

From Free Labor to Engaged Partners:

Reimagining Volunteerism
for Equity, Impact, and
Purpose



Who are we?

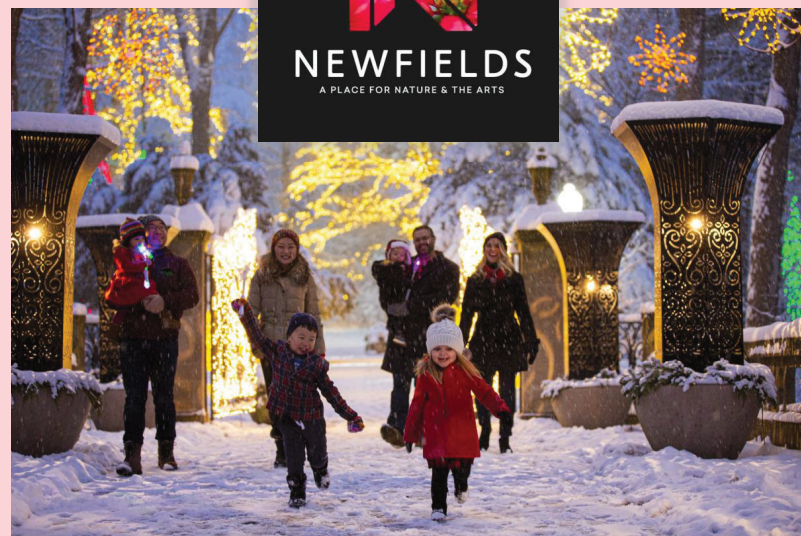
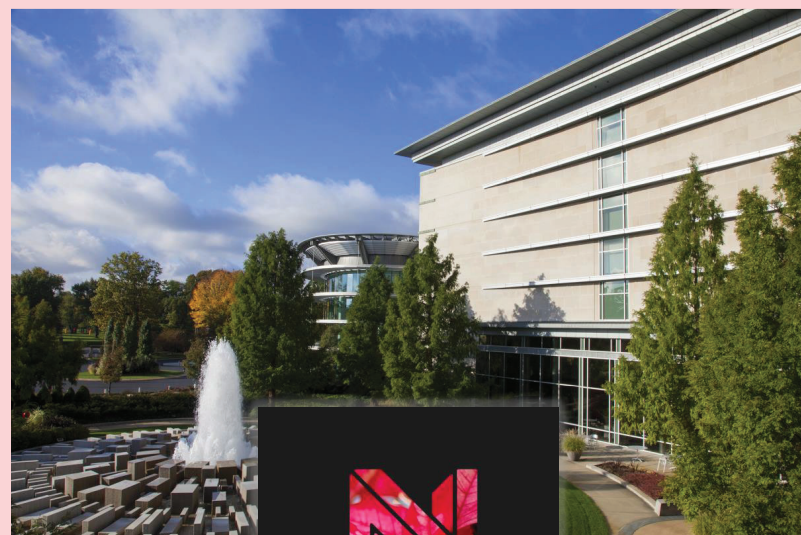
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Who are we?

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Who are we?

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Photo by Thom Milkovic

AAMV

How did we get here?

POINT
OF VIEW

In Defense of Volunteerism

Volunteers play a vital role for museums, and museums need to prioritize their volunteer programs.

By Chris Morehead

Museums are more than mere repositories for art, history, and culture; they are dynamic institutions that thrive on the passion and commitment of those who are called to put into action the mission, vision, and values for the communities they serve. Many of these people are museum volunteers who support a

wide range of responsibilities necessary for the preservation, interpretation, sharing, and promotion of the collections within their care. Numerous museums were founded by volunteers, and some are run wholly by volunteers. In recent years, many volunteer program leaders have been asked to justify their programs, and the

financial or other support they receive, through data that highlights their impact on the institution and the communities they serve. While statistical evidence is important, it often falls short in conveying the profound and far-reaching effects of volunteerism. Nonetheless, let us delve into some noteworthy figures:

- One in four Americans regularly volunteers, contributing an annual equivalent of \$184 billion in donated time, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship.
- The Global Trends in Giving Report states that 85 percent of volunteers donate to the nonprofits they volunteer for, yet only 55 percent of organizations evaluate the impact of volunteers, according to nonprofit software management research firm Software Advice.
- In a national survey commissioned by UnitedHealth Group, 96 percent of volunteers said that volunteering enriches their sense of purpose in life.

Despite dwindling budgets for volunteer programs, museums are increasingly reliant on volunteers for daily operations. Volunteers often serve as the welcoming faces that greet visitors, provide information, and offer guest assistance, making them the crucial first point of contact for museumgoers. As we know, first impressions are the most significant, and we rightfully entrust this responsibility to enthusiastic volunteers.

Volunteerism plays a pivotal role in the life of museums, and cultural institutions must support these dedicated volunteers, their programs, and the leaders who

steward these vital teams. Failure to do so will lead to yet another barrier separating museums from the communities they strive to serve.

The Volunteer Paradox

Today, volunteerism professionals are finding themselves in a paradoxical state. Some museum leaders recognize the value of their volunteer corps and are evolving their volunteer programs in step with the organization. At the same time, many museums are facing the reality that they have built volunteer programs that are widely inaccessible to the diverse communities they serve. Museums are navigating equity conversations in which they are turning a critical eye toward their decades-old models of volunteerism. Oftentimes in the name of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) efforts, volunteer managers are asked to diversify their volunteer corps without the training or resources that will make this work sustainable.

These volunteer managers, receiving limited support from their institutions, have no other option than to crowdsolve solutions and resources from one another. Organizations like the American Association for Museum Volunteers (AAMV), Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement (ALIVE), VolunteerMatch, VolunteerPro, and local volunteer manager support organizations like the Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement (MAVA), Central Indiana Association of Volunteer

Administration (CIAVA), and Directors of Volunteers in Agencies (DOVIA) Colorado, among others, have played crucial roles in providing volunteer program leaders with much needed resources and educational opportunities for personal and professional development. These resources, in addition to national conferences such as the Points of Light Conference, have contributed to a volunteerism renaissance completely supported by grassroots efforts.

Volunteerism not only benefits the institution but also the individuals and their communities. For example, research has shown that volunteering can improve mental and physical health. However, despite these positive trends and mutual benefits, many museum volunteer managers do not feel adequately supported by their organizations or their leadership. They often feel overworked and under-resourced, which challenges even the most dedicated.

What is causing this disconnect? Some institutions may unwittingly establish volunteer programs for the wrong reasons, focusing on metrics rather than the programs' heart—its mission, values, and vision. Without a seasoned and professionally trained volunteer manager, programs may lack a core purpose. Updates and changes that are made without considering key motivations of volunteers can leave both leadership and volunteer managers frustrated about a program's ineffectiveness.



Jeffrey Isaac Greenberg/501 Agency/Stock Photo



Workshop Overview

Our Journey Today

Segment 1

Reframing the Narrative (20 min)

Segment 2

Equity in Practice (20 min)

Segment 3

Resilient Leadership & Advocacy (20 min)

Breakouts & Guided Reflection (20 min)

Closing & Collective Commitments (10 min)



Segment 1

Reframing the Narrative



From Free Labor

Traditional view: Volunteers as cost-saving measures and labor solutions



To Frontline Engagement

Evolved view: Volunteers as mission amplifiers and community bridges



To Mission Critical

Future state: Volunteers as co-creators of meaningful experiences and institutional culture

Case Study: Measuring What Matters

Gilb Museum of Arcadia Heritage

By the Numbers:

- 2.5 staff members
- 5,000 annual visitors
- 5,000 community education kits distributed
- 112 volunteers

By the Impact:

- Teen and special needs volunteers build social skills, work skills, and leadership skills
- Museum meets volunteers where they are and finds a role that works
- The museum is an integral part of their community



Segment 2

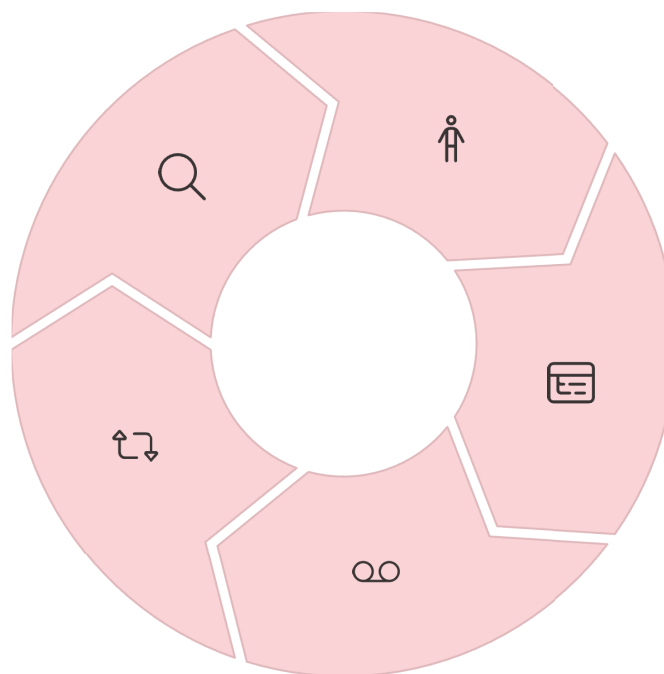
Equity in Practice

Assessment

Audit current demographics, accessibility barriers, and unspoken expectations

Evolution

Continuously evaluate and adapt based on feedback and changing community needs



Representation

Recruit responsibly from under-represented communities by building authentic relationships

Structure

Adapt program requirements, schedules, and pathways to reduce barriers

Voice

Create mechanisms for volunteer input in program development and institutional decisions

Motivation Matters



- Meaningful contribution to community
- Learning opportunities and intellectual stimulation
- Social connection and belonging
- Professional development and skill-building
- Alignment with personal values and interests

Different motivations require different program structures and recognition approaches to create fulfilling experiences.

Breaking Down Barriers to Entry

Economic Barriers

Unpaid time commitments, transportation costs, required uniforms or equipment, inflexible scheduling

Social Barriers

Lack of representation, exclusive terminology, unspoken cultural norms, established volunteer cliques

Structural Barriers

Complex application processes, rigid time commitments, physical accessibility issues, language limitations

Activity Preview: In our breakout, you'll conduct an equity audit of a volunteer program to identify and address these barriers.





Small Changes, Big Impact...

- Provide training on evenings and weekends
- Shorten commitments-rethink the investment
- Ask volunteers what they need to be successful
- Encourage peer-to-peer learning
- Provide in-person and virtual training opportunities
- Ensure assignments are mission-aligned
- Articulate why the program exists

Segment 3

Resilient Leadership & Advocacy

Common Institutional Challenges

- Budget constraints and staffing limitations
- Misalignment between departments on volunteer utilization
- Lack of leadership understanding of program value
- Institutional resistance to change
- Volunteer manager burnout and isolation



Building Your Advocacy Toolkit



Impact Data

Collect meaningful metrics that demonstrate volunteer contributions to institutional goals and visitor experience



Compelling Stories

Document and share powerful volunteer and visitor experiences that illustrate program impact beyond numbers



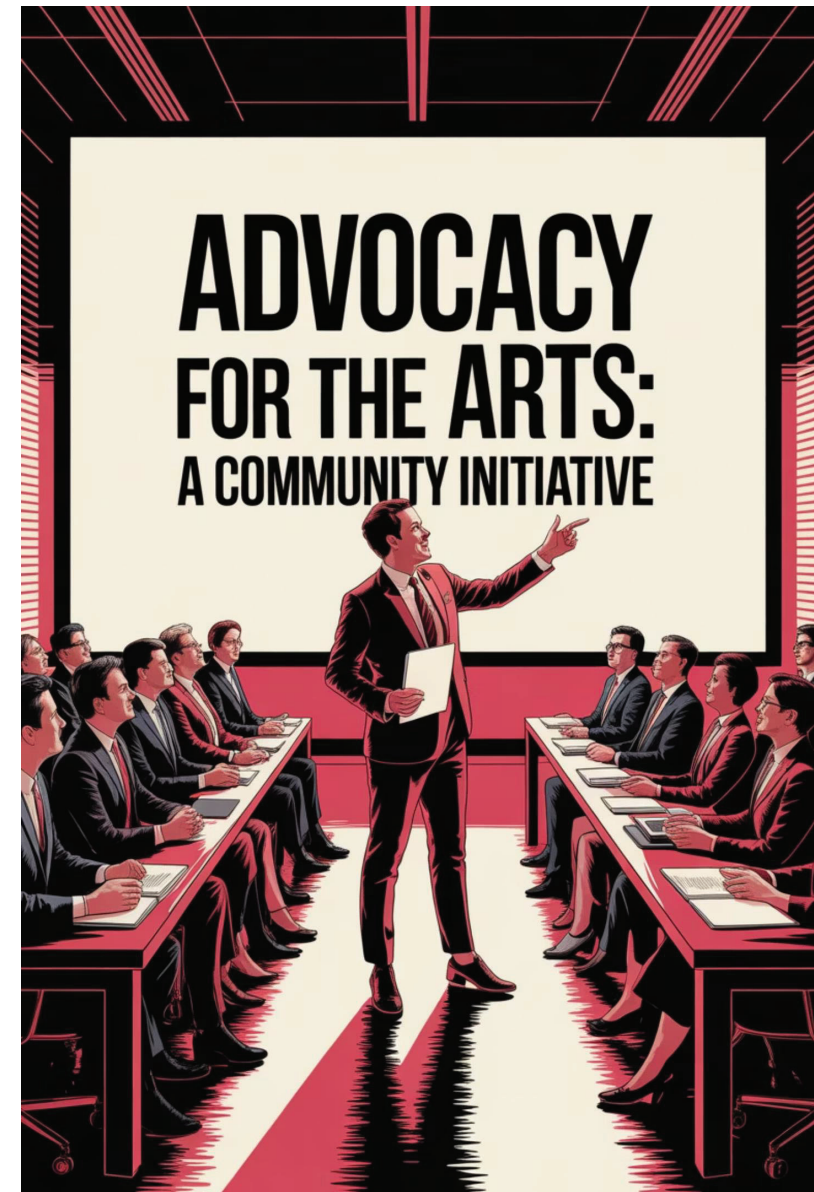
Strategic Alliances

Build relationships with other departments and leadership to create program champions throughout the organization



Vision Alignment

Connect volunteer program outcomes directly to institutional strategic priorities and mission advancement



Supporting Volunteer Managers as Change Agents



Essential Support Structures

- Professional development opportunities
- Peer networks and communities of practice
- Clear pathways for institutional advancement
- Resources for program evaluation and improvement
- Work-life balance and burnout prevention

Volunteer managers need institutional support to lead transformative change in volunteer engagement practices.



Guided Reflection & Action Planning

1 Reflection Questions

What mindset shift will I take back to my institution?

How might I reframe volunteer value beyond financial metrics?

2 Action Planning

What is one concrete step I will take in the next 30 days?

What resources or support will I need to implement this change?

3 Community Building

How might we support each other in this work?

What collective commitments can we make as museum professionals?

Key Takeaways:

Transforming Volunteerism Together

Reframing the Narrative

Your volunteer program is your most in-depth community program.

Equity in Practice

Break down economic, social, and structural barriers through intentional assessment, representation, and inclusive program design.

Resilient Leadership & Advocacy

Build advocacy toolkits with impact data, compelling stories, and strategic alliances to champion volunteer program value.

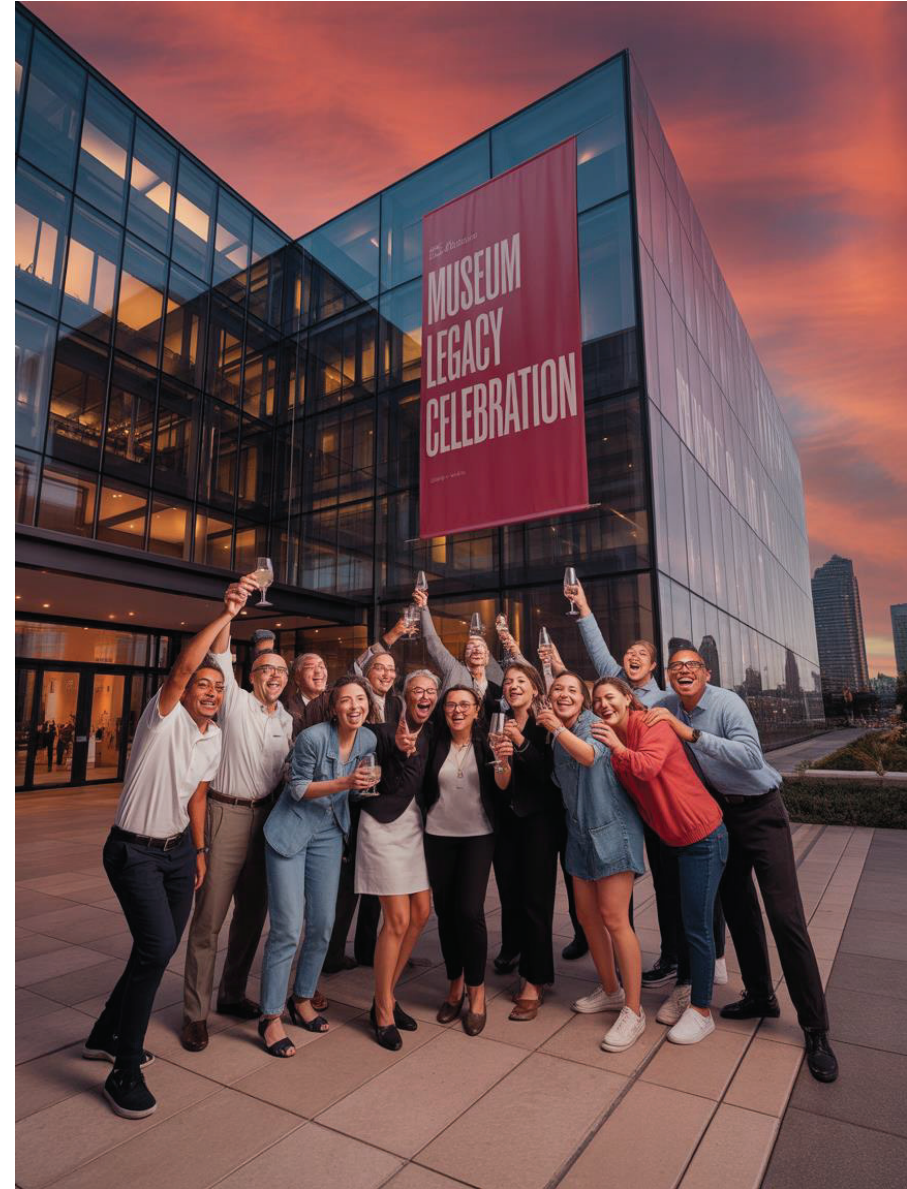


A New Era of Volunteerism: Our Collective Vision

We envision museum volunteer programs that are equitable, impactful, and purpose-driven—where diverse community members find meaningful engagement, museums build authentic relationships, and volunteer managers are empowered as transformative leaders.

[Download Workshop Materials](#)[Join Our Community of Practice](#)

**Thank you for your participation and commitment
to reimagining volunteerism!**



AAMV & ALIVE Community of Practice Sessions

Museums & Cultural Institutions

November Session

- Wednesday, November 19 @ 4:00 pm EST
- TOPIC: TBA

January Session

- Wednesday, January 21 @ 4:00 pm EST
- TOPIC: TBA

March Session

- Wednesday, March 18 @ 4:00 pm EST
- TOPIC: TBA



American Association for Museum Volunteerism
www.aamv.org

