better impact

NVW 2026

THE BETTER IMPACT REPORT · 2026

State of Volunteer Growth 2026

Growth is happening. Here's where.

COHORT OUTCOMES · N=3,949

12 MONTHS

Where organizations landed

Grew meaningfully (> +10%)	1,422 orgs
Held steady (±10%)	2,009 orgs
Contracted (> −10%)	518 orgs

GREW OR HELD STEADY **87%**

**Percentages are rounded independently and may not sum to totals.*

ORGANIZATIONS

3,949

Established organizations studied

ACTIVE VOLUNTEERS

2.5M

At study endpoint, April 2026

NET VOLUNTEERS ADDED

+132,599

+5.7% year-over-year gain

PUBLISHED APRIL 2026 · HOUSTON GOODWIN, CEO

betterimpact.com/state-of-volunteer-growth

01 · FOREWORD · HOUSTON GOODWIN, CEO

For the last twelve months, the question I've been trying to answer is a simple one: what's actually happening to volunteer programs right now?

I've spent most of my career in industries where that question is answerable in ten minutes. Benchmarks, dashboards, year-over-year comps. In the volunteer world, I couldn't find the answer anywhere. The data exists in pieces, a survey here, a national participation rate there, most of it lagging, none of it answering the question a program leader actually needs answered: *are programs like mine growing?*

So we built the answer ourselves. Every day, for a full year, we pulled active volunteer counts from 3,949 established volunteer organizations.

The biggest surprise: the fastest-growing volunteer segment isn't food banks or disaster response. It's **arts and culture, growing at more than three times the rate of healthcare.**

Beneath that, a steadier story. **87% of the 3,949 organizations grew or held steady.** More than a third grew meaningfully. The ones that grew, grew fast – averaging 31% expansion (median: 28%), concentrated in the fastest-growing cohort.

This is our first *State of Volunteer Growth* report. As long as I'm running this company, we'll publish one every year. The full picture, not just the wins.

DISCLOSURE

This study draws entirely from Better Impact's Volunteer Impact platform. As the platform provider, we have a commercial relationship with the organizations studied. We've published the methodology, the limitations, and the losses alongside the growth so readers can evaluate the findings independently.

Houston Goodwin

CEO, BETTER IMPACT

"To the leaders of the 3,949 organizations in this study, and to everyone across our industry: thank you. Happy National Volunteer Week."

02 · KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

Six numbers that define this year's report.

A twelve-month measurement of 3,949 established volunteer organizations across the US, Canada, UK, and Australia. Drawn from daily active-volunteer counts on Volunteer Impact.

ORGANIZATIONS

3,949

Established programs measured daily over twelve months.

GREW OR HELD STEADY

87.0%

Within ±10% of baseline or above it at measurement endpoint.

GREW MEANINGFULLY

36%

Exceeded +10% year-over-year, more than a third of the cohort.

NET VOLUNTEERS ADDED

+132,599

A +5.7% aggregate cohort gain, April 2025 to April 2026.

AVERAGE GROWER EXPANSION

+31%

The growers didn't grow marginally. They grew fast.

Median growth of 28%

ARTS & CULTURE · FASTEST SEGMENT

+12.9%

More than three times the rate of healthcare; more than five times the rate of education.

Total active volunteer base measured: **2.5 million** in April 2026, up from 2.3 million in April 2025.
*Percentages are rounded independently and may not sum to totals.

03 · THE STUDY

The national picture, in one paragraph.

Most national indicators of civic participation have softened over the past decade. The **2023 AmeriCorps Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement** showed the formal volunteer rate recovering to 28.3% from a pandemic low of 23.2%, still below pre-pandemic levels of roughly 30% and hours per volunteer have continued to decline.

Against that backdrop, the organizations in this study told a different story. Our study measures something different – active volunteer counts inside established programs, not population-level participation rates – but the contrast is worth examining.

Methodology

Scope. 3,949 established volunteer organizations Volunteer Impact customers active before December 1, 2024, still active as of April 15, 2026, with at least an average volunteer count of 10 over the study. The December cutoff gave every organization at least four months of normal operations before the April 2025 baseline.

Filters preserved 99.5% of the volunteer population. We filtered out micro-programs and platform departures. The methodology tightened on organizations, not on people.

Measurement window. April 15, 2025 to April 15, 2026. Exactly twelve months, daily cadence.

AGGREGATE REACH

BASELINE · APR 2025

2,324,767

active volunteers

↓

CURRENT · APR 2026

2,457,366

active volunteers

NET CHANGE

+132,599

+5.7% cohort growth

WHAT WE COUNTED

Active volunteer counts, a volunteer with a current record and tracked activity inside the window. **Hours, event signups, and applicant-stage volunteers were not counted.** Conservative by design.

FINDING 1

87% of organizations grew or held steady.

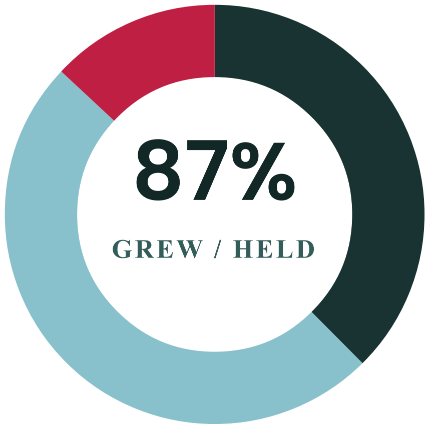
Across 3,949 established volunteer organizations, **36.0% grew meaningfully** (more than +10%), **50.9% held steady** (within ±10% of baseline), and **13.1% contracted beyond 10%**.

The cohort in aggregate added 132,599 active volunteers between April 2025 and April 2026 a 5.7% year-over-year increase.

Why this matters. The national formal volunteer rate is still below pre-pandemic levels, and hours per volunteer keep falling. Inside the 3,949 organizations we tracked, the volunteer base grew **+5.7%** over the same period. *Same direction as the national recovery, very different speed.*

Among the organizations that grew, average expansion was **+31% (median: 28%), concentrated in the fastest-growing cohort**. That's not marginal. The growers grew.

DISTRIBUTION · N=3,949



Grew >+10%	36.0% · 1,422
Held steady	50.9% · 2,009
Contracted	13.1% · 518

"In established programs with consistent operational tracking, growth was more common than contraction."

FINDING 2

A high-growth cohort is showing what's possible.

GROWERS IN THE STUDY

1,422

36.0% of the cohort grew >+10% year-over-year.

TOP 10% – HIGH-GROWTH

395

Organizations powering most of the cohort's gross growth.

VOLUNTEERS THEY ADDED

+189,227

Added over twelve months, across every segment we studied.

High-growth programs are not a different species. They run on the same platforms, serve similar missions, and operate in the same economic environment as everyone else. Which means what they're doing is replicable.

The real question isn't *why* these 395 organizations grew. It's **what the rest of the field can learn from them.**

Their presence in every category rules out the theory that growth is the exclusive property of any one kind of organization.

WHERE THE TOP 395 OPERATE

Healthcare	present
Government & Public Sector	present
Education & Learning	present
Arts, Culture & Entertainment	present
Non-profit & Social Services	present

Coming next. Follow-up research interviews leaders from this 395-organization cohort to surface the specific practices that set them apart. *Continues on page 7 →*

FINDING 2 · CONTINUED

Inside the +132,599.

To be transparent about how the cohort-level net of +132,599 actually breaks down, the table below decomposes the year into four groups. **Growth, stability, and contraction were all real and all sizable at the same time.**

WATERFALL · NET CHANGE BY COHORT

Bars scaled to absolute volunteer change

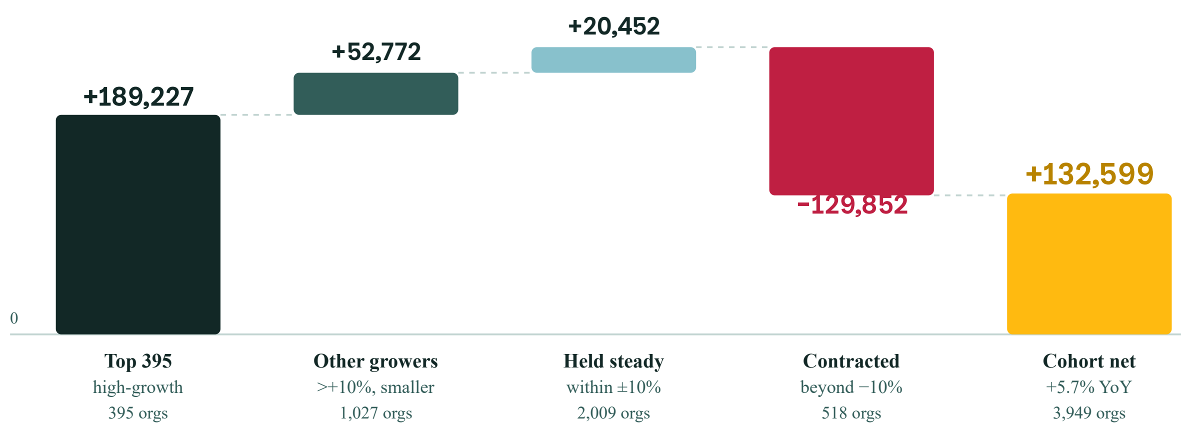


Figure 2.1 · Waterfall of volunteer change by cohort, April 2025 – April 2026.

COHORT	# OF ORGS	NET VOLUNTEER CHANGE
Top 395 high-growth organizations	395	+189,227
Other 1,027 growers – also >+10%, smaller in absolute gain	1,027	+52,772
Held steady – within ±10% of baseline	2,009	+20,452
Contracted beyond 10%	518	−129,852
Total study	3,949	+132,599

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

The shape of the year.

01

Growth concentrates at the top.

The top 395 grew at a rate that dominates the gross-growth number. The group interviews we're running next aim to understand why.

02

The middle is genuinely stable.

The 2,009 organizations in the middle aren't quietly losing ground. They're holding. In a sector where the assumption is decline, holding is a finding.

03

The losses are real.

The contracting 518 shed 129,852 volunteers collectively. That loss isn't a rounding story we treat it with the same seriousness as the growth.

The cohort-level gain exists because **growth at the top outpaced the combined drag of contraction and the normal operational variance in the held-steady middle.** That's the shape of the year. We wanted the math visible on the page.

A CAVEAT ON THE 518

We can't cleanly separate operational contraction from program wind-downs and heavy seasonality. A festival organization in an off-year, a community corps running a lean cycle, or a government program that restructured will all show up as "contracted" under our methodology, even though the mechanism is different.

Some share of the −129,852 is operators losing ground. Some share is programs that ended, paused, or ran on a seasonal low. Without customer-level inspection we can't give you the split – and we didn't want to filter on guesses about which is which.

The honest read: the true operational-contraction number is somewhat smaller than −129,852. We publish the full figure so readers can draw their own conclusions.

FINDING 3

Where the growth actually lives.

Not every segment moved at the same rate. The surprise is **where the growth is concentrated.**

SEGMENT	YEAR-OVER-YEAR GROWTH RATE	GROWTH
Arts, Culture & Entertainment 498 orgs · 178,678 volunteers	+12.9%	+22,993
Non-profit & Social Services 1,831 orgs · 1,283,518 volunteers	+6.4%	+81,907
Healthcare 557 orgs · 229,674 volunteers	+3.8%	+8,681
Government & Public Sector 533 orgs · 382,247 volunteers	+3.6%	+13,760
Education & Learning 382 orgs · 213,146 volunteers	+2.3%	+4,875
General / Other 148 orgs · 37,504 volunteers	+1.0%	+383

Figure 3.1 · YoY growth rate by segment. N=3,949 organizations across the US, Canada, UK, and Australia.

Consistent across segments

Every major segment has 37–40% of organizations meaningfully growing. Recovery spans categories rather than clustering.

Government runs the highest contraction rate

16.1% of government and public-sector organizations contracted beyond 10% – the highest rate of any segment and an early signal that municipal budget pressure is showing up in program capacity.

SIDEBAR · THE QUIET STORY OF 2026

Arts & Culture.

498 organizations. +12.9% in twelve months. Running more than three times the rate of healthcare.

Across 498 organizations in the Arts, Culture & Entertainment segment; festivals, theaters, galleries, museums, community events, and performing arts organizations, **the active volunteer base grew by 12.9% year-over-year, adding 22,993 volunteers in twelve months.**

That's more than three times the growth rate of healthcare volunteering (+3.8%), more than five times the rate of education (+2.3%), and roughly double the rate of the largest non-profit segment (+6.4%).

Arts and culture doesn't typically dominate the volunteer-sector conversation. The national recovery story usually gets told through food banks, animal shelters, and disaster response. **Our data suggests live experience – music festivals, theater programs, community arts, museum docenting – is drawing volunteers back at a pace no other segment has matched post-pandemic.**

GROWTH RATIO

Arts & Culture	**+12.9%**
Healthcare	+3.8%
Education	+2.3%

~3× the rate of healthcare; **~5×** the rate of education.

VOLUNTEERS ADDED

+23,000

Net active volunteers added across arts, culture and entertainment in twelve months.

Open invitation. *To arts-sector researchers and trade press: the numbers here are yours. Please use them.*

04 · THE FULL PICTURE

A look at the 13% that contracted.

Not every organization grew. **518 of them, or 13% of the study**, ended the twelve-month window with meaningfully fewer active volunteers than they started with (defined as a decline of more than 10%).

01 Not concentrated in any one segment.

Meaningful contraction shows up across every industry, ranging from **12.3% of non-profit** organizations to **16.1% of government and public-sector** organizations.

02 Government programs hit hardest.

16.1% contraction rate in government and public sector vs. 13.1% across all segments an early signal that municipal budget pressure is showing up in program capacity.

03 Meaningful decline, not collapse.

Average decline among the 518 was **36%** (median: 24%). Only 19 organizations across the entire study dropped below 10 volunteers – those are closures, not contractions, and we excluded them from the cohort.

04 Not broad recruitment failure.

Early signal suggests program wind-downs, mission scope changes, and budget shifts rather than systemic inability to recruit. We'll confirm or challenge that pattern in the 2027 refresh.

GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC SECTOR

16.1%

CONTRACTION RATE

We're publishing the 13% deliberately, we'd rather tell the whole story than clean the data into a single headline.

05 · WHAT THIS MEANS

A stronger year for the volunteer sector than the headlines suggest.

87%
GREW OR HELD

Nearly 87% of organizations in our study grew or held their ground. More than a third expanded meaningfully. Against the national backdrop of a fragile volunteer-rate recovery, this cohort is running ahead.

+12.9%
ARTS · #1 SEGMENT

The fastest-growing segment isn't the one anyone expected. Arts and culture outran the field by a wide margin – an uncovered story and an open invitation to arts-sector researchers and trade press.

395
GROWTH ENGINE

A cohort of 395 high-growth organizations is showing the rest of the field what's achievable. Same platforms, similar missions, different outcomes. That's replicable.

We built this study because the field has never had a shared, data-backed view of how volunteer programs actually grow, contract, or hold steady over time. **Better Impact has one of the largest operational datasets of active volunteer programs in North America, Europe, and Oceania. We think that dataset is worth putting to work for the field.**

06 · THE RESEARCH AGENDA

What we plan to publish over the next twelve months.

01

A deeper look at what growth actually buys.

What does a year of expansion translate to in volunteer hours, operational capacity, and community value? We have the data to answer this and will do so later this year.

02

What high-growth programs do differently.

We're interviewing leaders from the fastest-growing cohort to surface the specific practices, recruitment approaches, and volunteer-experience choices that set them apart. The goal: **a playbook other programs can actually use.**

03

A shared framework for program health.

The sector doesn't yet have a common language for describing whether a volunteer program is growing, stable, or declining in a meaningful way. We want that to change, and we'll share our thinking in the months ahead.

04

An annual refresh.

We'll run this study again in 2027, with the same methodology, so the field has a year-over-year comparison.

If you lead, fund, study, or serve a volunteer program, **we'd like to hear from you.** This is a starting point, not a conclusion. support@betterimpact.com

APPENDIX A · METHODOLOGY + LIMITATIONS

How we measured the year.

Study population

3,949 organizations using Better Impact's Volunteer Impact product. Criteria: **active customer on or before December 1, 2024**, still active as of April 15, 2026, with an average active volunteer count exceeding 10 across the twelve-month measurement window.

Measurement

Active volunteer count pulled daily across the window, with **April 15, 2025 baseline** compared to **April 15, 2026 endpoint**. "Active" means a volunteer with a current record: someone assigned, scheduled, or contributing time.

Stability classification

Organizations whose endpoint counts were within **±10% of baseline** are classified as "held steady." This band accounts for normal operational variance rather than trend.

Two different populations

Our findings reflect growth among **digitally-enabled organizations running on a volunteer management platform.** National rates (AmeriCorps, Independent Sector) reflect the entire nonprofit sector including organizations with no volunteer infrastructure. Different populations, not contradictory findings.

Survivorship note

Organizations that left the Volunteer Impact platform during the measurement window are excluded from the study. If contraction correlates with platform departure, our growth figures may carry an upward bias. We'll add churn-adjusted analysis in the 2027 edition.

Known limitations

- ✓ Sample of technology-enabled volunteer organizations **not a representative population sample**.
- ✓ Volunteer Impact customers only. Better Impact's **Get Connected** network is not included.
- ✓ Organizations averaging fewer than 10 active volunteers across the measurement window are excluded. This removes **micro-programs** and dormant accounts without relying on single-day snapshots.

WHAT WE DID NOT MEASURE

Hours-per-volunteer, definitions vary across the customer base. This report stays on volunteer counts.

Data contact · support@betterimpact.com Scope · US · Canada · UK · Australia

APPENDIX B · REFERENCES

Sources & further reading.

[01] **U.S. Census Bureau.** *At Height of Pandemic, More Than Half of People Age 16 and Over Helped Neighbors, 23% Formally Volunteered.* January 2023. census.gov/library/stories/2023/01/volunteering-and-civic-life-in-america.html

[02] **AmeriCorps & U.S. Census Bureau.** *2023 Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) Supplement to the Current Population Survey.* November 2024. Formal volunteer rate of 28.3% in 2023, recovered from 23.2% in 2021; hours-per-volunteer continuing to decline. americorps.gov/about/our-impact/volunteering-civic-life

[03] **Independent Sector.** *Health of the U.S. Nonprofit Sector: 2025 Annual Review.* December 2025. Pre-pandemic volunteer rate of 30% (2017, 2019) vs. 28% in 2023. independentsector.org/resource/health-of-the-u-s-nonprofit-sector/

[04] **National Council of Nonprofits.** *New Data and Resources on Volunteers.* 2024. 46.8% of nonprofit CEOs report volunteer recruitment as a "big problem," a 62% increase over 2003. councilofnonprofits.org/articles/new-data-and-resources-volunteers

ABOUT BETTER IMPACT

Better Impact is the largest volunteer experience platform in North America, supporting more than **3,500 paying customers** and approximately **80,000 organizations** across Volunteer Impact, Get Connected, and Volunteer Link.

More than **700 million volunteer hours** have been logged on the platform.

Learn more at betterimpact.com.

CITATIONS & VERIFICATION

All citations verified April 2026.

This report will be refreshed annually. The 2027 edition will run the same methodology on the same cohort plus new entrants, with churn-adjusted comparisons added.

For press, research, or partnership inquiries: support@betterimpact.com

NVW 2026 · FIRST ANNUAL

The numbers are yours. The story is yours.

For National Volunteer Week 2026: **thank you to every volunteer professional** in the 3,949 organizations we studied, and to everyone across our industry doing this work.

This is your field.

READ THE FULL REPORT ONLINE

betterimpact.com/state-of-volunteer-growth

better impact

Hamilton, Ontario · Made for the field.