

# Virtual Volunteering: How Seniors Can Give Back From Wherever They Are

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Giving back often means going out: cleaning up litter along the highway, serving in a local soup kitchen, visiting hospital patients. But with today's technology, virtual volunteering provides exciting opportunities to contribute without going anywhere but online.

Getting online also means you can give back globally—no plane ticket necessary. Watch as these students in Brazil connect via video chat with residents of American retirement communities: An error occurred.

The CNA Speaking Exchange project referenced above is an excellent example of meeting a need by pairing simple, yet readily accessible tech (FaceTime and Skype) with motivated, available volunteers. Though the relationships developed span miles and generations, the benefits go both ways. “Any engagement that a younger person can have with someone from another generation can prove positive,” says Dr. Jesse O. Bolinger, former Director of the RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) of Southern Iowa. “Connecting generations through technology can be beneficial for learning by both individuals, teaching of technology skills by the younger generation and teaching about history and past experiences by the older individual. In addition, this connection can assist in combating common symptoms of loneliness and a feeling of disconnect for the senior.”

## What We Know About Older Volunteers

Countless studies and stories point to volunteering's value to the individual. That truth is universal: when you do good, you feel good, whether you're 25 or 105. The distinction, says Arthur Koff, founder of RetiredBrains.com [External link disclaimer](#) (an exclusive online resource hub of volunteer opportunities for seniors), is that many older adults are looking to fill their time and find challenges—and they're not distracted by raising families, going to school, keeping a job, and other younger/midlife obligations.

Indeed, senior volunteers are valuable and available. Consider these stats from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and this post on the value of older volunteers [External link disclaimer](#):

- The number of older volunteers hit a 10-year-high in 2011.
- 1 in 3 U.S. volunteers are 55 and older.

- Over 20 million older adult volunteers contributed nearly 3 billion hours of service in 2011, a monetary value of \$67 billion.

With numbers like these, Bolinger believes the future of virtual volunteering is bright. “If utilized properly, technology has the potential to allow nonprofit organizations to run entirely virtually and entirely by volunteers,” he says.

And as strongly evidenced in the Speaking Exchange project, virtual volunteering transcends the limits of space and time—while tapping into the unmatched value of a senior’s lifetime of wisdom. “Virtual volunteerism also has the potential of letting organizations function around the clock,” Bolinger explains. “While someone sleeps in the United States, a senior in a retirement facility across the world could be writing fundraising letters or utilizing their past skills as an accountant to help insure the organization’s strong financial future.”

### **Creating a Bridge, Overcoming Challenges**

In many cases, technology creates a bridge, matching vetted volunteers with identified community needs. Creating more access to and awareness of these opportunities—along with overcoming the tech learning curve and initial apprehension to using it—is key for future success.

Bolinger sees both resistance and openness to using tech among the seniors he serves. Another challenge? Some organizations, particularly in rural areas, are skeptical about virtual volunteers, thinking the engagement would be unreliable, time-consuming, or expensive. “These factors are far from the truth,” says Bolinger. “Any organization with tax-exempt status can apply for a Google Grant, which give nonprofits access to a host of web-based tools to help connect volunteers and staff (i.e. Google Drive, Google Sheets, word processing and presentation software, and Dropbox.com [External link disclaimer for file-sharing](#)). Finding creative ways to engage volunteers is the key.”

Koff believes there would be significant interest among older adults in remote volunteerism, but the challenge also lies in how the organizations and seniors find each other. If a senior is resistant to tech, he’s not likely to search Google for ‘virtual volunteering positions,’ much less to check sites like SeniorCorps.org [External link disclaimer](#) or VolunteerMatch.org [External link disclaimer for local brick-and-mortar engagements](#). “Unfortunately most seniors do not understand there are many ways to volunteer from the comfort of their homes,” says Koff. “However, as more seniors become aware of programs they will join them.”