

Executive Summary

Introduction and Description of the Project

To boost community engagement and support across Montana, conducting a landscape scan of volunteer programs is a crucial first step. This initiative systematically collects and analyzes information about existing resources, services, and gaps within a specific area. The goal is to identify current resources, understand the areas being served, and pinpoint where services are lacking. By mapping out the landscape of volunteer programs, we can better allocate resources, foster collaboration among organizations, and ultimately strengthen the impact of volunteer efforts throughout the state.

Summary of the Four Volunteer Program Types

- **DIRECT CONNECT:** These programs match volunteers with organizations based on specific criteria and needs, often through specialized platforms. Examples include national platforms like JustServe, Idealist, Volunteer Match, Points of Light, and United Way's YouCanVolunteer.org.
- **PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS:** These involve joint efforts that facilitate volunteerism through community and corporate initiatives. Examples include corporate programs (e.g., Montana Rail Link, Benefis Health System), service clubs (e.g., Rotary Club, Kiwanis), community programs (e.g., HRDC, CAA), and special interest organizations (e.g., Montana Food Bank Network, Red Cross).
- **BLENDED PROGRAMS:** These dual entry point programs combine elements of direct connection services with partnership-based avenues. Notable examples include AmeriCorps programs and the Montana Campus Network for Civic Engagement (MCNCE).
- **GRASSROOTS OUTREACH:** These efforts include newsletters, community listservs, flyers, social media, and personal connections. While crucial for community engagement, they fall outside the scope of this landscape review.

Definition of Volunteer Program

A volunteer program is defined as an initiative aimed at linking individuals eager to volunteer with organizations needing their assistance. This project focuses on systems and platforms that connect volunteers with opportunities aligning with their interests, excluding organizations that only place volunteers within their own programs.

Summary of Findings

Montana has a vibrant non-profit sector with over 8,500 tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organizations, offering a wide range of volunteer opportunities. The state ranks among the top ten for formal volunteerism, with over 37% of residents participating in organized volunteer activities. In 2023, more than 343,982 Montanans volunteered through various organizations, contributing an estimated economic value of \$843.4 million. Additionally, Montana has one of the highest rates of informal helping, with 68.8% of residents engaging in activities such as assisting neighbors and community members.

Direct Connect Programs

- **NATIONAL DATABASES:** Platforms like VolunteerMatch.org and Idealist.org play a pivotal role in connecting individuals with volunteer opportunities. However, these platforms often underrepresent local community needs and skew results towards larger, well-known organizations.
- **UNITED WAY'S YOU CAN VOLUNTEER.ORG:** This database is integral for connecting volunteers with local opportunities. It offers features like volunteer matching, community promotion, and flexibility in volunteer opportunities. Despite its benefits, it is currently available in only half of the United Way chapters in Montana, covering 11 counties.

Partnership Programs

- **CORPORATE PROGRAMS:** Many companies, such as Montana Rail Link and Benefis Health System, encourage employee volunteerism through organized initiatives. However, these programs face challenges in accessibility and geographic limitations.
- **SERVICE CLUBS:** Organizations like Rotary Club and Kiwanis support local projects and connect volunteers with local needs. The process is less direct and often limited to specific geographic areas.
- **COMMUNITY PROGRAMS:** Local organizations like HRDC and CAA focus on addressing specific community needs. They have broad geographic reach but may have limited volunteer opportunities and lack centralized listings.
- **SPECIAL INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS:** These organizations, such as Montana State Parks and Red Cross, offer volunteer opportunities aligned with specific interests. Their specialized focus may limit the range of opportunities available.

Blended Programs

- **AMERICORPS:** This program combines direct connection and partnership-based models. It offers various programs like AmeriCorps State and National, VISTA, NCCC, and RSVP. AmeriCorps provides diverse opportunities but often requires longer commitments and may not fully meet the needs of local organizations.
- **MONTANA CAMPUS NETWORK FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (MCNCE):** This coalition promotes civic engagement and volunteerism among college students. Campus-based volunteer job boards are password protected, limiting access to the broader community.

Leadership and Governance Volunteers

- **BOARD, LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE POSITIONS:** Many non-profit organizations seek volunteers for strategic roles on committees, work groups, and boards of directors, which are essential for their planning, governance, and operational success. In Montana, board positions can be found through the Governor's Office, local government websites, and networking within the community. However, there are limitations, such as the exclusion of private non-profit positions from those platforms, scattered information, and a heavy reliance on networking, which can be a barrier for less connected individuals.

Geographic Reach

- **COVERAGE:** The programs and projects described extend their reach to only 26 of Montana's 56 counties. Significant portions of the state remain underserved, highlighting the need for expanded access and reach of volunteer programs.

Key Takeaways

- **EXPAND ACCESS AND REACH OF VOLUNTEER MATCHING PLATFORMS:** Collaborate with United Way to increase the availability of the YouCanVolunteer.org database across all United Way chapters in Montana. Ensure volunteer databases better represent local community needs by promoting smaller, local opportunities.
- **OPTIMIZE CURRENT PLATFORMS:** Improve and utilize existing platforms to better connect volunteers with committees, work groups, and board positions, with a focus on the private non-profit sector.

- **ENHANCE VOLUNTEER COORDINATION:** Strengthen connections between corporate volunteers and local organizations.
- **PROMOTE ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION:** Encourage companies to work with the MNA to maximize impact and access.

By understanding the landscape of volunteer programs, stakeholders can make informed decisions to enhance volunteerism and address the needs of all Montanans. The future of volunteerism in Montana looks bright, promising a stronger, more connected community where everyone can contribute and thrive.