appealing to people of diverse backgrounds and, if so, how can government or nonprofit organizations develop these roles?
- What efforts have organizations found successful for engaging volunteers from diverse and immigrant communities and how can other entities replicate these efforts?

The result of this research is a set of 8 strategies for engaging volunteers from diverse and immigrant communities, which government and nonprofit organizations can develop into an action plan for change.



Members of MAVA's Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Task Force take part in a panel discussion at the National Summit on Volunteer Engagement Leadership



Research and Development of Strategies

The Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Initiative was made possible by a grant from the St. Paul Foundation.

The following activities contributed to development of this report:

- Program Manager – MAVA hired a part-time Program Manager to lead the Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Initiative.
- Inclusive Civic Volunteerism Task Force – The Task Force was made up of 18 members who represented culturally-specific organizations, city and county volunteer programs, community volunteers, and MAVA representatives. The Task Force met 5 times for in-depth discussions about barriers to volunteerism for immigrant and racially diverse communities, success stories, perception of volunteerism in immigrant and diverse communities, and other relevant topics.
- Mini-Grants – MAVA issued a Request for Proposals and managed the distribution of 3 mini-grants of \$2,500 each to fund projects on inclusive civic engagement. Grant recipients took part in a cohort group that met 4 times to discuss activities, successful strategies, and lessons learned.
- Individual meetings – MAVA’s Program Manager took part in over 30 interviews, meetings and practitioner group events to compile experiences of volunteer managers, culturally-specific organizations, and community volunteers from across the East Metro region of the Twin Cities.
- Previous MAVA Research – MAVA conducted several previous research studies that contributed to this project:

Immigrant Volunteerism Initiative – A research project focused on learning about volunteerism in immigrant communities and how organizations can begin to engage members of these communities as volunteers. The final report, “Relationships Matter,” is available for purchase on MAVA’s website (www.mavanetwork.org).

City Volunteer Program Initiative – A project aimed at developing best practices for starting and developing a volunteer program in a city government. As part of this initiative, MAVA also did initial research into immigrant volunteerism in city governments. The findings of this study – that immigrant volunteers have much to contribute to and also much to gain from volunteering with a city – spurred MAVA’s interest in exploring the subject further. MAVA’s resources on volunteerism for cities can be found on our website (www.mavanetwork.org).



Dr. Mai Moua and a panel of experts present a MAVA training on Immigrant Volunteerism in 2009.

Why Prioritize Racial and Ethnic Diversity?

Many government and nonprofit organizations struggle to recruit volunteers — of any race or background — to fill needed positions. It may seem like focusing on diverse communities just makes recruitment goals even more difficult. However, engaging volunteers from immigrant and diverse communities is essential for both governments and nonprofits in order to stay relevant, provide quality services, and continue to engage high numbers of volunteers.

Consider the following:

- Between 2000 and 2015, the percentage of Minnesota’s population who are people of color nearly doubled, from 10% in 2000¹ to 19% in 2015.² The percentage of the United States population comprised of people of color also grew, though slightly less rapidly, from 25% in 2000 to 39% in 2015.³
- While the population of every race group in Minnesota increased from 2010-2015, “the state added four times as many people of color as non-Hispanic white residents,” according to the Minnesota State Demographic Center.⁴
- People of color are increasingly moving out of Minneapolis and St. Paul to first and second ring suburbs, resulting in many of these suburbs becoming 20% or more racially and ethnically diverse.⁵ For cities, this means that engaging volunteers of diverse backgrounds is essential if volunteers are to reflect the diversity of the community.
- Nonprofit organizations that serve diverse communities provide more culturally-relevant services when volunteers of diverse backgrounds are involved at all levels of the organization.
- Engaging volunteers from immigrant and diverse communities allows cities, counties, and nonprofit organizations to begin building relationships with these communities, inviting community members to learn more about the services provided and opportunities for involvement.

The question, then, should not be whether or not governments and nonprofits can afford to spend time and resources engaging diverse communities. The question should be: Can they afford not to?

Between 2000 and 2015, the percentage of Minnesota’s population who are people of color nearly doubled, from 10% in 2000 to 19% in 2015.

A Starting Point

Many volunteer engagement professionals have expressed a strong desire to better engage immigrant and diverse communities as volunteers but are unsure of where to start. MAVA developed 8 strategies to address exactly this issue. Each strategy offers concrete steps that organizations can take for building a more diverse volunteer cohort.

In addition to the 8 strategies, MAVA created an Action Plan template to help guide your next steps in engaging a more diverse volunteer pool. This template is located on Page 23 of this report; we encourage you to use the template to write down ideas and notes as you read through the 8 strategies.



STRATEGY #1

Shift Your Language

The term “volunteer” is not universally understood.

One reason for this misunderstanding is the formalization of volunteerism in American society. The term “volunteerism” is often used to describe formal volunteering – donating time to an organization or other entity in a supervised setting which often includes an application process, interview, and ongoing tracking of hours and activities. Informal volunteerism, on the other hand, is when people help one another as friends and neighbors. Although this type of giving fits the definition of volunteering, people often do not refer to it with that term.

Informal volunteerism is prevalent in communities of color and immigrant communities. People drive one another to doctor appointments, watch each other’s children, assist at their church, and spend days participating in funerals or other cultural events to aid a neighbor. They do not, however, label this as “volunteering.” According to one community volunteer who is an immigrant from Cameroon, “We are more comfortable with the word ‘help’.” This sentiment was echoed by members of multiple other immigrant communities.

Even for people within the field of volunteer engagement, there is not always agreement on where to draw the line between “volunteering” and simply being a good neighbor. As an example, which of the following would you consider “volunteerism”?

- Serving on a city board or commission?

What if you list this activity under “work experience” on your resume?

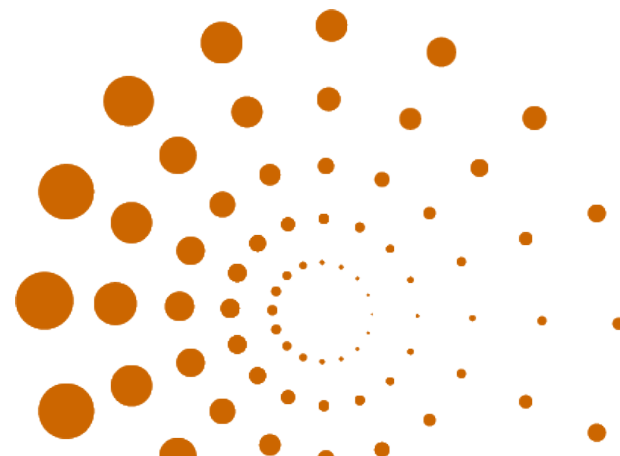
- Watching your neighbor’s children so he or she can go to a job interview?

What if you do this with the understanding that your neighbor will return the favor when you need it?

- Taking your mother to the doctor?

If you ask a room full of people this question, they will likely express a variety of answers. Recognizing this helps build understanding that the term volunteerism and the surrounding concept are sometimes unclear.

*We are more comfortable
with the word ‘help’.*



Volunteer vs. Help

To take it one step further, compare the definition of “volunteer” to the definition of “help.” Consider the following:

Volunteer: Someone who does something without being forced to do it; such as a person who does work without getting paid to do it.⁶

Help: to give assistance to; to make more pleasant or bearable to be of use to; to change for the better.⁷

It’s clear from these definitions why many people are more comfortable using the word “help.” Volunteerism, or working without pay, does not sound like something everyone can do — especially those struggling to make ends meet. Giving assistance or changing for the better, though? Those sound like things a person can — and wants — to do to make their community a better place.

Shift Your Language

What does this mean for volunteer engagement professionals? When working with immigrant and diverse communities, consider using words beyond “volunteer.” “Help” is one good option, but other broader terms — like “support,” “benefit,” or “give,” are also possibilities. Please note — this doesn’t mean you should eliminate the word “volunteer” from your vocabulary. Don’t change the “volunteer” tab on your website to “help” or start calling all of your volunteers “helpers.” Instead, simply mix up the language you use when talking about volunteer work — both in your print materials and when you’re speaking to someone directly. Use the word “volunteer”, but also use other words — ones that are more universally understood — to speak to a person’s sense of community.

Similarly, when recruiting volunteers from diverse communities, focus on how the volunteers can assist their community instead of how they will help your organization. Very often volunteer engagement professionals speak about impact in terms of the organization — for example, volunteers contributed 10,000 hours of service *to the organization*, or a volunteer can help by organizing a clothing drive *for the organization*. Instead, talk about how a volunteer can help by giving their time *to their community* through your organization, or how they can organize a clothing drive *for their community*. The organization is implied — it’s a part of the process — but it’s not the focus.

Use the word ‘volunteer’, but also use other words—ones that are more universally understood—to speak to a person’s sense of community.

Admittedly, this is the easiest of the 8 strategies to implement. It’s also the least likely to be successful when adopted on its own. Our recommendation is to adopt this strategy alongside one or more of the other strategies to increase your chances for success. Shifting your language is important, but you must do more than that to truly build a diverse and inclusive volunteer program.



STRATEGY #2

Build Relationships

No conversation about engaging diverse populations can take place without discussion of relationship-building. It is central to any successful outreach effort. In fact, a key finding of MAVA's 2009 study on engaging immigrant populations was that relationship-building needs to be the primary focus—so much so that the report is entitled "Relationships Matter." Many people across cultures say they would volunteer if they were asked, but they aren't asked. Building relationships is the first step toward making that ask.

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Be Specific, Be Authentic

All communities are different. You need to identify the specific communities you're hoping to engage and build relationships in each of those communities. There are no shortcuts, and it is hard work. Be prepared for that.

What helps is authenticity. Be sure you can articulate why you want to engage a particular community – to yourself, to your organization, and to the community.

Many immigrant and diverse communities have had the unfortunate experience of being approached so someone can "check a box." They've been asked their opinion, only to see no action or change happen in response. This means you may need to work extra hard to build trust and show that you have an authentic interest in their opinions, skills, and contributions.

Ideas for Building Relationships

Once people understand the importance of building authentic relationships, the next question is "How?" While there is no one method that will work in every situation, we've compiled a list of approaches that cities and organizations have found effective.

1. Attend cultural events or celebrations

Have a booth at an event that celebrates a diverse community or culture in order to meet people, build relationships, and establish a connection with the community. According to one task force member that is part of the Hmong community, "Certain companies and organizations come to all of our events. We know them and we see them as a part of our community."

Establishing this type of relationship will take multiple years of attending one or more events. MAVA recently worked with a local organization to bring City of St. Paul representatives to their community event, “Little Africa Fest.” Representatives from the Parks and Recreation department and the library system were able to host a booth at the event. The representatives commented that they had many great conversations and did quite a bit of education around the programs and services their department offers. They noted that they did not recruit many volunteers, which was their original intent. However, both representatives who attended the event felt that if they continued having a presence over several years they would be more successful at recruiting new volunteers for their programs.

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We know them and we see them as part of our community.*

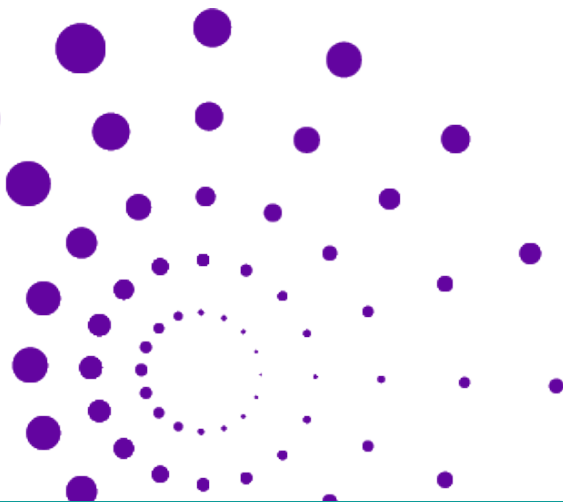
Find out what type of cultural events happen in your own community and what gatherings have an opportunity for hosting a booth. Remember that establishing relationships takes time, so don't rush volunteer recruitment. Offer people a chance to get to know your organization, interact with you, and learn about the services offered. Over time there will be a natural flow into asking them if they'd like to help.

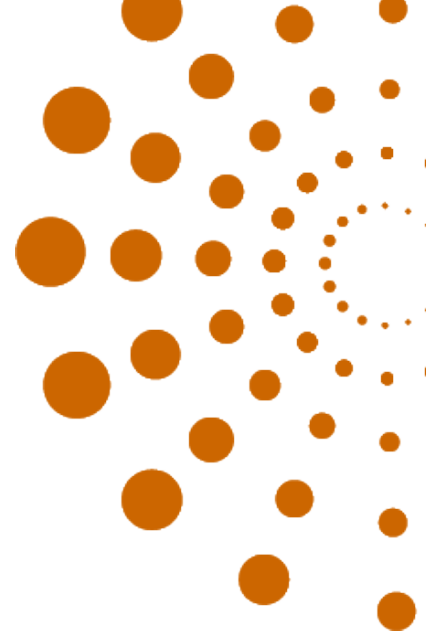
Suburban and rural cities, along with organizations based in these cities, have noted that there are fewer cultural events outside of the metro area. Although not culturally-specific, farmer's markets are another type of event where organizations have had success engaging with diverse populations. If there is not a cultural event or celebration in your service area, consider hosting a booth at a local farmer's market, particularly one close to the neighborhoods you're hoping to reach.

2. Reach out to culturally-specific groups or organizations

There are many organizations or community groups that serve, celebrate, or advocate for people of a particular culture. These groups are a tremendous resource as a starting point for building relationships within immigrant and diverse communities. You must understand, however, that staff at these organizations are stretched very thin. In fact, many culturally-specific groups are run entirely by volunteers. Therefore, it's essential to build relationships with these organizations as opposed to simply asking them to help or connect you to the community.

Further, many staff and volunteers at these organizations are repeatedly asked to serve on boards of directors, commissions, and other leadership roles as representatives of their communities. One person can only have so many leadership positions! So be mindful of what you ask from a leader of a culturally-specific organization. Instead of asking them to serve on your task force or board of directors, ask if they can connect you with a volunteer or community member who may be interested in your work. And be sure you don't simply ask for their help — also offer ways that your organization can support their work. This will help establish a partnership that can lay the foundation for an ongoing relationship.





3. Collaborate internally

Many large organizations (and some small ones) work in a very siloed environment. If this is the case with your organization or government, you need to be intentional about communicating with other departments about your outreach efforts to diverse communities. Collaborating will make all of your work in this area more efficient, but it will also alleviate any confusion that might come from multiple departments or programs contacting the same community members.

4. Host a community open house

For nonprofits, invite people from the surrounding community to come visit your office, learn about your services, and get to know your organization as a neighbor. For cities, consider a “new resident” open house that is particularly marketed toward immigrant populations. Invite residents to come to city hall, meet with staff members and volunteers, learn about how to navigate city government services, and discover what the city has to offer. Immigrant populations are sometimes intimidated by government offices, so inviting them to visit and learn is a good step to creating a more welcoming city.

5. Other ideas

Places of worship or religious organizations are often a good place to start in reaching out to diverse communities. An additional idea is to contact culturally-specific employee groups at mid-to-large-sized companies in your city or nearby your organization. Although these groups are not usually listed on the company’s website, many companies have them and they are a great way to connect with local professionals of diverse backgrounds. This is an excellent strategy for suburban organizations or cities that may not have as many local cultural events available.

Be Persistent

If you don’t receive a response when you first reach out to communities of color, don’t give up. Remember that these communities have repeatedly been approached by people who were required to solicit input from culturally diverse groups, but did little or nothing with the input received. Keep trying. Being persistent is a first step in demonstrating your authenticity.

One of MAVA’s sub-grant recipients is a group looking to improve health and wellbeing for all people in a St. Paul suburb. This group realized that their outreach efforts were not reaching people of color, many of whom were relatively new residents in the city. As part of their outreach effort, they decided to hold a community conversation between a Lutheran church and a mosque. Convincing members of the mosque to participate was a slow process – it involved talking with multiple “gate-keepers” before speaking with the leaders of the mosque who could make the conversation happen. After many months and a dozen meetings, the conversation between the church and the mosque happened. It was a welcoming and productive conversation, and a number of participants became volunteers with the community group. It never would have happened, however, if the organizers had not been persistent in seeking an authentic relationship.

Role of Cultural Liaison

When building relationships with communities of new Americans or people of color, you may be fortunate enough to engage someone in the role of cultural liaison. This is a person who is from the community you are trying to reach and can work on behalf of your organization or city to build support within the community. Finding someone who will serve in this role can be exponentially advantageous to your outreach efforts; however, it is essential that you understand what the role involves.

Being a cultural liaison is more than making a few introductions. It involves more than talking to a couple of people about an organization. Instead, it means representing your organization — the good, the bad, the confusing — within their community. It's a lot of pressure, and a lot of work.

As an example, Claudia is a volunteer Police Reserves officer for a suburban St. Paul city. She began as a "Police Explorer" while in high school, then continued on to the Reserves program. Claudia's parents immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico, and she is well-connected in the Latino neighborhood where she grew up and still lives — a neighborhood that is in the city where she volunteers with the Police Reserves.

Claudia's volunteer role goes beyond the hours she serves as a Reserve officer. When someone in her community has an encounter with law enforcement, they come to her for help. She has appeared in court for people. She assisted a woman whose husband was being deported. She has people come to her all the time with questions about the police. And they are not just family friends or people she knew growing up — they are people she has never met before who have heard she can help with anything police related. Her volunteer job has turned into much more — she represents the police in her community and does her best to give everyone a good experience.

Many people, in fact, have said that working with her has been their first positive encounter with the police. So she is not only helping her community, she's also changing people's perspective on law enforcement. It's a huge responsibility, but one that she's happy to accept.



Being a cultural liaison is more than making a few introductions.



STRATEGY #3

Understand the Importance of Socio-Economic Status

Taking into account socio-economic status is crucial when working with diverse communities. While 26% of Minnesota's population as a whole is in or near poverty, this number is significantly higher for people of color.⁸ Below is a breakdown of individuals in or near poverty for the four most prevalent cultural minority groups in Minnesota, according to a 2016 report by the Minnesota Demographic Center:

African-American: 35% in poverty, 25% near poverty; therefore, 60% in or near poverty

Mexican: 26% in poverty, 32% near poverty; therefore, 58% in or near poverty

Hmong: 27% in poverty, 34% near poverty; therefore, 61% in or near poverty

Somali: 57% in poverty, 26% near poverty; therefore, 83% in or near poverty⁹

People identifying as members of these four cultural groups are 2-3 times more likely to be living in or near poverty than a white Minnesota resident. Therefore, when engaging volunteers from these cultural groups it is essential to consider socio-economic status and make adjustments that accommodate volunteers from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Survival-Mode

Several of the task force members active in this initiative repeatedly stressed that many people of diverse backgrounds, particularly recent immigrants, are in "survival-mode." They are looking for work or working long hours, they are trying to afford food and housing, and they are often sending money to relatives in their home country.

People in "survival-mode" volunteer, but they volunteer differently. They help others in their community, but are better able to participate in these activities when there is reciprocity involved. People in poverty have a variety of needs, and if they can help a neighbor who will help them in return, this is a more approachable form of volunteering than a role where there is not an immediate or tangible benefit. Some individuals in survival-mode are simply unable to volunteer in a formal fashion, and it's important to acknowledge this.

People in 'survival-mode' volunteer, but they volunteer differently. They help others in their community, but are better able to participate in these activities when there is reciprocity involved.

A Little Easier

There are steps you can take to make it a little easier for those in or near poverty to volunteer with your organization or government.

1. Child Care

Finding safe, affordable child care is a barrier for many people, and this is especially true of people in or near poverty. Providing free child care at volunteer events or gatherings may be the factor that allows a parent to attend. Also consider, when possible, making volunteer events family-friendly. Being able to bring and involve their children allows people who do not have access to child care the opportunity to participate. Further, inviting children makes it so parents working multiple jobs or odd hours can be involved without sacrificing precious family time.

2. Transportation Stipends

According to the Minnesota Demographic Center, seven percent of all Minnesotans don't own a vehicle, and this percentage is much higher for communities of color. Of particular note, 31% of African-Americans and 27% of

Somali people do not have a vehicle; this correlates with the higher number of people experiencing poverty in these cultural groups.¹⁰ As a whole, communities of color are more reliant on public transportation and rides from family or friends than white Minnesota residents. Providing a transportation stipend may make it easier for a person in poverty to access volunteer opportunities, particularly if they are far from their home.

Whenever possible hold events in the community you would like to reach. Have meetings there. Have trainings there. Go to them.

3. Food

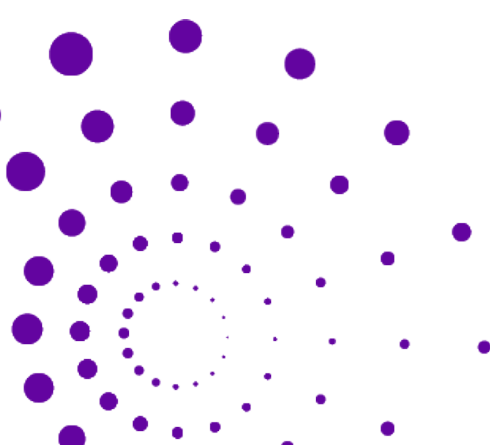
Food is often seen as a "nice to have" at meetings or events but it is much more of a necessity for lower-income volunteers. Offering food can be a major incentive for getting people who are on the fence to come and participate. Make sure that you do your homework, though, and provide food that meets any dietary restrictions of the population you're trying to engage.

4. Outings

Many nonprofits are given free tickets to sporting events, theater productions, and other outings to distribute to their volunteers.

While most volunteers appreciate this type of recognition, it can be even more meaningful for volunteers who couldn't otherwise afford such an outing. When distributing these tickets, however, consider allowing volunteers to have more than two (the typical number offered to each volunteer) to allow as many people as possible to participate. For volunteers of a lower income, the ability to take their whole family may mean the difference between being able to use the tickets or not.

In addition to these amenities, whenever possible hold events in the community you would like to reach. Have meetings there. Have trainings there. Go to them. It makes volunteering just a little bit easier.





STRATEGY #4

Embrace Skill-Based Opportunities

Skill-based volunteers are people who bring a specialized skill set – often one that they typically would be paid to perform – to your organization or government. Examples may include accountants who assist the financial department, doctors and nurses who help at a free clinic, or a professional musician who performs at an event.

Skill-based volunteer opportunities are particularly attractive to recent immigrants who are not yet able to work in the United States or looking to build their resumes. Several government volunteer managers who were part of this initiative reported great success with engaging immigrant volunteers by developing and advertising skill-based volunteer positions. In fact, these volunteer managers found online recruitment through sites like VolunteerMatch to be very effective – perhaps an exception to the rule that relationships must come first.

To engage volunteers in these roles, you must first develop them. Look for positions where volunteers will use resume-building skills and experience the culture of an American workplace. Advertise the positions you have available and be open to finding ways to use additional skill sets volunteers may bring. It's also helpful to review your application and interview questions to make sure volunteers have an opportunity to share any specific skill sets they may want to contribute.

Short-Term Commitments

In order to embrace skill-based volunteers you must accept of short-term time commitments. Many organizations ask volunteers to be involved for a minimum of six months or a year. When working with people who are job-searching, it's important to realize that they will likely leave the volunteer position once they secure full-time employment. This may mean they volunteer with your organization for as little as a month or two. But, according to one city volunteer manager, "the skills they bring are so valuable that it's definitely worth it to engage skill-based volunteers, even if it's only for a short time."

Once you've established your organization or government as a place that engages skill-based volunteers, word may spread within local immigrant communities. Several volunteer managers reported that, after engaging a number of volunteers from immigrant communities in skill-based roles, other volunteers from those communities began coming to them to ask if they could volunteer as well.

The skills they bring are so valuable that it's definitely worth it to engage skill-based volunteers, even if it's only for a short time.



STRATEGY #5

Recruit from Those Who Use Your Services

In all our interviews with volunteer engagement professionals, there was one entity that stood out as having little or no problem engaging volunteers who reflect the surrounding community. Can you guess what that entity is?

The library.

It makes sense. The library is a welcoming place. It is open to everyone. It has something for everyone. Many people interact with the library because it offers such a wide array of services in an inclusive environment. And if you know a place, and like a place, and appreciate what it does...why not volunteer there?

The same goes for government and nonprofit organizations. Some of the people who most appreciate your work are those who have received services from you.

The first question is this: "Are diverse and immigrant populations using our services?" If your answer is "no," then your first step is to focus on educating diverse communities about what you offer and inviting them to participate. For government organizations, it's most helpful to break this down by department, since the "clients" of a city or county are all of its constituents. While people of color may be using the library system, perhaps they are not using the parks (and, likely, the diversity of volunteers in the parks may reflect that).

*If you know a place, and like a place,
and appreciate what it does...why not
volunteer there?*

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is an important concept in communities of color. Many immigrants come from a more communal society than American culture. Neighbors helping one another is not just a nice thing to do — it's a way of life. And it's a natural human feeling to desire to give back to someone (or something) that gives to you.

But many organizations do not encourage reciprocity from those who use their services. There are several reasons for that. Organizations that serve low-income families may assume their clients do not have extra time to give. Others figure that if a client wants to help, they'll simply apply to be a volunteer. But this isn't always the case. Someone who has received services may wonder if they're needed or wanted as a volunteer. How do you make sure they feel welcome? Ask them to help.

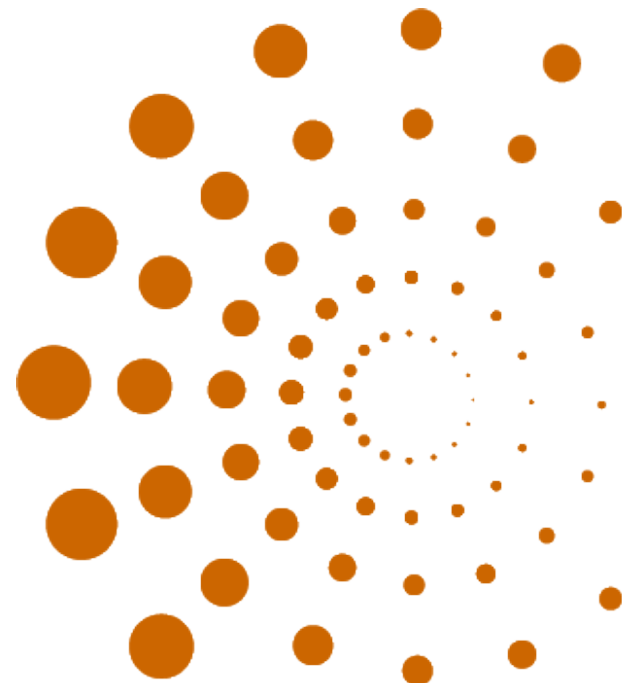
*It's a natural human feeling to
desire to give back to someone
(or something) that gives to you.*

Exclusive Policies

It's not uncommon for nonprofits to have policies that prohibit clients from volunteering. In some cases these policies are in place for good reason. In other cases, they are policies that "have always been there" and need to be revisited. Whether or not clients can safely and effectively volunteer with a program depends entirely on the work of the organization.

If you have policies in place that prohibit clients from volunteering, we encourage you to review them and determine if they're necessary. Is there a good reason for the policy? If so, are there ways the policy could be revised to be more inclusive? For example, perhaps if clients cannot volunteer with a program from which they've received services, they can volunteer with a different program in the organization.

Again, we recognize that changing policies is not possible or prudent in some cases. All we ask is that you review the policies you have in place to ensure they are both necessary and as inclusive as possible.





STRATEGY #6

Partner to Engage Groups of Youth

According to the Minnesota Demographic Center, “Most populations of color are much younger than White Minnesotans on balance. Notably, among Somali and Hmong Minnesotans, half or more of the population is under age 21.”¹¹

Many of these young people are second-generation immigrants. They were born in the United States and have grown up in the American school system. They are more comfortable with the concept of volunteerism than many of their parents and are accustomed to doing service projects.

These students are a great demographic to engage as volunteers. The problem? They’re busy. They have school, activities, family obligations, and (often) not enough time for an ongoing volunteer commitment.

A great way to engage diverse youth is to partner with already-existing groups on one-time volunteer projects. Sports teams, service clubs, Boy and Girl Scouts and many other groups have a service component that involves volunteering in the community. This means that an entire group of young volunteers may be just one phone call or email away. Reach out to the leaders of these groups to let them know you have projects available. Once the youth are on-site, educate them about your organization’s work and how they’re contributing. Although these students won’t likely sign up to volunteer on a regular basis right away, they may come back when they’re older and have more time to give.

This strategy was particularly successful for cities who reported their school district was more diverse than the city itself. Inviting groups of youth to participate in volunteer projects is a way to engage more people of color as city volunteers and educate young people about how they can give back to their city.

Another way to engage youth is through service learning opportunities. Some high schools and most colleges have a service learning program that requires students to complete volunteer hours as part of their coursework. Connect with local schools that engage students in service learning —particularly those more accessible to lower-income students, like community colleges—and find out how your organization can partner with them. Be sure you understand the requirements of hosting service learning students at your site so that you can complete any verification or paper work students may need to submit to their instructors.

It’s worth noting that youth should not be viewed as a bridge to the adult population in a particular immigrant community. Youth and adults have different interests and are likely interested in different opportunities. Engaging youth can, however, give you an opportunity to build awareness among parents about the opportunity to volunteer with your city or organization.

A great way to engage youth is to partner with already-existing groups on one-time volunteer projects.

Remove Barriers

Immigrant and diverse populations face a variety of barriers to volunteering, some of which have already been addressed. But there are several important barriers that have not yet been discussed.

Background Checks

Many organizations require volunteers to pass a background check. Do you know if the company you use for background checks can run a report on someone who is not a citizen? Many cannot, and this is a difficult barrier for immigrants who want to volunteer.

One member of our task force who engages volunteers for several cities was able to overcome this barrier by asking the city police department to run background checks on non-citizen volunteers. The police were able to do this and, therefore, people who are not citizens were allowed to volunteer. While many organizations do not have this resource at their disposal, it's worth considering for cities or counties that have a police department.

For other organizations, consider this: Are there volunteer positions that do not require background checks such as work that is not directly with clients, that is always supervised, or that does not have access to financial systems? Is it possible to create some of these positions so that people who cannot undergo a background check can volunteer? While some organizations simply cannot do this, those that can be more flexible will be more welcoming to immigrant volunteers.

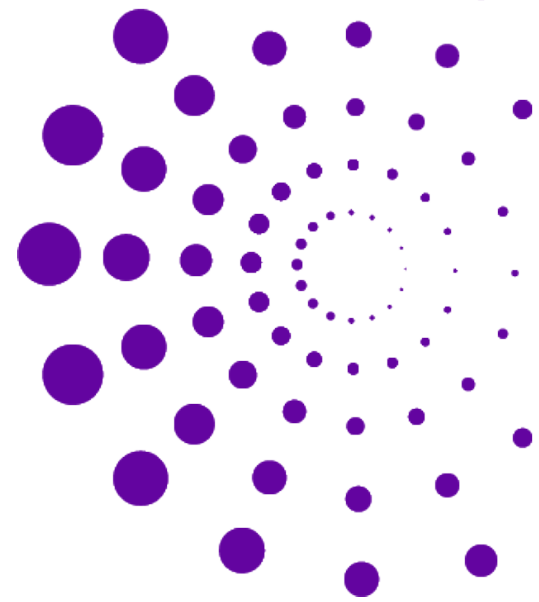
Flexibility

Volunteer positions are often treated much like paid positions — you are expected to arrive on time, communicate any absences, focus on your work, and complete your tasks. You are expected to make volunteering a top priority. And, in some cases, if you are repeatedly late or miss more than one shift, you're no longer allowed to volunteer.

For a person who is low-income and/or from a communal society, meeting such strict requirements is not always possible. Consider someone who does not have a car, and depends on public transportation or friends to get places. Buses run late and friends have other obligations. Similarly, consider someone who does have a car but has many friends and family relying on her for transportation. If a friend needs to go to the doctor at the same time as her volunteer shift, the friend will likely be a higher priority. And you know what? That's good. It should be that way.

Let's make it okay for volunteers to have other priorities.

As with all the strategies discussed, we recognize this isn't always possible. But in many cases, it's just not that big of a deal if someone comes in on Thursday instead of Tuesday, or arrives at 2:00 instead of 1:00. So, if you can, be flexible. Let volunteers know that you rely on their help, but that you understand that others do, too.



Policies

In discussing Strategy #5 we recommended you review your policy on clients volunteering. It may be worthwhile, however, to go further than this. Consider reviewing all your volunteer policies with an eye for exclusive rules and language. As mentioned above, policies that require dismissal if a volunteer misses more than one shift may exclude people who have multiple community and family obligations. Are there other policies that may hinder people of color, immigrants, or low-income individuals from volunteering with your organization? If so, assess why they are in place and how they might be changed to be more inclusive.

Consider reviewing all your volunteer policies with an eye for exclusive rules and language.

Language

Language is the most difficult barrier to overcome, particularly for people who speak very little or no English. While you can certainly make flyers or advertisements in other languages, before you do this you must have the infrastructure in place to support a non-English speaking volunteer. Is your orientation in another language? What about your volunteer handbook? Do you have a person who can offer training in another language? If these pieces aren't in place you won't be able to successfully engage the volunteer.

There are many immigrants who do speak English, but are not fluent or lack confidence. There are ways you can make these volunteers feel more welcome within your program. First, make sure you have opportunities available that do not involve public speaking. This can be very intimidating for people who do not speak English as a first language. Second, be patient in your conversations with them, and coach your other volunteers to do the same. It is very frustrating and discouraging when someone does not understand what you're saying. Work with your volunteers to make sure this happens as little as possible and that when it does you have ways to overcome it.



STRATEGY #8

Create an Inclusive Organizational Culture

Creating an environment where volunteers of all ethnicities and backgrounds feel welcome and included is the key to retaining diverse volunteers.

How do you go about influencing this type of change within your organization, especially if you are not a top decision-maker? It can be difficult, but there are steps you can take.

1. Educate everyone within your organization about the importance of engaging volunteers of diverse backgrounds and experiences, along with why it is a priority.

Help people to understand how vital it is to engage volunteers who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the community you serve, and collaborate with them as partners in making it happen.

2. Gain support from organizational leaders and ask them to communicate the message of inclusion.

Discuss your goals for diversifying the volunteer pool with leaders at your organization, and ask for their help in creating a stronger culture of inclusion to support your efforts.

3. Build a culture of inclusion within your own department.

If you are a volunteer engagement professional, be intentional about making your own program more welcoming. Host lunch and learns with volunteers from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are willing to share their experiences and traditions. Bring in trainers on cultural competency. Coach volunteers on working with people who do not speak English as a first language. Prioritize your own professional development regarding equity and inclusion. Start with yourself and your own department and build from there.

Resources

There are many resources available for organizations to help you assess your organizational culture and help you make changes to promote inclusion and equity. Below are a few recommended by members of MAVA's task force:

- Intercultural Development Inventory from IDI, LLC (idiinventory.com)
- Intercultural Effectiveness Survey from Kozai Group (kozaigroup.com)
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Toolkit from Charities Review Council (smartgivers.org)

There are many other tools and resources available, so be sure to research options before determining the right one for your organization.



ACTION PLAN

To help you get started, MAVA has created an Action Plan template for you to use to plan your next steps in engaging diverse and immigrant communities as volunteers with your organization. We suggest that you choose up to 4 strategies to focus on in the upcoming months. One strategy is not optional – that is Strategy #2, Relationship Building. This is the most important strategy, and one that should be part of every action plan. The other strategies you choose will depend upon your organization or government and its top priorities.

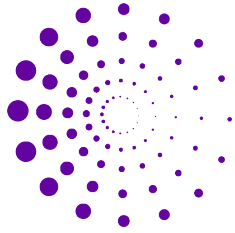
For each strategy, decide on 1-2 specific actions you will take along with a timeline for each. The goal here is to keep you moving forward with smaller action steps that feel more approachable than large, overarching goals. You have many demands on your time, and creating this action plan will help you keep your work of engaging volunteers from diverse and immigrant communities as a priority.

Complete the Action Plan template and put it up where you'll see it often. Check your progress on a monthly basis to make sure you're on track. There will be setbacks, and there will be action steps that aren't as effective as you hoped. But with each step you'll make progress toward a more inclusive volunteer program. The important thing is to keep taking those steps.



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INCLUSIVE VOLUNTEERISM ACTION PLAN

8 STRATEGIES

1. Shift Your Language
2. Build Relationships
3. Understand the Importance of Socio-Economic Status
4. Embrace Skill-Based Opportunities
5. Recruit from Those Who Use Your Services
6. Partner to Engage Groups of Youth
7. Remove Barriers
8. Create an Inclusive Organizational Culture

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Action #1:

Timeline:

Action #2:

Timeline:

STRATEGY:

Action #1:

Timeline:

Action #2:

Timeline:

STRATEGY:

Action #1:

Timeline:

Action #2:

Timeline:

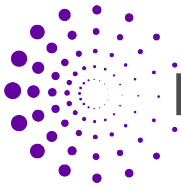
STRATEGY:

Action #1:

Timeline:

Action #2:

Timeline:



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