



Volunteer Engagement Among Non-Profits

**Understanding the process to recruit, train and utilize volunteers in New York State**

Prepared by The Siena College Research Institute for The New York State Commission on National and Community Service

**2011-2012**

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## **New Yorkers Volunteer: State Commission on National and Community Service Volunteer Engagement Among Non-Profits, 2011-12**

The Siena College Research Institute (SRI), under the direction of the New York State Commission on National and Community Service, conducted a survey of non-profits across the state of New York to better understand the process among those organizations to recruit, train, utilize and reward volunteers. This report highlights the findings of that survey that is the second part of SRI's 2011 work with the Commission. The first component, an investigation of the civic health of New York as well as the volunteer behavior of New Yorkers was reported in the 2011 New York Civic Health Index Report.

### **Methods and Data Collection**

For the survey of non-profits, conducted from October 2011 through February 2012, SRI procured a randomized list of 5,000 non-profit organizations throughout New York State. Potential respondents were sent a letter which identified the purpose of the research and invited them to participate by returning an included paper survey in a postage paid envelope, via the web ([www.siena.edu/sri/nyvol](http://www.siena.edu/sri/nyvol)) or by telephone. Respondents who did not complete the survey by mail or web were contacted via telephone and again invited to complete the survey. Three hundred forty-two individuals from these non-profit organizations completed the survey. Additionally, SRI emailed approximately 4,890 individuals from lists provided by Regional Volunteer Centers in New York State, having been asked to do so by the Commission, to invite them to participate via the web. Of those in the list supplied by the regional centers, 351 responded by completing the survey which brought the total to 693 completed surveys.

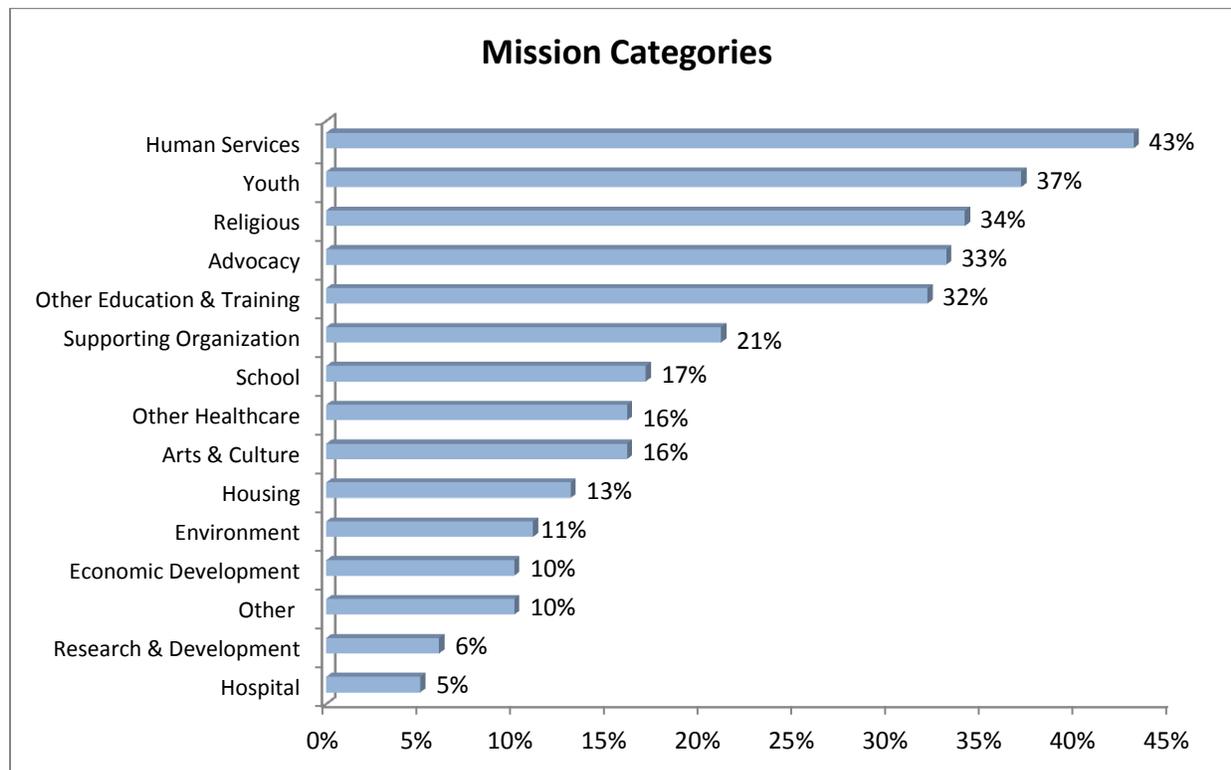
Numbers in charts may not add to 100% due to rounding. For example, in the chart titled 'Volunteer Activities of New York Residents, Past Twelve Months' on page 11, for 'Donated items' the numbers add to 101%. The general rule applied is that any number with a tenths place value of .5 or higher gets rounded up to the next whole number. In this example, 'Never' is 10.6% which rounds to 11%, 'Once' is 8.5% which rounds to 9%, 'Few times' is 39.9% which rounds to 40%, 'Once a month' is 15.8% which rounds to 16%, and 'More often' is 25.2% which rounds to 25%. Adding up the actual percentages with the tenths place equals 100%, however in this example adding the rounded percentages yields 101%.

### **Sample Descriptions**

The non-profit organizations were asked to identify, from a pre-defined list, categories that described their mission. A plurality selected the broad category of Human Services (43%) including a majority (53%) of those organizations with annual revenues over \$1 million. Approximately one-third identified Youth (37%), Religious (34%), Advocacy (33%) and Other Education and Training (32%). Twenty-one

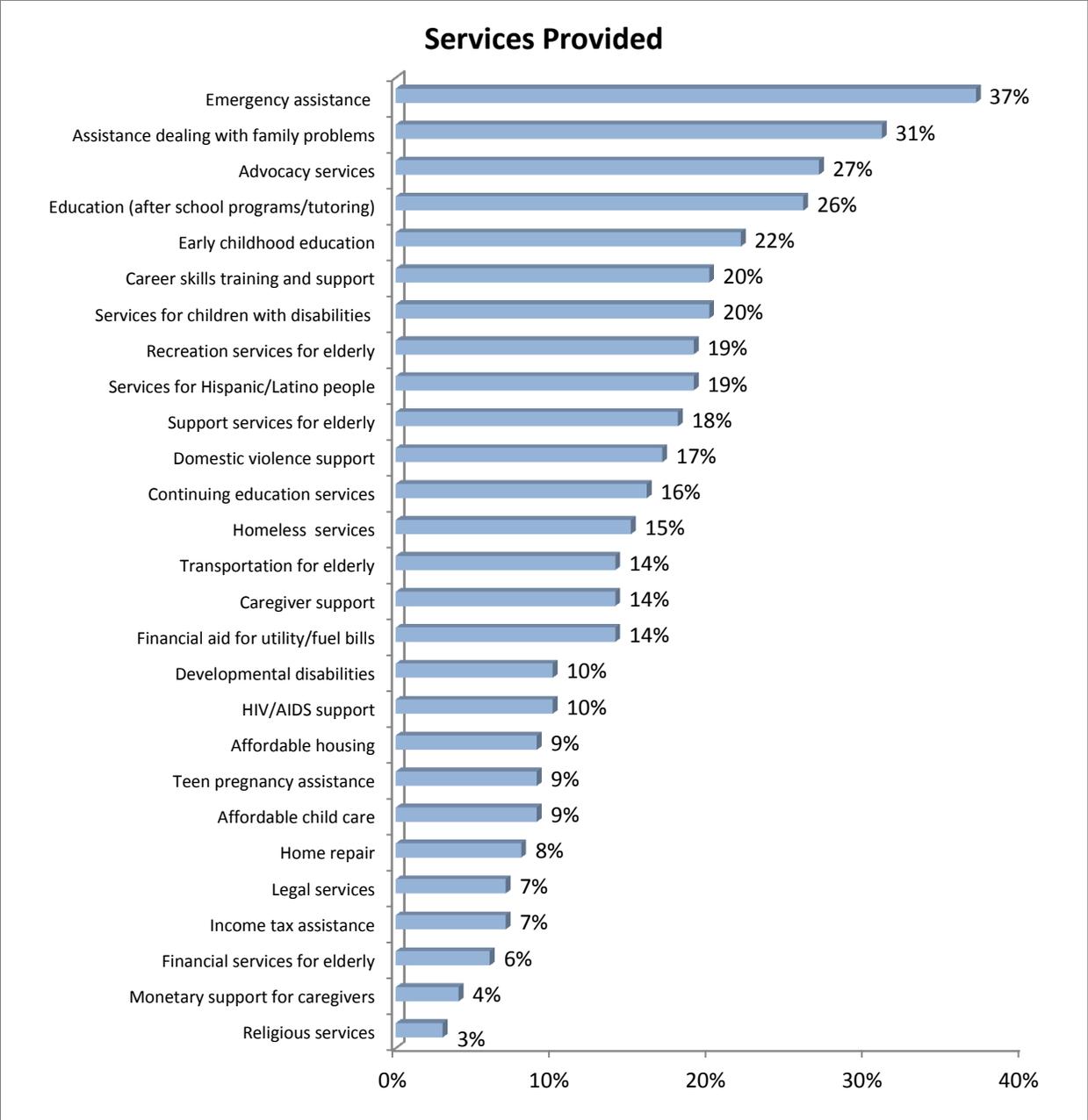
percent selected Supporting Organization and fewer than 20 percent picked the remaining nine categories – School (17%), Arts/Culture (16%), other Healthcare (16%), Housing (13%), Environment (11%), Economic Development (10%), Research/Development (6%) and Hospital (5%).

Community-based organizations tend to list services similar to the entire sample, while regional organizations are more likely to say healthcare but less likely to indicate Religious, or Youth Services. Statewide or larger organizations tend to include Education/Training, Advocacy, Supporting Organization as part of their mission relative to the entire sample and to report at a lesser degree Religious.



When asked more specifically about the services they provide, the most often cited service was emergency assistance (37%). At least twenty percent identified assistance dealing with family problems (31%), advocacy services (27%), education (26%) and early childhood education (22%). Career skill training and support and services for children with disabilities both were identified by 20 percent of the entire sample.

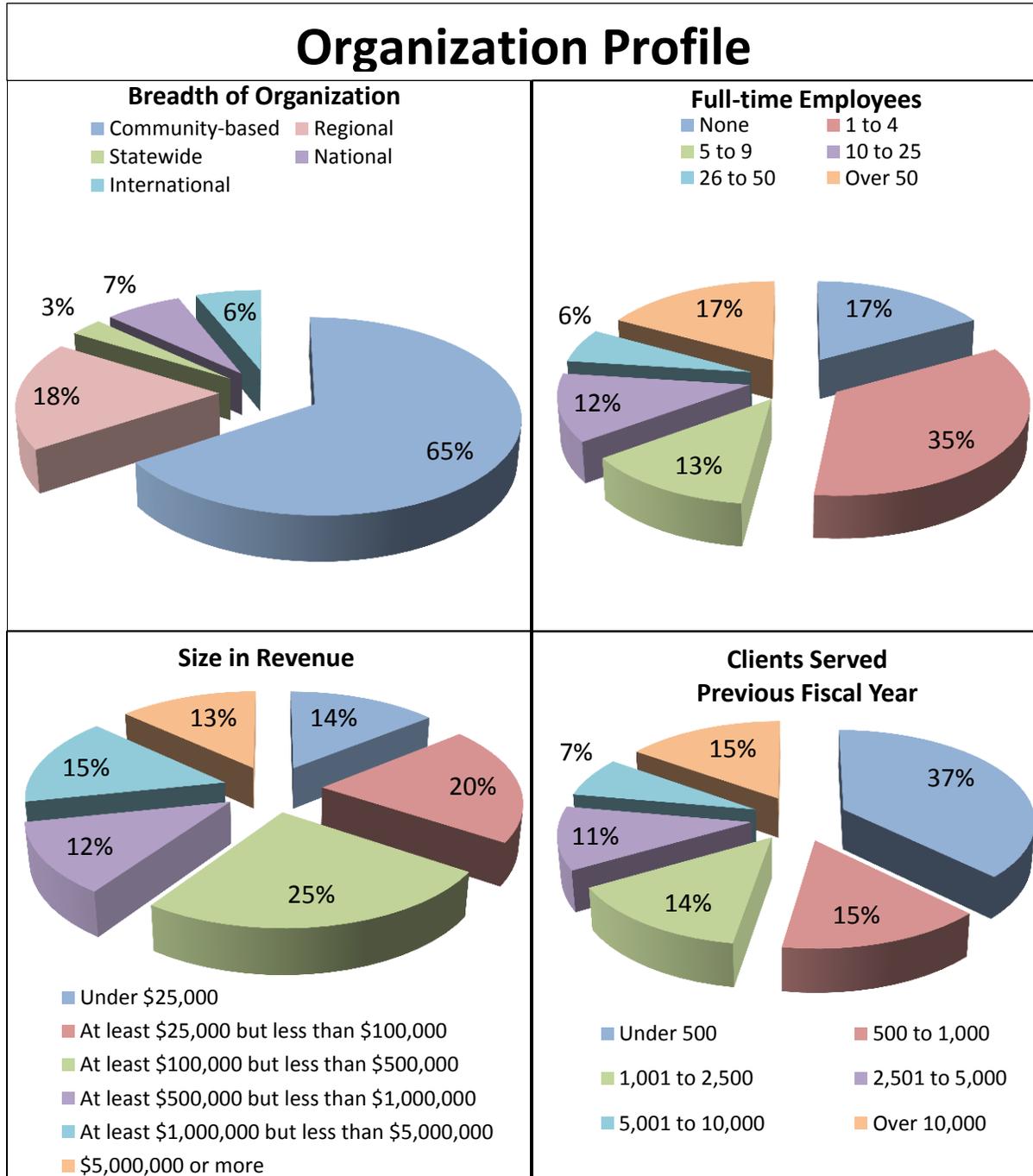
When compared to the entire sample, community-based organizations are more likely to provide the services of: emergency assistance, assistance with family problems, and elderly support. Religiously affiliated organizations are more likely than non-religiously affiliated organizations to provide financial aid for utility bills, emergency assistance, domestic violence support, homelessness services, assistance with family problems, and elderly support.



Sixty-five percent of respondents describe themselves as community-based while 18 percent identify as regional. The balance, nearly 17 percent describe as statewide, national or international. Fourteen percent have annual revenues under \$25,000, 20 percent at least \$25,000 but less than \$100,000, 37 percent at least \$100,000 but less than \$1 million and 28 percent at least or more than \$1 million.

While 17 percent report having no full-time equivalent employees, 35 percent have 1 to 4, 25 percent have 5 to 25 and 23 percent have more than 25 full-time employees. Over one-third, 37 percent, served up to 500 clients during its most recently completed fiscal year while 29 percent served between 500 and 2500 and 33 percent served over 2500 clients in the last year.

The vast majority of the organizations we surveyed, 93 percent, have been in operation for at least or more than 10 years. Looking at the number of clients they served over the last year, 44 percent say that number has increased, 50 percent say it has remained the same and only 7 percent saw a decrease.



The greatest percentage, 83 percent, include contributions as a source of funding for their organization followed by 71 percent – fundraising events, 47 percent – government grants, 46 percent – foundation grants, 31 percent – fee for services, 23 percent – membership dues. Smaller organizations are less likely to include grants and fees as a funding source while larger organizations are more likely to do so.

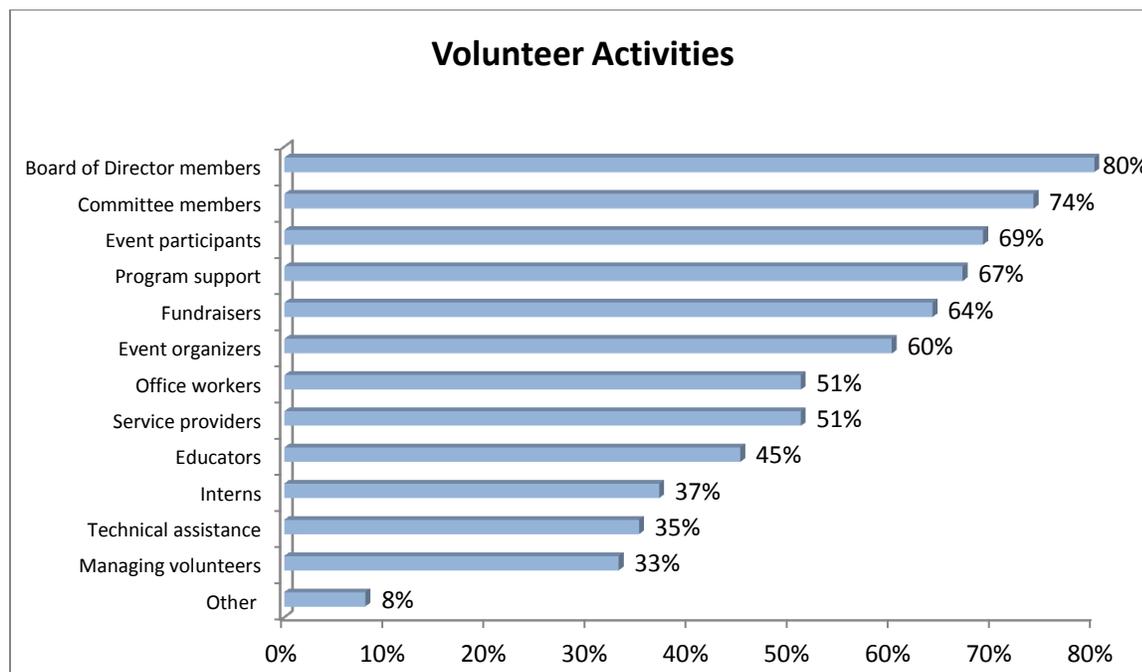
Ninety percent of all organizations have a website and 63 percent participate in Facebook.

## Recruitment

The primary goal of the non-profit survey was to measure the capacity of non-profits to engage volunteers. Engagement is measured by evaluating the ability by which non-profits recruit, train, evaluate, retain and develop volunteers. We first look at recruitment and retention and the ways in which non-profits contact volunteers or facilitate contact from them and maintain communication as well as the depth of commitment from volunteers.

Sixty-nine percent of responding organizations have a method for volunteers to contact them or sign up to volunteer on their website. This is especially true of larger organizations, both those that have revenues over \$1 million and those that serve over 500 clients. Non-religious organizations are more likely to have a volunteer web portal than religiously affiliated organizations.

These organizations have significant numbers of volunteers involved in a wide range of functions. Across the entire sample, organizations average 333 volunteers that over the course of the last fiscal year have volunteered for or through the organization. Organizations with annual revenues under \$100,000 average fewer than 200 volunteers, while those with revenues over \$100,000 but less than \$1 million average 304 volunteers and larger organizations average 600 volunteers.



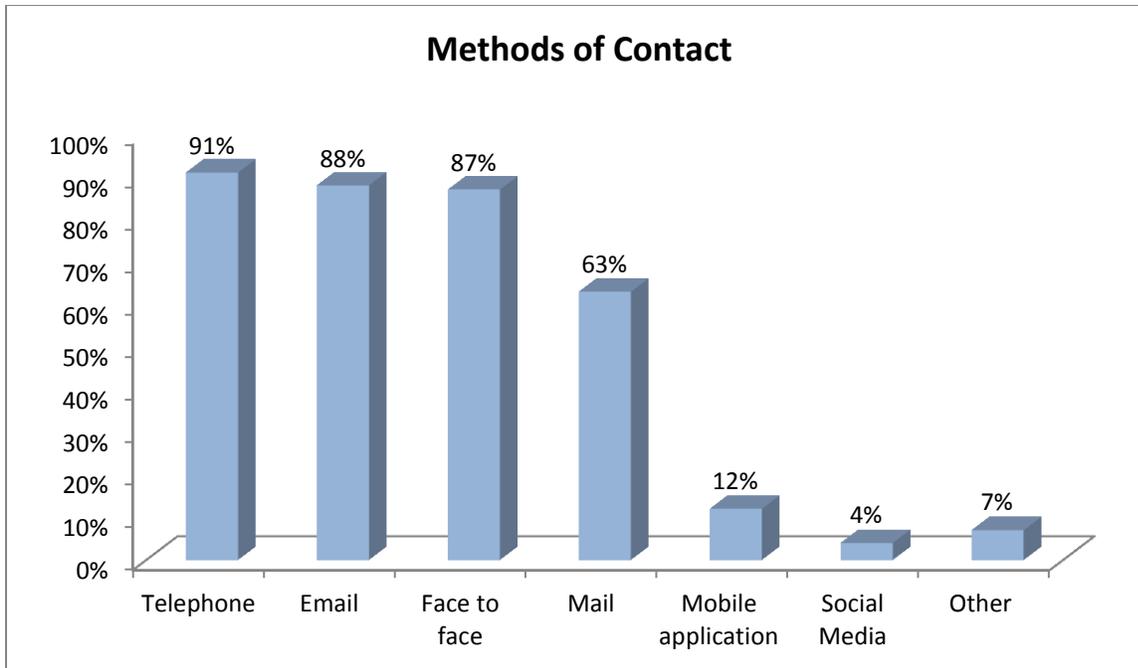
Eighty percent of organizations have volunteers serving on their Board of Directors and nearly as many, 74 percent have volunteers as committee members.

Many organizations have volunteers active in events as well as ongoing programs. Sixty-nine percent of all organizations have volunteers as event participants. Sixty percent of all organizations and 66 percent of smaller organizations use volunteers as event organizers. Two-thirds of all organizations use volunteers for program support and over half, 51 percent, identify volunteers as 'service providers.' Over half have volunteers providing office work and 64 percent have volunteers working as fundraisers. Nearly half, 45 percent, use volunteers as 'Educators.'

Despite this apparent ubiquity of volunteers across most functions of most organizations, only 62 percent of organizations have a staff person that coordinates volunteer services. Of those responding, only 15 percent indicate that the coordination of volunteer services is that person's entire job. While the presence of a volunteer coordinator is less frequent in lower revenue organizations, those organizations with revenues of \$1 million or more only report having a coordinator at the rate of 73 percent with fewer than 1 in 4 of those being full time.

Overall, only 9 percent of all organizations have a full-time volunteer coordinator.

Fifty-eight percent of organizations maintain an electronic database of current volunteers. That rate is greater among larger organizations but only reaches two-thirds in those with \$1 million revenue or those that serve more than 2500 clients.



When asked how they stay in contact with their volunteers, about ninety percent use telephone, email and face-to-face. Still nearly two-thirds use the mail while very few use either a mobile application for a smartphone or social media. We find little variation by organization in the use of these methods of contact. Given the rate of volunteer coordinators and the application of volunteers, technological enhancement of volunteer coordination could be a beneficial next step which could be a shared innovation. In other words, given that these organizations use volunteers widely but today do not as a whole have either fully modernized records or contact system, they could collaborate to create and share such a beneficial system.

We asked all respondents to classify their volunteers into one of three different categories and to indicate the percentage of their volunteers that fit into each category:

1. One-shot helper. Volunteers that provide labor, support or assistance at one event or at a series of single isolated events.
2. Continuing contributors. Volunteers that commit to the organization for a continuing program or ongoing task and become a regular member of the team for a period of time.
3. Deeply committed leaders. Volunteers that demonstrate a deep commitment to the organization and its mission and potentially assume administrative duties or provide innovative energy and leadership.

Overall, organizations indicate that 27 percent of their volunteers are ‘one-shot helpers’, 43 percent are ‘continuing contributors’ and 28 percent are ‘deeply committed leaders.’

Interestingly, the composition of volunteers, one-shot, continuing or deeply committed is similar across organization size, number of clients served, organization breadth and religious affiliation.

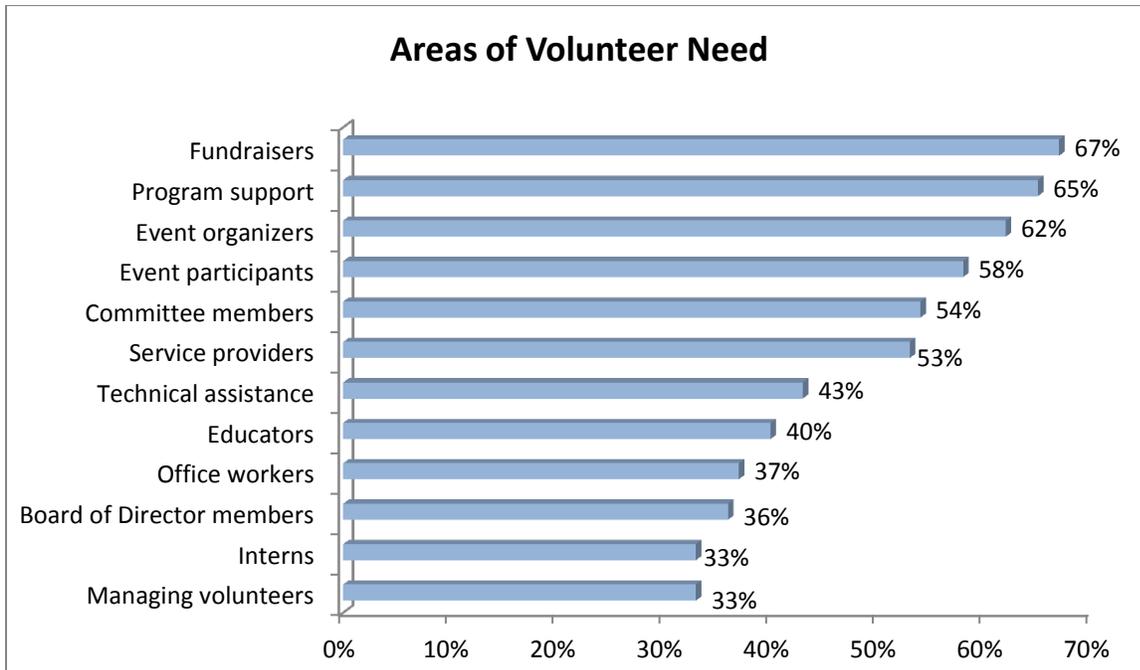
After answering a series of attitude questions about volunteer utilization, organizations were asked whether they had too many volunteers, the right number or if they could use more. Seventy-five percent said that they could use more while 24 percent said that they had the right number and only 1 percent said that they had too many. Again we see little variation on this question by organizational demographics. Religiously affiliated organizations are slightly more inclined to say they could use more while very large organizations are, at 29 percent, a bit more likely to say that they have the right number of volunteers.

Clearly, these organizations use, value and would like to have more volunteers. Turning now to the process of recruitment, we find that organizations readily admit that there is room for improvement. Only 12 percent give themselves a grade of excellent when asked to describe the job they are doing in recruiting volunteers to participate in their organization. Forty-two percent say they are doing a good job while 38 percent say ‘fair’ and 8 percent rank the job they are doing as ‘poor.’

When asked about specific methods for recruiting volunteers, word of mouth was regarded as the most effective method with 93 percent of non-profits giving it a very or somewhat effective rating. This is closely followed by referrals from staff and volunteers at 89 percent. Although recruiting at local schools, colleges, religious or civic organizations and using their website is considered effective by more than 50 percent of organizations, approximately one-quarter haven’t used these methods of recruitment. Nearly half do not use volunteer centers, social media, corporate volunteer programs or newspapers. While those methods were found to be more effective than ineffective, only one-quarter to one-third felt they were effective.



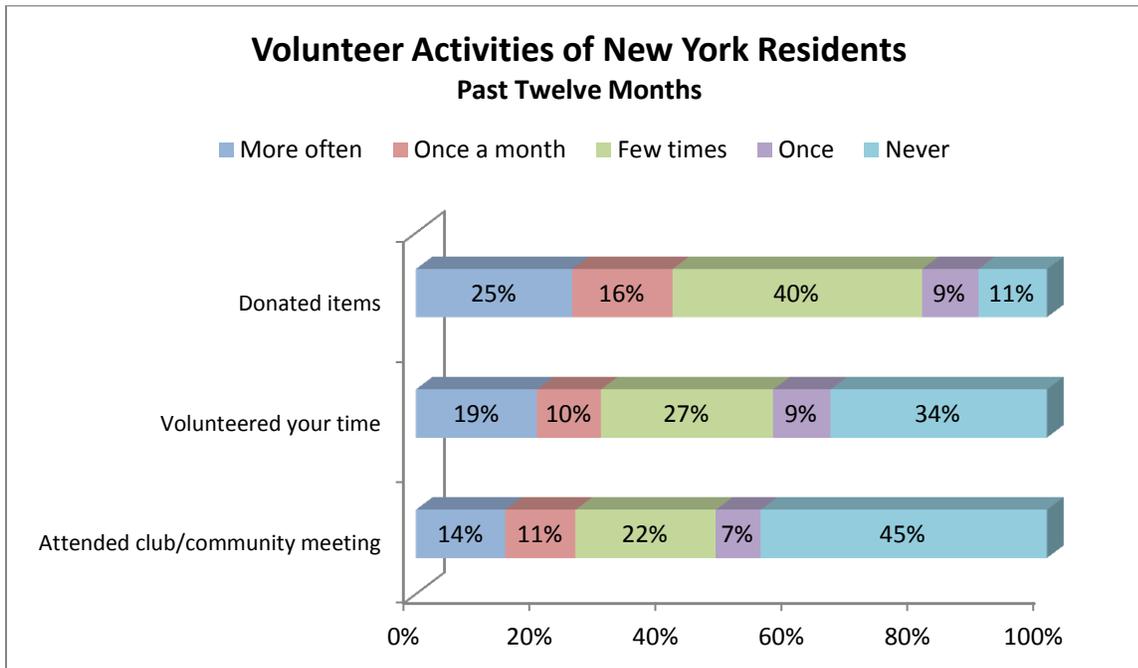
It is clear that the people that work or volunteer for these organizations are viewed as their greatest tool for recruiting and retaining volunteers. However, when the public was asked, in a related public opinion survey, if they had been asked to volunteer for any organization or cause by a volunteer agency, a friend or another volunteer in the past 12 months, 59 percent said “No”. While, word of mouth and referrals are now seen as most effective, organizations, in that they tend to rate their recruitment as less than excellent, see the need to expand their recruitment efforts and to more effectively ask more citizens to volunteer.



Organizations indicate that their need for volunteers is significant. When asked about 12 different roles that volunteers play in their organization, at least one third would like to have more volunteers for each of these areas.

Assistance with fundraisers was the area of greatest need for non-profits (67%) but was closely followed by program support (65%) and event organizers (62%). Over half of the organizations we polled in New York would like more volunteers to work in event participation, as committee members, and as service providers. Between one third and 43 percent would like more volunteers in technical assistance, as educators, office workers, as Board members, as interns and to manage volunteers.

The reservoir of potential volunteers, while demanding to measure, is by any analysis quite large. When New York residents were surveyed, donating items such as food, blood or clothing was the most common contribution with 41 percent (25% often, 16% once a month) participating in this activity. Actual volunteering of time was done by two-thirds (19% often, 10% once a month, 27% a few times and 9% once) over the last twelve months. Twenty-five percent (14% often, 11% once a month) attended club, organization or committee meetings.



Additionally, residents contributed money or other property in the past twelve months in high numbers. Sixty-nine percent contributed to a local charity and 51 percent to a national or international charity. Eighty-seven percent of New Yorkers say it is either very (42%) or somewhat (45%) important that they and their household contribute to addressing the unmet needs of people in their community. Only 15 percent say that they are completely satisfied with their personal involvement in addressing those needs. And, 80 percent say that the volunteer efforts of people in their community have a substantial impact on the lives of those that need assistance.

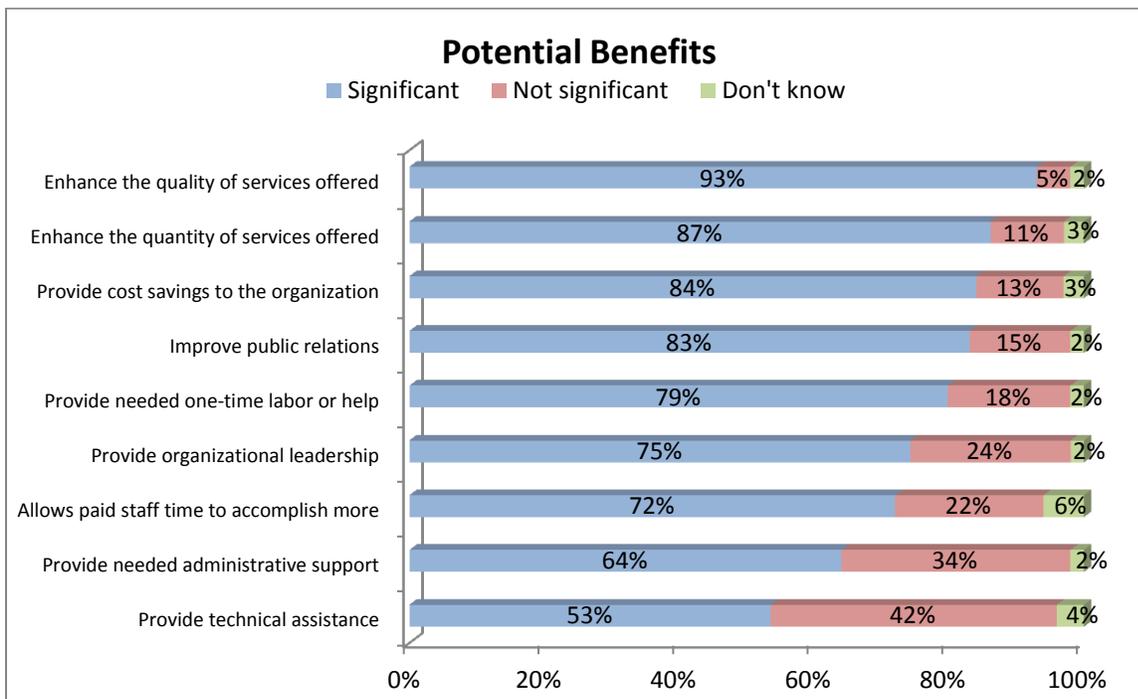
The pieces are in place. Organizations need and value volunteers. Citizens are inclined to volunteer or at least contribute, see it as important but do not, despite knowing that it helps, feel as though they are not doing as much as they could. Many are simply not asked and organizations acknowledge that they must do a better job of recruiting.

## Benefits of Volunteers

Given a global question, “now after thinking about the role of volunteers in your organization, would you say your organization does an excellent job, a good job, a fair job or a poor job of utilizing volunteers so as to achieve your mission,” 29 percent say ‘excellent’, 47 percent ‘good’, 22 percent ‘fair’ and only 3 percent ‘poor.’ While at first glance these are impressively positive numbers, no doubt, it is a worthy goal to see these numbers improve.

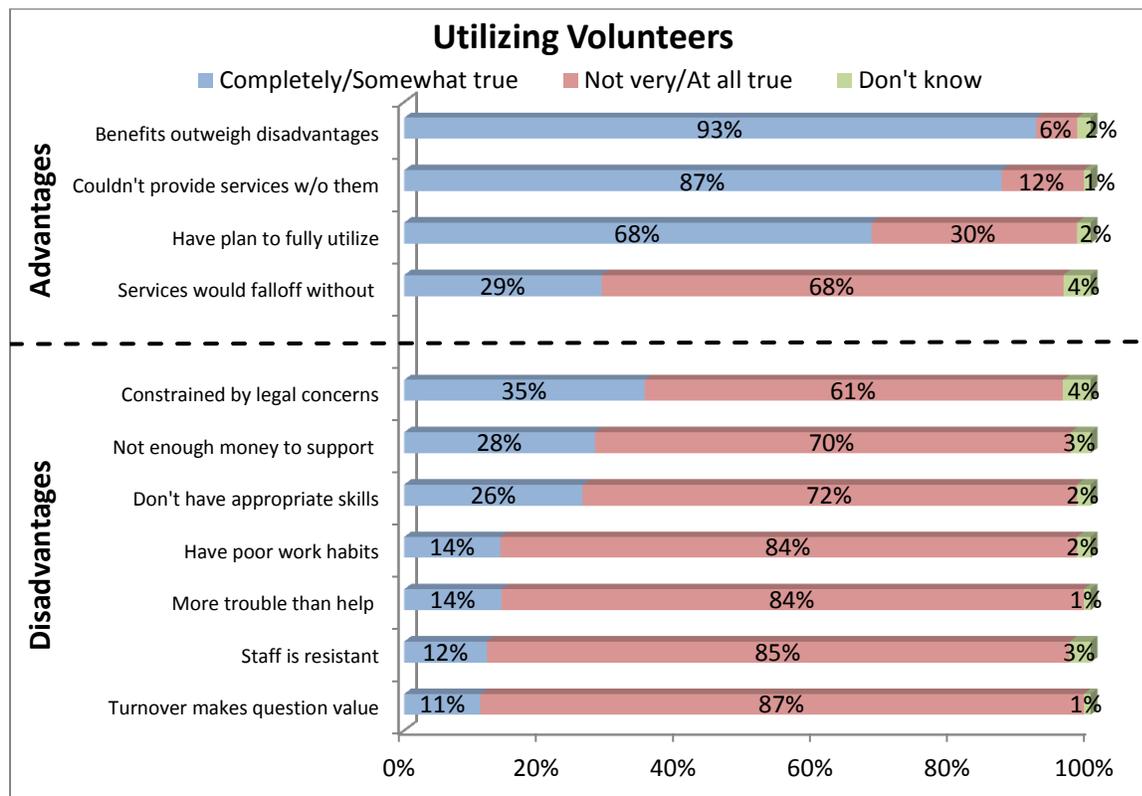
It seems clear that non-profits see great benefit in having volunteers contributing their time and resources to their organizations. In fact, 66 percent indicate that it is completely true that they simply could not provide the current services to their clients without volunteers. We further investigated some of the potential benefits and negatives that these organizations may experience when utilizing volunteers.

The respondents were given a list of nine potential benefits to an organization from utilizing their volunteers. They were asked to indicate the level of significance of each. More than half agreed that each of the benefits was significant to their organization. Most felt that volunteers enhance both the quality (93%) and quantity (87%) of services offered. At least three-quarters felt that volunteers also provide cost savings to the organization (84%), improve public relations (83%), provide needed one-time labor or help (79%) and provide organizational leadership (75%). Importantly, nearly three quarters find it significant that volunteers allow paid staff to accomplish more while nearly two-thirds see volunteers providing needed administrative support.



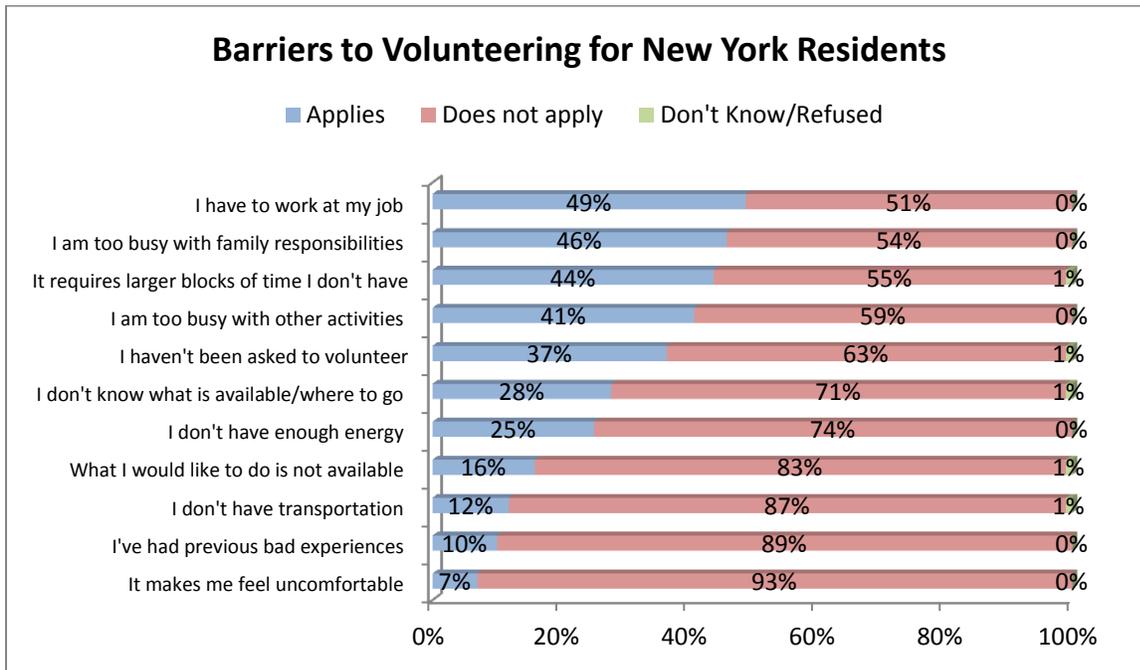
Next respondents were provided a list of both potential advantages and disadvantages associated with utilizing volunteers. They were asked to what degree they felt each of the statements was true for their organization. Overwhelmingly they saw the benefits of utilizing volunteers and felt that the disadvantages were minimized by those benefits. Ninety-three percent stated that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages. Eighty-seven percent felt they couldn't provide the services they do without volunteers but only 29 percent agreed that they would see a falloff in their provision of services if they did not have any volunteers. No doubt, they simply believe that somehow, someday they would make up the slack. Just over two-thirds (68%) indicated that they do have a strategic plan in place to fully utilize volunteers most effectively. In most cases, less than 20 percent felt that the disadvantages were true for their organization however some concerns did arise.

Just over one-quarter (26%) felt that they were unable to recruit volunteers with the appropriate skills and that their organization does not have enough money to support volunteer involvement (28%). More than one-third (35%) feel constrained by regulatory, legal or liability concerns.

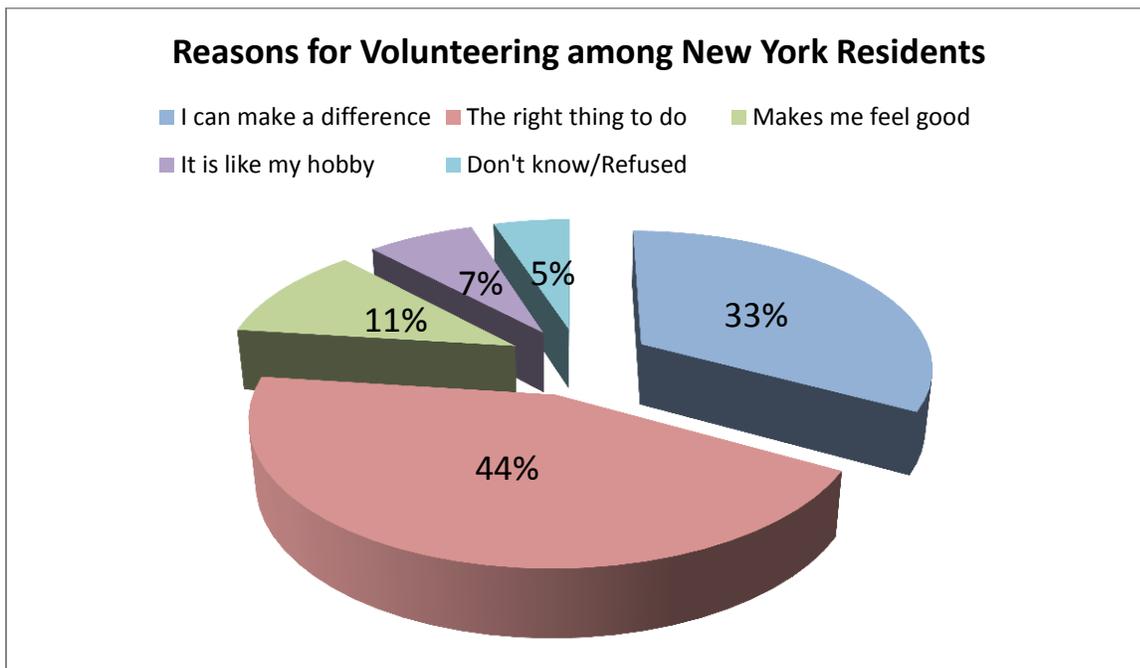


Although volunteers provide many benefits to non-profits and the volunteers themselves recognize the importance of contributing to addressing the needs of people that require assistance (87%) there are some barriers to volunteering. Time is the biggest barrier that keeps residents from volunteering. Whether work (49%), family (46%) or other activities (41%), residents state they don't believe they have the time required to devote to volunteering (44%). A large number also say that they simply have not been asked to volunteer; 37 percent say they have never been asked and 59 percent have not been

asked in the past year. Twenty-eight percent stated they don't know where to go to volunteer. Few are uncomfortable with it (7%) or had bad experiences (10%).

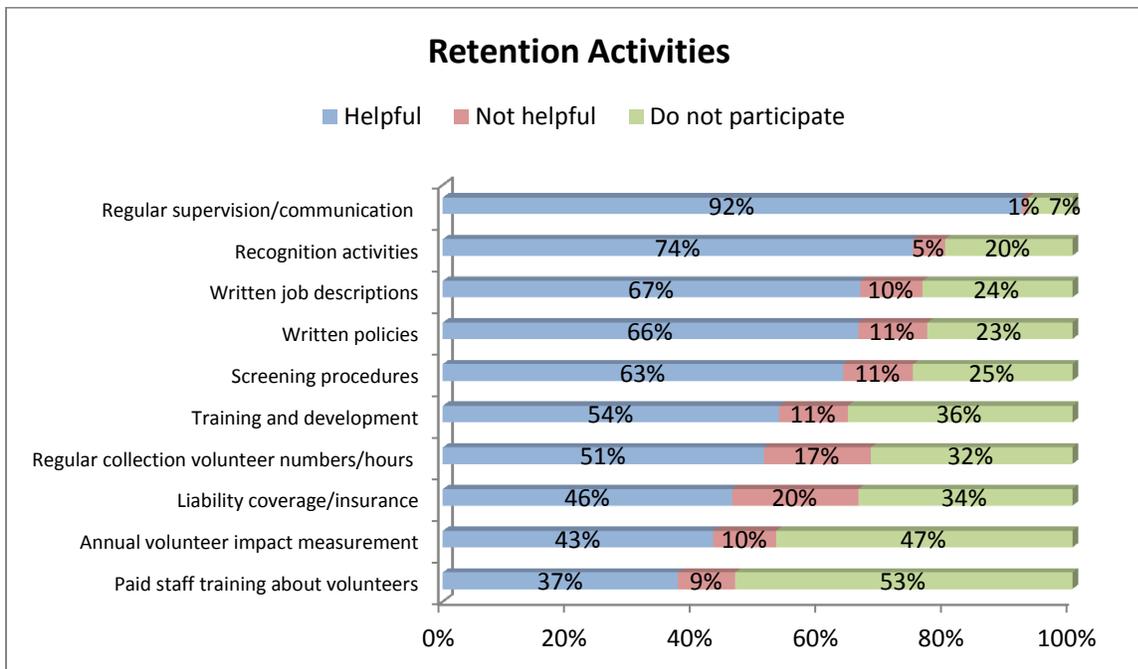


Despite these barriers residents state that volunteering is simply the right thing to do and they do believe they can make a difference in people's lives in their community through volunteering.



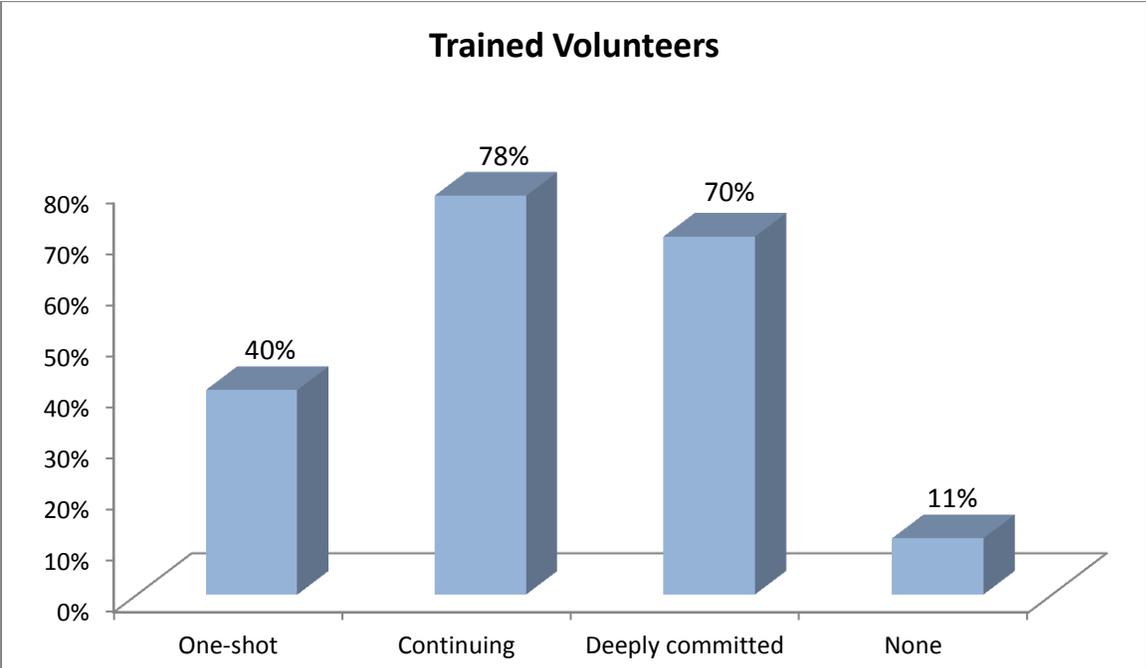
## Retention

Respondents were also given a list of activities or tools that could assist in the retention of their volunteers. They were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of each or to indicate if they do not participate in the activity or use of the tool. Regular supervision and communication with volunteers was the most participated in activity and also seen as the most helpful to retention. Recognizing the contributions of volunteers through activities such as award ceremonies or a Volunteer Appreciation Day was the second most utilized activity as well as the second most helpful. Written job descriptions for volunteers (67% helpful), written policies covering volunteer involvement (66% helpful) and screening procedures (63% helpful) were seen as highly helpful and used by about three-quarters of non-profits. Over half find value in training and professional development opportunities for volunteers (54% helpful) or regular collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours (51% helpful). Liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers was seen as helpful by 46 percent of non-profits but receiving the highest count for those saying it was not helpful (20%). Approximately half of non-profits do not use annual measurements of the impacts of volunteers (43% helpful) or training for paid staff in working with volunteers (37% helpful), but nearly one-third do see these activities as helpful.

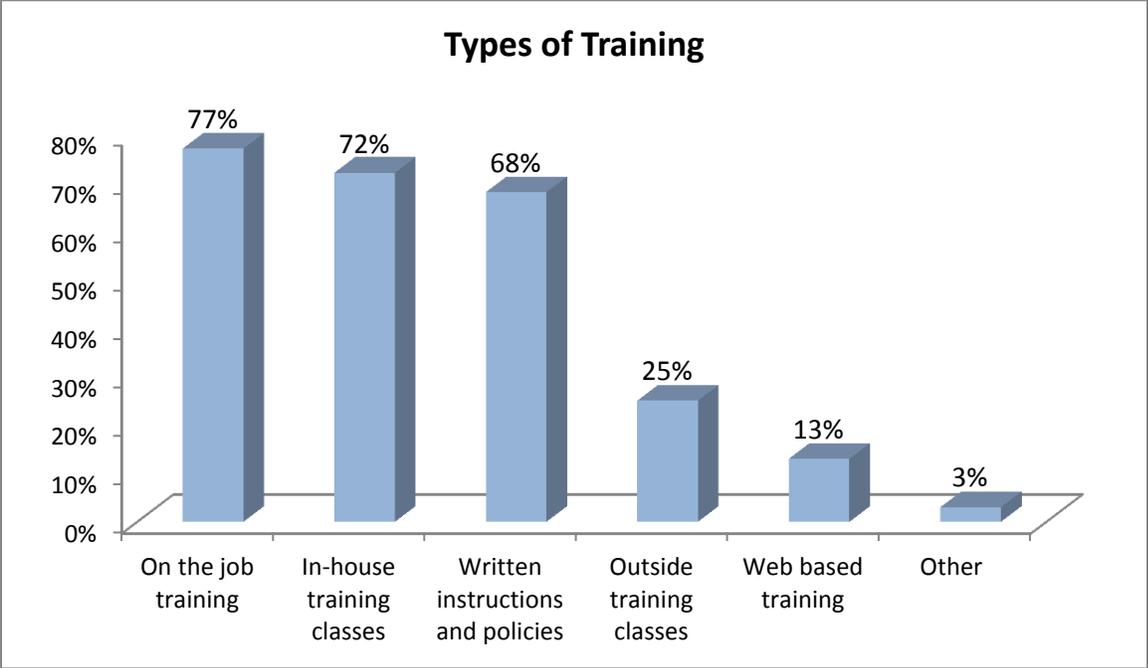


# Training, Development and Evaluation

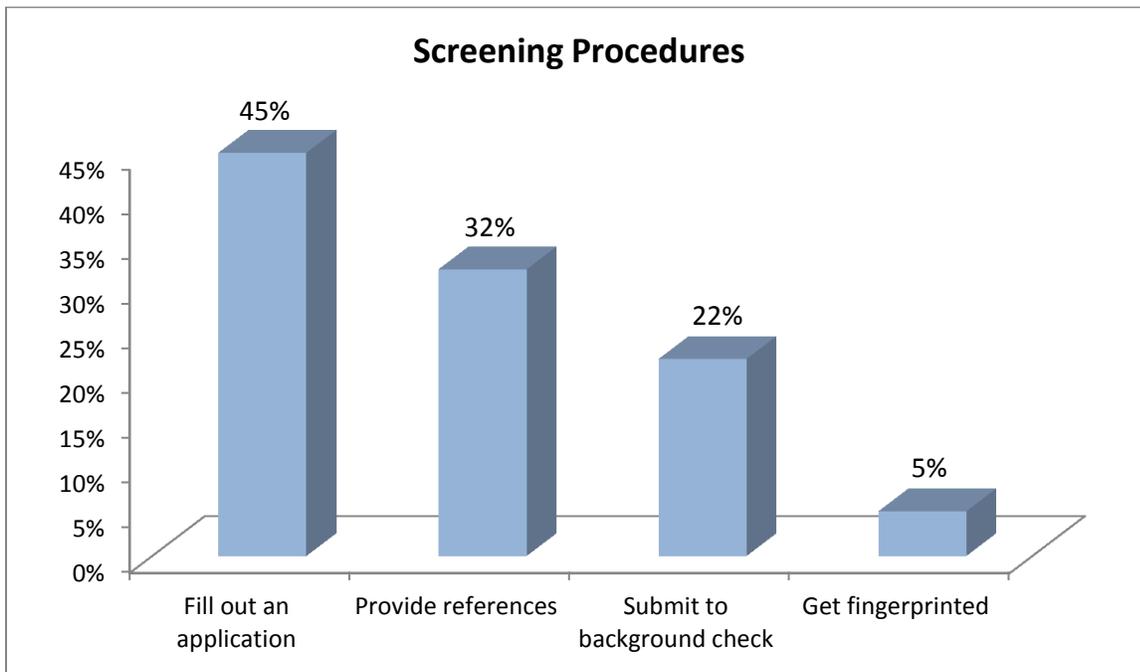
When asked about training more specifically, only 18 percent say they are doing an excellent job. Forty-five percent feel as though they are doing a good job while 30 percent admit to only doing a fair job and 7 percent say 'poor.' Eighty-nine percent of non-profits indicated that they do provide their volunteers with some sort of training. Continuing contributors were given training more often (78%) than deeply committed (70%) and nearly twice as often as one-shot (40%).



Those that do offer training, most often offer on the job training (77%). In-house training classes (72%) and written instructions and policies (68%) were frequently offered as well. One-quarter utilize outside training classes and 13 percent use web based training.



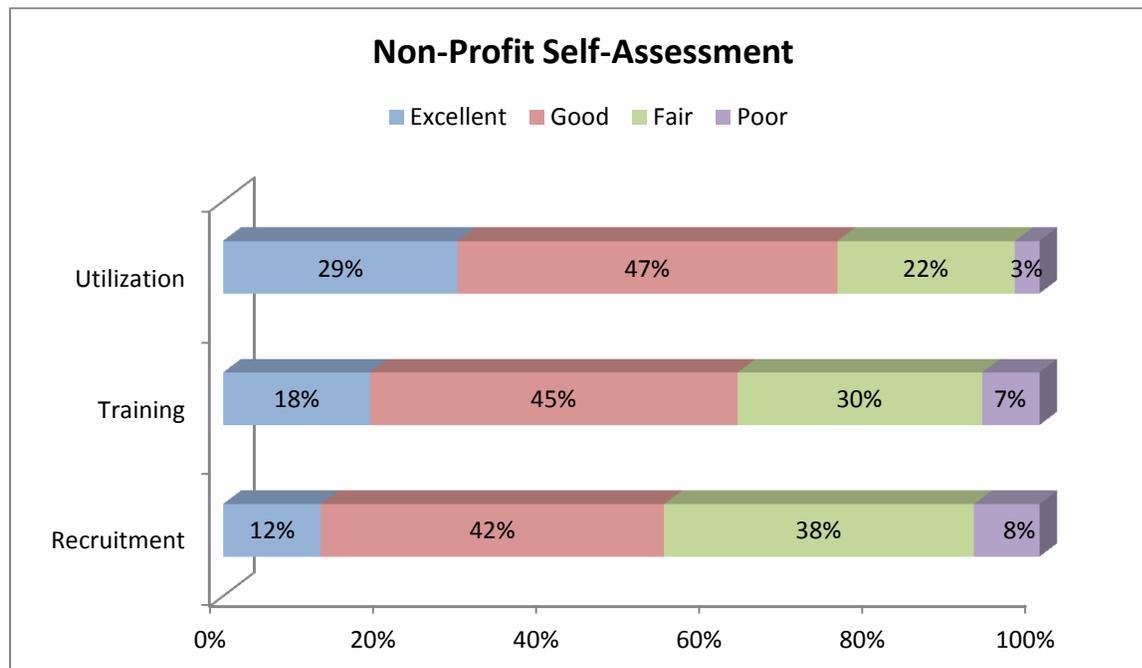
In order to successfully recruit and ultimately retain volunteers, some organizations use screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers. We asked respondents about four of these types of screening procedures. Nearly half ask all volunteers to fill out an application but only about one-third ask for references from all of their volunteers. Less than one-quarter ask all of their volunteers to submit to a background check and only 5 percent ask that all volunteers get fingerprinted. Of those that only ask for applications or references from some of their volunteers, many indicated that this is only for those volunteers that are not known to them or referred to them by someone they know. For those asking some of their volunteers to submit to a background check or get fingerprinted, often this was for individuals who will be working with children or other groups that could be at risk.



## Bridging the Gaps

It is clear that New Yorkers see the value of volunteering to their community and to themselves and want to volunteer. So, how do non-profit organizations bridge the gaps between intentions and actions? The first step may be to look within non-profits and see how they rate themselves in the areas of utilizing, recruiting and training their volunteers and what resources they feel their organization needs in order to efficiently recruit, train, develop, utilize and manage volunteers. Although over half (54%) feel they are doing at least a good job of recruiting volunteers 38 percent state that they are just doing a fair job. This appears to be the biggest area of opportunity for non-profits and the residents of New York State seem to agree with over one-third saying they have never been asked to volunteer and over one-quarter saying they don't know what is available or where to go to volunteer. *New Yorkers Volunteer* offers a comprehensive search tool that matches volunteers with organizations based on the volunteer's location, interests and availability, however, it would seem that many are not aware of this useful tool. Even non-profits indicate that nearly half do not use volunteer centers or coordinating agencies to recruit their volunteers. We recommend that *New Yorkers Volunteer* further explore the awareness and usage of this tool with both residents and non-profits.

Further exploration of the methods in which non-profits measure utilization is also recommended. The majority of responding organizations (76%) believe they are doing at least a good job of utilizing their volunteers with 29 percent of those saying they do an excellent job. However, without additional discussion to uncover what systems they employ to make these assessments, we cannot say for certain if this is accurate or based only on their perceptions.



According to respondents, the training they offer is at least good to nearly two-thirds (63%). That 89 percent of non-profits offer some type of training seems to support that assessment. However, most of that training is done with continuing volunteers (78%). This is slightly higher than the training completed with deeply committed volunteers (70%), which could be due to their knowledge of the organization and the volunteer activities they are asked to complete. One-time volunteers were training at nearly half the rate (40%). Training is an investment and may be viewed as wasted on these one-time volunteers; however, additional training with one-time volunteers could possibly result in a more meaningful commitment that would benefit both non-profits and volunteers and potentially lead to greater retention. Posing these questions to residents who have volunteered or perhaps the individual non-profits' own volunteers could allow for an understanding of the connection between training and as well as both utilization and retention.

Next, the organizations could look at addressing the barriers that were both identified by residents and revealed in this research as well as highlighting the positives they shared and exploring the opportunities that were uncovered. The two most prominent barriers appear to be that residents believe they do not have time to volunteer and that many have never been asked. Within these barriers exist opportunities to educate the public on the need for volunteers of all commitment levels and the reality that they have most likely overestimated the amount of time required for many volunteer activities. Two ways that this might be accomplished are by increasing usage of the volunteer search tool on New Yorkers Volunteer's website and raising awareness of volunteer actions that require less time and are more convenient such as technological volunteering. Eighty-eight percent of residents were not aware of any forms of technological or 'virtual volunteering'. Once made aware, 44 percent indicated they were likely (14% Very, 30% Somewhat) to volunteer their time in this manner. Additionally, within the individual organizations an application can be developed, similar to the New Yorkers Volunteer web tool, to facilitate matching the volunteers with activities that fit their abilities, interests and availability.

While raising awareness and educating the public on the variety of volunteer opportunities and tools available, residents can be reminded that they can make a difference by addressing needs within their community and with their own neighbors as well as the benefits to them personally (right thing to do, good feelings, etc.). This can be accomplished through mail, television and radio and maintained by email, mail and telephone communications. Once an individual responds online, by returning a postcard or by phone, they can be signed up to receive updates on volunteer opportunities via email from New Yorkers Volunteer or they can consent to their contact information being shared with non-profits so they can be contacted by phone or mail.

Recognizing the contributions of existing volunteers is just as important, if not more, than attracting new volunteers. Recognition can be given in a variety of direct and indirect ways. Developing the existing volunteer staff by utilizing them to train newer volunteers can give them a different sense of pride in their work, provide variety to long-term volunteers and increase their sense of being valued by the organization. Assigning trainers or mentors to new volunteers can also offer them a system of both support and development. Additionally, a yearly recognition day or event can allow organizations to give thanks to their volunteers in a formal manner. This can also be an opportunity to renew volunteers' commitments to the organization, whether in a formal or informal manner, and volunteers can be asked to deepen their commitment as well.

Finally, we acknowledge that a majority of organizations, 57 percent, say that the single largest need they have in order to efficiently recruit, train, develop, utilize and manage volunteers is additional financial support. But today, non-profits are constantly being called upon to do more with less. Indicating that it can't be done without more money simply won't address the problems or bridge the gaps. Organizations must increase their professionalism – recruit using technology, intake completely, manage, effectively utilize and provide recognition. Collaborative management including the development and fielding of technological recruitment and management tools must be accomplished with state support where available. While collaboration has its own challenges, the fact that so many organizations have similar needs points to collaborative problem solving as a viable solution.

Non-profits can be heartened by the widespread latent as well as explicit support among the citizenry of New York. Collaborative efforts that integrate technology may enhance target volunteering as well as enhance traditional recruitment. Professional management should improve volunteer management and pave the way to retention.

We recommend making this report and the data from the survey available to all non-profits to stimulate discussion and hopefully assist in their worthy efforts.



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**Understanding the process to recruit, train and utilize volunteers in New York State**

Prepared by The Siena College Research Institute for The New York State Commission on National and Community Service

2011-2012

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