



# Small Acts, Big Impact

Growing greatness through  
employer-based acts of service



*“Everybody  
can be great  
because  
everybody  
can serve.”*



These words from iconic civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. are a timeless call to greatness to all people from all walks of life. However, in the U.S. in particular, few are heeding King’s call.

Annual American volunteerism—after hitting an **all-time high 28.8%** among U.S. adults in 2001 following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, a rate that continued through 2005—began declining in 2006 before **bottoming out at 24.9%** in 2015.<sup>1</sup> **And hasn’t budged since.**

While the 3.9% drop may not seem like much, that percentage equals nearly **10 million fewer U.S. volunteers each year**,<sup>2</sup> a drought that’s acutely felt by philanthropic organizations across the country—especially since charitable giving has fallen as well over the same time frame: **The percentage of Americans giving to charity annually declined from a high 66.8% in 2000 to 55.5% in 2014.**<sup>3</sup>

**U.S. volunteerism**  
(adults age 18 and over)



**U.S. charitable giving**  
(adults age 18 and over)



**The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) explored the factors behind the nationwide drop in volunteerism/giving rates and identified four demographic and socioeconomic correlations:<sup>4</sup>**

- 1. Decreased community attachment**, due to lower homeownership rates and rising population density.
- 2. Increased commuting times**, which further affected community attachment as well as decreased time and energy for community engagement.
- 3. Shifting socioeconomic characteristics in communities**, including percentage of residents who have college degrees, high incomes, and low unemployment rates.
- 4. Decreased community capacity** to provide civic opportunities for people to engage.



**And while there isn't much employers can do to affect those external community and socioeconomic pressures, they can implement and/or amplify four key aspects of organizational culture:**

1

**Prioritize diversity.**

2

**Create space and opportunities for connection.**

3

**Gift the gift of time.**

4

**Call employees to greatness.**

**Using these four levers to drive community and connection can help to inspire employees to honor Dr. King's legacy of service and bring his words to life.**



## 1

## Prioritize diversity

While volunteer service and charitable giving are at historic lows nationwide, the good news is that there are diverse segments of Americans that volunteer and give at rates beyond the U.S. average. For example, women, Millennials and Gen Xers, veterans, parents, Spanish speakers, and foreign-born residents currently conduct the lion's share of American volunteering; by ensuring greater representation among traditionally marginalized populations, employers can not only reap the well-documented [benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce](#), but also more organically grow a spirit of service among employees and throughout organizational culture.



***“You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”***

—Martin Luther King Jr.

### Diverse segments of Americans volunteer more than overall adult population

U.S. volunteer service (adults age 18 and over)

Overall	Spanish-speakers	Immigrants	Parents	Gen Xers	Women	Veterans	Millennials
24.9%	49.7%	41%	39.9%	36.4%	33.8%	30%	28.2%

Sources: [Americorps](#); [New American Economy](#); [Zippia](#).



## 2

# Create space and opportunities for connection

The pandemic has been isolating, physically and emotionally, for most employees—unable to gather with loved ones, let alone with their extended professional and personal communities in a way that drives volunteerism. However, employers can build an infrastructure for community to build among employees that share common interests, culture, and/or geography so they might volunteer or donate together.

*(Fun fact: The top 10 states for volunteerism rates cover all four U.S. time zones, so finding volunteer hubs might be easier than employers think!)*

- ▶ **Setting aside time for work teams** that's specifically for bonding rather than meetings.
- ▶ **Standing up employee resource groups (ERGs)** for employees with common geography, backgrounds, and shared experiences.
- ▶ **Creating online forums** for employees to donate paid time off to make it easier for their colleagues to volunteer.
- ▶ Allowing employees to **convert PTO into cash donations** to their charity of choice.



▶ *“An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”*

—Martin Luther King Jr.





All are ways to spark service within an organizational culture and strengthen connective bonds between employees at the same time. Employers also can support organizational matching for charitable donations so that all employees—regardless of region or culture—feel supported by their employer in their efforts to give back.

### Top 10 U.S. states by volunteerism rates



### Employees want volunteer opportunities at work



70% of volunteer work happens **informally** between people in their communities.



71% of employees surveyed say it's **imperative or very important** to work where culture is supportive of giving and volunteering.



Yet only 47% of U.S. **employers offer** community volunteer programs.



## 3

## Give the gift of time

**Given King's heartfelt actions and words toward serving others, the sad irony is that most Americans don't even volunteer on the federal holiday in his honor.** After an uphill congressional battle, Martin Luther King Day was named a federal holiday in 1983. First observed in 1986, the day is now celebrated annually in the U.S. on the third Monday in January and was named a national day of service in 1994 (the only other annual nationwide day of service is Sept. 11).

While proponents of the holiday encourage Americans to make it a “day on,” in terms of serving their communities, the truth is most employees view it as a free day off—and that's if their employer honors the holiday at all. **Fewer than half (45%) of U.S. employers give workers paid time off for MLK Day,**<sup>5</sup> a percentage only slightly higher than paid holiday rates for Presidents' Day and Columbus Day.

It's surely not by coincidence that volunteerism and charitable giving peak in November and December; it's when our minds are most attuned to being with loved ones and remembering those less fortunate—and when most people have time off work to shift their focus outward. **Giving employees the gift of time to serve via employer-paid holidays on MLK Day and Sept. 11 is a small and easy step forward in boosting volunteerism.**



*“If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.”*

—Martin Luther King Jr.

### Most common employer-paid holidays in the U.S.

Thanksgiving	97%
Christmas	97%
Independence Day	92%
Labor Day	91%
New Year's Day	90%
Memorial Day	90%
MLK Day	45%

Source: Zippia.



# 4

## Call employees to greatness

Perhaps the easiest step of all in encouraging service from employees is simply to ask them to serve. **Some 42% of American volunteers say they first volunteered after just being asked to by a community or organization member.**<sup>6</sup> Employers can help by using the strategies outlined here to give employees easy and accessible ways to get involved in volunteer service—and to help create networks that increase the likelihood that they'll be invited to get involved by their peers.

In addition, employers can tout the benefits of volunteer service as a way to inspire; data shows that volunteer service helps to combat loneliness and depression, improve mental and physical health, reduce substance abuse, and improve personal fulfillment.<sup>7</sup>

### Service benefits the servers, too

- ▶ **93%** of volunteers say that they enjoyed it.
- ▶ **90%** of volunteers report a sense of personal achievement.
- ▶ **77%** of volunteers report volunteering improved their mental health and well-being.
- ▶ **22%** of volunteers age 18-24 say volunteering helps them cut down on alcohol.
- ▶ **68%** of volunteers say volunteering helped them feel less isolated.

Source: [Trvst](#).



***“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”***

*—Martin Luther King Jr.*

**In other words, employers have an important role they can play in helping employees to do well by doing good. Surely not as artful a phrase as Dr. King might have given, but the sentiment is the same.**





**Learn more about Businessolver's  
commitment to volunteer service  
and charitable giving through the  
[Businessolver Foundation](#).**



Sources

- 1-4. Where Are America's Volunteers; University of Maryland School of Public Policy, 2018.
5. 45% of Employers Give Workers Martin Luther King Jr. Day Off—Here's How it Became a Holiday; CNBC, 2019.
- 6-7. Volunteering Facts & Statistics; Trvst, 2021.





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