



N.C. Commission on Volunteerism & Community Service

Youth Service Grant Discovery & Recommendations

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Executive Summary

With the guidance of the N.C. Commission on Volunteerism & Community Service (VolunteerNC) staff, Partners for Impact consultants led VolunteerNC's Youth Engagement Committee through a thoughtful and intentional process to answer the question 'How do we engage youth better?' Data collection showed that youth want to be heard, they want to make a difference for the causes they are passionate about, and they want to have fun. While many specific suggestions and strategies emerged, a common theme recommended centering youth in the engagement process. This starts with listening to youth, honoring their input, and building volunteer programs with them, not just for them.

The data also showed three goals that VolunteerNC should consider to strengthen these efforts across the state: resources, training, and communication. The recommendations in this report emerge from the data and multiple discussions with the Youth Engagement Committee and are framed within the values set forth by the Committee. Further discussion among the Commission, its staff, and the Youth Engagement Committee is the next step in creating specific approaches and strategies for furthering the work of engaging youth in volunteering. This work will benefit nonprofit and service organizations, North Carolina's residents, and the youth of our state.

Background

In September 2021, VolunteerNC engaged Partners for Impact to “better understand the youth service landscape in North Carolina and to identify potential pathways for developing and expanding the quality and quantity of youth service in the state.” The project focused on middle and high school-aged youth, in urban and rural areas. In the first phase of discovery, Partners for Impact met with VolunteerNC staff members and the Commission’s Youth Engagement Committee to identify their hopes for the future of youth volunteerism and reasons why youth volunteerism is important. The answers were many, including the benefits to youth of exposure to new experiences, gaining skills, connecting to their community, learning to advocate for themselves and others, and making a positive impact. The Committee also articulated the values they wanted to see represented in the final recommendations.

In this phase Partners for Impact and the Youth Engagement Committee also developed specific questions to be explored and defined an approach for gathering answers. Over the course of these meetings, several core questions were identified:

- What youth service models are working?
- What are the barriers to youth participation in volunteer service?
- What can VolunteerNC do to support what’s working?

The overarching theme of *How do we engage youth better?* surfaced from these discussions. Partners for Impact spent several months gathering data to answer these questions from a variety of sources and reported their findings to the Youth Engagement Committee for consideration. Through group discussion of themes, three final goals emerged with several strategies associated with each. This report provides findings from our data collection and the recommendations that evolved from the Youth Engagement Committee through this process. As a check and balance, this report presents the goals with the values from the earliest conversations that each honors.

VALUES

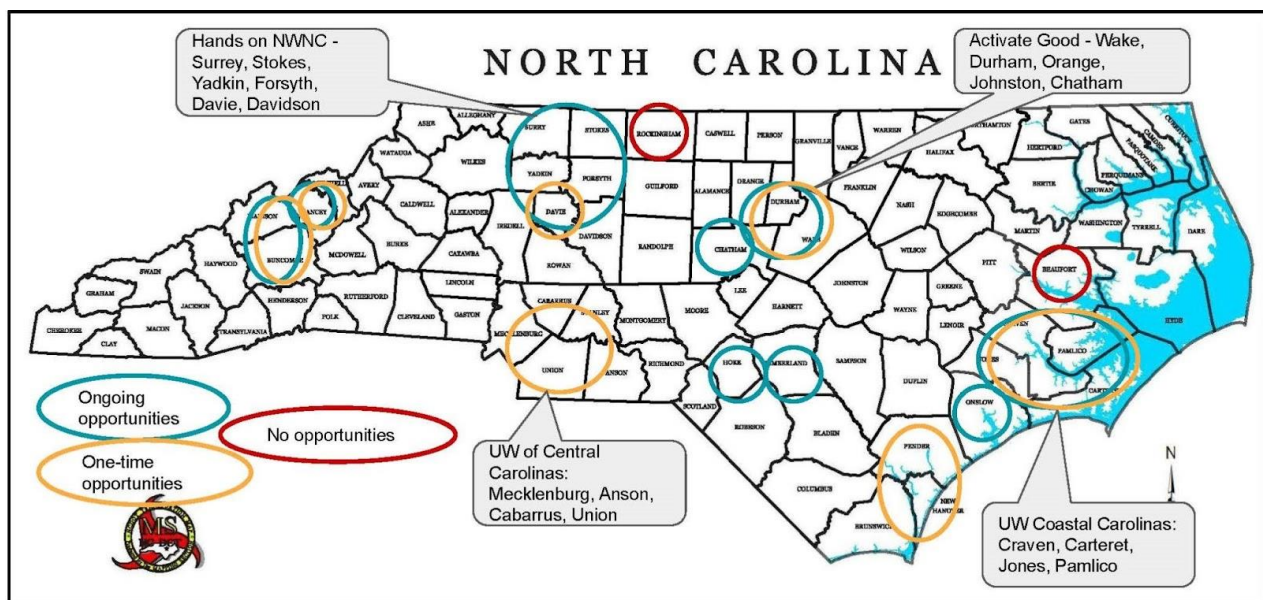
- Collaborative
- Accessible and inclusive
- Diversity, Equity, and inclusivity and belonging
- Youth-led opportunities as a focus
- Actionable
- Connecting to organizations catering to youth to share available resources
- Use existing resources
- Mindful of the barriers to volunteering that youth face
- Don’t place additional resource burdens on agencies
- Sustainable
- Viable for rural areas as well as urban
- Training opportunities included Leadership
- Quantity of programs
- Advocacy
- Meet the needs of youth as well as those of agencies
- Based in our new reality of covid era
- Centering youth
- Several age range opportunities - young kids and older kids

Overview of Process and Data Collection

Partners for Impact began the data collection process by working with the Youth Engagement Committee to develop a list of organizations that work with youth volunteers across the state. In developing a matrix, four primary types of organizations or groups emerged:

1. Volunteer Centers - organizations having a mission to promote volunteerism
2. Youth-focused organizations - such as scouts or church youth groups that focus on supporting youth in many ways and often include volunteer engagement as a key component of their work
3. Nonprofit agencies that utilize youth as volunteers to meet their mission (food banks, animal shelters, etc.)
4. Youth-led organizations or groups that include volunteering - these are typically clubs (Key Clubs/Interact Clubs, Honor Societies, etc.) but also include more formalized efforts such as a Teen Council at the municipal level

Because of their expected reach in communities to both organizations and individual volunteers, Partners for Impact began data collection with a short survey to volunteer centers. Megan Trawick at VolunteerNC sent the survey to approximately 65 volunteer centers and United Way agencies, covering nearly all 100 counties in the state. The survey asked about one-time and ongoing opportunities for youth volunteers, training, and sharing information about opportunities. Of the fourteen agencies that responded, 12 provide opportunities for youth to volunteer and 2 do not. The map below shows the distribution of responses from across the state.



These volunteer centers and United Way agencies also provided contact information for other nonprofits in their communities who are engaging youth volunteers. A second, similar survey was sent to these nonprofits, as well as others likely to use youth volunteers to accomplish their missions, e.g., food banks and animal shelters. This list also included local [Youth Councils](#) supported by the NC Council for Women and Youth Involvement. The survey went to approximately 95 agencies, 25 of which responded. All these organizations shared information about their efforts to engage youth in volunteering.

In the second stage of data collection, survey respondents were invited to focus groups for more in-depth discussions of their work. Two groups from volunteer centers were held, with a total of five attendees. These participants came from four different organizations: two in the Triangle, one in the Triad, and one in the Cape Fear region. No one from the 25 agencies responding to the second survey chose to participate in a focus group.

In addition to interviewing agency staff, Partners for Impact spoke directly to high school students about their experience with volunteering. Gianna Quilici at VolunteerNC invited youth to focus groups with Partners for Impact. She contacted participants in the Governor's Page Program, Governor's Volunteer Service Award youth nominees, and users of the [InnerView](#) social media platform. Five high school students engaged with Partners for Impact in a focus group and two one-on-one interviews. Partners for Impact arranged a second focus group with four students through personal contacts. The nine youth participants were from Charlotte, Huntersville, Troutman (Iredell County), Raleigh, and Durham. All had extensive volunteering experience.

Partners for Impact also had two "key informant" interviews with individuals who have managed programs that engage youth in advocacy work. Leroy Adams is the former Youth Voice Manager at [UP Partnership](#) in San Antonio, Texas and La-Mine Perkins is the Assistant Director of Community Engagement at [NC Child](#). Conversations with Leroy and La-Mine about their extensive experience working to center youth in their programs and provide platforms for youth voices significantly shaped the questions used in the focus groups and interviews.

Learnings: From Engaging Youth to Shifting a Mindset

The Youth Voice Manager with UP Partnership, Leroy Adams, worked with this collective impact initiative in San Antonio, TX to create equitable systems and ensure young people in Bexar County are ready for the future. Through the [Our Tomorrow](#) network, Up Partnership trains youth as researchers and policy advocates, while also “help[ing] adults embrace the importance of giving young people a seat at the table.” Mr. Adams provided examples of centering youth and building opportunities based on their passions - a departure from the standard approach of creating programs and trying to recruit youth to take part.

Our Tomorrow designs their engagement efforts to connect with a diverse group of youth, particularly those who often do not feel their voices are heard. Staff listens to youth to design programming with them rather than for them. The shared vision, the program’s execution, the issues addressed, and the language used all are consistent with youth’s lived experiences and reflect what the youth consider important. Our Tomorrow provides skills training, connections, and support so that young people can advocate for the changes they want to create.

A later conversation with La-Mine Perkins, the Assistant Director of Community Engagement at [NC Child](#) reiterated the value of this way of working. NC Child has been supporting a Youth Advisory Council in Wake County. She described a recent example of following the lead of their student volunteers that led to advocacy and action on issues that were important to youth. What started as an oral health intervention became an opportunity for students to meet with the county school board and other leaders, resulting in changes to curriculum and policies about mental health and substance use. NC Child provided training and support and gave power to high school students to make a difference about issues impacting youth.

What these two key informants described reflected what Partners for Impact was hearing from the youth themselves. Staff from the volunteer centers in North Carolina that were having the most success engaging youth also expressed similar views.

What does it mean to “center youth” in programming? It means listening to youth, identifying what issues they are passionate about, supporting them as they develop the actions they want to take, and building their capacity to create change in their communities. While youth often know what they care about, they do not always have the knowledge and skills to act on those passions. Successful youth engagement programs focus on giving youth the tools and platform to express themselves – and then getting out of their way.

In interviews and focus groups, the topic of equity was raised repeatedly. In some conversations, the question was about who has the privilege to volunteer - the time, the transportation, the information about opportunities shared by teachers and guidance counselors. Other discussions focused on power - who held it, who did not, who had a voice, who believed they did not have a voice. Examples of opportunities for youth to take the lead and adults to play a supporting role showed how agencies are building more equitable practices and accomplishing their missions of authentically engaging youth. Interviewees also spoke of making sure opportunities are not designed only for those with the most access and the greatest resources. Programs that center those youth least likely to participate in standard volunteering programs reach a wider audience and give more young people a chance to engage and participate, without excluding some by design.

Answers to the Guiding Questions

The focus groups and interviews also yielded more specific answers to the guiding questions.

Why do youth volunteer?

Youth want to:

- Advocate or work on issues they care about or feel passionate about
- Speak up for those who historically are not provided opportunities to speak up for themselves or who are unable to speak for themselves
- Help make the world a better place
- Make a difference
- Help people and their communities
- Learn about experiences different from their own
- Work with friends when volunteering
- Create relationships and deep connections around shared interests and experiences
- Try new things and take risks, and that's easier with friends
- Work on issues with which they have a personal connection
- Stand out on college applications; distinguish themselves above other students
- Gain career experience, e.g., students who want to be attorneys are volunteering with Teen Court and have opportunities to represent teens, meet judges and attorneys, and learn how the justice system works
- See the difference they are making and know their work is effective
- Fulfill service hours requirements

What facilitates youth volunteerism?

Youth are more likely to volunteer when:

- Organizations start with what youth are passionate about and build opportunities to volunteer around those interests
- Adult mentors help youth develop their own volunteer opportunities based on their interests
- Volunteering opportunities are created around a group of youth who are already interested in an issue
- They experience volunteering with family from a young age
- Opportunities are made available through other activities, e.g., volunteering with their sports teams at community events/agencies, or volunteering within their sports teams to coach younger members

- Agencies have adult leaders who are passionate about service, have good relationships with young people, and a reason for getting youth to volunteer
- Learn about opportunities through teachers or other trusted adults or from a friend/peer
- They can see their direct impact, for example, seeing improved grades of kids they are tutoring
- Get immediate positive feedback and know that what they are doing is actually working, especially when it takes a long time
- Organizations find creative ways to draw in every interest and give everyone an option to participate
- Opportunities utilize youth's different talents, for example, having youth musicians perform in the background at a volunteer food packing workday
- Something hooks them to try something new
- Information is shared through social media, including through teens sharing information on their own pages
- Incentives are offered - service hours, gift cards, prizes, letters of recommendation
- They have online/virtual opportunities so they can volunteer after working or sports
- Opportunities are available during the school day and during the summer
- Opportunities are easy - quick, local, don't require a lot of commitment or special skill
- They feel positive peer pressure and see volunteers held up as models
- Organizations provide resources/compensation so that youth do not have to choose between volunteering and a part-time job
- They believe it's a safe place, the opportunity is exciting and fun, and they can see themselves making their communities better
- Their parents receive information in their own language and are assured that the opportunity is safe their kids

What are good ways to reach youth?

- Email local college and high school clubs and market the volunteer opportunities
- Social media outreach, including Instagram
- Contact pre-existing groups about other types of opportunities
- Contact staff of schools to share on the school's social media, email, Canvas, homeroom
- Hang posters at schools
- Set up tables or provide flyers at school/teen events
- Encourage targeted outreach by school staff and other adults to include those who are traditionally left out of volunteer opportunities (out of the box thinking about recruitment)

What are challenges to volunteering?

Youth are less likely to volunteer when:

- They don't feel listened to or that their voices are important
- The marketing and messaging around an opportunity makes it sound like it is not directed at them, e.g., it sounds like you are looking for A students, that's not me so I don't think that this for me
- What adults have identified as pressing issues do not align with what youth identify as important
- The agencies where youth could engage offer solutions and services that don't align with what youth are experiencing every day
- They lack time because they are also in school, working, doing sports, clubs, and are challenged to find opportunities that don't conflict with other commitments
- They have responsibilities at home, including taking care of siblings or working to support their families
- The lack of information about volunteering opportunities
- Teachers share information only with students who they think will take advantage of the opportunities
- Organizations have age restrictions for participation
- Volunteering carries a stigma - "people think of old people and homeless, people who smell bad"
- They or their parents have language barriers
- Schools are consumed with survival and safety and have no time to talk about getting involved in community service
- Schools have turnover that makes it harder to get information to students
- They are struggling with stress and mental health issues
- They do not have other friends who are volunteering and don't want to volunteer alone

What do agencies need to support youth volunteerism?

Volunteer Centers and other agencies need or would like:

- Money for
 - Staff focused specifically on youth who can work on young people's schedules, i.e., not Monday-Friday, 9-5
 - Scholarships for youth to attend service camps/events
 - Training youth and youth advisors to build capacity, e.g., what is required for advocacy, creating policy change, working together, racial equity, leadership, conflict resolution, issue-specific content
 - Food, transportation, incentives, bus vouchers
 - Hosting youth expos
 - Promotion of opportunities in the community
 - Stipends for participation for youth who have to choose between working for pay and civic engagement

- Training on
 - Incorporating youth leadership and youth voices
 - Creating authentic opportunities for youth to contribute to policies and big decisions - youth know when they are tokenized
 - Being good allies for youth
 - Racial equity, including language to use and what's important when recruiting for diverse groups of volunteers
 - Creating space to share with young people (without adults feeling attacked)
 - Creating space that is ready for young people, that's respectful and values what they have to say
- Connections to agencies working with youth, particularly those who are made vulnerable by systemic racism
- Help to equitably support all youth to become involved in volunteerism
- A resource guide for schools about ways that they can get their students civically engaged
- To hear from other organizations about what worked and did not work
- To have a conference or network of volunteer centers
- To know about opportunities for trainings with other organizations
- Latitude to spend Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) money in additional ways, including in ways that allow time to develop relationships and provide incentives for involvement
- Opportunities to meet all the organizations who are getting VGF funds to share what's working and not working across the network

Goals & Recommendations

The Volunteer NC Youth Engagement Committee reviewed and discussed the analysis and learnings from above, including realistic expectations for the role of Volunteer NC in strengthening youth volunteer engagement across the state. While embracing the concept of centering youth in volunteering, the Committee also recognizes that many organizations have a service model that relies on engaging volunteers to help fulfill the organization's mission.

Moving towards deeper engagement of youth, including an increase in youth-centered volunteer service opportunities, will require:

1. Extensive communications to connect opportunities with a variety of young people, including and especially those who have not traditionally been targeted with volunteer opportunity communications. In addition, communications need to convey the importance of volunteering, including opportunities that center youth in their creation.
2. Technical support, training, and resource sharing across agencies to build the skills and capacity for developing, increasing, and enhancing youth-led and youth-centered volunteer opportunities.
3. Advocacy, education, and facilitated connections between funders and organizations to increase support for youth volunteer service.

The following goals emerged from the Youth Commission after exploring all of the discovery content:

GOAL 1: Strengthen youth engagement by increasing awareness around the importance of and opportunities for youth volunteering

Examples of potential outcomes:

Create a statewide communication strategy

Build local communications capacity

Target populations:

- Youth - all ages, cultures, backgrounds, grade levels, career paths, geographic locations
- Adults who work with youth - who recruit youth for volunteer opportunities and those who are connected with youth in any way who can share the benefits and opportunities of volunteering with all youth.
- Entities with volunteering opportunities
- Entities serving youth in any way

Values honored through this goal:

- Viable for rural areas as well as urban
- Accessible and inclusive
- Actionable
- Meet the needs of youth as well as those of agencies
- Several age range opportunities - young kids and older kids
- Using existing resources
- Collaboration

GOAL II: Expand the number of entities centering youth in volunteering and youth-led initiatives through training and resource-sharing**Examples of potential outcomes:**

Increase skill and knowledge through trainings and online resources

Increase connections across agencies through peer-to-peer education

Increase the number of youth-centered projects

Target populations:

- Agencies that create and connect youth to volunteer opportunities
- Entities with youth advisory boards or that have youth leadership positions
- Agencies serving youth in any way

Values honored through this goal:

- Meet the needs of youth as well as those of agencies
- Centering youth
- Connecting to organizations catering to youth to share available resources
- Use existing resources

GOAL III: Facilitate increased funding for youth volunteerism through advocacy with funders, donors, and state leaders

Examples of potential outcomes:

Convene and connect stakeholders

Educate funders on the importance of youth engagement and need for resources

Target populations:

- Foundations and endowments
- Individual and corporate donors
- Local, state, and federal government
- Private institutions and organizations

Values honored through this goal:

- Mindful of the barriers to volunteering that youth face
- Don't place additional resource burdens on agencies
- Sustainable
- Centering youth
- Collaboration
- Viable for rural areas as well as urban
- Advocacy

Conclusion

By engaging in this discovery and sense-making process, VolunteerNC and its Youth Engagement Committee have articulated a more focused and values-driven vision for engaging middle and high-school-aged youth in volunteering and service. Much of the data collected was in line with VolunteerNC's existing knowledge base and general direction. This report and the recommended goals are intended to provide a clearer direction for the Commission and its committees to pursue its mission with young people.

Suggested next steps for VolunteerNC are to develop long- and short-term outcomes associated with each goal, strategies to achieve them, and a few simple indicators to measure progress. Continuing to engage with young people and the adults who work with them will strengthen the process and keep youth at the center of the work.