

How State Government Can Better Invest in Volunteers

A report to the Legislature
Chapter 45, Laws of 2019

Serve Washington
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Executive summary

The 2019 Legislature enacted [Substitute Senate Bill 5265](#) (Chapter 45, Laws of 2019) that directed Serve Washington to gather information about volunteer opportunities within state government. This report outlines our findings and recommendations for the Legislature to consider ways to increase and expand volunteer opportunities in the state of Washington.

We sent managers of state volunteer programs an online survey and examined results from 16 state agencies. Because we did not receive any funding to produce this report, we consider it an initial look at how state government can improve its volunteer efforts. With additional funding and resources, we can provide a more thorough review.

What we found

Volunteers help us build a more vibrant and resourceful state government

- Volunteers and national service members make an incredible contribution to state agency work and Washington communities. Based on the survey information, we know our volunteers bring new energy and ideas, enhance services by supplementing and broadening existing work, and offer specialized skills. Their contributions extend the reach of government and improve the program's service reach. They represent an investment that gives the state valuable leverage to extend its limited resources.

We need more consistent investment in volunteer efforts

- While there are costs associated with volunteers (recruiting, hiring, managing, recognizing, etc.), the return on investment is significant. To sustain volunteers, we need more investments. While agencies vary in volunteer engagement and management efforts, the survey showed us we need to increase our overall volunteer investment. We looked at how agencies manage high-quality volunteer programs and found that respondents disagree the most on *whether the agency actively pursues funding and resources to sustain volunteer engagement*. If an agency doesn't pursue or allocate proper funding to support volunteer programs, the state won't see the full return investment on those programs.

We must improve how state government manages best practices, training and professional connections around volunteerism

- The agency staff tasked with managing volunteer programs reported varying levels of support and investment in their program and their skill development. The best public sector programs reach out to partner, share and incorporate best practices from similar agencies. However, we found that this level of professional connection isn't formalized within state government. Staff managing volunteers want to receive volunteer management training and attend networking opportunities with other state agencies.

What we recommend

Successfully retaining and managing volunteers is in our best interest. **Even when we subtract the cost of managing volunteers, organizations that make volunteers central to their work can return [three to six times the value](#).** To support and manage volunteer programs that are well integrated within state government agencies, Serve Washington offers the following recommendations.

1. We need to remove barriers to volunteerism

- **Explore how agencies can meet their unique resource and funding needs.** Each state agency needs to determine its organizational priorities, resources and funding needs of its volunteer programming, and the state should invest accordingly. The survey found that the major barrier to volunteerism is resource constraints or inefficiencies. An example of this is a lack of available supervisors.
 - Some programs explicitly described budgetary constraints or the need for more investment and support from all levels of their agency.
 - Over half of the programs reported allocating less than half of a full-time employee to oversee volunteers or the volunteer program.
- **More fully integrate volunteer programs.** Organizations that successfully manage volunteers have shown us that we will be more successful if we fully integrate a volunteer program into what we already do, instead of tacking it on as a side addition. This can help us minimize their costs and scale our work in new ways (Deloitte Consulting LLP, *Nonprofit Service Enterprise*, 2010).

2. We need stronger state support and partnerships

- **Use partnerships and technology to grow volunteer programs.** Partnership with local volunteer centers (or the statewide platform offered through Serve Washington) will benefit our programs. While there is no “one size fits all” approach, the state can help agencies grow volunteer programs that will supplement rather than replace or reduce staff or services.
 - Only 25% of the survey respondents agreed that their agency pursues funding and resources to sustain volunteer engagement.
 - Less than half agreed that their agency uses the right technology to enhance volunteer engagement. Using technology saves time for many public professionals engaging volunteers. This technology should include recruitment and management tools.
 - Half of survey respondents agreed that their agency allocates sufficient resources to ensure volunteer engagement.
 - Five programs reported unfilled volunteer positions.
- **Create a way to connect and share best practices.** Volunteer program managers reported interest in a number of resources they believed would benefit their volunteer program. These include additional training (i.e., volunteer management training) and connecting with other state agencies and employees who engage volunteers to share best practices. Currently, no opportunity or mechanism exists for state volunteer program managers to connect, and share best practices or other resources.

- **Create a volunteer management group.** Following examples from other states, Serve Washington could convene a group of state level volunteer managers in Washington that would meet to:
 1. Promote volunteerism in state agencies by acting as a clearinghouse.
 2. Share information and solve problems.
 3. Identify information, trends and issues.
- **Create resource guides.** Our survey respondents rated a handbook or resource guide to engage volunteers in state agencies as ‘highly desirable.’ We recommend creating resources guides, which could help agencies identify and incorporate best practices around volunteer data tracking and engagement.

3. We need to better identify and accommodate volunteer roles

- **Make volunteering part of the agency’s mission strategy, not an add-on duty.** We asked human resource managers to complete the survey if their staff believed their agency **could** accommodate volunteers in the future. However, agencies which did not already have a volunteer program chose not to respond. We must recognize that high-quality volunteer programs require resource investments and staff time if we want additional state agencies to develop and believe in volunteer programs. We need to help agencies see that a volunteer program can’t be an additional duty to an already-full staff position. As [research demonstrates](#), we need to make volunteering a core function — not an add-on.
- **Respond better to why we need volunteers, not simply increase the number of volunteers.** State agencies need to better identify key agency or community priorities and then purposefully seek out volunteers with the core skills to address those priorities. While only three respondents shared specific ideas, nine said they want to identify new ways that staff can engage volunteers to help achieve their agency’s mission. This could help agencies determine what kind of skills they need from a volunteer. More than 80% of survey respondents said the interest in volunteer positions rose over the last three years or stayed the same. That means we may be successful in expanding current volunteer opportunities.
- **Explore opportunities to integrate national service members with community volunteers within state agencies.** The Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency, administers a number of national service programs. Most notably is AmeriCorps, which is designed to engage Americans in a variety of service opportunities. Serve Washington could host webinars for state agencies to help them learn more about the various national service programs and how to determine if their agency’s needs align with national service.

4. Strengthen connections between our volunteer programs and the state’s volunteer infrastructure

- **Work across sectors to strengthen the volunteer ecosystem.** Currently, the state does not engage with our volunteer infrastructure as equal partners responsible for the success of volunteer engagement. Right now, these efforts fall heavily on the nonprofit sector. With one group designated as the leader (Serve Washington), agencies could come together and collaborate in one place. However, we would need additional funding and resources to develop infrastructure with nonprofit partners and support this type of system and partnerships.

- **Develop better volunteer infrastructure.** Adequate infrastructure means we use our volunteers more efficiently. Serve Washington, state agency volunteer managers and other partners need to create a strategy on how to better develop our programs and train our volunteer staff.

Background

The 2019 Legislature enacted Substitute Senate Bill 5265, which directed Serve Washington to study volunteer opportunities within state government. As the state commission on national service and volunteerism, we conducted this study and considered ways to increase and expand volunteer opportunities.

Serve Washington sought information on the following:

- How we use volunteers or need additional volunteers in existing programs.
- The costs and benefits of volunteer programs.
- Volunteerism barriers and how they differ at each agency.

It is important to note that this bill included a fiscal impact, which was unfunded. As a result, we were limited in how much we could research. However, this topic has immense potential, and we can more thoroughly research it with adequate funding.

What principles informed our recommendations?

We used two sources to gather our foundation principles for this project:

Principles from the Reimagining Service group. Reimagining Service was a national coalition of multisector representatives from nonprofit, government, education, and faith-based organizations, funders and corporations who sought to increase the impact of volunteers.

Service enterprise characteristics from Deloitte Consulting LLP research. [This research](#) illustrates what makes a successful volunteer framework (*Nonprofit Service Enterprise*, 2010). We call these “service enterprises” and we used them to inform our recommendations. They share the following characteristics:

- Document our priorities through a detailed strategic plan.
- Establish partnerships with other organizations to extend the agency’s reach.
- Recognize the ongoing need for funding.
- Set clear expectations and onboarding with volunteers.
- Prioritize initiatives to manage how we allocate resources.
- Leverage modern technology to improve communications.
- Use a volunteer tracking system to manage resources.
- Create standardized training for paid staff and volunteers.

One of the key characteristics listed above is partnership with other organizations. This point is especially important. That’s because this study did not examine the overall volunteer landscape, nor the role that nonprofits and volunteer centers play across Washington even though we know they are essential partners and contributors to the state’s volunteer infrastructure. We would examine these relationships more thoroughly in future studies.

We can learn how to build better frameworks from nonprofit organizations. These groups often have a long history of volunteer program management and volunteer engagement.

The steps we've taken

On January 7, 2020, Serve Washington staff met with volunteer program managers from the Office of the Insurance Commissioner, Department of Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Commission, and Department of Fish and Wildlife. In collaboration with these managers, we developed an online survey and planned follow-up phone calls for additional clarification. Through this meeting, an online survey, emails and phone calls, we reviewed volunteer opportunities at the following state agencies:

- Office of the Attorney General
- Department of Ecology
- Department of Corrections
- Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Department of Natural Resources
- Department of Labor & Industries
- Office of the Insurance Commissioner
- Parks and Recreation Commission
- State psychiatric hospitals
- State developmental disabilities programs
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- Washington Military Department
- Office of the Secretary of State

Volunteer contributions

Nearly one-third of agencies don't track volunteer hours or the volunteer program's return on investment. The remaining agencies reported collectively engaging over 13,000 volunteers per year who provide more than 626,000 hours of service. These volunteers serve in either short- or long-term positions and often contribute specialized skills and talents. These volunteers contribute more than \$19.6 million each year. This is based on the [Independent Sector's](#) estimated value of a volunteer hour in Washington (the Independent Sector is an organization that works to strengthen civil society).

Most volunteer program managers reported that the demand for volunteer positions grew or stayed the same over the past three years. To fully capitalize on these contributions, the state can further invest in a number of practices to support community-based volunteerism and remove barriers that could cause systemic issues.

While this report examines community-based volunteerism, it is shortsighted not to acknowledge the role of national service (AmeriCorps) programs within three agencies: Department of Ecology, Department of Veterans Affairs and the Employment Security Department. These agencies engage national service members, who in turn recruit a significant number of community-based volunteers. During the 2018-19 calendar years, these state agency-run AmeriCorps programs engaged 64,267 volunteers who contributed 445,963 hours to the state.

Our study's limitations

Without additional resources, we couldn't collect data regarding all available or possible volunteer opportunities in state government agencies. A more comprehensive study would give us a more thorough review of higher education institutions and agencies that could accommodate future volunteers.

We also recognize we couldn't capture certain programs in this report. This includes national service programming and state agency Community Emergency Response Teams that leverage additional skills and service hours in various capacities, including disaster response efforts. In fact, in times of disaster, spontaneous volunteer engagement, Citizen Corps Programs, AmeriCorps Disaster Response Teams and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster are critical partners in community response. We didn't clearly identify the role of these organizations in the survey. This area deserves further examination.

Finally, not engaging nonprofit partners while completing this review is a significant limitation. State volunteer programs often rely on partnerships with nonprofits, and the landscape of their programming is not included in this report. That's why our approach is only state-centric.

Survey facts

Background

This was the first Volunteerism in State Government Survey to be conducted in Washington. The Legislature directed Serve Washington to administer the survey. We developed survey items based on the bill's stated intentions and best practices from the volunteer sector.

Who participated

We emailed all state human resource managers to request that a representative from each agency complete the survey if their agency was either directly or indirectly engaged in community volunteers or is an agency that could accommodate volunteers in the future. We asked HR managers to identify the most appropriate individual(s) to respond to this survey and forward the request to them. A total of 16 state-led volunteer programs completed the survey. The survey was open from February 10-28, with responses accepted as late as May 8. A representative from the following volunteer programs with their hosting state agency responded to the survey:

- DOC Volunteers - Department of Corrections
- DSHS Statewide Volunteer Program - Department of Social and Health Services
- Eastern State Hospital Volunteer Services - Eastern State Hospital
- Emergency Management Division - Washington Military Department
- L&I Volunteer Program – Department of Labor & Industries
- Litter Clean-up Program - Department of Ecology
- Office Volunteer Program - Office of the Secretary of State
- Parks and Recreation Volunteer Program - Parks and Recreation Commission
- Spokane Veterans Home - Department of Veterans Affairs
- Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors - Office of the Insurance Commissioner
- Volunteer and Internship Opportunities - Office of the Attorney General
- Volunteer Program - Department of Natural Resources

- Washington Soldiers Home Volunteer Program (Orting) – Department of Veterans Affairs
- Washington Talking Book & Braille Library Volunteer Program - Office of the Secretary of State
- Washington Veterans Home Volunteer Program (Port Orchard) - Department of Veterans Affairs
- WDFW Statewide Volunteer Program - Department of Fish and Wildlife

Higher education institutions, the Department of Services for the Blind, Western State Hospital, and state developmental disabilities programs were not represented in the survey. After contact with these programs, we determined the following:

- Higher education institutions are generally highly decentralized when it comes to volunteer programs — their programs are widely distributed and locally managed. This made it overly-burdensome for them to respond to the survey.
- The Department of Services for the Blind reported rarely using volunteers. When it does, volunteers are usually individuals who receive agency services and choose to volunteer for work experience.
- Information we gathered from the Developmental Disabilities Administration showed that it does not host a formal volunteer program with posted opportunities. Volunteers might occasionally be interns looking for specific experience.
- Western State Hospital representatives were contacted after COVID-19 had significantly altered state operations, and did not participate in the survey. The Eastern State Hospital responses demonstrated that about nine volunteers are engaged each year within that hospital system.

Survey questions

The 2020 survey contained 19 items with topics covering the following:

- Basic volunteer program information
- Volunteer data tracking and volunteer impact
- Volunteer management practices
- Available volunteer opportunities

Survey results

About the volunteer programs

- Results showed that the majority (81%) of programs engage volunteers directly, either through a formal volunteer program or through informal volunteer opportunities.
- Two programs partner with nonprofit agencies that engage volunteers on behalf of their agency/program, and one program directly engages volunteers for some functions and through partners for others.
- Nearly all programs (94%) engage short-term volunteers.
- Most (81%) engage long-term volunteers.
- Eleven programs engage skills-based volunteers with specialized skills and talents.

Volunteer data tracking and volunteer impact

The [Independent Sector](#) establishes the national estimated volunteer value at \$25.43 per hour (2018). The estimated volunteer value for Washington is \$31.42. Six of 16 programs calculate the agency's return on investment. Two programs based their investment return on the national estimate, three based it on the state estimate, and one based it on \$17 per hour. The program that reported \$17 per hour did not share how it determined this value.

On the survey, four state agencies reported engaging AmeriCorps members and community volunteers. We did not collect information about how many or what type of AmeriCorps programs these members served with (i.e., AmeriCorps VISTA or AmeriCorps National Direct). As the commission on service and volunteerism, we partner directly with additional state agency programs that engage AmeriCorps State members (Employment Security Department, Department of Ecology, and Department of Veterans Affairs). These national service programs are distinct from community volunteer programs. Our survey did not capture any information on these AmeriCorps state programs.

We also note that Community Emergency Response Teams through state agencies are not represented in this survey. We recognize the value that these programs bring to state agencies.

Of the 12 that track volunteer numbers and hours, programs reported a range in volunteers engaged per year. The range went from seven volunteers to 9,912 volunteers. The total was 13,284 individuals and 103 groups.

Volunteer hours per year ranged from 171 hours to 209,671 hours. This was a total of 626,256 hours across all 12 reporting programs. Five of the 16 programs do not track volunteer hours or the return on investment. These five programs reported an average of less than one full-time employee dedicated to overseeing the volunteer program.

When asked about available volunteer positions, programs reported the following:

- Five had unfilled positions
- Six had completely filled positions
- Two were unsure
- Four selected "other"

Those who selected “other,” shared the following explanations:

- “We are currently restructuring our volunteer program.”
- “We do not have specific positions for volunteers.”
- “Placement is on a space and supervisory availability.”
- “Always can use volunteers.”

Half of the programs reported that interest in volunteer positions has risen over the last three years, one reported that interest has gone down, five reported no change, and two stated they were unsure.

We asked respondents to select statements that they agreed with regarding impacts of the volunteers or volunteer programs. Table 1 below shows the number of programs that agreed with each statement.

Table 1: How many programs agreed with the following statements

Statement	Number of programs that selected the statement
Our volunteers bring new energy and ideas	13
Our volunteers enhance services by supplementing and broadening existing work	12
Our volunteers offer specialized skills	12
Our volunteer program enables us to develop a group of strong supporters	11
Our volunteers bring community connections and personal networks to agencies/areas	11
The investment of time, resources and staffing expenses in volunteers and volunteer programming yields sizeable outcomes	11
Our volunteers often give more of their time than often originally planned, due to their genuine interest in the agency/division	9
Our volunteers encourage increased diversity by providing opportunities to involve the differently-abled, members of underprivileged communities, and/or people of varied age groups or other under-represented populations	7
Our volunteer program contributes tangible economic value, not in the form of financial donations, but in volunteer time and service	7

The differences in responses between programs that reported engaging greater than 20 volunteers per year compared to those who engage less than 20 or who not track number of volunteers were greatest on the survey items shown in Table 1. Specifically, larger programs agreed more with statements related to volunteer impacts. For the nine programs who engage more than 20 volunteers per year, 100% of them agreed with the following statements:

- Our volunteers enhance services by supplementing and broadening existing work.
- Our volunteer program enables us to develop a group of strong supporters.
- Our volunteers bring community connections and personal networks to agencies/areas.
- Our volunteers offer specialized skills.

Of the seven remaining programs, less than half agreed with the statements above.

Volunteer management practices

Programs reported a range of full-time equivalent positions dedicated to overseeing the volunteers and/or volunteer program:

- Two programs reported zero full-time employees.
- The largest program reported 14 staff and 19 volunteer coordinators overseeing the program.
- The average position allocated to volunteer management is 3.6 FTE.

Chart 1: Volunteer Management Practices Part 1

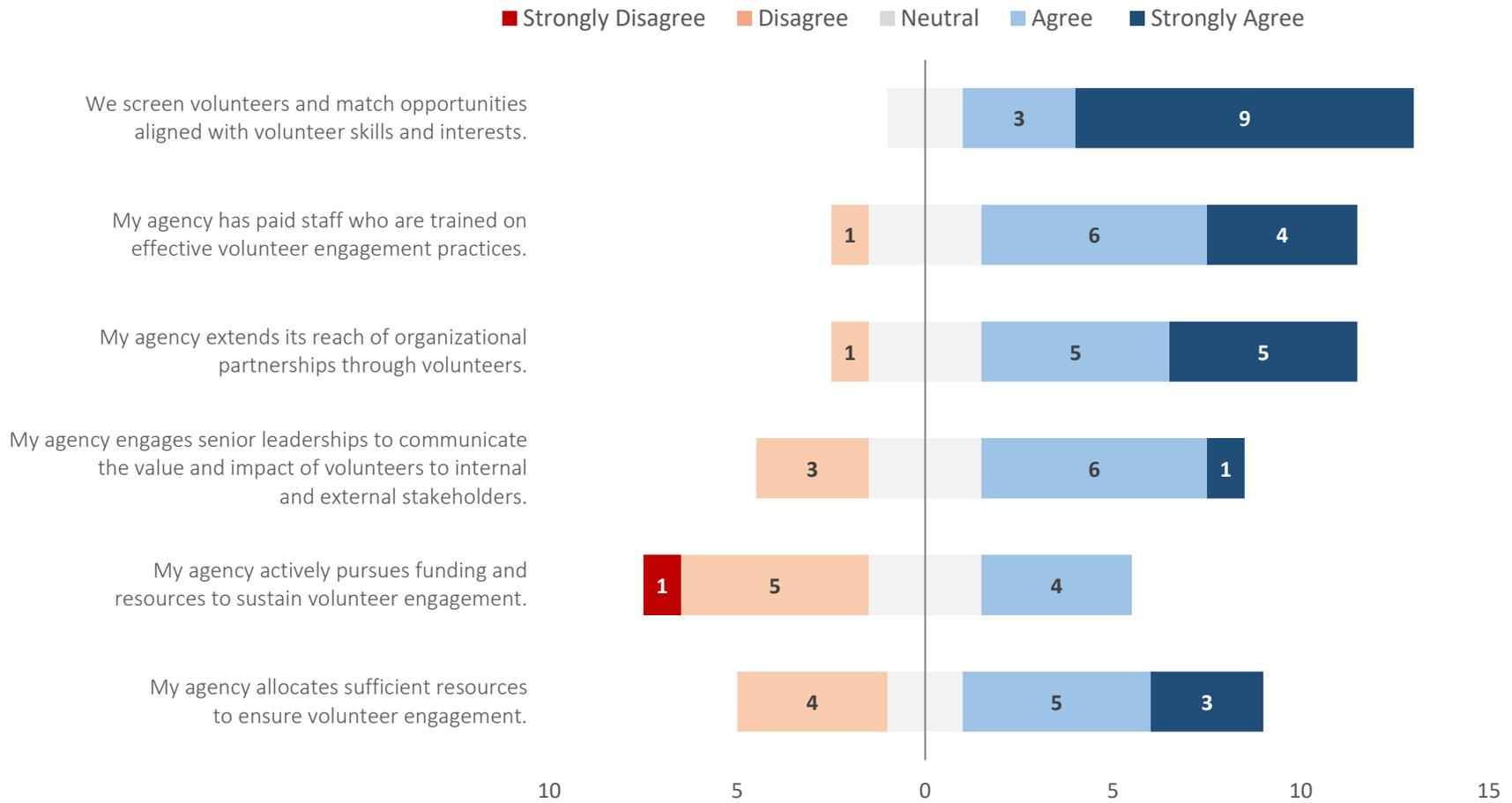
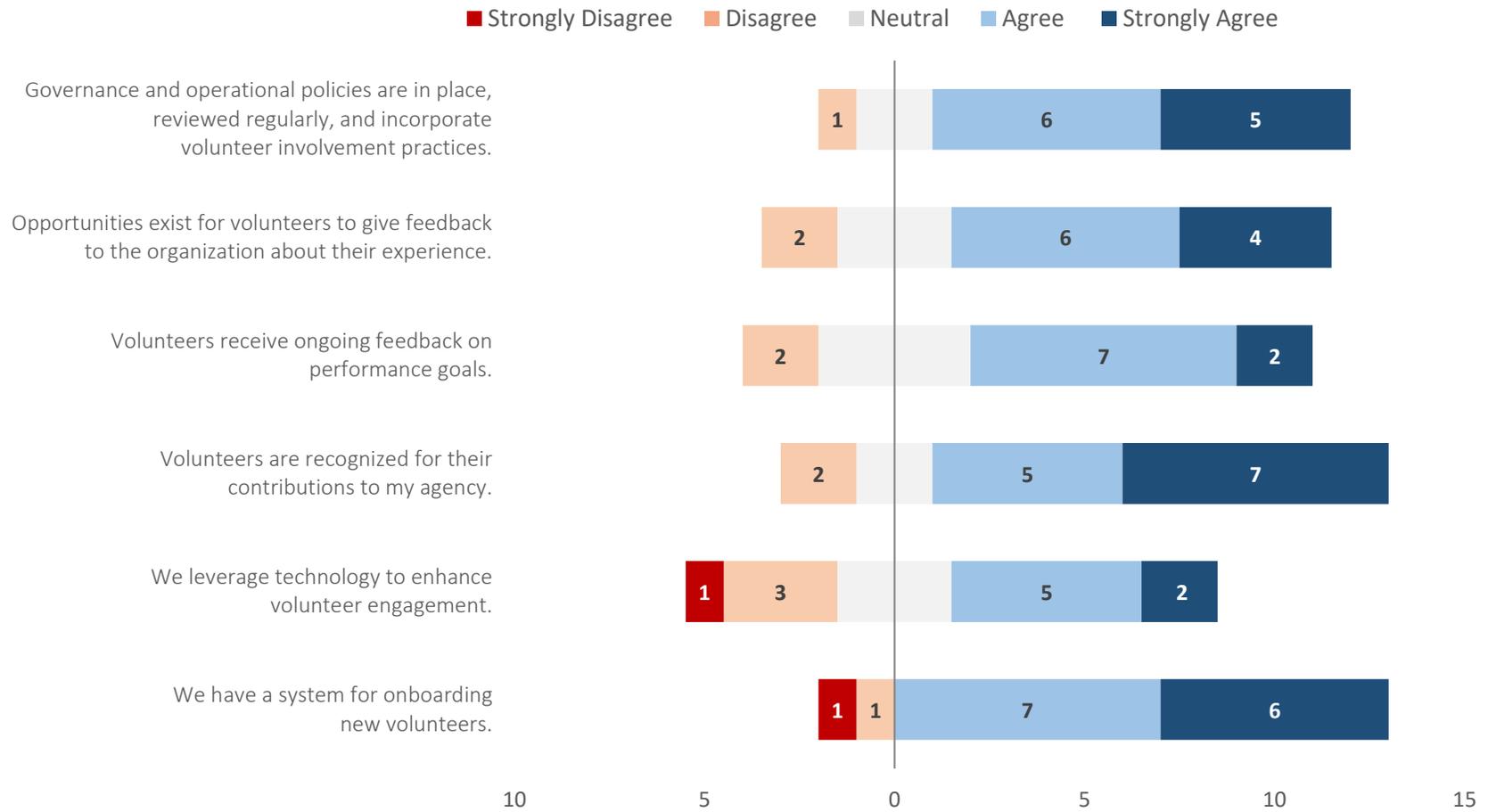


Chart 2: Volunteer Management Practices Part 2



Available volunteer opportunities

Programs reported recruiting volunteers primarily through their agency website and through word of mouth. Other avenues included social media, print media, radio, outreach to people who use agency services, partnerships with public agencies and corporations, trade shows, outreach at public events, and posts on volunteer sites (i.e. Idealist, Volunteer Match, Seattle Works, United Way).

Ten programs reported engaging skills-based volunteers with specialized skills and talents. You can see in Table 2 below that volunteer opportunities varied across programs and within programs.

Table 2: Top volunteer opportunities by program

Volunteer program	Volunteer opportunity 1	Volunteer opportunity 2	Volunteer opportunity 3
Department of Natural Resources	Trail construction and maintenance	Campground hosts	Public outreach
DOC Volunteers - Department of Corrections	Religious Program facilitators	Secular/self-help program facilitators	Family Program assistants
DSHS Statewide Volunteer Program - Department of Social and Health Services	For-credit interns		
Eastern State Hospital Volunteer Services - Eastern State Hospital	Spiritual care volunteers	Self-help affiliated group volunteers	
Emergency Management Division - Washington Military Department	Amateur radio operators	Non-paid internships	
L&I Volunteer Program - Department of Labor & Industries	College unpaid internships	Recording video extras	Safety and Health Program specialists
Litter Clean-up Program - Department of Ecology	Litter pickup along roads, parks, and beaches		
Office Volunteer Program - Office of the Secretary of State	Students looking for more exposure to the work environment	General experience	

Volunteer program	Volunteer opportunity 1	Volunteer opportunity 2	Volunteer opportunity 3
Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors (SHIBA) - Office of the Insurance Commissioner	Medicare counselor	Outreach specialist	Administrative (data entry)
Spokane Veterans Home - Department of Veterans Affairs	Recreational therapy volunteers with activities	Volunteers for special functions	Therapy volunteers
Volunteer and Internship Opportunities - Office of the Attorney General	Law clerk	Clerical	Legal assistant
Parks and Recreation Volunteer Program - Parks and Recreation Commission	Campground hosting	Established groups such as friends groups, adopt-a-parks, etc.	Special projects and/or events
Washington Soldiers Home Volunteer Program (Orting, WA) – Department of Veterans Affairs	Recreational event support	Recreational small group support	Recreational one-on-one visitations
Washington Talking Book & Braille Library Volunteer Program - Office of the Secretary of State	Shipping	Audio book production	Braille book production
Washington Veterans Home Volunteer Program (Port Orchard) - Department of Veterans Affairs	Visiting veterans and assisting with scheduled activities	Sharing skills, like entertainment, instructors, seamstress	Grounds cleanup and area beautification projects for large groups
WDFW Statewide Volunteer Program - Department of Fish and Wildlife	Hunter education	Wildlife Program projects	Fish hatchery support

We asked respondents to describe volunteer opportunities that aren't currently available but that could be beneficial to their agency if they existed. Three programs shared the following roles: front entrance greeter/escort, 'treatment mall' (someone who supports self-directed, rehabilitative skill-building activities), job shadowing (following an employee throughout the workday or workweek to learn what that particular role entails), and volunteer support at outreach and tabling events for the library.

When we asked them to share barriers their agency faces to engaging volunteers, respondents said:

- Population we serve
- Staff resistance
- Available supervisors for some of the volunteers
- Having enough time in the day to keep them engaged
- Scheduling and coordinating statewide coverage
- Adequate training to support outreach needs
- Facility locations in remote parts of the state

Respondents selected the following trainings/resources that would benefit their volunteer program:

- In-person training for staff on managing volunteers (7 of 16 agencies).
- Online webinars for staff on managing volunteers (11 of 16 agencies).
- Networking opportunities to share best practices with other state agencies and employees who engage volunteers (11 of 16 agencies).
- Handbook or resource guide for engaging volunteers (12 of 16 agencies).
- One program believes additional agency-specific trainings could be helpful.

While we asked them to share any additional information that might help us better understand their program, we didn't include their responses here because we didn't want to identify specific agencies.

Closing

Volunteers offer significant contributions to many of our state agencies, and more importantly, to our communities across Washington.

Serve Washington identified a number of key areas in which the state can provide support to maximize volunteer impact. **We need adequate funding for staffing to address the recommendations outlined in this report.**

It is important to remember that volunteer engagement isn't purely a discussion of leveraging resources and meeting demands within tight budgets — volunteers support citizen involvement and build a greater understanding of how government works. **Our hope is that the Legislature embraces more effective ways for the state to invest in and grow our volunteer programs.**