



WHITE PAPER

Building a lasting volunteer community:

Retention strategies to combat
food insecurity in the USA

Introduction

Food insecurity, defined as the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, remains a persistent issue in the United States.

In the fight against food insecurity, volunteer retention has proven to be a critical factor. A stable volunteer base not only improves the quality of services provided, but also reduces the operational costs associated with continuous recruitment and training.

This white paper aims to illustrate volunteers' role within charitable organizations tackling food insecurity across the United States. By keeping volunteers engaged and committed, charities can operate more efficiently, ensuring that resources are directed where they're needed most. Additionally, this paper will demonstrate how tools like Rosterfy's volunteer management platform can enhance volunteer engagement and retention, providing a valuable tool for organizations working to alleviate hunger.



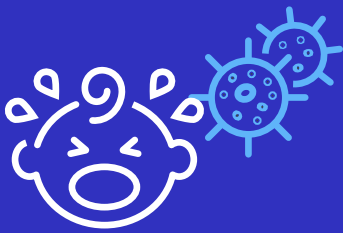
12.8%

In 2022, the prevalence of food insecurity was significantly higher than in previous years, **rising to a concerning level of 12.8%**, compared to 10.2% of households in 2021.¹



Food Insecurity in the USA: Current Landscape

Food insecurity has become an increasingly pressing issue in the United States, with recent years marking a significant rise in the number of households struggling to access adequate food.



The **COVID-19** pandemic exacerbated this problem, with its impact still reverberating across communities. For instance, **families with children experienced food insecurity at a rate of 8.8% in 2022**, up from 6.2% in 2021.²

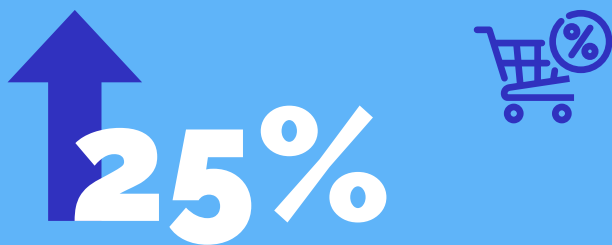
Societal disparities have also become more pronounced, although the issue is too complex to link to just one demographic. For example, food insecurity rates among Hispanic households surged to 32.8% from 2019 to 2022,³ reflecting systemic challenges faced by communities. Additionally, some studies have shown that disabled working-age adults and unemployed individuals are at a greater risk of experiencing food insecurity,⁴ and over half of adults with serious mental illness reported low or very low levels of food security.⁵

Beyond social and personal factors, geography can play a role, as rural areas often face unique challenges exacerbating food insecurity. Factors such as limited transportation, low wages, underemployment and systemic racism unfortunately still contribute to higher hunger rates in these regions.⁶



Challenges Faced by Charities and Food Banks

Charities and food banks across the United States are grappling with significant resource constraints as they strive to meet the growing demand for food assistance.



Over the past four years, **grocery prices have surged by 25%**, disproportionately affecting low-income families who now spend a staggering 31% of their earnings on food.⁷

This sharp increase in food costs has not only strained the budgets of those in need, but also escalated the operational expenses of food banks. Rising food expenses coupled with often stagnant or shrinking funding have left many organizations struggling to maintain their services.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a troubling decline in volunteer numbers, compounding the challenges faced by charities and food banks. Between September 2020 and September 2021, the number of volunteers in the United States dropped by approximately 7 percentage points. For example, the Denver Rescue Mission experienced a drop in their annual volunteer numbers from 16,000 to 14,000.⁸ This decrease in volunteer engagement has had a profound impact on the operations of many organizations, reducing their capacity to distribute food and support their communities. Additionally, a survey conducted by Feeding America revealed that 127 food banks in its network still required more volunteers to sustain their activities.⁹

The increased demand for food assistance has also highlighted the demand for expanded infrastructure among charities and food banks. Many organizations are finding themselves in need of additional warehouse space, vehicles for food distribution and other essential equipment to manage the growing volume of food donations and deliveries. Without adequate infrastructure, these organizations face significant logistical challenges, hindering their ability to effectively address the escalating food insecurity in their communities.

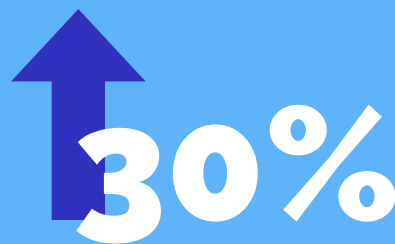
The Role of Volunteers in Addressing Food Insecurity

While it's true that volunteers play critical roles in sorting and distributing food or organizing drives, those examples can't fully capture the value they bring to their communities. Leveraging each volunteer's unique strengths and skills allows nonprofits to stretch their resources further and serve more individuals. Successful volunteer-driven initiatives, such as community food pantries and mobile food distribution programs, have already demonstrated the powerful impact that a committed volunteer force can have on alleviating food insecurity. While variables may differ across the globe, it's clear that the value of volunteers is practically universal, as volunteer managers from New Zealand can attest.

"Volunteers are integral to our operations, enabling us to efficiently distribute food to our Food Hubs and prevent edible surplus from reaching landfills,"

– Madi Walter, Marketing & Communications Manager at NZFN.

However, managing and retaining volunteers has become increasingly challenging in the current economic climate. The cost-of-living crisis has placed a significant financial burden on many Americans, making it more difficult for them to commit time to volunteer work.



30%

The typical American household is now rent-burdened, with **more than 30% of their earnings going toward rent.**

Additionally, nearly 19% of renters reported falling behind on rent payments at some point in 2023, a 2 percentage point increase from the previous year.¹⁰

Homeowners face similar challenges, as home ownership costs have risen to levels that consume roughly 30% of a borrower's gross monthly income, surpassing the recommended threshold of 28%.¹¹

These financial pressures leave fewer resources and less time for volunteer activities, as individuals prioritize securing their own livelihoods. The reduction in available volunteers places additional strain on food banks and nonprofits, which are already dealing with increased demand for their services. This situation underscores the importance of effective volunteer management strategies that can maximize the value of each volunteer's contribution.

Tools like Rosterfy's ROI Volunteer Value Calculator can help organizations better understand the true value of their volunteer programs, making it easier to justify investments in volunteer retention and engagement strategies.¹²

Effective Strategies for Volunteer Engagement and Retention

In the current economic climate, offering meaningful and flexible volunteering opportunities is crucial for engaging and retaining volunteers. Many volunteers are experiencing increased pressures due to the cost-of-living crisis, which has significantly impacted their ability to commit time and resources to charitable activities.

For instance, in the UK, 38% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) participants reported volunteering less frequently due to financial strains.

Additionally, 41% of these volunteers have taken on new responsibilities related to the financial crisis, limiting their availability for traditional volunteering roles.¹⁴

40%



40% of charities state that the recent drop in volunteers has kept them from achieving their main organizational goals.¹³

To address these challenges, organizations can implement skill-based volunteering and mentorship programs, which allow volunteers to contribute in ways that align with their professional development goals. By doing so, nonprofits not only help volunteers build their resumes and acquire new skills but also provide opportunities that are more manageable alongside their other commitments. Flexible volunteering options, such as virtual or short-term projects, can make it easier for volunteers to stay engaged without overextending themselves.

Providing tangible support and resources to volunteers is another essential strategy for retention. The financial burden of volunteering, particularly travel expenses, can be a significant deterrent. In the UK, 16% of BAME volunteers reported that they personally paid for travel costs, compared to 9% of non-BAME volunteers.¹⁴

While current numbers for the United States are not yet available, the disproportionate effect of food insecurity on some demographics might suggest that some of the same variables are at play.

Problems like these can be alleviated by offering financial assistance for travel expenses or virtual volunteering options in certain scenarios.

22%



Also, **22% of volunteers expressed feeling too exhausted to continue volunteering**,¹⁴ highlighting the need for nonprofits to create support networks that can bolster mental health and well-being.

Providing training and development opportunities further enhances the volunteer experience, equipping participants with new skills and fostering a sense of personal growth and accomplishment.

Rosterfy's attendance tracking system also plays a critical role in supporting volunteers by simplifying the check-in process for shifts and events, matching each individual to relevant opportunities based on their availability and skills.

This not only helps volunteers easily manage their commitments but also enables organizations to maintain accurate records of volunteer participation, ensuring that their contributions are effectively managed.¹⁵

Recognizing and appreciating volunteer efforts is fundamental to maintaining a positive and supportive environment. In the face of economic pressures, volunteers need to feel valued and motivated to continue their endeavors.

Rosterfy's reward feature offers an innovative way to track and redeem volunteer rewards, gamifying the volunteer management process and making recognition an integral part of the volunteer experience.¹⁶

By acknowledging their efforts, organizations can reinforce the importance of each volunteer's contributions, boosting morale and encouraging continued engagement.

Creating an inclusive and supportive environment is equally important. As the cost-of-living crisis has taken a toll on many volunteers, particularly those from marginalized communities, nonprofits must prioritize fostering a welcoming atmosphere. This includes providing resources and support tailored to the needs of diverse volunteer groups, ensuring that all volunteers feel appreciated and empowered to make a difference.

How Rosterfy can help you build a lasting volunteer community

Rosterfy is designed to streamline the volunteer management process, offering features that simplify volunteer engagement, training and communication,¹⁷ making it easier for organizations to engage and retain volunteers. By automating key tasks, the platform reduces the administrative burden, allowing managers to focus on strategic activities that enhance volunteer engagement.

Automation for Efficiency

Rosterfy's task automation eliminates repetitive administrative tasks, such as scheduling and rostering.¹⁸ Volunteers are assigned to shifts that match their availability and skills, minimizing scheduling conflicts and gaps in coverage.

Real-Time Insights

With customizable dashboards, managers can visualize their roster's status in real-time. Metrics like volunteer attendance and impact are tracked, helping organizations to maintain a connected and engaged volunteer community.



As Lori Glick from Blessings of Hope noted:

"We like to keep those stats in front of volunteers so they can see their contributions are really making an impact. All that data feeds directly from Rosterfy."¹⁹

Enhanced Communication

Rosterfy's communication tools, including automated emails, SMS and mobile notifications, ensure volunteers are informed and connected, reducing the likelihood of miscommunication. Volunteers appreciate knowing where their efforts are directed, which fosters a sense of purpose and belonging within the organization.

Volunteer Satisfaction and Retention

Organizations using Rosterfy have reported increased volunteer satisfaction due to the ease of managing commitments and the recognition provided through incentive programs. For example, The Miami Dolphins Special Teams' incentive program automatically tracks volunteer hours through Rosterfy, rewarding volunteers with points that can be exchanged for memorabilia, concert tickets and more.²⁰

Key Features Supporting Volunteer Management:



Screen: Ensure compliance with thorough volunteer screening and background checks.



Check In & Out: Manage attendance onsite or remotely using kiosks or geo-fencing.



Integrate: Create a single source of truth for your volunteer program with over 30 API integrations.



Report: Track the ROI of your volunteer program with customizable reports.

The Path Forward: Enhancing Food Security Through Volunteer Retention

To effectively enhance food security through volunteer retention, it's imperative to back these efforts with robust public policies and community engagement strategies.²¹ We must recognize the critical role that volunteers play in addressing food insecurity and ensure that support systems are in place to facilitate volunteerism. This includes providing funding for volunteer programs, offering tax incentives for volunteering and implementing frameworks that reduce the financial barriers to volunteer participation.

Additionally, fostering strong community partnerships is essential for sustaining volunteer engagement. Organizations should collaborate with local businesses, schools and civic groups to build a network of support for their volunteer initiatives. These partnerships can help expand the reach of volunteer programs and ensure that resources are available to meet the needs of volunteers, such as providing transportation, childcare or financial assistance.



As organizations continue to navigate the challenges of addressing food insecurity, optimizing volunteer management must be a top priority. By leveraging tools like Rosterfy, organizations can create a more effective and satisfying volunteer experience, leading to higher retention rates and greater overall impact. We encourage all organizations to explore Rosterfy's solutions for improving volunteer engagement and retention. By doing so, they can build a resilient volunteer force that is crucial in the ongoing fight against food insecurity.



Sources:

1. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/>
2. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/107703/err-325.pdf?v=6901.4>
3. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Rachidi-Gundersen_Why-Did-Food-Insecurity-Increase.pdf?x85095
4. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10753081/>
5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9551141/>
6. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/rural-hunger-facts>
7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/02/02/grocery-price-inflation-biden/>
8. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/12/09/volunteer-decline-homeless-pandemic/>
9. <https://apnews.com/article/business-new-york-f1d0043611da56718aa205b13f8g81d6>
10. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2023-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202405.pdf>
11. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/mortgages/cost-of-living-by-state/>
12. <https://www.rosterfy.com/blog/quantifying-the-value-of-volunteers>
13. <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e02585be-c7d7-48c4-9d10-83f1902cf8cc>
14. <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/bame-individuals-volunteering-less-often-due-to-cost-of-living-crisis-survey-reports.html#sthash.JbWGIJyea.dpuf>
15. <https://www.rosterfy.com/knowledge/check-in-system>
16. <https://www.rosterfy.com/features-reward-and-recognition>
17. <https://www.rosterfy.com/features-volunteer-management>
18. <https://www.rosterfy.com/features-schedules-and-rostering>
19. <https://www.rosterfy.com/blog/case-study-blessings-of-hope>
20. <https://www.rosterfy.com/blog/the-miami-dolphins-special-teams-the-heart-of-the-community/>
21. <https://www.rosterfy.com/security-compliance>



www.rosterfy.com