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Challenge IV
27 March 2026

HELP WANTED: Volunteers needed

The average-aged retired person should participate in volunteer service because it positively impacts a person's sense of purpose, health and wellness, and society as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

“Everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve... You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Everyone Applies

While volunteer service benefits all age groups, this thesis will focus on the average aged retiree, circa 60 years and up. This age group was selected for the following reasons because (1) most of the evidence and studies collected point to those over 50 years of age, and (2) because every citizen worker will hopefully, someday, retire. And finally, (3) if there are powerful benefits available for reaping later in life, imagine how rewarding it will be to start now.

Definitions

Volunteer service is working or performing a service without being paid monetarily. There are two types of volunteer service: formal and informal. Formal volunteer service typically consists of a group of people working voluntarily as part of an established organization, such as

Big Brothers Big Sisters, American Red Cross, Samaritan's Purse, or being associated with a school or church. Informal service is related to all other means of helping people without pay, separate from an organization. It is typically conducted with direct contact, from one person to another. Examples include tending to weeds for one's parents, watching a neighbor's home when they're away, and going the extra mile to provide water bottles to the homeless. However, with informal service, the lines defining volunteer service blur with other types of service, such as random acts of kindness.

For older age groups, formal volunteer service may be more appealing than informal service because of the ease of structure and lack of planning needed when starting out. The intensity of service is completely up to the individual's capability.

Thesis Statement

The average-aged retired person should participate in volunteer service because it positively impacts a person's sense of purpose, health and wellness, and society as a whole.

PERSONAL IMPACT

"What makes a legend? Is it what someone did while they were alive? Or how they're remembered after they're gone?" – Jake Fischer, The Guardian (2006)

Fulfillment

Fulfillment is the sense or feeling of contentment which accompanies actions that align with personal values and principles. For Christians, fulfillment occurs when keeping to the Lord's commands. For instance, one of the ten commandments is to "Honor your father and

mother.” When a child gives credit to a parent, the parents receive honor, respect, and a positive reputation, among the pleasure of the knowledge that their child is faithful and grateful. While the child may be recognized for respect, they are filled with a deeper sense of gratitude.

The first time I volunteered with Civil Air Patrol, an auxiliary organization of the Air Force, was in 2023, at the March Air Force Reserve airshow. It was hot. I awkwardly directed traffic, picked up trash, and sat with a team of dehydrated sweaty kids. Although I was exhausted, I knew I wanted to serve again. We joked together, worked behind the scenes together, shared a meal together. One of my core values is servant leadership. By seeing how our menial work can brighten a stranger’s day, I left feeling full.

There are some things money cannot buy. In the children’s book, *The Table Where Rich People Sit*, author Byrd Baylor describes a girl whose parents claimed they were rich. They weren’t. They were dirt poor, and their handcrafted wood table showed it. However, her parents put a price on the sunsets they see every day in the countryside at \$20,000. The mountains that change colors throughout the day were labeled \$50,000. Also, the parents valued the girl who can write “really good lists” and her brother at \$1 million each. In the end, the girl seemed to understand what being rich really meant. Wealth does not always involve material riches but instead: senses, nature, experiences, family.

This line of thinking coincides with what my friend thought about this subject. Upon asking a high-achieving friend his thoughts on volunteering versus being paid to work, he asserted, “Volunteer work pays more because it pays in memories that last, relationships that live on, and shares the wealth. You get more satisfaction and happiness from seeing someone better off than seeing a paycheck.”

As people age, it is imperative we continue to support one another in truth. Fulfillment comes from following God's command to love him and love one another. To actively love others and to wish good upon them are the best actions we can do. More importantly, to serve someone beyond our needs results in true fulfillment.

Cultivating Reputation: Highlighting Character and Skills

Influence stems from likeability, whether an individual has a positive or negative reputation. To put it frankly, volunteer service looks good on a person. Many individuals who people genuinely enjoy being around are probably ones who: formally or informally volunteer, are charitable, or are people who are likely to help you. Why? Because whether or not they take care of themselves or are introverts or extroverts, volunteers serve others. In fact, Sam Ewing declares, "Hard work spotlights the character of people: some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don't turn up at all." Through volunteer service, the moral character of individuals becomes highlighted. Traits like passion, work ethic, and consistency are commonly displayed by volunteers. These character traits are also reflected in one's reputation. My former technical mentor nearly had a part time job with the hours he spent per week, per month, per year for the CyberPatriot youth program. And yet, he remained unpaid, coaching to give back to the program that propelled him forward in his skill in the technological field. He not only had a strong work ethic, he was consistent, and it was evident when he showed up every meeting and was available throughout a week to talk about issues.

Furthermore, volunteering helps individuals gain social skills necessary to interact with strangers, acquaintances, and even employers. At every event, volunteers have opportunities to network and connect with others, which helps them acquire experience through direct

observation and participation, allowing one to understand how parts of the world work. Opportunities involve engaging with similar-minded volunteers or people from different backgrounds by sharing ideas, information, and stories. As with most skills, social skills improve the more one practices it. Socializing is a fundamental factor of networking, especially being able to converse well, and with time, a volunteer with a plethora of opportunities will improve skills they practice. For example, when a person restocks bookshelves at a library, they could improve the hard skills of classification, organization, and spatial reasoning. Likewise, they can also develop their soft skills, such as patience and diligence.

Philanthropy and Investments

A recent study conducted by *Fidelity Charitable*, one of the largest independent charity platforms in the United States, found that 78% of pre-retirees and retirees state charitable giving plays a significant role in their lives. Additionally, they found:

Almost one-quarter of pre-retirees and retirees (24%) say charitable giving is much more important than other financial priorities. These committed givers are financially savvy, likely to plan for the financial aspect of giving more, and more likely to volunteer longer hours with more organizations ([Fidelity Charitable](#)).

Moreover, retirees with accumulated wealth can also find fulfillment through exploring volunteer opportunities at many charitable organizations. If anyone, generally pre-retirees, plans to invest long-term, so donations and investments of time and money will become personal. Thankfully, one does not need to go far to discover a community of genuine social workers to connect with.

Mentorship

“Mentorship is one of the most powerful ways to create a lasting impact, not only in the lives of those you guide but also within your own. As we age, we accumulate a wealth of experiences, lessons, and wisdom that can serve as invaluable resources for younger generations. Mentoring allows you to share that knowledge, foster growth in others, and find renewed purpose in your own life.” – Senior Citizens, Inc.

Everyone accumulates knowledge. And with knowledge comes wisdom. Although I am but 17 years old, I feel I have accumulated wisdom through my experience, especially in Civil Air Patrol and through my social mistakes. I can only imagine the wealth of wisdom I will someday acquire by the time I retire. Children can always use the support and guidance of someone wiser. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is one example of such a mentorship organization. To be an older sibling to a child who needs moral support, the volunteer must be at least 18 years old. Because of their life experience, a retired volunteer would become a guiding figure in the child’s life.

Freedom

Freedom of choice is fundamental for volunteer service if participants are seeking fulfillment because this requires authentic workers who want to be there. Senator Robert Kennedy once recounted, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.” What makes volunteer service unique is it allows people with a passion to choose their own cause to actively support but in doing so, they can influence others to do the same. By bringing like-minded

people together, serving a worthy cause, and simply having a choice, volunteer service provides people with a very personal, enriching fulfillment.

HEALTH IMPACT

“There is no better exercise for your heart than reaching down and helping to lift someone up.”

– *Bernard Meltzer, Civil Engineer*

Physical Health

Volunteer service not only impacts the soul but a myriad of studies in recent decades describes how service improves physical and mental wellness. Statistics from *WifiTalents* ([WifiTalents](#)) presents that volunteer service improves mortality rates by 22% compared to non-volunteers, averaging an additional four years added to one’s lifespan.

Similarly, a longitudinal study was published by Eric Kim et al in the *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, which surveyed the data of 12,998 participants aged >50 years sourced from the *Health and Retirement Study* over the course of three trials (2006-2008, 2010-2012, 2014-2016). This Health and Retirement Study is an ongoing project recording economic changes for over 20,000 Americans over the course of every two years ([HRS](#)). Using multiple logistic, linear, and generalized linear regression models Assistant Professor Kim evaluated 34 indicators relating to physical health, health behaviors, and psychosocial well-being. The research also accounted for demographics, varying physical health behaviors, and personalities. The four year follow up period concluded that participants who volunteered ≥ 100 hours per year had reduced risks of mortality, physical functioning limitations, higher physical activity, and

better psychosocial outcomes, including higher optimism and a greater sense of purpose in life with lower depressive symptoms such as hopelessness and loneliness. ([AJPM](#))

Professor Jeffrey Burr, a professor of gerontology at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, claimed that for decades, researchers have observed a connection between better general health and volunteering. This study investigated the 5 risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD) and metabolic syndrome among middle aged to older adults. By examining the data of 7803 participants between 2004-2006 from the *Health and Retirement Study*,

Logistic regression (computer prediction) was used to describe relationships occurring between volunteering and central adiposity (concentrated obesity), hypertension (high blood pressure), lipid dysregulation (LDL and HDL cholesterols, triglycerides), elevated blood glucose levels (blood sugar), and high inflammation, along with 2 indexes of the MetS (energy consumption).

In other words, the results of the logistic regression chart showed volunteers were predicted to have less abdominal fat, better lipid regulation, elevated blood sugar, and equal MetS compared to non-volunteers ([AHA](#), [The Gerontologist](#)). Additionally, volunteers over 50 years were less likely to have hypertension, according to a 2013 study on heart health by researchers Rodlescia Sneed and Sheldon Cohen, in which those who volunteered at least 200 hours in 12 months, were less likely to develop hypertension compared to non-volunteers ([APA](#)). Furthermore, an article published in 2013 by *JAMA Pediatrics* ([Journal of the American Medical Association](#)) unveiled that,

Volunteering can also reduce cardiovascular risk in volunteers themselves, suggesting a novel way to promote health in our society. This intervention was found to be effective in

a sample where the majority of adolescents had low socioeconomic status and were from minority groups, indicating an approach that could potentially be used to *target health disparities*.

Volunteering is not only a health benefit for seniors, but even in adolescents. The fact that volunteer service is available to everyone and can be used as medicine makes it a powerful combination.

In an article published by *Blue Zones*, multiple individuals assert that volunteer work was the “catalyst” for positive changes in their mental health. The term ‘Blue Zones’ was coined by Dan Buettner, who investigated areas around the globe reported to have remarkable longevity. Beginning in 2004 with 5 zones categorized, his project has expanded to improving healthy lifestyles in communities by publicly sharing their research, which is available online on their website ([Blue Zones](#)). Naomi Imatome-Yun, a registered nurse and health journalist for *Blue Zones*, asserts volunteer service is a “long-term investment in your health and in your city if you sign up to do it regularly” ([Blue Zones](#)). She cited several sources, all pointing to improved mental and physical health. In one study of chronologically advanced individuals aged 60 years, volunteers reported having better physical health and satisfaction, perceiving volunteering as a “catalyst” to positively impact their mental health. Once again, another study of aging found those who volunteer their time have longer life spans, which is what Blue Zones categories are all about.

What was inconclusive about these studies, however, was the direct effect of the act of “volunteer service” itself on the body, because all service is not equal. For instance, one may

gain exercise from lifting crates in a warehouse, while another could remain stationary while streaming Sunday productions for their church.

Furthermore, the intensity of the results may depend entirely on the motives themselves. Konrath et al. from the *American Psychological Association* reported that “the mortality risk reduction was true only for those with “other-oriented” motives.” Volunteers with self-oriented motives had mortality risk similar to non-volunteers. In other words, participants were shown to live longer when they volunteered for other-oriented reasons. On the contrary, another study reported benefits are conferred only to those with a *positive view* of others. Dr. Sara Johnson concludes, “We may need to personalize the prescription to volunteer—perhaps through framing the prescription to foster positive views of others or to underscore the benefits to others” ([Sage Journals](#)). Thus, it seems that in order to reap the maximum benefits and added longevity that comes with volunteering, services that include physical activity, as well as, altruistic motives are the key ingredients. This phenomenon is backed by the following research. Lara Aknin, director of the *Helping and Happiness Lab* at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, led a review of research in 2020, weighing which of three different motives for altruistic action- autonomy, competence, and relatedness- will boost happiness the most. Published in *Social Issues and Policy Review*, she concluded that, “The most rewarding experiences are those one chooses voluntarily to perform (as opposed to being compelled to), those in which you see your efforts make a positive impact, and those that connect you with other people.” On the same note, the *American Heart Association* ([AHA](#)) shared that “[Asst. Professor Eric] Kim noted a 2011 study in Health Psychology that suggested people who volunteered for altruistic reasons were at lower risk of dying four years later than non-volunteers, while those volunteering for self-centered purposes saw no benefit.”

Brain and Mental Health

Volunteers are recorded to have less depression and anxiety, and higher self-esteem, satisfaction, happiness, and sense of purpose, leading to overall better mental health.

“Researchers can't explain all the connections yet,” states journalist Michael Merschel from a 2023 article published in the *American Heart Association*, where he continues, “Some are clearer than others, such as the link to mental health.”

“Volunteering can help build stronger social networks in a way that probably differs from simply hanging out with friends,” Asst. Professor Eric Kim states. “Volunteering [has an] overarching, outward-focused, pro-social motivation, [making it more] soul-nourishing” ([AJPM](#)). Those who volunteer often work with like-minded people. Some researchers believe strong social relationships could be associated with exercising the anterior cingulate gyrus, a collar-shaped component of the prefrontal cortex that controls emotional regulation and decision making process, as well as a higher density of von Economo neurons which improve dementia ([PLOS](#)). Lara Aknin notes, “Emotional rewards are stronger when people give in ways that are socially connected” ([AHA](#)). People who give receive stronger emotional rewards than those who do not. With the connotation of rewards, having stronger positive emotions associated with memories make them last longer. Because volunteers give service to their community, they receive stronger emotional rewards.

The concept of helper's high was originally coined by Allan Luks in the 1980s. Helper's high is defined by *Psychology Fanatic* as, “The feeling of euphoria, increased well-being, and reduced stress that people experience after engaging in acts of altruism or helping others. It's a combination of physiological and psychological rewards associated with selfless behavior” ([Psychology Fanatic](#)). Luks notes that this phenomenon occurs stronger between direct,

one-on-one interactions. Because parts of formal volunteering and all of informal volunteering are one-on-one, a volunteer can perceive the direct effects of their service towards recipients.

Like many experiments, Allan Luks began by noticing that people who helped others shared a pleasant physical sensation post-service. They described increased energy and warmth, positive moods, and actual relief from aches and pains. To test his theory of the effects of kindness and health, he examined 30,000 volunteers, discovering that there are two stages to helper's high. The first stage is the initial response to helping another. This incorporates a wave of the body's natural painkillers, endorphins. The second stage is calmer, activating the reward center in the brain to release a mix of biochemicals: serotonin (social fulfillment), dopamine (reward and motivation), and oxytocin (bonding "love" hormone) ([Allan Luks, Cleveland Clinic](#)). He also indicates that those who assist others directly tend to have a stronger feeling or reaction, because of the personal moment and "emotional resonant experience" ([Psychology Fanatic](#)). Therefore, while all volunteer services are acts of helping, helping beneficiaries directly will bring about a full helper's high experience. With importance, he observed that regular helpers are ten times more likely to be in good health than that of non-helpers. By nature of its service, volunteers have the opportunity to experience this nourishing phenomenon, and acutely so.

In conclusion, a vast amount of research examines the connection between physical health and volunteerism. However, simply doing service is not enough to reap the whole benefits. Having selfless, "other"-oriented motives lead to the most fulfilling experiences.

SOCIETAL IMPACT

“For the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), volunteerism is not separate from development; it is a vital part of the human infrastructure that sustains progress.” – Haoliang Xu, UNDP Associate Administrator

Volunteer service begins to impact society in multiple areas. Not only does volunteering support the community and the individual, volunteering also sets a moral example for younger generations, provides for disaster relief, and affects the economy. Christianity further explains why this approach is so fulfilling.

The Moral Example

“Whatever you do, whatever you don’t do, affects someone else.” – Maj Alexandra Wiggins, Civil Air Patrol

Older folks who volunteer continue to set the example for younger people. This is important because virtues and values are dependent upon a standard or expectation. Naturally, we look at those who precede us as role models– our parents, grandparents, teachers, doctors, discoverers, artists, church elders, military leaders, and community leaders. With their accumulated experience, skills, and wisdom, retirees become invaluable blessings to their communities. Jim Rohn says, “You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.” Whether one realizes it or not, altruism influences the next generation. Everyone leaves an impression. Maya Angelou, a renowned poet and civil rights activist, affirms that “People will

forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

Colonel Craig E. Newton is a prime example. During the Coronavirus pandemic, he opted to retire from his job as a mechanical engineer. He had joined a Civil Air Patrol squadron volunteering to assist in any way. They needed a safety officer. From being a safety officer Colonel Newton quickly found he needed to learn more about Civil Air Patrol’s missions. He learned. Soon he was promoted to squadron commander, then group commander, then deputy for the state. This past year had represented the wing to advocate for national-level support. Serving 40 hours per week, Col Newton is the California Wing Commander, setting the example for the entire state. In our conversation, he shared a quote he hopes guides his life from anthropologist Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Disaster Relief and Recovery

Retirees and seniors are a key factor to an effective disaster response. *Senior Daily News* presents that despite the common belief that disaster relief is physically demanding, an effective intervention requires a variety of skills, such as administration and logistical support, emotional care, and long-term availability to rebuild the community. “Seniors, with their wealth of experience, resilience, and dedication, bring an invaluable presence to these efforts.” ([SDN](#))

In March 2020, Governor Cuomo of the state of New York called on health professionals to care for the rising overflow of coronavirus patients. Over 52,000 volunteers showed up, the majority composed of retirees and students ([TIME](#)). Team Rubicon, a veteran-led humanitarian organization provides international disaster relief. In 2021, 11% of their volunteers who had

deployed at least five times were aged 65 or older. Being the senior instructors, experienced equipment operators, seasoned sawyers, and mentors among their peers, the seniors were vital to quality operations ([Team Rubicon](#)). From 2018 through 2022, following the wake of storms in Texas, a group of retired veterans volunteered with Samaritan's Purse to remove debris from yards around the community ([Samaritan's Purse](#)). After the Eaton and Palisades fires, the Pasadena Senior Center opened its doors for seniors to volunteer, restoring their emotional wellbeing and granting volunteers a sense of purpose. ([Pasadena Senior Center](#))

Other organizations follow a similar route: Samaritan's Purse, Salvation Army, American Red Cross. Without the volunteers with more experience, who have the temperance that younger volunteers do not have, volunteer organizations would be much different today.

America Needs Volunteers: Economic Effect

"Without volunteers, we would be a nation without a soul." - Rosalynn Carter

By its nature, volunteer service can last through economic crises. Generally, retired individuals are financially sound. With the development of artificial intelligence, reduced immigration, and companies unable to find enough qualified workers, a significant job gap is predicted ([Inc](#)). Retirees can volunteer to temporarily fill job gaps in the work force, or train students in various fields, such as management, public speaking, and specific operations. Countries such as third world countries, where advancing technology cannot reach is where volunteers are needed.

Additionally, while paid work is built to affect economics, the numbers saved through volunteer service are astonishing. In a 2023 study by AmeriCorps, formal volunteers in the

United States served over 4.99 billion hours with an estimated \$167.2 billion of economic value ([NonProfit PRO](#)). Furthermore, Rotary, an international volunteer organization, was estimated to save up to US\$850 million, as recorded in the 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report published by the United Nations ([SWVR](#)). This is an astonishing contrast with the initial investment of volunteering. Imagine needing to pay all these people if people were not willing to volunteer.

The Christian Servant

While there have been various conversations around volunteer service and its benefits, not only to the recipients, but to the servant, the principal question that has not been answered is why people should do it, or what is the “greater good.” The concept of the greater good must have an origin or a standard, otherwise it simply remains as a concept of unknown origin. In fact, the definitions will infinitely circle without becoming closer to an answer.

In regards to origins, a concept of consenting to a greater good was introduced as the Golden Rule in early Egypt between 664-323 BC, with the phrase, “That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another.” ([University of Chicago](#)) Translating Thales of Miletus’ words from the 6th century, Greek biographer Diogenes Laërtius writes, “When asked how men might live most virtuously and most justly, he said, ‘If we never do ourselves what we blame in others.’” ([Project Gutenberg](#)) Centuries later, eastern philosophers like Confucius even emphasized in *The Analects*, 「己所不欲，勿施於人。」Which translates roughly to, “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others” ([Chinese Text Project](#)). Finally, Biblically, in Luke 6:31, the following concept was the first positive form of this command, “Do to others what you would have them do to you.” However, what made Jesus’s words so revolutionary was the

exhortation of active goodness towards one another *without* expectation that they will repay or treat you the same. As painful as that is, his words encompass not only human decency, but are the culmination of what loving others looks like. Moreover, 1 Corinthians 13:14 further qualifies and describes true love towards others as patient, kind, is not proud or self-seeking, rejoices in truth, is always protecting, trusting, hoping, and persevering.

According to Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr, everyone has an impulse called the drum major instinct, which is the desire everyone has to be great, to be first, to be the best! “We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade. Alfred Adler, the great psychoanalyst, contends that this is the dominant impulse.” Everyone has it ([Bethlehem Farm](#)). However, while this human tendency could lead to pride, harnessed properly, it could lead to something better. When James and John asked to be placed upon heavenly thrones to the left and right of Jesus, the King did not rebuke them for being selfish or wanting to be first. Instead, he recognized it, and pointed them in the right direction. Jesus said, “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Rather than rebuking his disciples, he urges them to subjugate their human desires, do the opposite of what society upholds, and embrace servanthood towards others as a higher moral endeavor.

Jesus further calls us to be *set apart* in this world in actionable ways. By volunteering, we display His light. In his video, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, Ryan Kasper further clarifies this concept:

Yet that is what Jesus asks for; not glory, not vengeance, not dominance, but transcendence. Transcendence of the norm, through love, humility, restraint, mercy, and radical compassion. And that's why this philosophy matters. Because, if you've ever actually tried to live like this, not perfectly, but honestly, you'd see that something the world doesn't know what to do with.

And so, if we want to be heard and to be a positive influence, one must first assist another, placing others before oneself. Not only striving to be heard just to be heard, rather to be instruments for the Lord's love towards others. 1 John 3:18 proclaims, "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." By serving others, we Christians actively fulfill these exhortations.

Andy Truitt, former *Classical Conversations* national director, recasts our identity and echoes these thoughts by stating, "Our purpose is to be the tangible expression of God's love to others."

CONCLUSION

"If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way." – Martin Luther King Jr.

Three years later, I maintain a connection with my former airshow strike team leader and wingman. Moreover, I constantly recognize the efforts of the people who volunteer there, who continue leading the next generation through building character and serving our nation.

After examining the impact volunteer service leaves on the individual, on our health (physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally), and on society, the average-aged retired person should participate in volunteer service. If these are the benefits you can reap later in life, how much more rewarding will it be to start now?

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