



# Virginia Community Engagement Index

Building a Culture of Service, Volunteerism,  
and Civic Action in the Commonwealth





VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIAL SERVICES

Serve Virginia is an office within the Community and Volunteer Services Division of the Virginia Department of Social Services, an executive branch agency of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

# Welcome to the Virginia Community Engagement Index!

At Serve Virginia, we are proud to work alongside our partner network of individuals and organizations dedicated to serving their communities and to introduce the **Virginia Community Engagement Index (VCEI)** as a tool for all to use to catalyze community impact.

As a unique, first-of-its-kind resource, the VCEI provides data and insights into the social and civic fabric of Virginia and establishes a framework for turning this research into strategic actions that can inspire and mobilize more residents to engage in their communities.

In the coming pages, you will find baseline data and insights to help us:

- Identify what Virginians believe to be the pressing challenges facing our communities.
- Assess where Virginians think action should be taken — and the degree to which they take action to address these challenges.
- Understand what motivates Virginians to get involved and stay involved.

Beyond the numbers, however, the VCEI affords us an opportunity to rally together from a place of shared knowledge and understanding. Nonprofits, government agencies, private employers, faith communities, education providers, healthcare organizations, and all our partners can use this information to further their daily work. **However, the true strength of this study will rest in our ability to use it to inform collective action.**

We look forward to partnering with you to put the VCEI into practice. Together, we can place the VCEI in dialogue with the community knowledge you bring to the table and contextualize our findings within the overarching body of community research we have at our disposal. By better understanding the motivations, benefits, and priorities of Virginians that have a connection to their community, we can create programs, policies, and practices that operate from a strengths-based perspective to generate a deeper investment.

We're pleased you're here to learn more about the VCEI and the value it can add to your organization and your community — and we will be honored to partner with you to bring these findings to life through continued collaboration!

Sincerely,



**Kathy J. Spangler**  
Director, Serve Virginia

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## SECTION 1

# Our Process: Building the VCEI

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### Convening a Coalition and Aligning Our Objectives

Before we put pen to paper to develop this study, we recruited a Core Team of partners representing 38 diverse public, private, and nonprofit organizations throughout Virginia to help us identify what the VCEI needed to be.

Each of these partners brought several unique professional and personal lenses to the project. With so many voices at the table, however, we quickly discovered a lack of shared definition around concepts and terms like “community engagement” and “civic health” — even despite the rigor and volume of research that has been conducted on the topic.

Nationally, this body of research has pointed to declines in volunteerism and social cohesion over the past decade. These findings periodically spark articles and opinion pieces all asking roughly the same question: “Where have all the volunteers gone?” And while that’s a fair question to ask, it wasn’t the central question our Core Team wanted to answer.

Instead, we wanted to know, “Who are Virginia’s community volunteers and civically engaged residents? What do they care about? Where and how are they engaging? And why?”



Together, we sought to develop a body of knowledge that can:

- **Present** representative findings unique to Virginia to complement and “fill in the gaps” of local knowledge that national studies can’t always provide.
- **Assess** community needs and priorities throughout Virginia.
- **Uncover** what drives engagement in formal and informal acts of service and volunteerism.
- **Understand** what influences participation in civic and democratic processes.
- **Identify** potential strategies for volunteer and national service recruitment, retention, and support.
- **Inform** policy measures, advocacy, and community program development.
- **Rally** the ecosystem around a shared vision and understanding of community engagement in the Commonwealth.

In short, we aimed to develop a study that could help us better understand the degree to which service, volunteerism, and civic engagement is a strength in our communities, and how to continue to build and leverage that strength.



“The VCEI provides a level of local understanding and insight that is invaluable to supplementing the work we do at the national level. When we can combine this community-level knowledge with national data, we can provide a truly holistic portrait of engagement in our communities.”

**MEGAN SINGER**

Senior Manager of Strategy, Points of Light; VCEI Research Advisory Committee Member





## Conducting Our Research

To help us and our Core Team deliver on our objectives and enhance, rather than duplicate, national bodies of work, we engaged a Research Advisory Team. This team was composed of partners within AmeriCorps' Office of Research and Evaluation and Points of Light who added their thought leadership in the design of our research methodology.

Per our objectives, we executed a methodology designed to capture an unprecedented level of insight into who engaged residents of Virginia are and what drives their behaviors. Our intent was not to capture a representative sample of the general public, which our colleagues at AmeriCorps and the U.S. Census have already done with their "Volunteering and Civic Life in America" report.

Therefore, we distributed our VCEI survey through two primary channels from January 30 through March 8, 2023, and we generated the following response:

- **3,099 Participants:** Purchased through research panel providers
- **3,294 Participants:** Procured through the communications platforms of our Core Team members\*

*\*Note: Our total response of 6,393 participants allowed us to weight the data to accurately reflect Virginia's geographic and demographic diversity. With our weighted sample, our strategic research partners at SIR in Richmond, Va., deployed various statistical modeling techniques and segmentation analyses to help us arrive at the level of insights our Core Team envisioned when embarking on this project. A complete demographic breakdown of our respondent pool can be found in our full companion research findings report on our website, [ServeVirginia.org](https://ServeVirginia.org).*

## What our methodology and respondent profile means for our analysis

The participants generated through our Core Team lists are significantly more likely to be engaged because they are already connected to organizations that are providing resources and services to enhance individual and community health and well-being.

Additionally, the participants generated from our panel providers are more apt to report higher levels of engagement simply by agreeing to share their voices and opinions as part of a research panel.

Therefore, as you engage with the findings in this report, and as we continue to convene and develop strategies around these insights, it is imperative that the voices represented in the VCEI be considered "Engaged Virginians" or "Likely to Be Engaged Virginians" — not necessarily "Everyday Virginians."



## Acknowledgments

The Virginia Community Engagement Index simply would not have come to fruition without the dedication and support of our Core Team and Research Advisory Team members, who gave their time and energy over the course of several months to inform our goals and methodology, distribute our survey, and help develop our key findings and takeaways. **To each, we offer our gratitude, praise, and hope for continued partnership.**

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- **Christine Schoppe**, Former Chief of Staff
- **Megan Singer**, Senior Manager of Strategy

Finally, we would like to thank SIR, our research, consulting, and communications partner based in Richmond, VA., for their tireless and thoughtful approach to shepherding this work with us, as well as the Virginia Service Foundation and the Governor's Advisory Board on Service and Volunteerism for their leadership and insights throughout this process.

## SECTION 2

# Key Findings & Insights

Through our analysis, we sought to answer the following key questions:

01

What are our most top-of-mind and pressing community needs and priorities?

02

How effective at addressing community needs do we perceive each of the following action areas to be?

Political Action,  
Policy Change,  
& Lawmaking

Community  
Education &  
Outreach

Volunteerism  
& Service

Donations &  
Philanthropy

03

To what extent are we currently engaging in acts that advance each of these action areas — and why?

04

How do we inspire and mobilize more people to act?

# Assessing Community Needs and Priorities

Across every region of Virginia, respondents placed highest emphasis on their overall health and well-being, as well as the prime social drivers influencing their ability to live their fullest and healthiest lives. In particular, the top five needs identified were:

Education

Health & Well-being

Housing

Public Safety

Economic Security

## Regional Insights

In examining community needs by region, Education, Health & Well-being, and Housing remain the top three priorities across the board. However, regional level responses allow us to understand local distinctions and priorities with more clarity.

- Northern
- Central
- Eastern
- Piedmont
- Western

Northern Virginia residents ranked issues around **DEMOCRACY** higher than any other region.

Central Virginia residents ranked issues around **CIVIL & HUMAN RIGHTS** higher than any other region.

Piedmont Virginia residents ranked issues around **HOUSING** higher than any other region.

Western Virginia residents ranked issues around **HEALTH & WELL-BEING** higher than any other region.

Eastern Virginia residents ranked issues around **VETERANS & MILITARY FAMILIES** higher than any other region.

# Learn More

Our full findings report available on our website contains ratings of individual needs related to every priority area. For example:

## Education

Within education, respondents felt **TEACHER BURNOUT** needed to be addressed more than any other issue.

## Housing

Those prioritizing housing felt making **RENTAL PROPERTIES** more affordable was the greatest need.

## Economic Security

Next to **INCREASED WAGES** and overall **JOB GROWTH**, respondents felt **WORKFORCE TRAINING** was a top three priority for influencing economic security.

To access our full findings report, go to [ServeVirginia.org](https://ServeVirginia.org).

## How to Use VCEI Community Needs Data

The VCEI can help organizations assess their alignment with community priorities and determine where to act, both individually and collectively with their partners. These findings can also be used to spread awareness and educate community leaders about the issues residents in your communities are experiencing, and why your particular program, organization, or coalition is essential to meeting those needs.

It is important to note, however, that our survey design intentionally forced respondents to think critically about their top issue areas, as well as the needs within those areas, and to make difficult choices about what is most important to them.

In this way, our survey was designed to complement other studies, such as Community Health Needs Assessments, that are more intentionally focused on offering definitive assessments of needs, while also demonstrating the areas where engaged Virginians may be most willing to act.

## Assessing Community Action and Current Engagement

Overall, respondents overwhelmingly ranked “Political Action, Policy Change & Lawmaking” and “Community Education & Outreach” as the top two most effective actions to address community needs.

While “Volunteerism & Service” registered highly for certain needs like Disaster/Crisis Response, as well as senior care, youth programs, and refugee services, respondents most often listed “Volunteerism & Service” third or fourth when considering which actions would be most effective.

Finally, “Donations & Philanthropy” was seen as a very useful tool for addressing needs like food and nutrition insecurity, animal welfare, and access to higher education, but overall, it ranked low in terms of perceived efficacy.

### What Does this Mean?

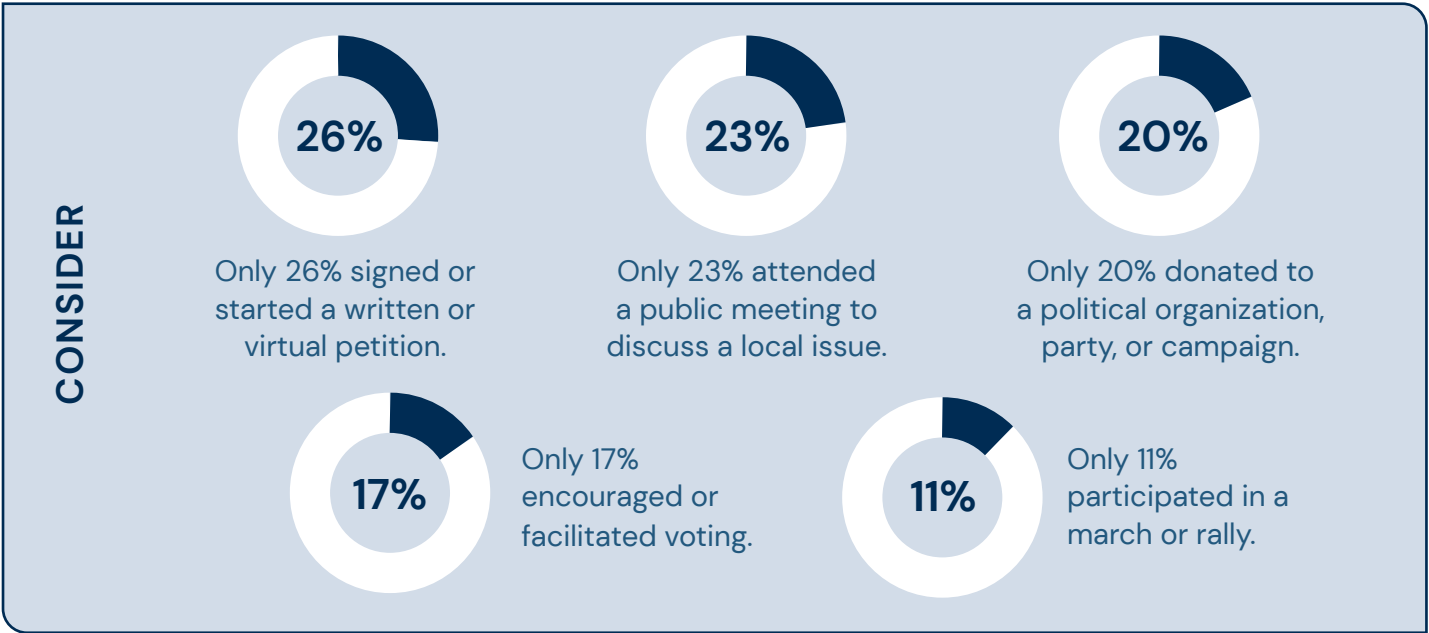
One key to mobilizing more Virginians to act may rest in our ability to demonstrate how volunteerism impacts all other actions, particularly the ones respondents perceive to be most effective. None of these actions exist in a vacuum, and while volunteerism may not have rated top two for effectiveness against priorities as often as others, volunteerism does in fact play a significant role in amplifying community education and outreach, in affecting policy decisions, and in supporting philanthropic endeavors.



# POLITICAL ACTION, POLICY CHANGE & LAWMAKING

## To what extent are respondents engaging in these actions?

While 68% said they voted in an election in the past year, they did not as often report engaging in other actions that can potentially influence policy.



## Why or why not?

Though respondents said “Political Action, Policy Change & Lawmaking” “would be” one of the most effective actions to take to address community needs, most respondents said they do not trust the players responsible for setting policies, nor do they feel engaging with members of government to be an effective use of their time.

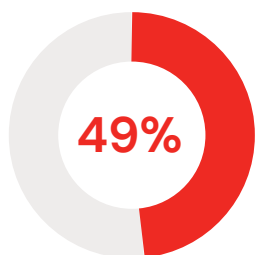




## COMMUNITY EDUCATION & OUTREACH

### To what extent are respondents engaging in these actions?

Respondents reported engaging in a variety of formal and informal methods of outreach and dialogue to increase awareness around community issues or causes.



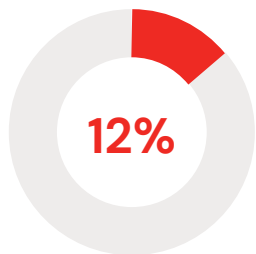
#### Engaging in Dialogue

49% said they discussed political, societal, or local issues with people whose views differ from their own multiple times per month in the past year.



#### Engaging on Social Media

34% said they posted or shared content on social media related to a political or social cause in the past year.



#### Distributing Materials

12% said they distributed educational materials like brochures and pamphlets.



### Why or why not?

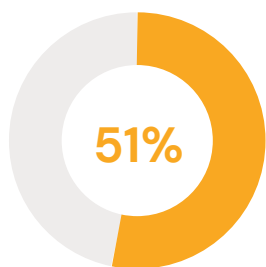
As with “Political Action, Policy Change & Lawmaking,” low levels of trust in government to do “what is right” and faith that members of government will be responsive may help to explain why respondents are more likely to attempt educating those around them through conversation and social media than they are to attempt educating members of government.



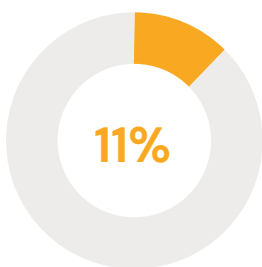
## DONATIONS & PHILANTHROPY

### To what extent are respondents engaging in these actions?

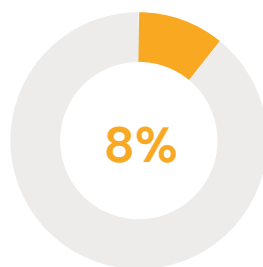
51% of respondents said they donated \$25 or more to a nonpolitical organization or cause in the past year, and they were more than twice as likely to donate to nonpolitical causes than political ones.



Have donated \$25 or more in the past year.



Can't afford to volunteer or contribute.



Haven't found a cause [they] care enough about.

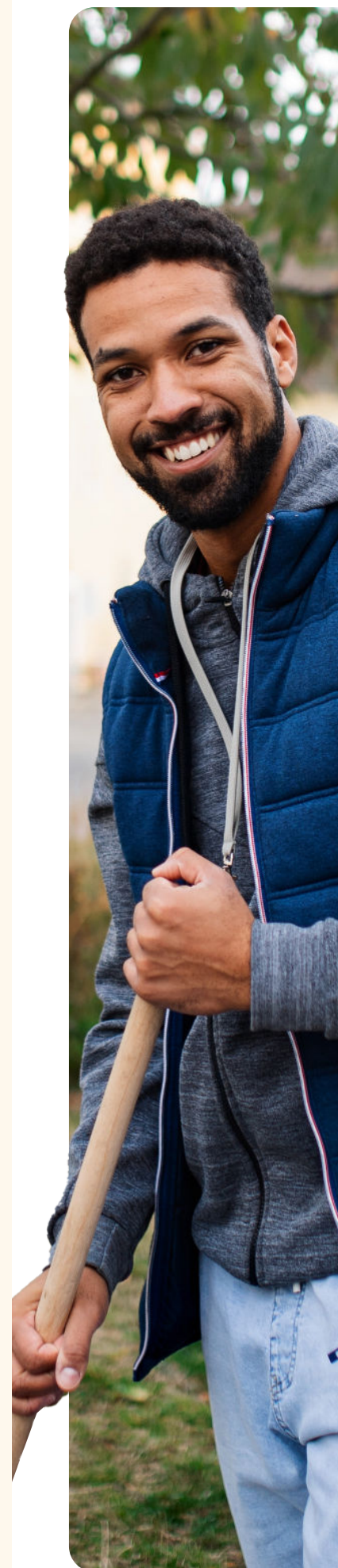
### Why or why not?

While low trust in government can help explain lower levels of political donations, lack of means and lack of inspiration can help to explain why only roughly half made nonpolitical donations.

In addition, respondents may not have made as many donations because they simply don't feel it is an effective way to address community needs.

#### CONSIDER

"Donations & Philanthropy" was rated as the number one most effective action to take for only one community need: Hunger/ Access to Nutritious Foods.



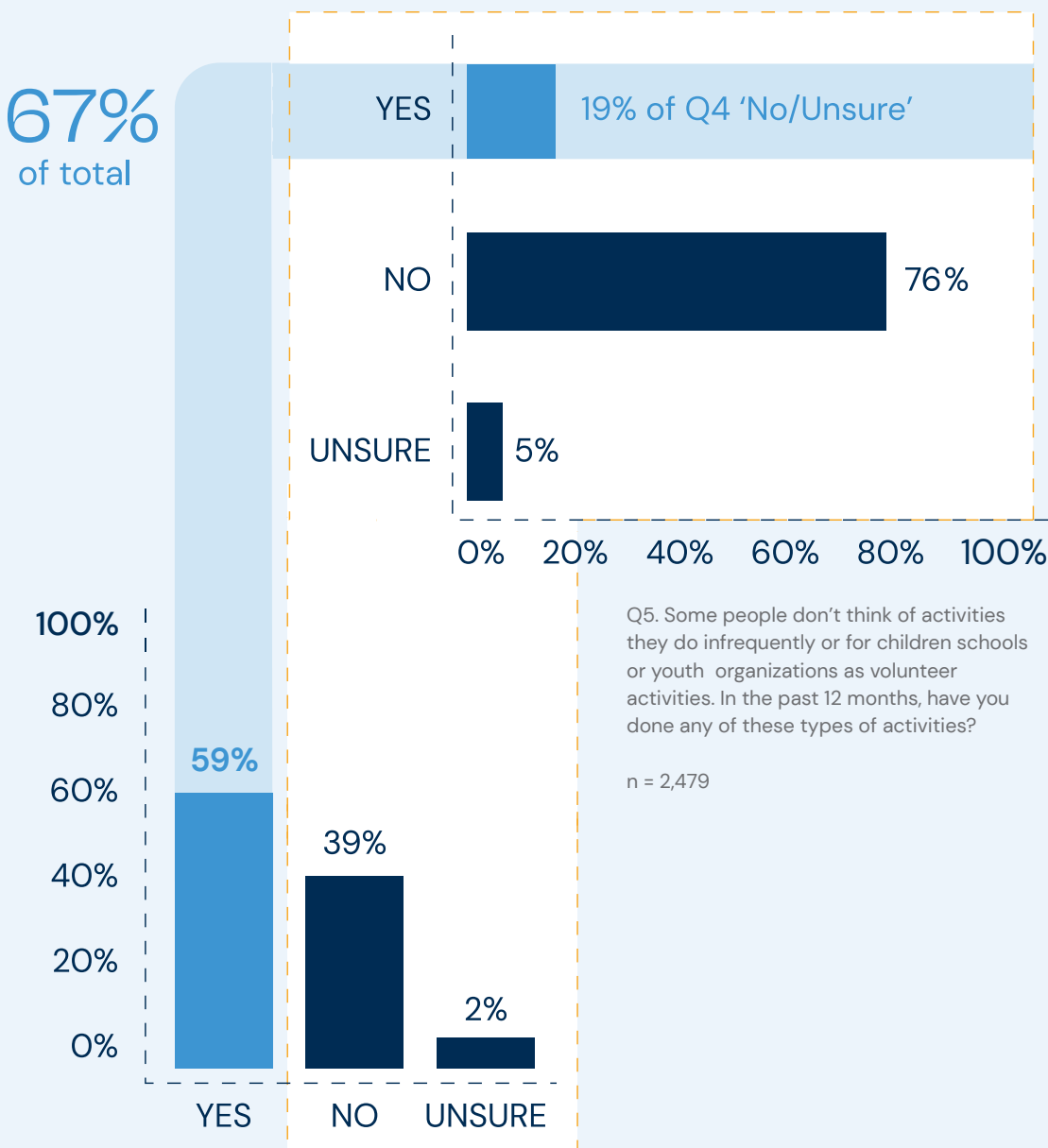


## VOLUNTEERISM & SERVICE

### To what extent are respondents engaging in these actions?

Respondents engaged directly with organizations through “formal” channels of volunteer activity at a much higher rate than other civic actions. **In fact, as shown below, 67% said they volunteered with an organization at least once in the past year.**

#### Percentage of Respondents Who Have Volunteered in the Last 12 Months



Q4. In the past 12 months, did you spend any time volunteering for any organization or association?

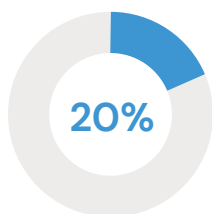
n = 6,382

## VOLUNTEERISM & SERVICE

However, even with that high level of formal volunteering being reported, there remains a considerable amount of service happening at the community level that doesn't necessarily fit within traditional definitions of what constitutes "volunteering."

# 7/10

7 out of 10 respondents said they've helped their neighbors out in the past year, and 55% said they exchanged favors with their neighbors more than once a month.



Nearly 20% of respondents who said they didn't volunteer changed their mind when prompted to broaden their definition of "volunteering."

# no yes

Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents were 9% and 7% more likely, respectively, to switch from a "no" to a "yes."

### WHERE RESPONDENTS VOLUNTEERED



Q6. Which type of organization have you volunteered for in the past 12 months? Select all that apply.

n = 4,353

## Why or why not?

Again, the role of trust here cannot be overstated. In short, those organizations most traditionally associated with leveraging volunteerism and service to advance their missions were among the institutions in Virginia most trusted to “do what is right.”

Incidentally, three of the top five places where respondents most reported volunteering — **Youth or Educational Organizations, Food Pantry or Hunger Relief Organizations, and Hospital or Health Organizations** — also align with the organizations they trust and the needs they feel are most pressing.

The remaining two of the top five places leveraging the highest levels of volunteerism — Houses of Worship or Religious Organizations and Neighborhood or Recreational Associations — also contribute to the physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being of individuals and communities.



### MOST TRUSTED ORGANIZATIONS

64%

Nonprofit  
Organizations

62%

Local  
Businesses

57%

Educational  
Institutions


51%

Healthcare  
Organizations

## Key Insight

Though respondents listed “Political Action, Policy Change & Lawmaking” as the most effective way to address more community needs than any other, the majority said they did not have faith that government institutions and representatives would act on their recommendations or effectively tackle those challenges. As a result, respondents more often turned to helping others directly within their neighborhoods or through the institutions they trust most.





"I think [the VCEI] was a model for how groups of people can listen to each other, learn from each other, and compromise with each other — all in the spirit of attaining a common goal. Process matters, and I hope that inclusivity remains central to the work of strengthening our communities."

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**ABE GOLDBERG**

Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Political Science,  
James Madison University; VCEI Core Team Member





## SECTION 3

# Mobilizing More Virginians to Act

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## Extending the Invitation to Engage

Our findings revealed that respondents participated in direct service and volunteerism, both with their neighbors and with organizations, more so than any other act of engagement.

This willingness of Virginians to give of themselves in service to others — and their capacity to follow through on that willingness — stands as one of our greatest strengths to grow.

However, building and leveraging that strength to its fullest extent will depend on our ability to use VCEI insights, as well as our collective knowledge and resources, to extend the invitation to a larger and more diverse group of Virginians to:

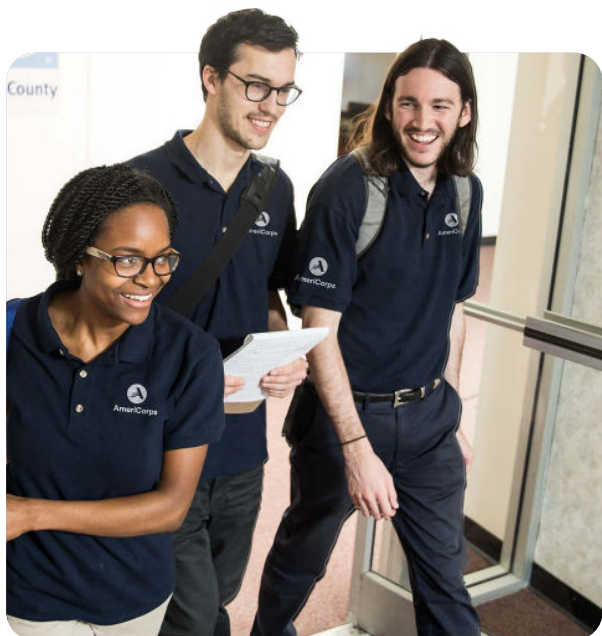
- Inform organizations and policymakers on the needs their communities face.
- Work with organizations and policymakers to identify solutions to those needs.
- Become an active contributor to those solutions by giving of their time, talents, treasure, and voices through service, volunteerism, philanthropy, and civic action.



# How We Can Use VCEI Data to Invite More Virginians

Unfortunately, 13% of respondents said they don't volunteer, serve, or contribute to causes as much as they may want to because they've never been invited or encouraged, or they simply don't know where to start. Reducing that number to zero hinges on our ability to extend clear, compelling, and inspiring invitations to engage their communities in whichever ways they're able.

To help our partners craft those invitations, the VCEI has a wealth of data examining the motivations, benefits, and barriers to service and volunteerism that can help us tailor our outreach and direct more residents to meaningful opportunities to contribute.



## Engaging Virginians in Direct Service and Volunteerism

### Knowing Why they Start

For many respondents, their spiritual beliefs or houses of worship were their first entry points into volunteerism or service.

For many others, personal experience and education were key forces in getting them involved — whether they had been personally affected or helped by others, witnessed an injustice that inspired them to act, or were compelled by learning about an issue.

## Top Five Reasons Respondents Began Volunteering

It was an important part of my house of worship or spirituality.

People helped me and/or my family when I was in need, and I want to “pay it forward.”

I was encouraged and given opportunities to give back throughout elementary, middle, and high school.

I experienced or witnessed firsthand an injustice or social issues and felt I needed to act.

I learned about an issue in school, through the news, or from others and was inspired to act.

## Knowing What Stands in their Way

### TOP FIVE LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

- 01 I don't have enough free time.
- 02 There aren't enough convenient times and locations to volunteer or serve.
- 03 I lack transportation.
- 04 I'm unable to volunteer or serve in person due to health concerns or lack of accommodations for a disability.
- 05 It's hard to bring or find care for children or other dependents while I volunteer or serve.

### TOP FIVE EMOTIONAL HURDLES

- 01 I serve others enough through my work.
- 02 I'm burnt out, and the issues are too big for me to fix.
- 03 It's hard to find fulfilling opportunities that match my interests and skills.
- 04 I feel uncomfortable, unprepared, or unqualified to help others directly.
- 05 I've never been invited or encouraged to volunteer or serve, or I don't know where to start.

## Key Insight

While it's important to remain cognizant of the barriers to volunteerism and service, our driver analysis found barriers in and of themselves do not have a strong correlation to whether respondents reported volunteering in the past 12 months.

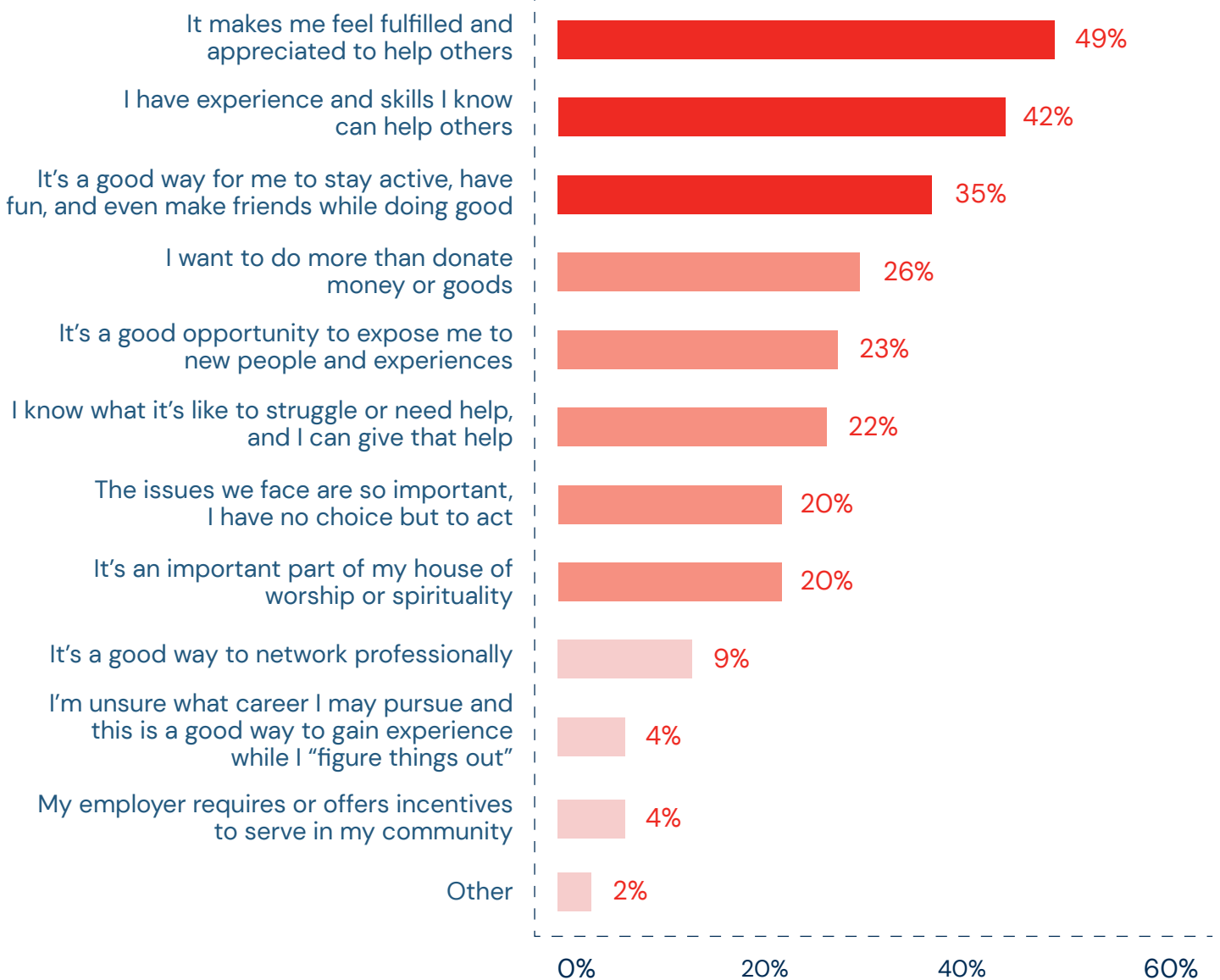
What did have the strongest correlation? The benefits derived from the act of serving others. When people feel fulfilled and that the work they do is meaningful, they are more likely to engage and remain engaged.



# Keeping Virginians Engaged in Direct Service and Volunteerism

## Knowing Why they Come Back

Respondents most often cited personal fulfillment and feelings of appreciation when asked to consider why they continue volunteering. Beyond that, knowing they have contributed their skills and experience, and having shared the experience with others, were top reasons for staying involved.



Q10. Why do you continue to volunteer or give back? Select up to three descriptions that best match your experiences.

n = 4,355

# Understanding Generational Divides



## How Younger Generations View Service and Volunteerism

When asked why they continue to volunteer, Millennials and Gen Z respondents were more likely to say:

- It's a good opportunity to expose me to new people and experiences.
- I know what it's like to struggle or need help, and I can give that help.
- It's a good way to network professionally.
- I'm unsure what career I might pursue, and this is a good way to gain experience while I "figure things out."



## How Older Generations View Service and Volunteerism

When asked why they continue to volunteer, Baby Boomers were more likely to say:

- It makes me feel fulfilled and appreciated to help others.
- I have experience and skills I know can help others.
- It's a good way for me to stay active, have fun, and even make friends while doing good.
- I want to do more than donate money or goods.

## Data Dive: Generations Matter

Partners can use the VCEI to dive into demographic insights far beyond motivations. For example:

- Gen Z respondents were 7% more likely than the total respondent pool to rank Housing and Economic Security as a top three community need.
- Millennial respondents were 10% more likely to list Housing as a top need.
- Gen X respondents were 5% more likely to list Economic Security as a top need.
- Baby Boomer respondents were 10% more likely list Democracy as a top need.

## Using the VCEI to Recruit for National Service

While younger populations still valued the fulfillment gained through the act of service above all, they were also cognizant of the less tangible benefits of serving through AmeriCorps beyond the education award and living allowance. As national service programs continue to target recruitment strategies, touting networking and career advancement strategies may resonate with high school and college students unsure of their next steps.

Meanwhile, messaging aimed at 55+ populations to serve through programs like AmeriCorps Seniors may gain traction by amplifying the opportunity to impart skills and lessons learned while also staying active.

# Examining Key Target Segments

Extending the invitation to serve (and increasing the number of Virginians who accept that invitation) hinges on targeting and connecting with them wherever they are on the engagement spectrum — from those currently engaging at high levels to those we haven't yet reached effectively.



## Maximizing the Value of Our "Active and Frequent Engagers"

Though our "Active and Frequent Engagers" are volunteering and contributing civically at high rates, 16% also said they felt burnt out. Therefore, rather than invite this group to do more, how do we instead invite them to "do differently?" And how do we ensure we're recognizing and celebrating their already immense contributions?



More than any other group, **“Active and Frequent Engagers”** have the potential to help organizations advocate for policy measures and to educate others — the two acts respondents felt would be most effective for meeting community needs.

This segment is 13% more likely to believe in the effectiveness of bringing concerns or ideas to members of their local government. So, how do we, as individual organizations and as a network of partners, equip them to do so?

Similarly, how do we empower them to leverage their positions within their networks, places of employment, or houses of worship to organize activities and spread awareness of ways to get involved?

## Reigniting the Passions of Our “Active but Sporadic Engagers”

Our **“Active but Sporadic Engagers”** experience a mix of challenges. For example, when compared to the total respondent pool, they were:

4%

Less likely to feel they have experiences and skills that can help others.

6%

More likely to say there aren’t enough convenient times and locations to volunteer or serve.

5%

More likely to say they don’t have enough free time.

8%

More likely to say they’re burnt out, and the issues are too big for me to fix.

This mix of logistical and emotional barriers represents a steep challenge and will require invitations to serve that will allow them to see how volunteerism and civic action fits into their daily lives and aligns with their personal experiences and skillsets.

Similarly, since this group was more apt to feel the issues were too big for them to fix, the success of our invitations may also hinge on the degree to which we can communicate how their actions will make a tangible difference and then make good on that promise when they engage with our organizations and in our communities.



## Sparkling Connections with “Potential Engagers”

“Potential Engagers” were 7% more likely to say they have never been invited or encouraged to serve, or don’t know where to start. That said, they were active in serving others.

In fact, although “Potential Engagers” did not report any organization-based volunteering in the past year, 53% said they exchanged favors with their neighbors to help each other — and 46% said they did so more than once a month.

As with the total respondent pool, this level of informal, neighbor-to-neighbor service suggests that “Potential Engagers” have a high degree of trust in others within their communities. However, levels of institutional trust were not as high with “Potential Engagers,” who were:

12%

Less likely to trust  
Nonprofit Organizations.

7%

Less likely to feel it would be  
effective to bring an issue  
or concern to a member of  
their state government.

7%

Less likely to trust  
Government.

10%

Less likely to feel it would be  
effective to bring an issue  
or concern to a member of  
their local government.

7%

Less likely to trust  
Educational Institutions.

4%

Less likely to trust  
Healthcare Organizations.

For this group, who is extending the invitation may be just as important as the invitation itself — and “Potential Engagers” trust local businesses more than any other organization.



# Forging Pathways of Engagement through the Workplace

56% of VCEI respondents said they were employed full- or part-time — and yet only 4% of those who have volunteered in the past year said they continue to do so because their employer offers incentives to serve in their communities.

Moreover, when asked to consider how their employers might play a more active role in community engagement, respondents set a high bar of expectations that employers aren't currently meeting, especially in communicating and offering incentives to serve.



## CONSIDER

80%



said it was important or very important for employers to communicate regularly about opportunities to serve,

55%

yet only 55% said their employer was effective at doing so.

79%



said it was important or very important for employers to offer incentives like paid time off for volunteering,

48%

yet only 48% said their employer was effective at doing so.

78%



said it was important or very important for employers to contribute profits or pro bono services to community organizations,

50%

yet only 50% said their employer was effective at doing so.

69%



said it was important or very important for employers to sponsor group volunteer activities such as MLK or 9/11 Day of Service Events,

48%

yet only 48% said their employer was effective at doing so.



"The VCEI will help prompt organizations to have conversations around community issues, needs and priorities. Doing so will allow us all to understand before acting and, more importantly, prioritize resources to maximize impact."

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**MAY NIVAR**

Senior Manager of Community Impact, Altria; Founding Member and Chair, Asian and Latino Solidarity Alliance; State Board and Richmond Chapter Member, Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities; Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership – Political Leaders Program Class of 2023; VCEI Core Team Member

## SECTION 4

# How We're Using the VCEI

We see the VCEI as a foundational body of knowledge with several practical applications for all organizations in the Commonwealth — one that can help us break free of silos and advance collective impact strategies, programs, and policies all Virginians can embrace.

We're committed to making our data available for all to access on our website, [ServeVirginia.org](https://ServeVirginia.org). Beyond access, we're equally committed to helping organizations see where they can “plug in” and how they can leverage these findings to support their current work, enhance their partnerships, and grow their impact in the following areas:



## Increasing Grassroots Service, Volunteerism, and Civic Action

For any organization interested in leveraging volunteers to enhance their services — or that needs more Virginians to lend their voices in support of their mission and causes to spur donations and policy measures — the VCEI offers a wealth of information about what motivates people to get involved and stay involved.

With this information, we can craft and target more emotionally resonant invitations to serve that speak to the diverse personal experiences of Virginians and what they hope to achieve through their actions.



## Growing National Service in Virginia

In 2022, nearly 3,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers served in Virginia's communities, supporting programming aimed at improving literacy skills, opening access to higher education, protecting our natural resources, resettling refugees and families affected by disaster, providing access to services for vulnerable immigrant populations, and fighting substance use disorders and the opioid epidemic through peer support and counseling, to name a few.

But we also know that, too often, service members are coming into communities, rather than coming from the communities in which they serve. At Serve Virginia, we are committed to ensuring national service works in every community in the Commonwealth, and the insights contained in the VCEI will help us recruit more service members from Virginia and spread awareness of how national service can be a vital part of building the skilled and compassionate workforce Virginia needs now and into the future.

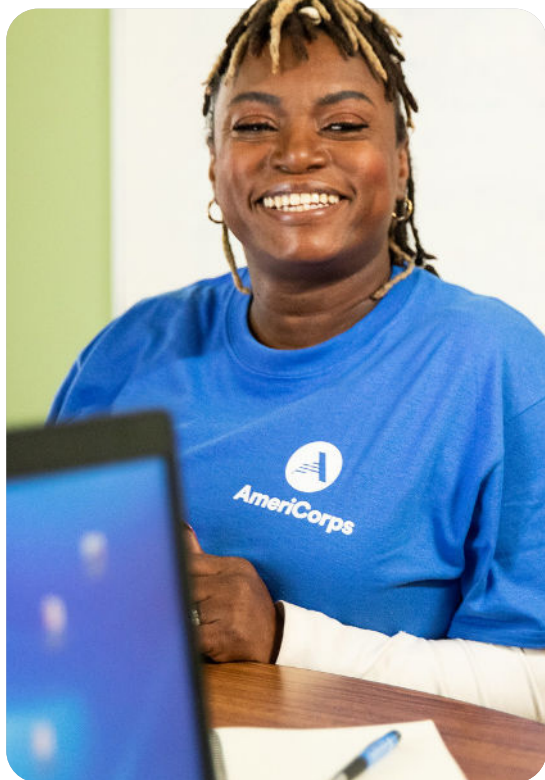
We also believe that programs being advanced throughout the Commonwealth to meet the needs identified in this study can be enhanced by understanding how national service may fit into current program models or projections for program growth, and we're committed to helping organizations further their understanding of national service through hands-on planning, outreach, and support.

### What we're already advancing:

Using findings from the VCEI, as well as our partners at AmeriCorps and Points of Light, Serve Virginia has developed a targeted social media campaign to spread awareness of where service and volunteerism can take residents of Virginia and drive them to the appropriate opportunities to "Pair their Passion with Purpose."

To learn more, and to leverage any of these campaign assets for your own promotional purposes for free, download our Partner Toolkit at [ServeVirginia.org/Toolkit](https://ServeVirginia.org/Toolkit).





## Boosting Organizational Capacity

The data contained in the VCEI will be invaluable for organizations to call attention to the needs our communities face. In doing so, organizations can more effectively demonstrate the need for their programs and the value of the services they offer. These insights will be essential to crafting grant requests and advocating for local, state, and federal appropriations that will build their capacity to deliver on their missions.

More importantly, as organizations increase their individual capacity to leverage the time, talent, treasure, and voices of residents and policymakers, they'll also be building their capacity to identify and enlist organizational partners from across sectors to plan and execute programs and policies with the potential to generate collective impact.

## Generating Collective Impact

Though the VCEI provides a “ranking” of community needs and priorities, for lack of a better term, it does so only in the fact that we forced respondents to limit their choices to their top three overall needs and the top three issues related to each of those needs.

What our community needs findings truly reveal is the interconnectivity of all these priority areas. Take the top three of Education, Health & Well-being, and Housing, for example. None of these can be addressed in isolation. As a convener, we're committed to bringing individuals and organizations advancing work against all these priority areas to the table — to dive into these findings and determine strategies that can leverage our combined knowledge and resources to drive partnerships, programs, and policies.

### What we're already advancing:

When it comes to boosting capacity and planning for collective impact, the VCEI itself stands as a shining example of what can be accomplished when individuals and organizations come together around a shared focus. This is an unprecedented dataset, and it will take all of us coming together — as sectors, as communities, as regions — to turn it into action.

Such an effort, led by the Community Foundation for a greater Richmond and The Schaberg Foundation, is already underway in the Central Region, where a core team of individuals representing more than two dozen organizations are examining their region-specific findings and generating targeted actions they can take to address the challenges and needs their residents are feeling and experiencing daily.



## Measuring Our Success

The VCEI provides a wealth of benchmarks for us to gauge, and we're committed to tracking them in 2025 through a second wave of this study. The following are some key performance indicators we will be examining.

## Service & Volunteerism

If we're successful at engaging, inspiring, and mobilizing a larger and more diverse group of Virginians to uplift their communities through direct action, we can expect to see:

More Virginians engaging in "informal" and "formal" organization-based volunteering — and engaging in those acts with more frequency.

More Virginians serving as AmeriCorps members in the Commonwealth.

Lower levels of Virginians saying they have not been invited or encouraged to serve.

Greater numbers of Virginians engaging in civic actions beyond voting.

Higher ratings of trust for all organizations in Virginia.

Higher ratings of efficacy around bringing issues or concerns to members of government.

## Drivers of Engagement

In addition to these benchmarks, we will also be tracking key drivers of engagement that our analysis has identified, such as:

- Are more people saying they feel fulfilled and appreciated when volunteering?
- Are they seeing and engaging with opportunities to give of their experience and skills?
- Are young residents seeing the career-building and networking opportunities volunteerism can provide?
- Are older residents seeing volunteerism as a way to stay active?
- Are employers' community engagement performance ratings improving?

Such indicators can help us gauge whether we're pulling the right levers when it comes to tailoring our appeals and invitations to serve.



## Community Needs

First, we believe we need to continue to gain a better understanding of community-level needs and priorities, and we will continue to convene with partners and community members to place our findings in context with other bodies of work in the field.

Similarly, as part of our awareness and recruitment campaign, we are actively asking people who engage with the campaign to rate the needs and issue areas they care most about.

Long term, we will continue to use the VCEI to gauge the effect our efforts may be having on the ground. For example, if through our collective planning efforts underway in the Central Region we advance strategies to mobilize volunteers to support housing programs and priorities, we may expect to see several potential shifts in the data over time.

In that instance, we could find more respondents listing affordable housing as a priority to address. If the efforts of our partners were focused on mobilizing Virginians to spread awareness about housing issues, that data point could register as a measure of success. On the other hand, if resources had been committed to strengthening policies or programs to address affordable housing, then that data point would tell a different story.

Our pledge, then, is to continue building the body of knowledge we have through the VCEI, and to keep engaging our partners in interpreting exactly what these insights mean for our organizations, our residents, our communities, and our Commonwealth.







"The process of building the VCEI as a Core Team helped to develop and strengthen the relationships that will carry our ability to put these findings to their fullest use — developing strategies, programs, and partnerships to meet our communities' greatest needs."

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**VANESSA DIAMOND**

SVP, Civic Innovations, Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond;  
Board Member and Global Affiliate Chair, Points of Light; Board Member, Virginia Governor's Advisory Board on Service and Volunteerism; Board Member, America's Service Commissions; VCEI Core Team Member

# Connecting the Dots

We believe we have only scratched the surface of the potential the VCEI holds for our organizations and communities. And, just as we must extend the invitation to serve to all Virginians, we must also extend the invitation to any and all individuals and organizations in our Commonwealth and beyond to engage with this data. Together, we can turn these insights into innovative strategies to mobilize more individuals to “Serve Virginia.”

As you continue to engage with this report — and our full findings report available on our website, [ServeVirginia.org](https://servevirginia.org) — we invite you to begin “connecting the dots” by considering what could be possible if more community members served, volunteered, or engaged civically in our communities.

## ● PLACING THE VCEI IN CONTEXT & CONVERSATION

How does this data speak to other sources of information you use regularly to make decisions?

In what ways can this study spark dialogue within your organizations and communities?

How can this study be used to demonstrate the value of community engagement to more employers in your community?

## PUTTING THE VCEI INTO PRACTICE

What insights can you use from this report to hone your volunteer recruitment and retention practices?

Are volunteers having experiences with you that leave them fulfilled, and are you actively supporting their ability to identify opportunities to get involved?

● In what ways can service and volunteerism play a larger role in your community’s workforce development strategies and pipeline?



**Serve Virginia**

PAIRING PASSION WITH PURPOSE



TO ACCESS OUR FULL FINDINGS, GO TO [SERVEVIRGINIA.ORG](https://servevirginia.org)