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# The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers and Donors in the U.S.

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## ABSTRACT

Human service organizations in the US are heavily dependent on volunteers and donations. The COVID-19 pandemic compromised the ability of volunteer coordinators and fundraisers to obtain and retain such vital resources. This article details the experiences of those entrusted with the acquisition and retention of time and money for human service organizations during the pandemic. Volunteer coordinators faced obstacles in reestablishing a volunteer base, and keeping volunteers engaged and supported while navigating the health risks associated with COVID-19. Fundraisers had to rapidly adjust their solicitation methods amid greater demand for accountability, transparency, and impact from donors. These challenges required innovations and ad-hoc adjustments -both of which were difficult to initiate during the COVID-19 pandemic when operations were carried out virtually. Much has been made about how executive leadership or organizations responded to the pandemic. This article is unique by providing empirical evidence of how specific units within human service organizations adapted.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic; nonprofit management; volunteer coordination; volunteering; fundraising; disruptive extreme context

## Practice Points

- Volunteer coordinators and fundraisers should prioritize impact when marketing partnership opportunities with their organizations.
- Volunteer coordinators can leverage virtual operations, when possible, to reduce certain burdens associated with in-person volunteering but should remember that many volunteers value the social component of in-person volunteering.
- Considering the intermittent nature of extreme events (e.g. natural disasters, economic crashes), volunteer coordinators should establish and sustain a dedicated core of volunteers, while welcoming episodic volunteers (Hassett, 2021).
- When soliciting donations from millennial donors, fundraisers should deploy simple, personalized messaging to maximize effectiveness.

## Introduction

The contributions of the nonprofit sector in providing human services in the United States cannot be overstated. Nonprofits support basic human needs, strengthen communities, and facilitate civic engagement (Urban Institute, 2021). In order carry out such tasks, human service organizations in the U.S. are extremely reliant on volunteer work and funds provided by donors. The COVID-19 pandemic cast severe uncertainty on the ability of human service organizations to continue to acquire and maintain such resources as stay-at-home orders and economic precarity may have created



significant barriers for individuals to volunteer for and donate to the organizations they care about and the causes they serve.

The United States was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Nearly all facets of U.S. life were upended overnight. Companies and nonprofits initiated mass layoffs and furloughs, while pivoting to virtual operations. Employees were faced with job and market instability, alongside fear for their health and safety. In response, nonprofit organizations scrambled to address these evolving societal needs, while the novel pandemic conditions forced them to be innovative in their approaches. The 24-month period marked by the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic can be described as a *disruptive extreme context*, as the everyday order of business and public organizations was upended, and individuals were forced to operate in a newly disordered society (Brammer et al., 2020; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Hannah et al., 2009; Sarkar & Clegg, 2021).

Pandemic effects continue to be felt. While it is impractical to evaluate the overall impact of COVID-19 on U.S. human services and nonprofit sectors, much can be learned from emerging trends. For example, layoffs, health restrictions, unpaid leaves, and external market factors contributed to financial instability, heavier workloads, and staffing shortages among nonprofit human service organizations. Due to health and safety concerns, in-person formal volunteering ceased or decreased significantly in favor of virtual volunteering (Biddle & Gray, 2020; Lachance, 2020; Nanavaty, 2020; Pawłowski & Leppert, 2021; Pickell et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Trautwein et al., 2020). By contrast, informal volunteering saw an uptick, as service-minded individuals began shopping and delivering food and medication and providing necessary transportation for neighbors in need (Biddle & Gray, 2020; Churchill, 2020; Cnaan, Handy, et al., 2022; Cnaan, Meijis, et al., 2022; Tierney & Mahtani, 2021; Tolentino, 2020; Trautwein et al., 2020; Yang, 2021; Yumagulovaa & Handmer, 2021). Nonprofits reliant on funding from individual donors were also affected. In the five years prior to 2020, few nonprofits experienced a drop in donations (Urban Institute, 2021). However, over one third of nonprofits reported a decrease in donations in 2020— more than the previous five years combined (Urban Institute, 2021). Of the existing literature, the majority focus on overall organizational responses to extreme events, but virtually none focused on specific units within these organizations and how they reacted. Only one recent article highlighted challenges of volunteer recruitment, management, and volunteer health and safety faced by organizers and volunteer managers of large UK sporting events following the onset of the pandemic (Power & Nedvetskaya, 2022). We use this study as an exploratory probe to shed light on the disruptive extreme context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic for this vital subgroup of nonprofit employees. We conducted focus groups with volunteer coordinators and fundraisers to gain insight into the response to the pandemic among NPOs. Therefore, we ask: What were the experiences of volunteer coordinators and fundraisers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did the pandemic affect their work?

The next section highlights literature exploring fundraising and volunteering in human service organizations, trends in volunteering and fundraising, and disruptive extreme events and crises contexts. Ensuing sections present our study methods and findings from our focus group interviews related to the work of volunteer coordinators and fundraisers during COVID-19. The discussion section connects our findings to the literature at large, offering implications and suggestions for practice and future research.

## Literature review

### Fundraising and volunteering in human service organizations

Human service organizations in the United States, like all nonprofit organizations, are reliant on volunteer work and funds raised from various sources (Cappellari et al., 2011; Henderson & Lambert, 2018; Mozos et al., 2016; Seo, 2020). Volunteer work is a vital and inexpensive way for nonprofits to achieve their mission (Handy & Mook, 2011; Handy et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012), and an estimated 80% of nonprofit organizations use volunteers (Hager, 2004). In addition to volunteer labor, many

nonprofits also solicit donations to meet budget requirements and fund operations. Similarly, ninety percent of recipient nonprofit organizations reported that donations are “important,” “very important,” or “essential” to their work (Urban Institute, 2021). This highlights the vital nature of fundraising for nonprofits to solicit donations from individuals. Combined, most human service organizations are resource dependent and require the expertise of fundraising professionals and volunteer coordinators. Given that the onset of the pandemic caused havoc in most organizations, we set to find out how the work of these two sets of professionals was affected during the first year of the pandemic, and how their organizations were affected.

As there is very limited literature regarding the work of these two resource-generating professionals, we reviewed recent trends in fundraising and volunteer coordination, as well as management during crisis situations. We used these three bodies of literature as conceptual springboards to study the influence of the pandemic on the work of fundraising professionals and volunteer coordinators.

### **Trends in volunteering**

In the face of restrictions to large group events and other factors during the COVID-19 pandemic, informal volunteering saw a rise (Biddle & Gray, 2020; Churchill, 2020; Cnaan, Handy, et al., 2022; Tierney & Mahtani, 2021; Tolentino, 2020; Trautwein et al., 2020; Yang, 2021; Yumagulovaa & Handmer, 2021). Indeed, Harris (2021) found that informal volunteering in the early stages of the pandemic addressed some basic physical survival needs that service organizations did not. At the same time, Dederichs (2022) found the share of formal UK volunteers dropped by at least one third in the first lockdown stage, with elderly people, women, and those with higher educational attainment most likely to cease. Measures such as social distancing and travel restrictions along with fears of contagion posed new challenges on volunteer coordination. Overall, recent literature appears to suggest that the pandemic has had a negative effect on formal volunteering behavior (Cnaan et al., 2022; Dederichs, 2022; FIDELITY Charitable, 2020). Volunteer coordinators in many human service organizations found themselves facing new challenges that were unprecedented. Both the pool of volunteers and volunteer allowed positions were minimized. These restrictions coupled with the rushed transition to online volunteering were rapid and hard to control developments. Overall, uncertainty prevailed in the work of volunteer coordinators (Windon et al., 2023).

### **Trends in fundraising**

Charitable donations can come from a multitude of sources, including foundations, corporations, and bequests/estates (Andreoni, 2006). However, the largest source of giving is from individuals (Giving USA, 2022), with total giving increasing steadily since 1962. In 2021, individuals gave over \$326 billion, representing nearly 70% of all giving sources (Giving USA, 2022). Prior to 2020, an overwhelming majority of nonprofits reported either an increase or a steady stream of donations (Urban Institute, 2021). Although the numbers suggest that nonprofit fundraisers should be able to secure donations with ease, other factors suggest otherwise. When the pandemic hit in 2020, 37% reported decreases in incoming monetary donations, more than the previous five years combined (Urban Institute, 2021). Furthermore, it's been reported that formal donation behavior to organizations decreased slightly during the pandemic relative to before the pandemic (Cnaan, Handy, et al., 2022). Many donating individuals and organizations sensed a deep uncertainty and hesitated to support human service organizations not knowing which of them will continue functioning and which is most needed (Van Steenburg et al., 2022).

However, there appears to be a divergence in the literature between donations reported by organizations and self-reported individual giving. Overall self-reported individual giving since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have increased (Fridman et al., 2022; IUPUI, 2021; IUPUI Women's Philanthropy Institute [WPI], 2021). While difficult to identify causes for this inconsistency, there are potential explanations in the literature. One potential explanation



for the disparity is that many individuals reported increasing their charitable giving solely to organizations dedicated to basic needs and health (IUPUI Women's Philanthropy Institute, 2021). Moreover, the reported percentage of households that gave increased from 31.8% to 41.1% (IUPUI Women's Philanthropy Institute, 2021). However, an important caveat is that these households reported giving directly to COVID-19 relief related causes or organizations (IUPUI, 2021).

Another possibility for this discrepancy is the strategic donation approach of the millennial generation. Now the largest donor group, millennials are characterized by being more environmentally friendly and value-conscious than other generations, valuing traits such as quality, localism, and social responsibility, and prefer to donate to organizations that embody these values (Crawford & Jackson, 2019; Madison: Society for Nonprofit Organizations, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2020). Furthermore, millennials are often described as being politically aware and active, contributing to and participating in advocacy efforts (FIDELITY Charitable, 2020). Whereas previous generations were content with traditional nonprofit marketing that leveraged mass-marketing efforts and brand loyalty, millennials and subsequent generations depend more on their social networks for word-of-mouth information regarding philanthropy. Thus, it is possible that millennials are less likely to donate to organizations less aligned with their preferences.

In conjunction with these trends, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed new circumstances that fundraisers and volunteer coordinators needed to adapt to and address. As discussed below, we posit that these challenges and adaptations are symptoms of disruptive extreme events that shaped the work of resource generators in human service organizations.

## Disruptive extreme events and crisis contexts

Disruptive extreme events are defined as discrete episodes or occurrences that may result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to organization members (Hannah et al., 2009). By extension, disruptive extreme contexts are environments where one or more extreme events have occurred or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capacity to prevent the event or be properly prepared for it (Hannah et al., 2009). During extreme contexts, individuals may experience stress, fear, and additional burdens unseen previously. Extreme contexts are characterized by a need to respond and adapt, a burden that falls largely on organizational leadership. For example, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, government and airline leadership were tasked both with quelling passenger fears and initiating additional safety measures.

We assert that the COVID-19 pandemic is a disruptive extreme event that created a disruptive extreme context within nonprofit management. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of literature on reactions to the pandemic focuses on organizational behavior and leadership. Kaltenbrunner et al. (2022) focused on which human service organizations in Austria best survived the pandemic. They found them to be characterized by a shared understanding of the crisis as well as having a common sense of direction, social connectedness, and managerial care for employees. Kim et al. (2022) focused on organizational relationships in the community and beyond as means of coping with extreme disruptive events such as the pandemic. Sarkar and Clegg (2021) focused on how leadership activated resilience in organizations that successfully dealt with the pandemic. Yet, these major works did not focus on specific units within these organizations. The work of fundraisers and volunteer coordinators, who faced unprecedented challenges during the first year of the pandemic, was rarely discussed in the literature.

Our goal is to provide empirical evidence to describe the disruptive extreme context created by the COVID-19 pandemic to the work of those who are entrusted with generating and retaining resources required for the work of nonprofit human service organizations. Therefore, we present the findings of our study as an opportunity to describe the way in which volunteer coordinators and fundraisers operated in the disruptive extreme context precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research question aimed to locate ways in which the disruptive extreme context created by the COVID-19 pandemic affected a vital element of nonprofit organization operations: What were the experiences of

volunteer coordinators and fundraisers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did the pandemic affect their work?

## Methods

This study emerged from a separate study that measured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering, giving, and prosocial behavior (Cnaan, Handy, et al., 2022). In the present study, we use a qualitative research approach reliant on focus group interviews and thematic analysis of collected data to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the work of volunteer coordinators and fundraisers in nonprofit human service organizations. Focus groups involve the use of in-depth group interviews through which participants are selected purposefully according to their knowledge and experience of the study area (Burrows & Kendall, 1997; Thomas et al., 1995). Although the groups are not necessarily representative, one benefit of focus groups is the group dynamic, which can enrich the type and range of data generated through social interaction. Data are often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-on-one interviews (Rabiee, 2004; Thomas et al., 1995). All research described herein received approval from the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board.

We facilitated four focus group interviews with volunteer coordinators and fundraisers from different human service and other nonprofit organizations. The volunteer coordinators and fundraisers in our sample came from mid-sized organizations (annual budgets from \$200K–\$3 M) in diverse fields, across 11 different states. 4 out of the 28 participants were of the male sex. At the time, all 28 participants held a bachelor's degree with 17 also holding a master's degree, and 2 holding a doctorate degree. Respondents represented various organizations including museums, environmental organizations, hospitals, immigration services, and human social service organizations.

In all focus groups, the researchers began the discussion with one question: "In what way did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the practice of generosity in your field/life?" We allowed conversations to flow naturally, with a focus on the influence of the pandemic. We only intervened when discussions went off topic.

Focus group interviews were conducted between September and October 2021. As such, respondent experiences do not reflect trends beyond that point. Interviews lasted 60–120 minutes, and were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed. All interviews were conducted in English and all participants were above 18 years of age with significant experience in their respective fields within the U.S. Collectively, the focus groups represented a total of 28 participants: 18 volunteer coordinators and 10 fundraisers. All participants signed a letter of consent. The study's qualitative approach allowed researchers to identify new and emerging trends within volunteering and fundraising during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis that grouped data into concepts and identified emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Engel & Schutt, 2017). The analytical steps we took included data description, interpretation, conclusion, and theorization amongst several authors.

## Findings

We first report the findings from volunteer coordinators (VCs) and follow them with those from fundraisers.

Four themes emerged in the VC data:

- (1) Challenges with reestablishing a volunteer base
- (2) Challenges with keeping volunteers engaged
- (3) Difficulties managing health risks and safety measures related to COVID-19 for volunteers and staff



#### (4) Benefits of virtual volunteer operations

### **Findings from volunteer coordinators**

#### ***Challenges with reestablishing a volunteer base***

VCs shared that the effects of the pandemic were complex and challenging in several ways. The first theme relates to the challenges of reestablishing their volunteer base. Given the risk of transmission of COVID-19, many individuals were hesitant to return to in-person activities where they would be in close contact with other people. Fear of infection was brought up multiple times, as potential volunteers were either fearful for their own health or for their family members. This was especially relevant for those coordinating volunteers in hospitals. One VC noted:

Some of the biggest changes I have seen, especially in the health care environment, is the fear. The fear that they could possibly get sick, or worse yet, they could take something home to their family members.

This also extended beyond hospital settings. One VC working for an immigration services organization echoed this sentiment:

And for some people, there's still a lot of fear and anxiety about in-person interaction, particularly when we can't guarantee the population we work with has been vaccinated yet. So that's kind of a sore point there.

The previously referenced VC from the hospital continued the conversation by sharing that one volunteer was willing to return but ultimately couldn't because their family members, some of whom that had health risk factors, feared transmission:

But in those areas where they could come back, they're fearful to come in [...] [T]here's a lot of family influence, so to say, on our volunteers. Where the families are saying, oh no, you're not going back. So even though the volunteer wants to come, the family is putting restrictions on their ability or their willingness to return. And I find that that has been hard.

In response to this challenge, several VCs described a move toward smaller, consistent core groups of volunteers. Doing so made sense to VCs as most in-person activities returned at a limited capacity, requiring fewer volunteers. One VC working at a food distribution organization noted:

Before the pandemic, we were pretty heavily reliant on groups of volunteers from corporate groups, religious groups, school groups [...] A lot of those corporate groups dried up almost immediately because of their work from home or whatever mandates from executive leadership. So, the profile of our volunteers definitely changed with that, and we had a lot more individual volunteers that were coming in more frequently.

However, VCs still had to consider how their volunteers would react to strict mask wearing and other health and safety measures. This was a shared experience for the VCs working in hospitals as one went on to share:

It really made you look at the individuals that were coming and if they [could] physically handle it. I readjusted all of my assignments down to a two-hour window, because I was concerned how they would handle being in a mask the whole time.

#### ***Challenges with maintaining volunteer engagement***

The second theme involved maintaining volunteer engagement throughout the pandemic. Due to the varied nature of this theme, we break down this section into further subsections.

#### ***Engaging volunteers virtually to address emotional and social needs***

VCs referred to the need to focus on keeping their volunteers engaged and retaining the volunteers they did have. In the early stages of the pandemic, this involved keeping in touch with volunteers virtually due to ongoing lockdowns. VCs noted that many of volunteers struggled with loneliness and

lack of social interactions during the lockdown, as many volunteers' primary modes of social contact were through volunteering. One VC from an animal services organization shared about a volunteer struggling with these emotions who was later believed to have died by suicide:

I had a list of them, and I was calling and checking in on all of them, especially my senior volunteers. Unfortunately, I think I did lose one to suicide. It was unclear, the cause of death, but implied. And he was one that I had been calling almost daily because I was so worried about him. And we were trying to find ways to help him engage. But he didn't have any family.

This VC further described the emotional burden they felt and the need to find creative ways to support volunteers, which was also the case with other VCs. This VC shared how they created an online support group that would meet regularly through video calls to help offer some form of social interactions and support in response to the above experience:

We've had a lot of volunteers that fall into that category, where their whole social life was volunteering with us. And so, when that shut down, it was a heavy blow to them. As a volunteer coordinator, I couldn't turn a blind eye to that, and really had to ramp up my strategies for reaching out and connecting with my volunteers.

Two other VCs shared their approaches to and experiences in keeping volunteers engaged virtually, especially to ensure their volunteers' social needs were met in the face of social isolation. Though these VCs worked in drastically different settings, one in a hospital and one in a nonprofit news organization, they both discussed how they initiated efforts to keep their volunteers engaged. To keep them committed to the organization, the VCs had to attend to the volunteers' pains and worries. They stated:

Part of it was we started a Facebook group just for the volunteers [...] And then I was doing weekly Zoom sessions, just this check in point, just to see.

It was great to have something new and different and to be able to engage the volunteers in something [...] So, I try to do Zoom happy hours with them. And that helps. It gives them a chance to connect with each other.

### ***Setting expectations and emphasizing meaningful experiences***

One VC noted that maintaining volunteer engagement in the later stages of the pandemic involved managing expectations of the volunteer experience because volunteering was not as it was before the pandemic. Volunteers now had to contend with social distancing and limiting interactions with others which naturally diluted social interactions and led to some disappointment. As such, VCs not only had to address these disappointments, but also clearly temper expectations of future engagement. In a setting where volunteers once worked side by side to package food, this VC spoke to this specifically:

We found when we initially had volunteers return, we struggled with managing expectations of their return. We had a lot of long-time volunteers that kind of expected to return with nothing changed.

One VC added that they found that many of the hospital volunteers that returned sought meaningful experiences. Volunteers believed that if they were to put themselves at risk, their experiences should be meaningful. VCs reported feeling tasked with providing meaningful experiences to returning volunteers:

I'm finding that our volunteers, the type of volunteer, I think, has shifted. So, you're not really getting the groups of people that are coming in to have coffee with their peers and kind of coming in for just social [reasons]. They want to make sure that they're having a meaningful experience. If they're going to be at risk, they want to make sure that what they're doing is meaningful.

### ***Managing health and safety during COVID-19***

While related to the previous two themes, managing health and safety involved additional logistical considerations for those coordinating volunteers during a pandemic. VCs had to consider those with



whom they interacted. Even if volunteers agreed to take the vaccine when it became available, others around them may not have done the same. For example, one VC described how their staff and local police department, with whom the nonprofit is connected, had low vaccination rates. Volunteers who worked in close proximity to these groups felt uncomfortable and frustrated because they felt their health was being put at risk. Ultimately, the interpersonal relationships between paid staff and the police department deteriorated. VCs were required to address the concerns and frustrations of their volunteers, while trying not to lose them.

In addition to meaningful protocols, VCs had to face what they perceived as performative health and safety measures. For example, a VC at a historical museum devoted extensive time and effort to cleaning and sanitizing public spaces in the museum due to an executive leadership mandate. The VC added that much of the efforts felt performative, and volunteers felt their extra work was meaningless, which can reduce volunteer satisfaction and retention, as noted earlier.

Not only were VCs managing volunteer fears and challenges, but they also had their own internal concerns and anxieties. One VC spoke to this personally as a mother:

My main concern individually, is exposure for my child, who is under the age of 12 and can't get vaccinated. So that's something that I personally have taken into consideration when thinking about volunteer work or being on site for different things. That's something that I'm sure other individuals have had to think about, as well.

### ***Benefits of virtual volunteer operations***

Although the previously mentioned themes presented challenges for VCs, there was a shared appreciation amongst VC respondents for how virtual platforms benefited them and their volunteers. The most notable aspect was the reprieve virtual spaces offered from the burden of travel and commuting. One VC from a human social services agency noted the benefit to clients and volunteers:

[T]he virtual space has been a blessing for a lot of people. [...] there's no longer that travel time and time away from work and family to talk to their lawyer and even show up to hearings and stuff like that. So, our pro bono legal volunteers have I think really liked the virtual nature of engagement that way.

Additionally, virtual operations provided accessibility and communication to others that were otherwise unavailable or limited, as noted by a VC that worked in an organ donation agency:

Lots of people want that in-person connection. But having virtual options provides a level of accessibility that we didn't have before.

### ***Findings from fundraisers***

Three themes emerged in the data from fundraisers:

- (1) Challenges of adjusting to changes in philanthropy
- (2) Calls to rethink solicitations from donors
- (3) Necessity of building trust through accountability and transparency

### ***Changes in the philanthropic landscape***

Similar to their VC counterparts, fundraisers shared that COVID-19 drastically changed the nonprofit sector with regards to fundraising and soliciting donations. Contrary to their expectations, fundraisers did not see donations dwindle after the onset of the pandemic. One fundraiser noted that many donors feared nonprofits would not survive the pandemic, leading them to donate with little to no questions

about how their money was used. The observation of this behavior was unprecedented. A fundraiser from a suicide prevention organization describes this phenomenon:

A substantial number of donors were so scared and didn't know what was going on. They just said, "Take our money. Keep our money. Do whatever you need to do with our money." All of the gift restrictions and gift agreements and nuances of clauses and contracts kind of went away. And people just were so reactionarily terrified about institutions disappearing that they ceded control over their money in a way that I had never seen before [...] And people are like, if you need it for general operating, use it for general operating. It just became this much more loose and easier to operate in [the] space financially.

This fundraiser further detailed this experience:

People just wanted to see things not disappear so desperately that they just kept throwing money at us. Like "How much more money do you need? How much more money do you need? Just tell us what you need, and we'll give it to you."

Fundraisers also noted the changes in their donor bases, both in number and type of donors. One fundraiser stated that they added more constituents between March 2020 and June 2020 alone than they had in any other recent year. One fundraiser added that in their organization, nine out of ten donors gave for the first-time. Another fundraiser working for a homeless shelter noted that philanthropy was centered around high-wealth individuals at the beginning of the pandemic. However, coinciding with rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020, they saw an increase in what they considered "normal-people giving" and "socially conscious giving." One fundraiser working for a city library network shared that they noticed a significant influx of lower- and middle-class donors who were stretching their budget to make a positive impact, detailed below:

It was really a rallying of what might be considered lower-level supporters coming together to say, "these things matter to us." And so, I mean, we saw major gift support increase as well. But it was really this groundswell of normal people, if you will, who were supporting philanthropy in a way that [...] like was this an aspirational period where like philanthropy came to mean more than what it used to.

### ***Rethinking solicitations from donors***

As fundraisers noticed these changes in the philanthropic landscape and culture, they had to respond and adjust their solicitation methods. This was first introduced when one fundraiser with over fifteen years of experience shared their thoughts on the overall "lazy" culture and approach to philanthropy and that fundraisers must change their approach and expectations:

I don't mean to offend anyone. I think a lot of philanthropy is lazy. We get used to like, how this appeal always works, so, we're just going to use it. And we don't try as hard to connect with people for who they are and where they are. And we make assumptions about each other and about our donors and kind of make decisions for them that they don't feel great about. And I think over, particularly the COVID period, people kind of lashed back at that, were like, you're not going to make choices for me. There are things that matter to me. And to some degree [...] I think, that was people almost being like, I'm taking some amount of this power back from you, from institutions, from whatever.

Regarding adjusting the approach to soliciting donations, this fundraiser went on to speculate:

It's forcing, I think, fundraisers to be more nuanced in our solicitations to people because donors are standing up and saying, I'm more than one thing. And I'm complex. And I want you to speak to all of my identities, not just the one that you're assuming is most prevalent in my life. And I think that's really cool and exciting and human and amazing about philanthropy. But I think it also makes our jobs a lot harder.

Another issue that fundraisers had to consider was donor fatigue. One such fundraiser noted that while there was a significant influx of donors in 2020 to their cultural and civic organization, there were factors that they believed threatened potential donors' stability and future engagement:



And yes, I think there's going to be a lot of donors dropping off. I've already heard colleagues talking about donor fatigue and just how do you keep people engaged and what resources do you need to do that? And hopefully nonprofits are figuring that out very quickly rather than waiting any longer.

In this instance, the fundraiser from the suicide prevention organization cited factors such as market instability which created challenges for them in maintaining a steady donor base:

But there was definitely a shift for us where we saw folks that we would traditionally rely on for major gift support step away from the organization and reduce their gifts and not be as invested in making additional gifts during the period of time. And when we talk to some of them about it, the response that we got was, "well, the market's really volatile." And I don't know what's going to happen. So, we're not going to make any decisions right now. We're going to wait a little bit and make a decision later.

Some fundraisers felt that one method to counter donor fatigue was reaffirming belief in an organization and/or cause. According to one fundraiser, alignment between donors and the organizational mission, i.e., combatting homelessness and providing excellent services to their client base, was critical:

It really was the folks that had the greatest connection to the mission that kind of got to the front of the line, the vanguard, so to speak.

### ***Building trust: expectations of accountability and transparency***

While donors appeared to have significant trust at the beginning of the pandemic, this did not continue into the long-term. The most notable theme that fundraisers mentioned was the shift in expectations. Many donors became distrustful of organizations and as such, trust became critical to a nonprofit's survival. Much of this shift can be attributed to the rise in momentum of the BLM movement in the summer of 2020. As one fundraiser working for an art museum noted:

When the murder of George Floyd happened and the protests happened around the world, there was definitely a shift in what donors were restricting their dollars for. A lot of folks are actually demanding, particularly in the foundation world, that organizations really step up their social justice and DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] work.

This fundraiser continued and shared that they believed this was not a temporary shift in the realm of fundraising but rather, the new norm:

I think one barrier might be trust. [...] I think that if organizations have not used the past year and all of the turmoil within to look at themselves, to think what can they do better with less resources and be more transparent and be more forthright, I think that's going to erode the trust that some organizations will have, if they really haven't taken these past many months to grow and to serve their communities in some way.

One way to build trust was to exemplify transparency and accountability. According to the fundraisers in our sample, nonprofits could demonstrate this by examining their hiring processes. For example, one fundraiser working for a technology nonprofit described how donors began to consider the demographic makeup of organizations to assess whether their hiring processes matched their mission of social change and equity before donating:

I would say, across the country, the demographic questions have changed. Instead of just asking about who we're serving, they're asking about, "What are the demographics of your board? What are the demographics of your executive staff, of your entire staff?"

The fundraiser from the suicide prevention organization underscored this belief:

For me, all of that is connected to this sort of push for greater transparency across the philanthropic sector.

Together, these themes provide a snapshot of the experiences of VCs and fundraisers during the pandemic. Both groups managed internal and external challenges, which created additional stress and pressure during an already difficult time. Our findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic overhauled the landscape and culture of volunteering and fundraising.

## Discussion

This study offers insights into the lived experiences of volunteer coordinators and fundraisers who play a critical role in the operation and survival of human service organizations.

We found that during the early stages of the pandemic, VCs had to consider how to keep their volunteers engaged and supported, especially those that benefited greatly from the social component associated with in-person volunteering. Virtual check-ins and phone calls became a regular occurrence. As in-person volunteering returned later, VCs were also tasked with reestablishing their volunteer bases which required navigating challenging dynamics regarding health and safety. A significant portion of volunteers were either unable or unwilling to return, due to concern about the transmission of COVID-19, aligning with Dederichs's (2022) findings on fewer willing volunteers. Power and Nedvetskaya (2022) also reported similar findings regarding the challenges of recruiting and maintaining volunteer engagement within sporting event volunteering. In addition to managing volunteer fears, VCs had to contend with their own fears and feelings regarding the pandemic, including weighing the value of their work against the risk of possible transmission to their own households. Finally, VCs found that virtual platforms could be leveraged to increase engagement by reducing burdens associated with traditional, in-person volunteering. This can be leveraged for future operations but Harris (2021) serves as a reminder that while technology increases social connectedness, it can leave behind those who are not "digitally enabled" or technologically savvy.

Among fundraisers, our findings reveal a drastic shift in donor expectations immediately following the onset of the pandemic compared to later stages in the pandemic. Early on, donors increased donations, allowing organizations to do whatever they needed to survive, providing a contrast to the findings of Van Steenburg et al. (2022). However, in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter movement, fundraisers reported a significant influx in new donors focused on socially conscious giving. However, it became clear that these new donors expected the impact to extend both into the communities they served but also within the organization itself, in its very makeup. These donors expected recipient organizations to increase their commitment to social justice work in the communities they served. Furthermore, fundraisers reported that prospective and current donors expected the makeup of organization staff and boards to embody diversity, equity, and inclusion. These findings align with current understanding of how millennials differ from previous generations in donation behavior and that they are less likely to donate to organizations less aligned with their preferences (Crawford & Jackson, 2019; FIDELITY Charitable, 2020; Madison: Society for Nonprofit Organizations, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2020). Lastly, fundraisers had to contend with donor fatigue and those unwilling to donate due to market instability, creating challenges with establishing a steady donor base which is consistent with recent research (Cnaan, Handy, et al., 2022; FIDELITY Charitable, 2020).

## Implications

One component of Crisis Management Theory is to shift the view of crises (in our case, extreme events, and their contexts) from threats to opportunities for growth and learning (Bundy et al., 2017; Lampel et al., 2009; Veil, 2011). Note that we do not wish to minimize the negative ramifications of the pandemic on the lives of many. Rather, we suggest that nonprofit management and leadership can use this time to evaluate and assess organizational strengths, areas of improvement, and other lessons learned while the pandemic and its extreme context are still easily recalled.

While certain findings are temporal to the early stages of the pandemic, we posit that some findings are representative of broader trends relevant to VCs and fundraising beyond. For example, VCs in the U.S. likely do not have to consider lockdowns and quarantines for their volunteers anymore, but it would be beneficial to consider the importance of the social aspect of in-person volunteering when utilizing virtual volunteering opportunities. Virtual volunteering is not without its own benefits, as shown by Sun et al. (2020) and Kong and Soon (2022). Virtual

operations can relieve burdens associated with in-volunteering, such as commuting or other accessibility related barriers (Sun et al., 2020). Therefore, VCs can leverage the virtual space for tasks such as training or certification processes which has also been suggested by Lachance (2020). However, VCs should consider their volunteers and potential barriers to leveraging virtual spaces as highlighted by Harris (2021) and Sun et al. (2020).

Perhaps most notable is what appears to be a common theme of valuing one's time and/or money and the desire that it makes an impact, regardless of amount. Volunteers now carry the expectation that any time they spend volunteering provides a meaningful impact that can be demonstrated. This can be reflected in the rise of crowdfunding during the height of the pandemic when community needs were exacerbated (Elmer et al., 2020; Saleh et al., 2021). Such crowdfunding campaigns often explain the organizer's need and how money would be used. Likewise, donors expect their money to go toward organizations that can demonstrate impact and accountability both in the community and within the very doors of the organization. For VCs and fundraisers that have struggled to recruit and retain volunteers or donors at pre-pandemic levels, this could be an opportunity to adjust the messaging and even marketing about the impact opportunities they provide. Clearly conveying the impact of a partnership with their organization can be a relatively quick but effective strategy to maximize resource generating amongst the new age volunteer and donor. As Van Steenburg et al. (2022) suggests, NPOs can gain much by from leveraging branding theories and models used by the for-profit industry.

Looking beyond, our findings highlight the benefits of having a consistent core group of volunteers to rely on, especially in times of crisis. We suggest VCs consider how to establish and leverage a consistent group of volunteers, while welcoming new and episodic volunteers. By assigning essential tasks to the core group and supplemental tasks to episodic group, VCs can alleviate the stress associated with an unstable volunteer supply during times of extreme events (e.g., natural disasters, economic crises). In addition, VCs should consider their volunteers who are members of more vulnerable populations and how crises such as pandemics may affect their ability to engage with the organization – and even utilize virtual tools to keep these populations engaged, as appropriate. For fundraisers, we note that millennials respond better to simple and personalized efforts, especially those that clearly communicate the impact of their organization's efforts (Crawford & Jackson, 2019).

Regarding implications for research, our findings suggest additional opportunities and points to consider related to the nuances associated with volunteering after the pandemic. One point of consideration is to interview volunteer coordinators and fundraisers after time to examine if the initial trends found in this study have persisted or are no longer relevant to their daily work. As this study solely focused on volunteer coordinators and fundraisers, a potential supplement to the data generated by this study could be to examine the perceptions and expectations of volunteers and donors themselves. Researchers could also seek to replicate this study but in different countries to examine how the experiences differ, perhaps in a non-Western context.

## **Limitations**

This study was not without its limitations. Given that this was a qualitative study conducted with 28 volunteer coordinators and fundraisers, the findings cannot be considered generalizable. Furthermore, the range of organizations increases variability among respondents, impacting the validity of our findings. The study emerged from a separate study, and the focus group interviews reflect a point-in-time collection of participants' insights and experiences in a single location and temporal context. Respondents do not represent all VCs and fundraisers; and respondents were collected by snowball sampling. Therefore, conclusions and findings must be taken with care. Future research should use the themes generated to assess how the effects of the pandemic on nonprofits have changed over time in a nationally representative survey.

## Conclusion

Human service organizations provide significant contributions to their communities but in order to do so, are heavily reliant on volunteers and donors to help carry out their work. The COVID-19 pandemic created a disruptive extreme context that threatened the ability of volunteer coordinators and fundraisers to acquire and retain the resources needed to keep these organizations operating. This paper serves to document the challenges faced by volunteer coordinators and fundraisers following the onset of the pandemic while underscoring the importance of their work. Furthermore, this paper provides guidance to help practitioners adjust to the new field of volunteers, donors, and their expectations moving forward.

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