

Amplifying Impact by Investing in Volunteer Engagement

The Need

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York City in March 2020, the country's largest local philanthropy, UJA-Federation of New York (UJA), tapped into its longstanding commitment to volunteer engagement to respond quickly to the new and urgent needs for food assistance among homebound and unemployed community members. For food pantries that regularly functioned with a skeleton staff and a handful of volunteers packing food for client pick-up, COVID-related restrictions posed a whole new set of challenges. How could they safely pack the foods? Who would deliver them? Could they find, screen, train, and support volunteers to help? UJA's Volunteer Accelerator, designed to help organizations more strategically engage volunteers, helped three of the food pantries pivot to address these challenges and the dramatic spike in demand.

About UJA

Dedicated to supporting New York area organizations with a focus on caring for those in need, building Jewish life and responding to crises worldwide, UJA recognizes the essential role of volunteers in addressing critical community needs and prioritizes volunteerism across many of its departments. Since 2014, UJA's Time for Good Committee – comprised of staff and dedicated lay leaders – has invested \$10 million in the work of 19 organizations with the goal of building capacity to achieve mission through engaging volunteers. Funding has supported staff positions dedicated to volunteer engagement, training, tools, technology, and coaching to enable organizations to harness best practices for effective engagement.

Strategy

In fall 2019, UJA launched the Volunteer Accelerator, an initiative that equips organizations eager to build capacity through the strategic engagement of volunteers in a specific program. This new model, designed in partnership with VQ Volunteer Strategies (a consulting firm specializing in volunteer engagement strategy), provides volunteer engagement training, individual coaching sessions in developing and implementing new volunteer roles and infrastructure, and a community of practice to explore engagement trends, pilot new practices and share learnings with similar agencies.

The first Accelerator supported teams from the Jewish Community Council of the Rockaway Peninsula, UJC of the East Side and the Shorefront Jewish Community Council as they prepared to implement new digital pantry technology to help clients customize food packages. Guided by the Accelerator, they identified needs that could be addressed by volunteers, designed new roles and planned recruitment.

Two months into the project, the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Strategy, continued

Postponing the implementation of the new digital system and leaning on best practices, tools, ongoing training and support already provided by the Accelerator, the teams assessed needs, designed new volunteer positions and began recruiting and supporting volunteers to meet the changing community needs. Responding to the immediacy of the pandemic, UJA connected the pantries to partners who could help recruit new volunteers. In short order, volunteers were sorting, packing, and delivering thousands of pounds of food to community members. Additionally, partnerships were developed with local grocery stores to serve as weekly market pick-up sites for pantry bags.

Impact

- Follow-up evaluation showed that all three organizations measurably improved their use of engagement best practices and significantly increased the number of food pantry volunteers (one party more than doubled its volunteer corps and the other two went from no volunteers to dozens of volunteers within a few months). Two of the three increased on average by tenfold the number of remote clients accessing the pantry and receiving home delivered meals.
- Buy-in for strategic engagement of volunteers within the three organizations reached beyond food pantries into other service areas. For example, the JCC of the Rockaway Peninsula engaged more than 75 virtual volunteers in the 2020 Census project, making calls, sending messages, and utilizing social media to Get Out The Vote.
- Following Accelerator participation, the pantries were invited to apply for funding to hire staff dedicated to sustaining and expanding engagement efforts. All three leveraged this option and now employ volunteer coordinators.
- In 2020, recognizing the increased demand for employment services due to pandemic-related unemployment, the UJA Committee invited three organizations to participate in the second Volunteer Accelerator focused on engaging volunteers to enhance employment services.
- In 2021, recognizing that organizational resources remain strained, the Committee focused on older adults. Two agencies with a proven track record of engaging volunteers in older adult services were invited to participate in the third Volunteer Accelerator and they are receiving coaching, training and funding in support of hiring volunteer engagement staff.

Next Steps

UJA plans to invest similar support in a few of its closest partners to help them harness volunteer talent to enhance their operations and programs more widely. UJA will once again partner with VQ Volunteer Strategies to collaborate with these selected organizations, conduct a comprehensive assessment, and identify opportunities to build capacity, improve operations or address other challenges by engaging volunteers.

Recommendations for Funders

UJA encourages funders to help grantees increase impact via the following steps:

1. Elevate strategic volunteerism as a factor for determining agency excellence – communicate to grantees that volunteerism is viewed as an indicator of leveraging both financial and human resources to expand programs/services and sustain operations.
2. Encourage grantees to include a budget line item funding volunteer engagement. Many nonprofits are unaware that they can ask for funding for staff to oversee volunteer involvement, volunteer management software, and training and coaching for staff.
3. Ask potential grantees about volunteer engagement successes and challenges during site visits and in grant applications and evaluations.
4. Ask about volunteer engagement strategy (see sidebar)
5. Convene other grant makers and nonprofits for dialogue about volunteer engagement strategies and best practices.
6. Explore how you can enhance your grantees' volunteer engagement strategies.
7. Highlight the advantages of a strong volunteer engagement culture to executive leadership and boards.
8. Collect data and metrics around volunteer engagement and share that data along with research demonstrating how strategic volunteer engagement enhances organizational sustainability and strengthens communities.
9. Use data to build the case internally and with funders by demonstrating the potential ROI for funding volunteer engagement.
10. Provide scholarships for professional development, training and networking opportunities for staff and volunteer leaders.
11. Fund professional staff positions to manage volunteer engagement.

Ask these questions to help assess grantee needs:

1. How does the organization determine the best way to involve volunteers in meeting its mission?
2. Does the organization have a dedicated, qualified volunteer engagement professional?
3. What type of training is provided to staff who work closely with volunteers?
4. How are volunteers trained for their roles and about the organization as a whole?
5. How are volunteers recognized for their contributions?
6. How does the organization track and communicate volunteer impact?
7. How do volunteers support project goals and drive organizational impact?
8. What are the barriers to further integrating volunteers into the organization?