Increasing Volunteers for State Agency Programs

Produced by the International Hunter Education Association-USA &
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Executive Summary

State fish and wildlife agencies rely on volunteers to field many of their conservation, fishing, hunting, and shooting sports programs and events. However, recruiting and retaining volunteers can be challenging, as many people juggle busy schedules with other commitments, making it harder for states to successfully implement conservation and R3 programs. This project provides insights into what people look for in a volunteer opportunity, the roadblocks they face, and strategies for recruiting and retaining volunteers more effectively.

To help fulfill this need, the International Hunter Education Association-USA (IHEA-USA) and the Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation (OSCF) worked with states to connect with current and potential volunteers to learn how to engage and retain more support for states' hunting R3 and education programs. DJ Case + Associates and Southwick Associates conducted focus groups and quantitative surveys of current and potential volunteers to generate findings that informed a pilot recruitment campaign. The takeaways from this project will help states with their volunteer recruitment and retention.

Through focus groups and volunteer surveys, several key trends emerged that, when combined with results from the pilot campaigns, provide an in-depth picture of the status of state agency volunteer programs. At its simplest, the overarching takeaway is that increased promotion (ideally through email and social media promotion) that clearly communicates the need and the opportunity will lead to successful volunteer recruitment. In the absence of recruitment, a large portion of the potential volunteers will be unaware of opportunities they would otherwise be interested in. The following key takeaways summarize these findings:

Volunteer Promotion

- **Of the current volunteers, very few reported being recruited through agency promotion. Current volunteers learned about volunteering opportunities through word-of-mouth, but this is not sustainable or scalable.** In the volunteer survey, only 2% of respondents learned about their program from the state agency social media, and only 6% from a state agency website. Instead, most current volunteers learned about opportunities through word of mouth from friends and family (19%), current volunteers (19%), or from a state agency employee (10%). Despite this, current and potential volunteers thought that social media and email lists would be highly impactful recruitment strategies (Figure 9. Volunteer promotion method, skill types combined.Figure 9 & Figure 40, pg. 22 & 52)
- **Email and social media promotion are highly effective**. In the pilot campaign, the strongest recruitment came from the email list, followed by paid social media, then organic social media. There are benefits with each of these modes of promotion.
    - **Email lists** generated the highest response rate and allow a state to focus on people who already fit the volunteer mold. For example, fishing volunteers can be recruited by directly targeting lists of current anglers in the state, and states with a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system can further target volunteers by demographics, behavior, or geography.
    - **Organic social media** allows broad promotion to existing followers for free, but lacks targeting capabilities and only reaches people who already follow the agency's page.

    - **Paid social media** can reach large audiences and allows for detailed targeting by geography and interests, but it requires a promotional budget and staff knowledge/experience with Meta ad purchasing. Some demographic categories may also require third-party data to reach those audiences.
- **States must ensure they have the capacity to onboard new volunteers before promoting opportunities.** After the pilot campaigns, partnering pilot states expressed concern that high interest may outpace their ability to train new signups. If too much time passes between signup and training, volunteers may lose interest and fail to follow through.
- **An online application is crucial.** In a survey of R3 practitioners across the U.S., only about 50% of states reported having an online volunteer application. And yet, 69% of the volunteer survey said an online application would make them more likely to apply (Figure 47, pg. 56).
- **Training should be clearly promoted and available.** In the non-volunteer focus groups, interest was high, though many questioned whether they had the necessary skills. More than 40% of potential volunteer survey respondents were interested in every training option (Figure 50, pg. 62) and majorities favored pre-event training (59%) or shadowing a volunteer (52%).

Advertisement Messaging

- **Helping the next generation, giving back to the community, and teaching new hunters and anglers were the three strongest motivators for current and potential volunteers** (Figure 3 & Figure 31Figure 34 pg. 17 & 42-44). In the pilot campaign, advertisements themed around helping the next generation had the highest click-through rates (1.4% - 2.0% for hunting volunteers and 1.5% - 2.6% for fishing volunteers), while messages about giving back to the community also performed at or slightly above industry averages.
- **Conservation messages perform well in some cases.** Messages relating to conservation had a click-through rate of around 1.2%, slightly better than the industry average. While untested, the potential volunteer survey also suggested messages about making hunting safer (Figure 32Figure 33, pg. 43), and spending time in nature (Figure 31Figure 34 pg. 17 & 42-44) may also be effective.

Day-to-day experience

- **Volunteers don't need much, but they do need clear expectations and communication.** Focus group participants and survey respondents often emphasized that what was most important to them was clear communication, consistent scheduling, and a manageable time commitment. Ideally, all of these would be outlined on a comprehensive volunteer landing page (62% of potential volunteers reported that they'd be more likely to apply if a comprehensive website were available). Additional insights into these needs include:
    - As potential volunteers age, they find it more important to know the **location**, **time commitment**, and **volunteer description** (Figure 43, pg. 54).
    - Most current volunteers participate in their programs every other month or less (Figure 2, pg. 16). While many potential volunteers were also interested in volunteering a couple of times a year (33%), there may be an appetite for a larger commitment, with 49% of respondents willing to volunteer once a month or more (Figure 45. Volunteering commitment., pg. 55).
- **Many volunteers enjoy the opportunity to socialize with fellow volunteers.** While socialization is not the primary reason people volunteer, focus groups and follow-up surveys showed that many participants value it (Table 11, pg. 35). Fishing volunteers in particular during the focus groups expressed interest in more social events, such as BBQs. In the volunteer survey, socialization was especially important for respondents aged 64 and older (Table 12, pg. 35).

For more information about the setup of the focus groups, surveys, and pilot campaign, along with information about the volunteer experience, aspects of a program that attract potential volunteers, and the effectiveness of these findings in the pilot campaign, please refer to the full technical report below.

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Introduction

State fish and wildlife agencies need volunteers and mentors to successfully implement many fishing, hunting, and shooting-related education, R3, and conservation projects. With more volunteer options available to the public, recruiting and retaining volunteers has become more difficult, threatening states' ability to staff programs like hunter education and many others. To help overcome this problem, states need insights and tested recommendations for finding, recruiting, and retaining new volunteers. The aim of this project is to provide states with tested recruitment messaging, recommendations, and approaches to increase their volunteer pool.

To help fulfill this need, the International Hunter Education Association-USA (IHEA-USA) and Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation (OSCF) worked with states to connect with current and potential volunteers to learn how to engage and retain more support for states' hunting R3 and education programs. DJ Case + Associates and Southwick Associates conducted focus groups, surveys, and pilot campaigns to gather qualitative and quantitative data on how states can increase volunteer recruitment and retention.

With one state participating in each AFWA region, the first phase of this project conducted focus groups with current and former fishing, hunting, and conservation volunteers to discuss their motivations and experiences. In the second phase, current and former volunteers from each AFWA region were contacted to complete a survey that further explored their journey to becoming volunteers and identified what they enjoyed or disliked about their program. Following the volunteer survey, a potential volunteer survey was distributed to people interested in volunteer opportunities in the conservation space to learn how best to reach and support this untapped volunteer base. The third and final phase of this project was the implementation of a pilot marketing campaign to test advertising strategies and recruit new volunteers for state agency programs.

Focus Groups

Methodology

Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited through state license data and existing volunteer lists in South Carolina, Colorado, Iowa and Maine when working with hunting and angling audiences. General population recruitment took place through UserInterview panels. UserInterviews is a company specializing in connecting researchers to specific audience segments through online interview and focus group platforms. For the general population focus groups, UserInterviews found participants interested in volunteering in conservation spaces but who had not previously done so.

Focus group participants were first screened for their experience with hunting, fishing, and other activities (Appendix A). The screener guide subsequently helped seat focus group participants.

Focus groups were conducted between May 26 and June 18, 2025 (Table 1). To maximize participation, sessions were held in the evenings (generally 6-8 PM). All focus group participants received a $200 incentive.

Table 1. Focus group schedule.

Focus Group	Date
Volunteer Hunt Focus Group 1	Wed 5/28/2025 6:30 PM - 8:00 PM
Volunteer Hunt Focus Group 2	Thu 5/29/2025 5:00 PM - 6:30 PM
Volunteer Fish Focus Group 1	Wed 6/4/2025 6:30 PM - 8:00 PM
Volunteer Fish Focus Group 2	Thu 6/5/2025 5:00 PM - 6:30 PM
General Population Potential Volunteers Focus Group 1	Tue 6/17/2025 5:30 PM – 7:00 PM
General Population Potential Volunteers Focus Group 2	Wed 6/18/2025 5:00 PM – 6:30 PM

A total of 54 people ultimately participated: 18 for hunting, 20 for fishing, and 16 from the general pool of prospective volunteers (Table 2).

Table 2. Focus group type and participation.

Focus Group	Number of Focus Group Participants
Volunteer Hunt Focus Group 1	9
Volunteer Hunt Focus Group 2	9
Volunteer Fish Focus Group 1	10
Volunteer Fish Focus Group 2	10
General Population Prospective Volunteers Focus Group 1	8
General Population Prospective Volunteers Focus Group 2	8

The following are summaries of the focus group discussions organized by topic/question from the topic guide (Appendix A). These summaries do NOT include every point made in the discussions; rather, they capture the main points and/or notable responses that informed the primary research questions.

Analysis

Following the completion of the focus group sessions, data was analyzed by identifying and recording trends in participants' responses to the questions in the focus group guides (Appendix A). First, the facilitation team reviewed and discussed their recollections of the focus group sessions. Then, those initial reactions were set aside, and the focus group recordings and transcripts were reviewed for trends in motivations, barriers, and other insights.

Where applicable, quotes are included in this report to illustrate the high-level trends the research team identified during focus group discussions with the participants. These quotes are not the only evidence the research team acquired to show that a trend existed. Rather, they are meant to exemplify the nature of a trend as expressed in participants' own words.

It is also important to note that, when conducting focus groups, the research team sought to reach a point in the conversations known as "saturation." Saturation is the point at which, after several focus group sessions with the same audience and the same guide, researchers begin to hear repeated themes, concepts, emotions, and perspectives, or receive repetitive comments. These themes are then identified, collected, illustrated, and formatted for inclusion in the final report. Reaching saturation does not mean the perspectives and comments of the focus group participants reflect broader societal trends at scale. Rather, these themes provide a foundation for a quantitative inquiry—a soft hypothesis that can be proven or disproven through quantitative methods—in this case, a survey. The results below reflect the "saturation point" of themes collected during these focus groups.

The two focus groups conducted for this project were largely composed of individuals who were not only highly active hunters and outdoor recreators but also dedicated volunteers. Their feedback was rich with insight and reflected years—often decades—of experience in both recreational and volunteer capacities. There were several relatively new volunteers with three years of experience or less, though they were fewer than the highly experienced volunteers.

While this input was valuable, the original intent of this project was to better understand how to engage a different audience: general hunters, anglers, and conservation-minded people who currently volunteer little to none. Demographically, the initial groups also tended to be older, white, and male, which aligns with much of the traditional volunteer base. These older volunteers preferred word-of-mouth or direct communication with their agency. However, this information is not helpful if agencies are hoping to reach others who have not previously had a connection with the agency. Additionally, this cohort nearly unanimously stated that social media ads and digital outreach campaigns would not motivate them to click or engage, emphasizing a disconnect between modern recruitment strategies and long-standing volunteers.

Recognizing these limitations, follow-up focus groups with the general population of prospective volunteers were designed to include a broader cross-section of participants, intentionally targeting individuals who were younger and more racially and gender diverse, better reflecting the constituencies that many state fish and wildlife agencies now serve. While many similarities existed, these follow-up groups offered distinct perspectives, motivations, challenges, and communication preferences that

differed from the more traditional volunteer profile. Their input provides critical insight into how agencies might design effective recruitment strategies that resonate with emerging audiences.

These findings not only inform recruitment messaging and outreach methods but also helped shape the design and interpretation of the potential volunteer survey, ensuring it captured a more representative picture of potential future volunteers.

Key Findings

Initial contact with volunteering

Hunting and angling volunteers largely became involved with volunteering through their professions, whether in conservation or education, and many continued after retirement. Additionally, focus group participants mentioned that their family members had previously volunteered, or that they participated to spend time with family. Some "accidentally" became volunteers through exposure as learners to the programs previously.

> *"When I retired from the fire service in 2006, I said let's go do something I really enjoy and promote my favorite hobby of hunting and fishing, and that is how I got started."*
>
> *"I've always enjoyed education, and I've always enjoyed the outdoors, hunting in particular, and it was a natural marriage between the two."*
>
> *"I had a buddy of mine who was volunteering about 16 years ago, and once he introduced me to it, I started getting involved, and it just took off. It's been very rewarding."*
>
> *"I would say I usually took two paths. For some opportunities, I had a friend or an associate who was doing something and telling me about it or encouraging me to join them in doing it. It was that personal connection. It was the invitation that got me to think 'Well, why not me. The others, it was the 'you see others doing things and you're just compelled to do it too.'"*

Potential volunteers ranged from those who had volunteered in other ways to those who had never volunteered for anything before; all were willing to volunteer when offered the right opportunity. Participants pointed to activities such as picking up trash, planting trees, and supporting outdoor recreation as opportunities to volunteer.

Motivations

Focus group participants who currently volunteer did so in an effort to maintain outdoor recreation opportunities while also making an impact on future generations and non-traditional participants. Non-traditional participants discussed by this focus group included women, urbanites, people with disabilities, and people of color. Many mentioned seeing a need in their community and wanting to fill that need, "paying it forward" and "giving back", which led them to volunteer.

Motivations for existing volunteers included:

- Passing on the tradition of hunting and angling
- Having social time with learners and other volunteers

- Maintaining family tradition of volunteering
- Engaging a new generation and non-traditional hunters

"When I retired, I thought, you know, this is something that I could do to try and get kids more involved and away from computers into the woods."

"If it wasn't for us getting [women and other non-traditional participants] out, they wouldn't do it. So, I guess that's the reason for me is seeing the need."

"It's definitely a male-dominated world. But I see more and more women being involved, and I love it, and just showing my girls that, like, you can do it, too, is really important to me."

"There's always a long waiting list [for programs]. And it was just very apparent that we needed more instructors. So, I went and got certified to teach."

"You know, getting positive feedback for your volunteering really makes a difference. I have people come up to me and say, 'Thank you for volunteering.' That's all I need, you know. Let me do more."

Many of the angling volunteers mentioned the feeling they get when watching someone catch a fish for the first time or knowing they're having an impact as strong motivators for volunteering.

Potential volunteers said they believe in supporting nature and the outdoors, and that conservation is important for everyone.

Past and current volunteers cited several factors that could make volunteering more attractive. Although volunteer benefits like goods and services were welcome, the avid volunteers who participated in these focus groups prioritized a job well done, a sense of accomplishment, the ability to see their impact, or being sincerely thanked for their work as reward enough. While these were the main themes that drove motivation to volunteer, when pushed in the focus groups, participants identified other motivators that agencies could implement to provide even more motivation for volunteers. These included:

- Social time with other volunteers.
- Recognition awards.
- Verbal or written notes of appreciation.
- Material items – hats, mugs, t-shirts, etc.

"I look for alignment with my beliefs and personal values. Let's assume I am into environmental conservation, so anything in that domain, I am more than likely to donate my time. Second is alignment with personal interests. You like fishing. I like fishing. Let's help each other. It's very much about values and interests for me."

"In the local community of people, both professionally and volunteers that you deal with, to be able to get to know them a little bit better."

"I don't know. I know I've got a couple of hats, you know. I mean, how many hats do you need? They're trying to thank you, and I'm not, you know, being down on it. I mean, thank me, just send me an email saying, 'you did a great job, we appreciate it,' would probably be enough."

"If you get a certain number of hours, you get certain things, like after 5 hours, you get a pen, and after 10 hours, you get a deck of playing cards. A park pass was one of them. That is a badge of honor for us; being able to display a volunteer park pass is something special to have, so having something to display once you reach a certain goal is really good. But I think just getting the information out to people, because I don't think very many people know that you can volunteer."

While past and current volunteers ranked material items (T-shirts, mugs, etc.) low in motivational priority, potential new volunteers ranked these material rewards higher and included serving food and drinks at volunteer events, regardless of their previous participation status.

Barriers

Past and current volunteers noted a multitude of barriers they have heard from potential recruits, as well as reasons they aren't able to commit more time than they already do. The largest barriers for current and past volunteers included a complicated training process, limited availability of time, not feeling qualified, and a lack of information about the specific volunteer opportunity.

Barriers for hunting and angling volunteers included:

- Lack of time or unclear time commitments.
- Lengthy training process.
- Feeling uncertain that they have enough expertise to teach.
- Lack of available information on how to volunteer or what the specific opportunity entails.
- Too great a distance to the volunteer opportunities.

"They want us to volunteer, but by the time they [a volunteer] agrees to become instructors, they have to go through a new instructor's academy, which is in some part of the state. Then they get assigned to another instructor, who has to mentor them for at least a year before they can be turned out on their own."

"A lot of people my age don't volunteer, because it's a time thing. Most of us are, you know, working typical 9-to-5s. And then I'm in my early thirties, a lot of people are starting families, [and] going to or finishing school."

"One thing that I found when I tell somebody, 'Oh, you should volunteer. You're really good at doing that particular thing.' They get a weird type of imposter syndrome, where they think that they have to be an expert."

"They've come to me because they can't locate the information on the agency's website on how they can become a volunteer."

"I am not retired, so the availability of days that I am available is a little hard to match up sometimes."

"I think the time commitment [is a barrier]. It's probably the biggest one. [The programs] can't be random. Normally, if you're doing an organized program like we do here, you have to commit to certain times, and that's hard for some people to do."

"There are a lot of volunteer opportunities I am interested in, but the time and location are reasons why I have not done them. One of them is almost an hour away and not somewhere I would normally go, and there are closer options. For my limited time, what do I want to volunteer for?"

For hunter education volunteers, the recruitment training process varied from a day-long event to a full year of apprenticeship before teaching alone. This was a barrier that arose in multiple states, though it was mentioned the most in states with the most rigorous training programs.

While current hunting or angling volunteers noted imposter syndrome (feeling like you are not good enough or do not belong, even when you are capable) as a barrier, this was also reported in discussions with potential volunteer recruits. Despite potential recruits being open to conservation-based tasks like trash pick-up or administrative support at events, when directed to specific events, like teaching hunting skills or helping people to learn to fish, there was less interest, as many identified a lack of personal knowledge, experience, or interest as a barrier to getting involved.

The majority of potential volunteers from the focus groups felt it was very important to be very familiar with the activity they would be volunteering to teach. Some felt that with adequate training, they would be willing to teach in a group of other volunteers or as an assistant to an expert, but they would be uncomfortable teaching alone due to their lack of expertise. While it seems unlikely to get someone with no experience to volunteer for an activity requiring some baseline knowledge and skill levels, offering support or assistant roles could alleviate entry-level barriers and provide these potential volunteers with a more comfortable first connection volunteer opportunity.

Extended Opportunities

Results from focus groups with past and current volunteers indicate that those involved are "avid" volunteers. The research team sought to clarify how avid these volunteers were and if they would be interested in other conservation volunteering opportunities if those opportunities arose.

Every participant stated that, to some extent, they would be open to other types of volunteering for the agency if asked, but this would depend on the opportunity, their availability at the time, and other factors. Some people felt that activities like picking up trash were not meaningful enough to motivate them to volunteer. It was not necessarily that the activity was "beneath them," but the personal sense

of meaning they got from teaching someone to fish or hunt versus picking up trash was subjectively different in their eyes.

> *"I volunteer a lot for different organizations, so I would say, 'Who is asking?' If it's something that I feel is important to me and if it's with somebody that I like to work with because I know most of the people, then that would get me to take on one more thing."*

> *"There needs to be some convenience for me. If I am interested in something, I am retired so I have plenty of time. I could volunteer every day if it were somewhat convenient for me to do that."*

Volunteers who had already participated in some form of volunteering were interested but expressed concern about whether it was outside their expertise.

> *"If it were in the line of something we're already doing, it would make it a little more expedient to be able to access and disseminate that information."*

> *"While I do have other things on my plate, you know, depending on what the ask is, I probably would give serious consideration to helping out with something else."*

The strongest motivator for volunteers already engaged with the agency to transition into other conservation volunteer roles was their current relationship with staff.

> *"Over the years, I've gotten to know and network with the people who are now in charge of a majority of the programs. And I think, just with the relationship, if one of them said, 'Hey, would you come and start this? Or would you do this?' I think just from working with those people in the past, I would be inclined to try to do something if they asked."*

For new potential volunteers, that expectation and experience was not a barrier, and they expressed a greater willingness to participate in a variety of conservation activities as long as there were clear instructions and expectations. Roles that were included in the discussion were:

- Habitat improvement or invasive species removal.
- Picking up trash or cleaning up parks.
- Staffing at events (administrative duties like parking, tickets, check-in, etc.).
- Aiding expert staff as an assistant (with some training).

Some of these new potential volunteers preferred these low-effort, low-commitment opportunities. Willingness to volunteer at events seemed largely driven by introversion and extroversion. Those who self-identified as introverts stated they wouldn't want to interact with that many people. Those who self-identified as extroverts said they would enjoy meeting and speaking with new people.

Virtual Volunteer Opportunities

There was hesitancy among current volunteers in teaching virtual classes. Many focus group participants noted the importance of in-person excitement and brought up that certain topics could not be taught online. However, these focus groups also noted that the current generation is attracted to online learning and that COVID led to surprising success with the virtual methods they've used.

> *"I guess you can do online courses and all that stuff as well. But I think in person really is much more exciting for the teacher, and I think it helps kind of get the students a little bit more psyched up, too."*

> *"State law requires that they have to take a [state] test, and they have to do a live fire, and we get it in and we get it back. I said, there's no way a damn computer--excuse me--is going to teach as well as I… I have been so pleasantly surprised with the retention rate and the interest that comes from kids or adults... But it makes a difference, and I think we have to learn to adapt to the new generations."*

> *"Angling volunteer efforts are all hands-on and can't be done virtually. I'm a fishing instructor and work outside, so there's really no way you can show a kid how to bait a hook or how to cast virtually. You can talk about things, but it's not going to fulfill the needs that you have for the program. Some things you can do virtually. Maybe you're introduction. Maybe a virtual introductory session to meet the people and remind them to bring their gear on the morning of the event. There could be hybridization. But the type of stuff I am involved in, you have to be in person. You have to show them how to tie knots, you have to inspect the knots, you have to touch the gear."*

Age of Learners

Past and current volunteers commented that they have taught and mentored both youth and adults. Some noted that youth were preferable for their excitement and eagerness to learn. There were mixed views on teaching adults, with volunteers noting that the older audience could be helpful or harmful.

> *"The kids give you a lot of energy. They are fun. I love working with kids."*

> *"It doesn't make a difference. I like teaching the classes to get a hunter going. But it does, as far as I think, sometimes [impact] the quality of what you can teach [and it] makes a difference."*

> *"I'd like a mixed age group. Adults can both be the biggest pain and the biggest blessing in the class."*

Teaching Styles

Early focus group discussions with past and current volunteers, as well as potential volunteers, raised concerns about topic knowledge and the ability to volunteer. The research team decided to follow up by asking about teaching styles as group or solitary roles to further evaluate opportunities to support volunteer efforts.

The majority of focus group participants indicated they preferred teaching in groups, though group sizes varied. They indicated that expertise was more evenly distributed among other instructors, making the teaching experience less intimidating. Focus group participants also noted that group teaching was beneficial for the learners.

> *"I strongly go for the group model, I think, as a learner…it is easier to listen, for me anyway, to a variety of voices, even if one person could cover it all, it's hard to listen to the same voice, the same tempo, etc.… But when you have some people changing it up, maybe even a little interplay between two instructors, that can work really well."*

> *"I'd say it's a team approach [that] is best for me. And even when I say a team, it could be a team of 2, 3, or 4, depending on the group's experience and seniority. This would offer a whole lot more than just [coming from] an individual."*

Teaching Materials

In addition to asking about teaching styles, researchers also followed up on another opportunity for supporting volunteers by digging further into the topic of training, education, and knowledge development by asking if volunteers preferred to come up with their own materials or be provided with a lesson (purposefully leaving the definition of "lesson" open to interpretation).

Across hunters and anglers, focus group participants preferred to teach from a loose guide or curriculum that provided some direction while allowing them the flexibility to adjust based on the needs of the group being taught. As many of these volunteers were avid anglers and hunters, they wanted the ability to exercise their knowledge and wisdom in their volunteer roles. However, they also recognized that having and understanding program goals and intended outcomes helps them ensure they meet the needs of the agency or organization for which they volunteer.

In general, the more experience an individual had, the more comfortable they felt with an open program. Conversely, the less experience an individual had, the more they wanted a guide or curriculum.

> *"I would definitely like a guide, but I would like to be able to make it mine and put it in my own words. I don't like 100% canned presentations, but I do want to know what the agency wants taught."*

Volunteers even suggested that agencies should schedule regular meetings to spotlight different instructors who taught specific lessons effectively, provide helpful teaching techniques and tools, and offer opportunities to improve personal teaching skills.

> *"If you've got a good set of objectives and key points that have to be covered, you can pitch them in whatever format you want to do it, and whatever you're comfortable with. But you've got to have the list of the things I've got to cover."*

> *"I hate to say that we teach to the test. But in our group of hunter educators there [are] things that have to be taught. So, having part of a curriculum is fine, but we are also allowed to do*

what we want to with our section in the time allotted. As long as we are covering what the state thinks is important that we have to cover."

"A standard curriculum with some flexibility. So, how many hours it has to be, how many hours it could be, what kind of suggested activities, and that yearly update is also a good time to share with other instructors in the area of what's going on."

"But we need to be able to take advantage of the skills that we have [developed] through our lives and be able to pass that on."

Ways to Connect for Future Opportunities

There was a key difference between volunteers who were already engaged with the agency and those who may be unaware of the opportunities that exist to volunteer. Past and current volunteers were unlikely to click on a social media advertisement, citing a risk of spam; others indicated they do not use social media. Most current volunteers noted that word-of-mouth from other instructors was the most effective form of recruitment, especially when paired with social events. A few indicated that a phone call or direct email from the agency would also be effective for recruitment.

"I run a very low-tech little computer. And the last thing I'm going to do is click on something that somebody offered over there."

"I didn't even know you could become a volunteer hunter education instructor until I encountered a gal through [local organization], like it was just a word of mouth thing…It's really hard to find the information on how to become [a volunteer], people are always asking about where to find the information to become an instructor."

"I've actually done this before, taken my friends with me to an event so they can hang out while I am doing the volunteer work, and then they can act as volunteers, and then they end up enjoying it and get involved as volunteers or ask me when I am going again. And I've had two or three people that actually got involved that way."

"Just word of mouth and asking [potential volunteers] to come and join you, I mean, I do that all the time. I tell them if you want to continue to volunteer, go ahead and get ahold of [someone at the agency] because it's really easy to get online and fill out an application."

"The marketing could be refined both in where and how. Going to places that are popular, such as a run club, breweries, or bars. I learned about some volunteer roles at a climbing gym that I go to."

"I'm retired. I'm older. I do the signs in the grocery stores or the signs at the state parks."

A phone call or direct email from the agency could serve well for volunteers already connected to the agency but seems improbable for those with no prior connection to apply direct communication methods for recruitment. While past and current volunteers did not see social media as a communication tool for themselves, they noted that social media advertisements could reach younger generations, since they are the primary users of most social media platforms. And they were correct with that assumption.

Unlike current volunteers, potential volunteers were strongly in favor of using social media to contact existing or prospective volunteers. In fact, social media was often their first thought, followed by word of mouth, events, and flyers. This difference is likely due to demographic differences. Younger and more diverse groups tend to utilize social media more heavily than older audiences.

Necessary Information

When asked, focus group participants – be it past, current, or potential volunteers– brought up clear and consistent communication as one of the most important things they need to feel confident and excited about volunteering. They said that clear communication impacted everything from understanding expectations to gaining important details about volunteer roles and opportunities. They also said clear communication helped them feel prepared for volunteer events. A few focus group participants also pointed towards resources and equipment as important aspects of angling volunteering. Essential information included:

- Clear task description.
- Date(s) of the event(s).
- Time commitment – recurring or one-time.
- Expectations of the role being filled.
- Metric of success / intended goals.
- If other volunteers will be present.
- If learners will be registered or if the event is come-and-go.
- Type of support provided by agency – equipment provided, co-teaching, curriculum, training opportunities, advertisement.
- Direct contact information to the staff lead.

“At the state level, they support us quite well. They advertise our classes, provide the dummy weapons, and everything. So, we get tremendous support from the state.”

“The more education I have, the more information that I can disseminate, the better I can present myself and present the craft that we're trying to volunteer for, and the better I feel about it.”

“I would need to know what the project is, who it might help or benefit, whether it's wildlife or habitat or people, and how much time it's going to take.”

“One of the elements that comes with it is how does that--whatever the commitment is that you're looking for-- what is it really? ‘Cause I've had people say it's this big [indicating small with hands] and it turns out to be this big [indicating large with hands], you know?”

> *"For me to feel comfortable I like to have a plan. What are we going to do and what is the intention or the goal. I like to know who is being affected by this and what we expect the result to be at the end of [the volunteer opportunity]. I don't like to wing things."*
>
> *"I would say reliable resources so if I'm supposed to volunteer for a fishing program the fishing rods need to work."*

If agencies hope to increase engagement among their current volunteers, these focus groups suggest they should follow the same onboarding and communication practices they use with new volunteers.

> *"The biggest thing I look for is the time commitment and understanding what this new volunteer activity would entail because I find that with a lot of my volunteer stuff, I raise my hand a lot, I volunteer a lot, and then I realize I overcommitted myself and that I need to back off or I need to spread it out over a certain period of time."*

Focus Group Conclusions

Taken together, the focus group results suggest that volunteer recruitment and retention depend less on a single incentive or message and more on increasing communication, strengthening personal connection, and making opportunities feel meaningful, supported, and realistic.

Current volunteers are often motivated by the potential to form relationships, make a tangible impact, support tradition, and share their knowledge, while potential volunteers may need clearer entry points, flexible schedules, visible benefits, and reassurance that they do not need to be experts to contribute.

Across the focus groups, participants emphasized the importance of the agency providing clear expectations, appropriate training or materials, staff support, and communication that matches how the different audiences prefer to be reached.

These findings provide important qualitative context for understanding how volunteers think about hunting, angling, and conservation volunteer opportunities; the following survey builds on these themes by testing them with a broader audience to better identify which motivations, barriers, messages, and outreach methods are most likely to support future volunteer engagement.

Volunteer Survey Results

Introduction

With a greater understanding of the volunteer experience from the focus groups, the volunteer survey was developed to further examine, quantitatively, what it's like to volunteer as a fishing or hunting mentor, a hunter education instructor, or as part of a conservation program. This included an examination of the volunteer recruitment process, including how people learned about the opportunity, why they signed up to volunteer, and the strategies they believed would be effective for increasing recruitment. The results of this survey help paint a picture of what a "typical" volunteer looks like and build a framework for recruiting new volunteers.

However, recruitment is just one part of the equation, because if new volunteers are not retained, the strategies that increase volunteer signups will soon be obsolete. As a result, the volunteer survey also sought to understand which parts of a program were most important to volunteers. This included learning about how far volunteers are willing to go, the importance of clear communication and expectations, and what they feel they need to succeed in their roles.

Volunteer Survey Sampling

This survey was developed and reviewed in collaboration with partner state fish and wildlife agencies, the International Hunter Education Association-USA (IHEA-USA), and the Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation (OSCF) (Appendix B). The sampling frame consisted of current and former fishing and hunting skills instructors, hunter education instructors, and conservation volunteers. Extensive solicitations were sent to all 50 states, requesting participation in this project. States were contacted multiple times, with follow-ups conducted as needed. In total, 6 states agreed to participate in this survey: Colorado, Iowa, Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. Partner states ultimately provided lists of current and former volunteers to contact.

In total, 3,774 volunteers were contacted via email to complete a survey about their experience as a volunteer. Each volunteer was contacted 4 times, and 780 complete responses were obtained, yielding a response rate of 21%.

Demographics

Most respondents were male (89%), white (96%), and over 65 years old (54%). Very few volunteers were younger than 45 years old (11%) (Table 3). These volunteers were primarily from small towns and rural areas. These volunteers were also highly educated, with 70% holding at least an associate's degree.

Table 3. Respondent demographics, by volunteer type.

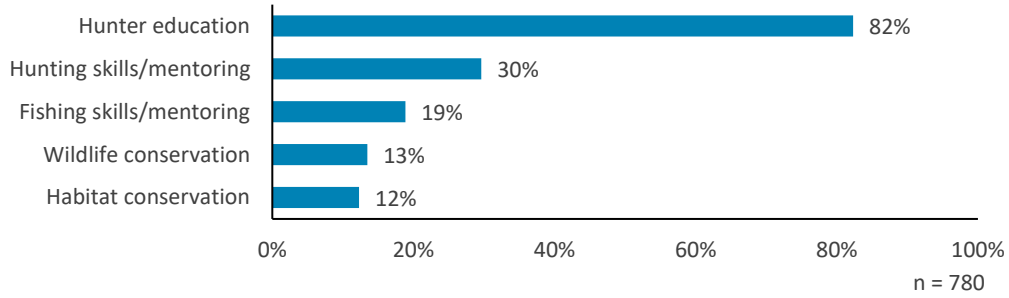
Gender	Fishing Skills	Hunting Skills	Hunter Education	Conservation	Total
Female	13%	6%	6%	10%	9%
Male	85%	94%	92%	89%	89%
Prefer not to say	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Race/Ethnicity					
White or Caucasian	88%	96%	97%	92%	96%
Asian	4%	1%	1%	3%	1%
Black or African American	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	4%	2%	1%	0%	2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%	1%	0%	2%	0%
Community					
Rural	20%	33%	33%	40%	36%
Small Town	32%	29%	28%	32%	30%
Suburban	29%	20%	21%	19%	25%
Urban	12%	8%	7%	10%	9%
Age Group					
18-24 years old	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%
25-34 years old	4%	4%	3%	5%	3%
35-44 years old	6%	9%	9%	11%	8%
45-54 years old	15%	11%	11%	13%	12%
55-64 years old	26%	26%	23%	22%	23%
65 years or older	48%	50%	54%	48%	54%
Education					
Some High School	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
High School/GED	6%	11%	12%	8%	10%
Some College	18%	19%	18%	14%	17%
Associates degree	12%	18%	20%	12%	18%
Bachelor's degree	31%	27%	26%	35%	28%
Graduate degree or higher	33%	25%	23%	30%	24%
Prefer not to say	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Total	147	231	642	201	780

Results

Volunteer Background

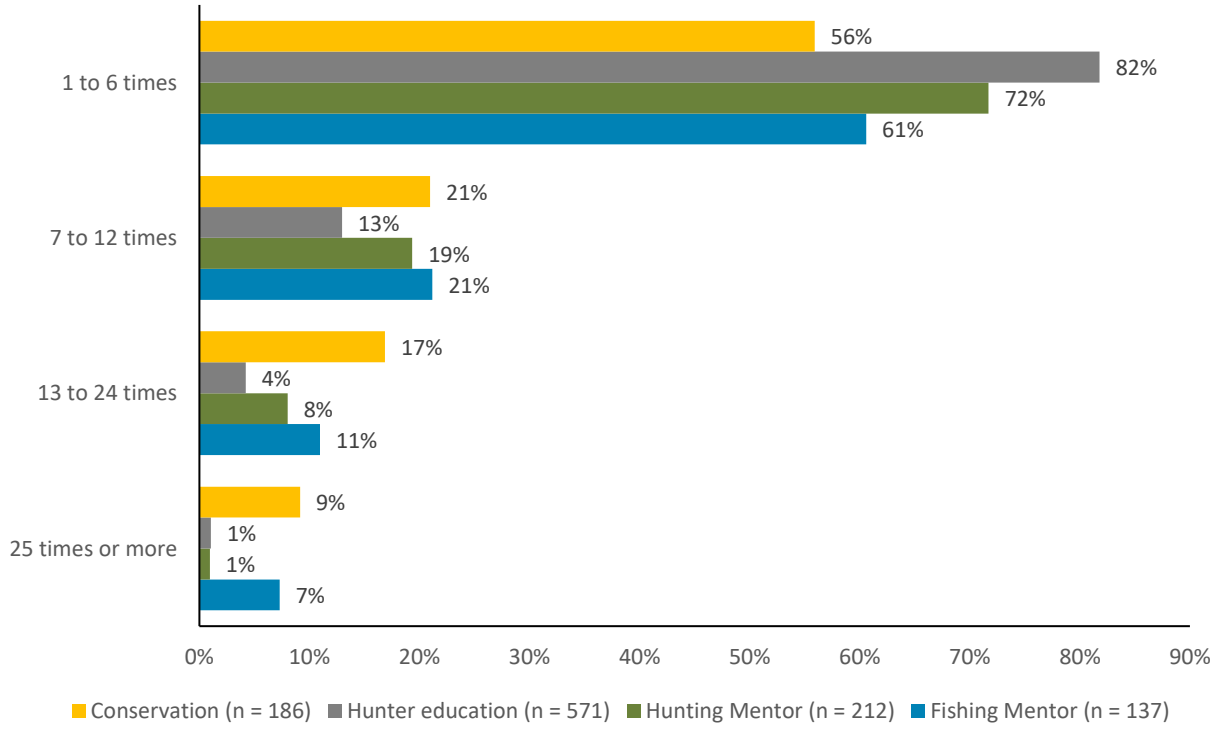
The majority (82%) of respondents were hunter education instructors, followed by hunting instructors/mentors (30%), and fishing instructors/mentors (19%) (Figure 1). Due to the smaller number of wildlife and habitat conservation volunteers, these respondents were combined into one "conservation" group.

Figure 1. Volunteer types, skill types combined.



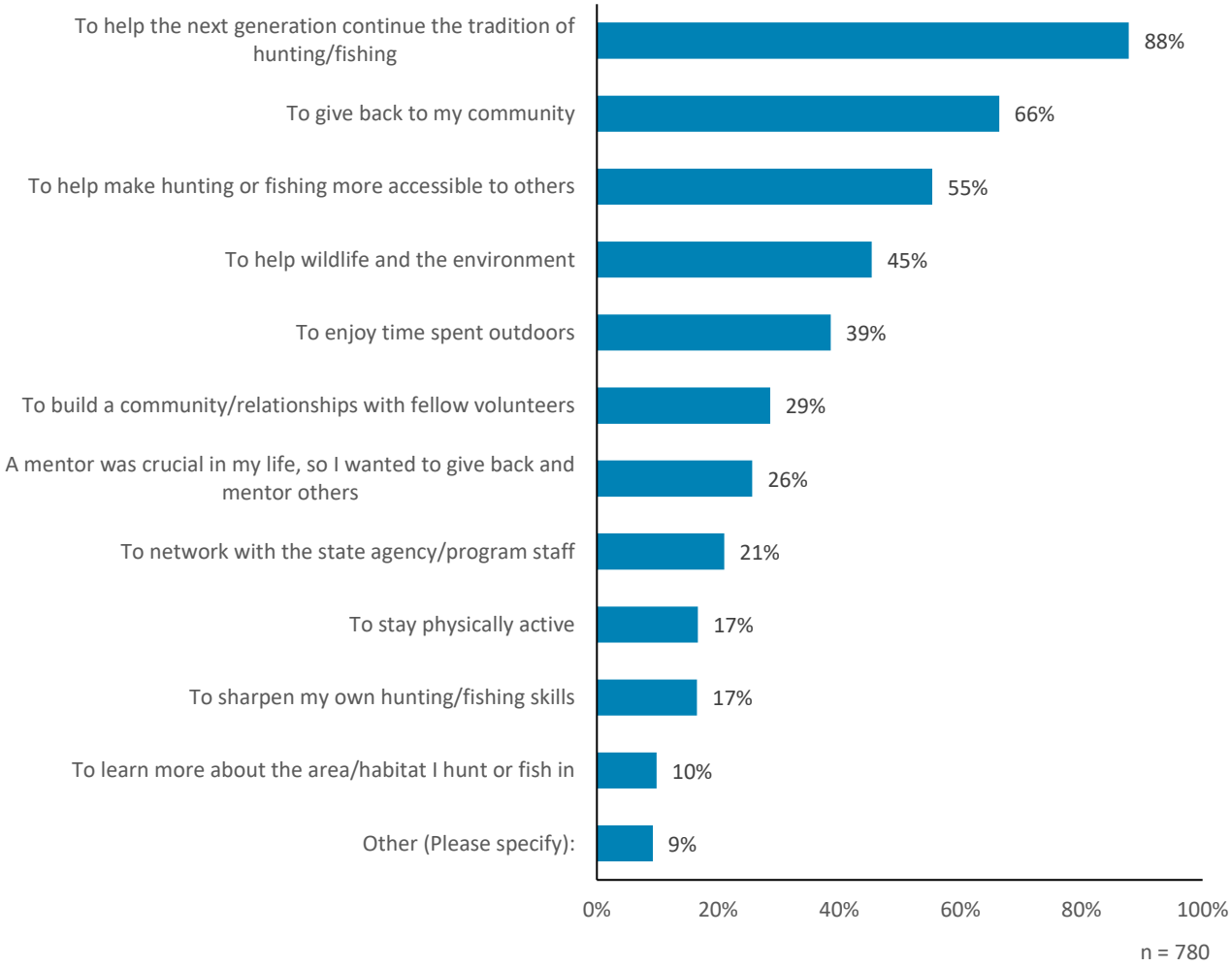
When asked about the frequency of their volunteering, most respondents said it was somewhere between once a year and once every 2 months. Very few volunteered on a bi-weekly basis, with hunter education instructors the least likely to volunteer more than once a month (18%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of times respondents volunteered annually, by volunteer type.



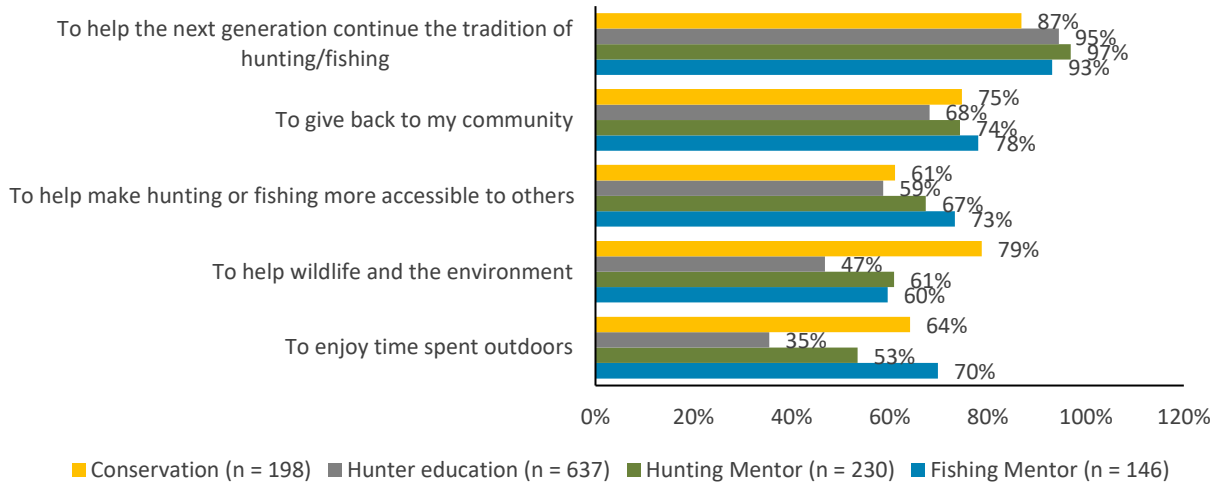
When asked why they volunteer, most respondents said they did so to help the next generation of hunters and anglers carry on the tradition (88%), to give back to their communities (66%), and to make the activities more accessible (55%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Reasons people volunteered, skill types combined.



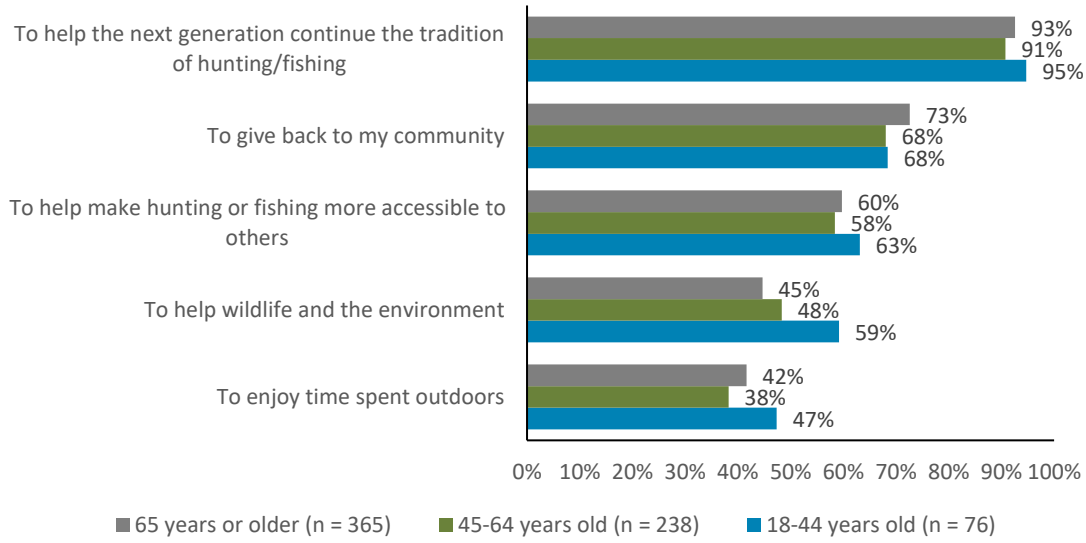
Conservation respondents were more likely than others to be interested in helping wildlife and the environment, whereas hunter education instructors were less motivated by helping the environment or by spending time outside (Figure 4). It's clear that volunteers are drawn to opportunities that allow them to make a positive impact on the environment around them, whether on individuals, the broader community, or nature.

Figure 4. Top five reasons respondents volunteered, sorted by hunter education instructors.



Although the sample size was small (n = 76), younger volunteers appear to be more interested in volunteering for environmental reasons, like to help wildlife and the environment, or to spend time outdoors (Figure 5).

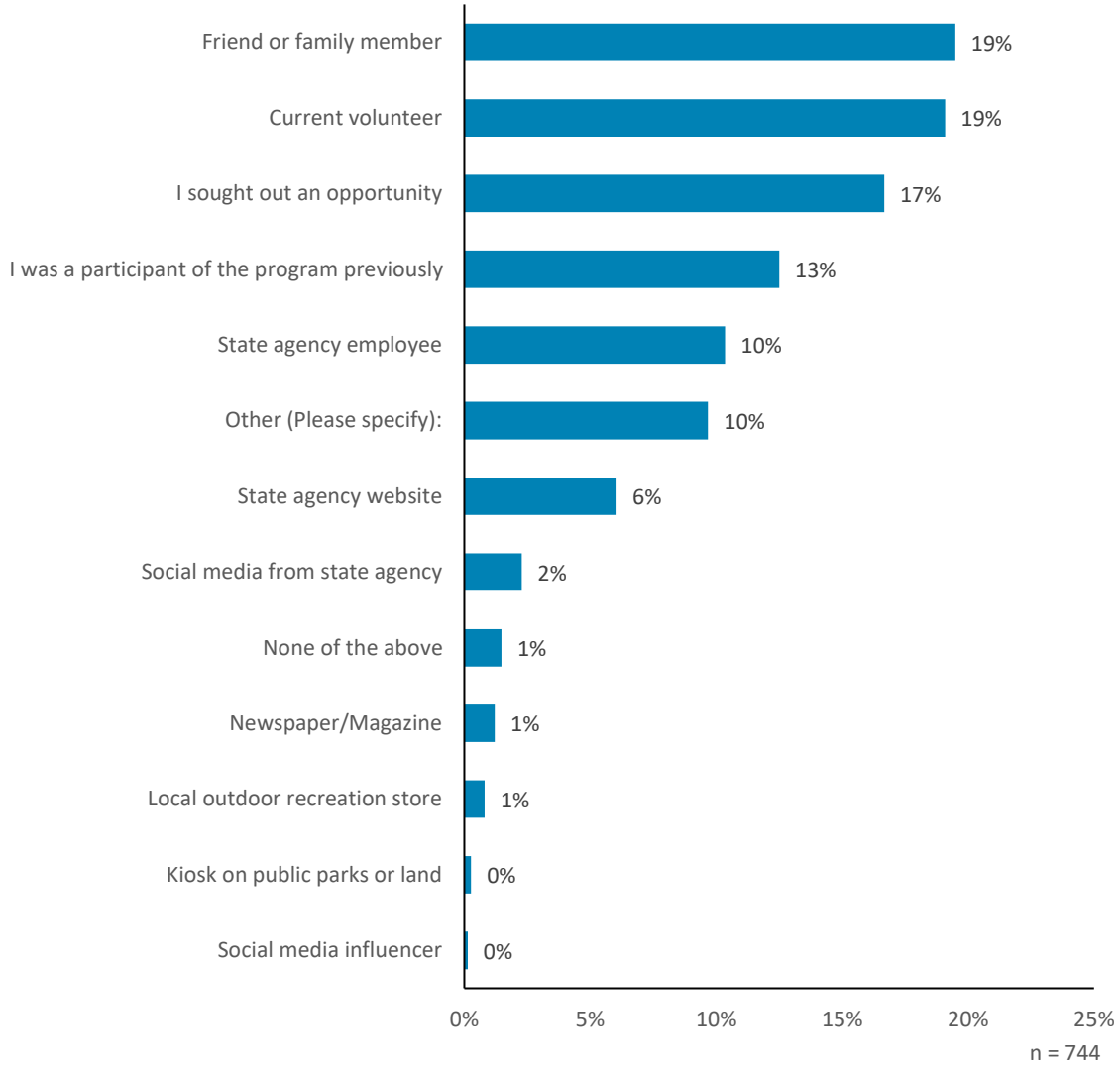
Figure 5. Top five reasons respondents volunteered, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



Volunteer Recruitment

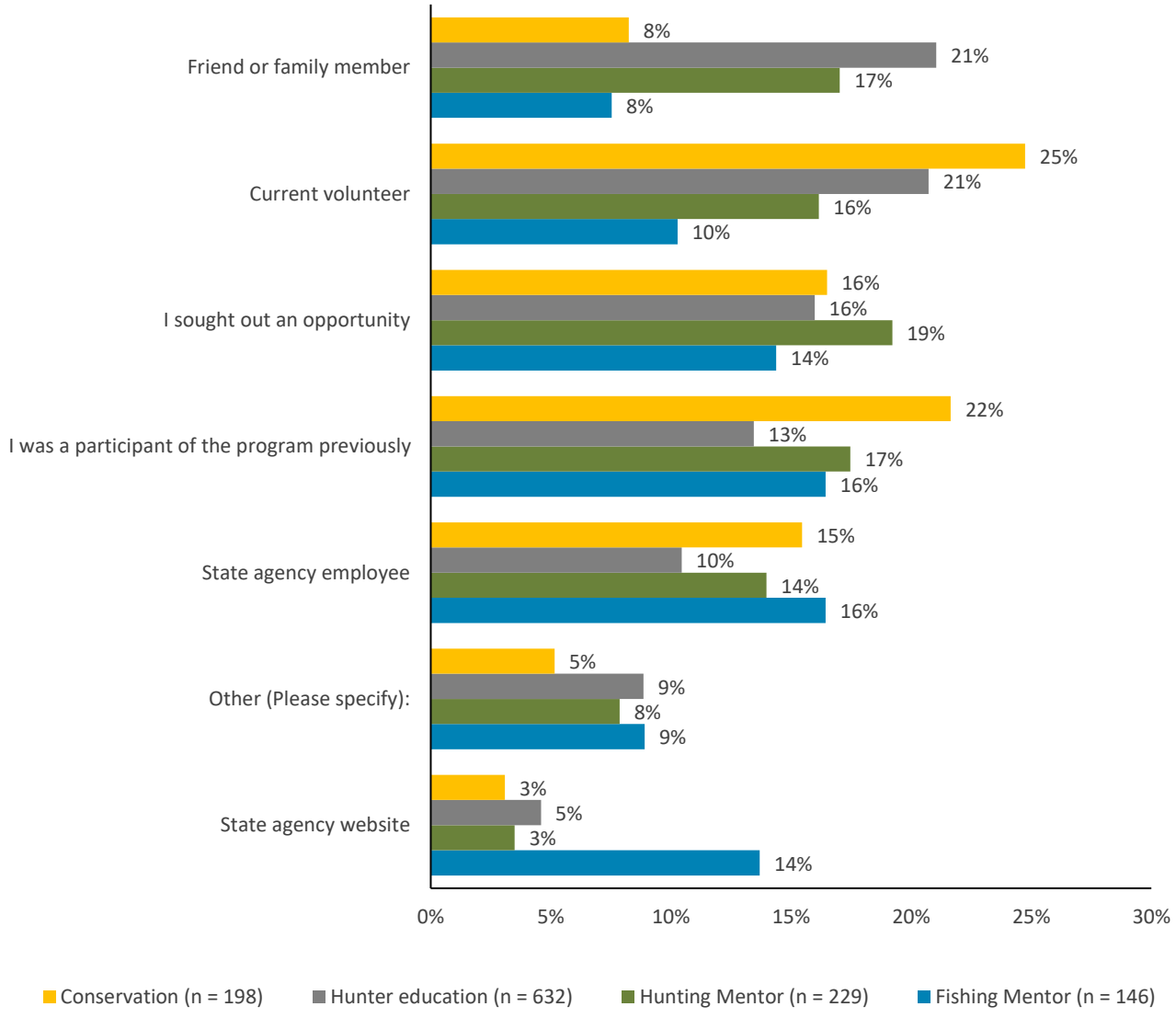
To help increase recruitment of future volunteers, it is important to understand how current volunteers learned about the program. Current volunteers represented in this study learned about their program in many different ways; however, word of mouth from family members or other volunteers (19% each) was the most common way (Figure 6). Very few respondents learned about the volunteer opportunities from the state agency's website (6%) or social media (2%), signaling an opportunity to recruit more volunteers through increased state agency promotion.

Figure 6. How respondents learned about volunteer programs, skill types combined.



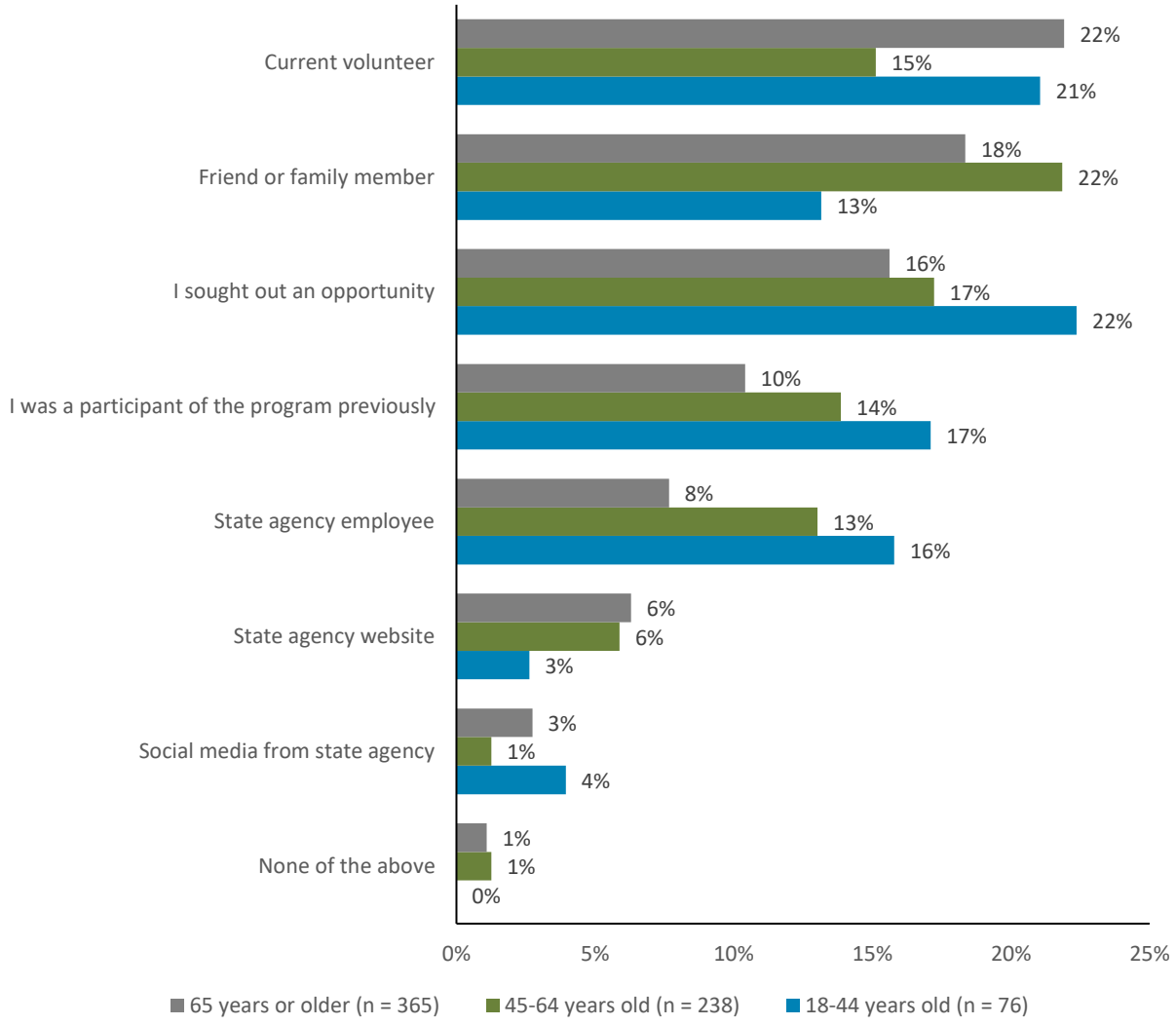
Compared with other volunteers, fishing volunteers were more likely to learn about an opportunity from a state agency website (14%), hunter education from friends or family (21%), and conservation from current volunteers (25%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7. How respondents learned about volunteer programs, sorted by hunter education instructors.



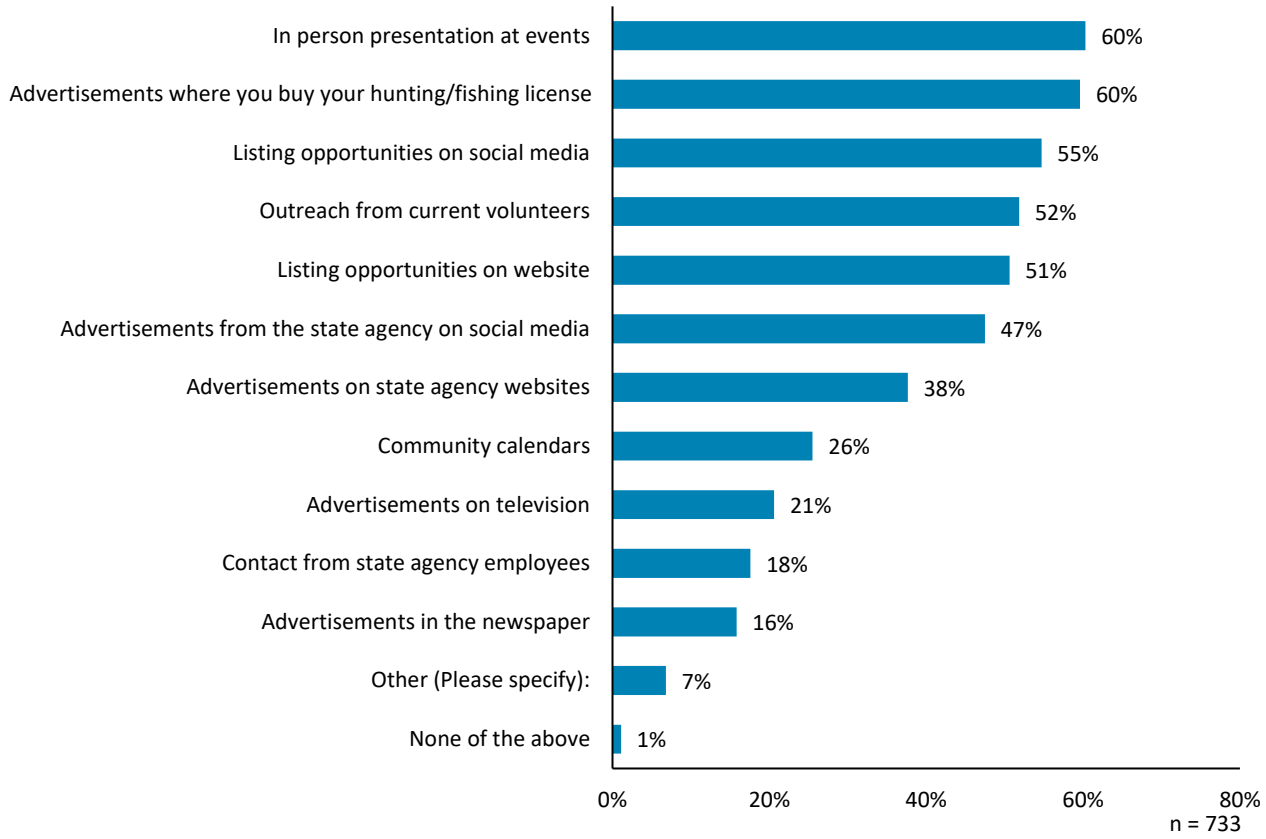
Younger volunteers (18 – 44) were more likely to seek out a volunteer program themselves and learn directly from participating or an agency employee (Figure 8). In contrast, older volunteers (65+) often learn from a friend or family member. Despite the association that the younger generation uses social media more frequently, the agency's social media recruited very few volunteers overall.

Figure 8. How respondents learned about volunteer programs, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



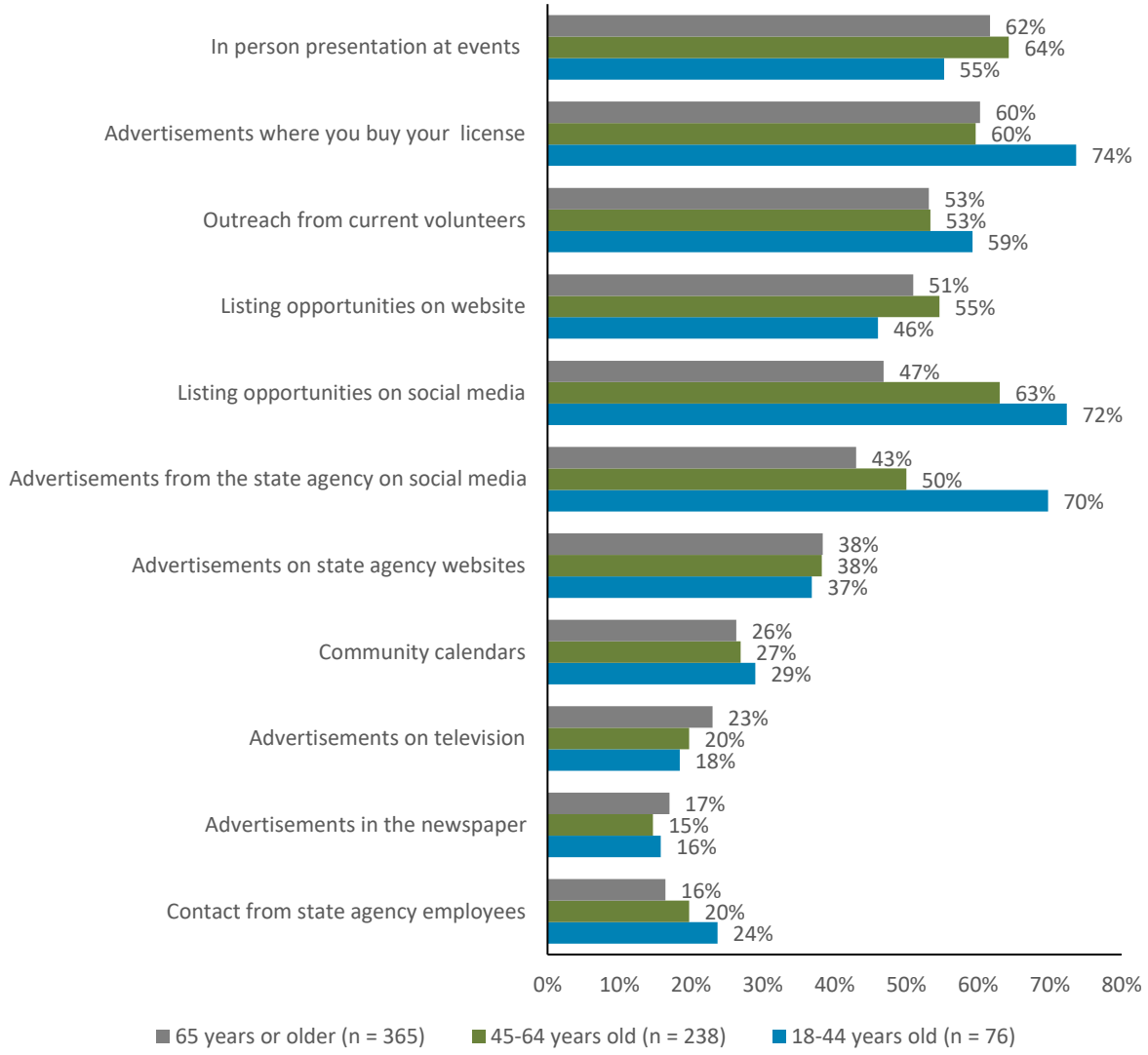
Respondents were then asked to consider which strategies would be effective for recruiting new volunteers. The top responses were in-person presentations at events (60%), advertisements for purchasing licenses (60%), and listing opportunities on social media (55%) (Figure 9). Most volunteers also thought outreach from volunteers (52%) and state agencies posting on their websites (51%) would be effective. While very few current volunteers were recruited via online methods (e.g., social media, website), it was clear that these are important promotional routes.

Figure 9. Volunteer promotion method, skill types combined.



Promotional preference varies very little by volunteer type. However younger volunteers (18-44 years old) advocate were more likely drawn to advertisements where licenses can be purchased (74%), posting opportunities on social media (72%), and advertisements on social media (70%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Method of promoting volunteer opportunities, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



Volunteer Day-To-Day Experiences

Much like hunter/angler R3, volunteer recruitment is but one component of a well-developed program. Retention is also key because programs that don't provide adequate support (either social or logistical) will likely suffer unacceptable drop-out rates. To explore retention, respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of their programs on a 4-point scale, from 1 (the agency is doing great) to 4 (the agency needs major improvement). Most respondents felt like they had a clear understanding of what was expected of them and received great communication from the staff. However, they also thought that the day-to-day experience could be improved and that recruitment campaigns need the greatest improvement (Table 4).

Table 4. Areas of potential improvement according to volunteers.
The scale is from 1 – doing great to 4 – needs major improvement.

	Volunteer recruitment campaigns	Volunteer communication	Day-to-day volunteer experience	Guidelines of volunteer role expectations	List of volunteer opportunities available
1	14%	29%	23%	34%	21%
2	36%	34%	41%	34%	36%
3	33%	25%	27%	22%	30%
4	17%	12%	9%	10%	13%

By volunteer type, many of these preferences are similar; however, hunting mentors were slightly more likely to say volunteer recruitment campaigns need major improvement (Table 5).

Table 5. Volunteer recruitment campaign effectiveness, by volunteer type.

	Fishing Mentor	Hunting Mentor	Hunter education	Conservation
1	17%	9%	12%	15%
2	38%	37%	36%	33%
3	32%	33%	34%	34%
4	13%	21%	17%	18%

Fishing volunteers were most likely to enjoy the day-to-day experience as is (28%), feel like their state did a good job setting expectations (40%), and clearly posted opportunities to volunteer (29%) (Table 6-Table 8).

Table 6. Volunteer day-to-day effectiveness, by volunteer type.

	Fishing Mentor	Hunting Mentor	Hunter education	Conservation
1	28%	17%	21%	18%
2	36%	42%	42%	44%
3	25%	28%	29%	26%
4	10%	13%	9%	12%

Table 7. Volunteer expectation effectiveness, by volunteer type.

	Fishing Mentor	Hunting Mentor	Hunter education	Conservation
1	40%	28%	32%	29%
2	27%	36%	35%	39%
3	22%	24%	23%	23%
4	11%	11%	10%	9%

Table 8. Volunteer opportunity listings, by volunteer type.

	Fishing Mentor	Hunting Mentor	Hunter education	Conservation
1	29%	14%	19%	16%
2	29%	41%	37%	37%
3	27%	32%	30%	35%
4	15%	14%	14%	12%

Respondents were also asked to rate their level of agreement with several statements about volunteering (Table 9). 74% strongly agreed with the statement, “I find volunteering to be rewarding.” Although most respondents agreed with the statement “I volunteer to improve the area I fish or hunt,” 22% (one-fifth) responded that they neither agreed nor disagreed. Roughly three-quarters strongly agreed that they volunteer to “pass on the tradition,” and 68% strongly agreed that they volunteer for the joy sparked in someone fishing or hunting for the first time.

When it came to driving distance volunteers, more than any other statement, they only somewhat agreed that they'd volunteer to support conservation efforts regardless of location. Similarly, while most agreed with the statement “I volunteer to help the environment,” a notable portion only somewhat agreed. The statement respondents most strongly agreed with was “I am proud of the work I do as a volunteer and take my role seriously,” underscoring the strong sense of responsibility volunteers feel for their roles.

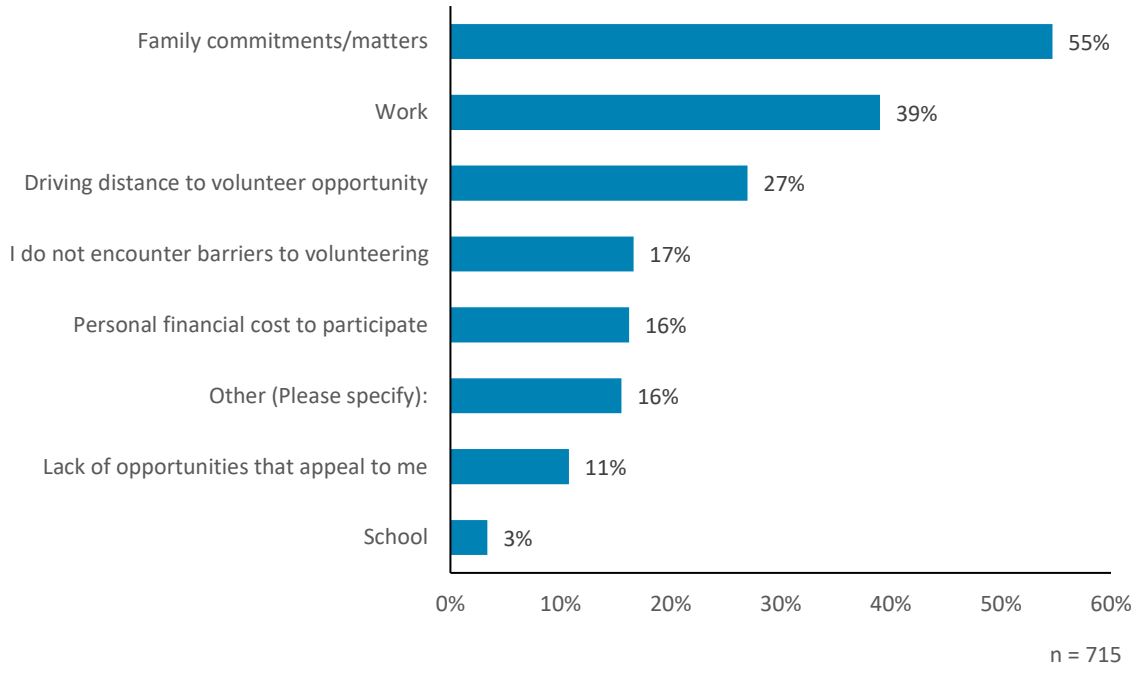
Table 9. Volunteer agree/disagree statements

Statement	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I find volunteering to be rewarding	5%	2%	3%	16%	74%
I volunteer to improve the area I fish/hunt	4%	4%	22%	27%	43%
I volunteer to pass on the tradition	6%	2%	4%	14%	74%
I volunteer for the joy I see sparked in someone fishing/hunting for the first time	5%	2%	5%	20%	68%
I volunteer to help with conservation regardless of location	5%	3%	17%	32%	43%
I volunteer to help the environment	4%	4%	18%	29%	45%
I am proud of the work I do as a volunteer and take my role seriously	5%	2%	3%	11%	79%

Volunteer Barriers

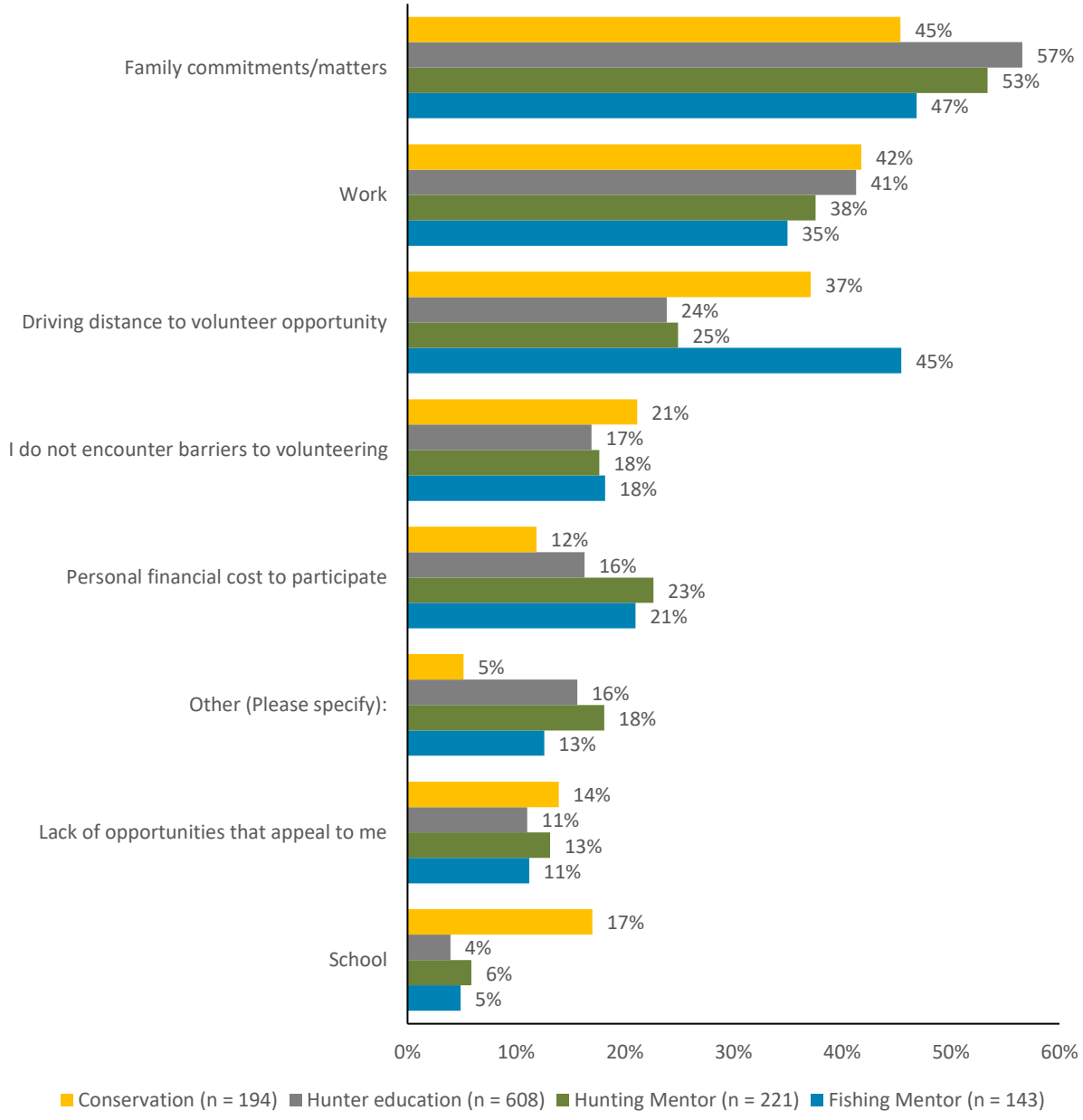
There are many barriers' people face when volunteering, many of which are out of state agency control. In this survey, the most common barriers were family commitments (55%) and work (39%) (Figure 11). Around a third of respondents (27%) said that driving distance was a barrier to volunteering. Offering programs statewide could reduce this concern. One barrier that state agencies are successfully preventing is a lack of appealing opportunities; only 1 in 10 respondents cited this as a concern.

Figure 11. Barriers to volunteering, skill types combined.



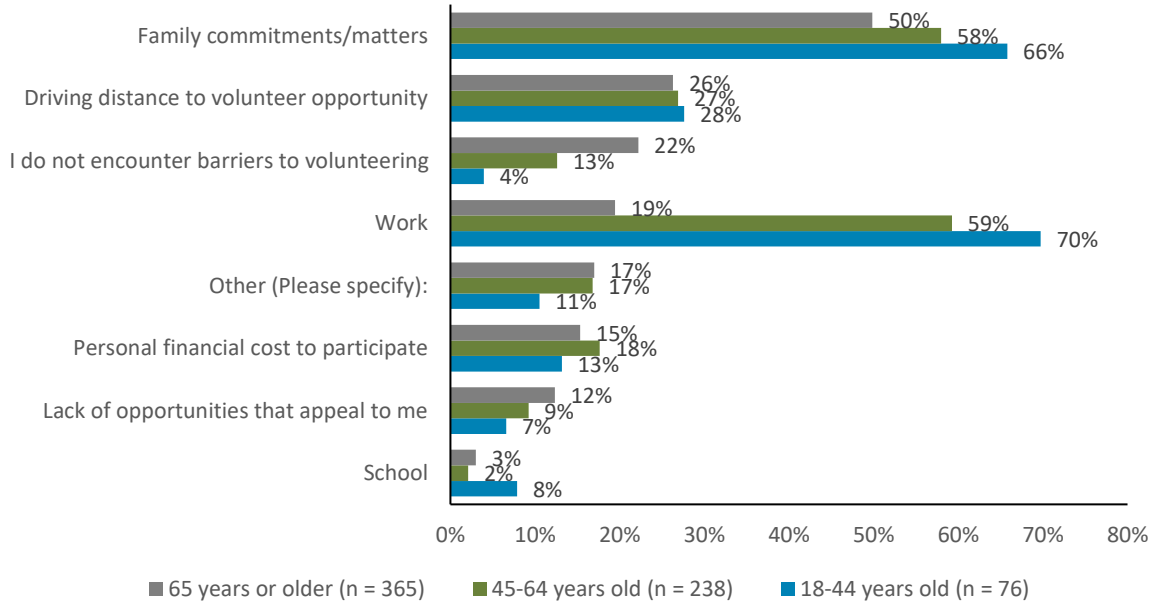
Regardless of the program, volunteers faced many of the same issues. The only item that stood out was the fishing skills mentors and conservation volunteers, were more concerned about the driving distance (Figure 12). Providing opportunities at sites near towns and cities will help reduce this burden.

Figure 12. Barriers to volunteering, sorted by hunter education instructors.



Older volunteers are less likely to be worried about work or family commitments than younger volunteers, but also less likely to feel like they didn't encounter any barriers (Figure 13).

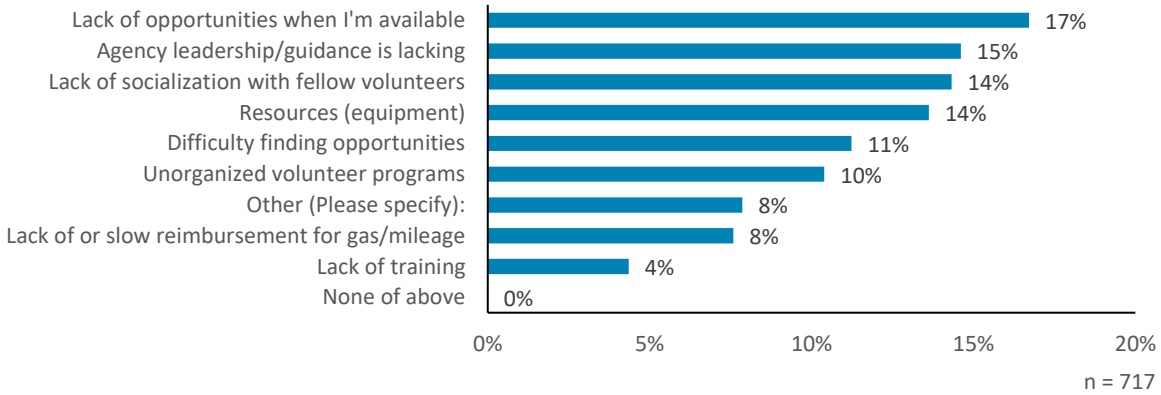
Figure 13. Barriers to volunteering, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



Volunteer Experience

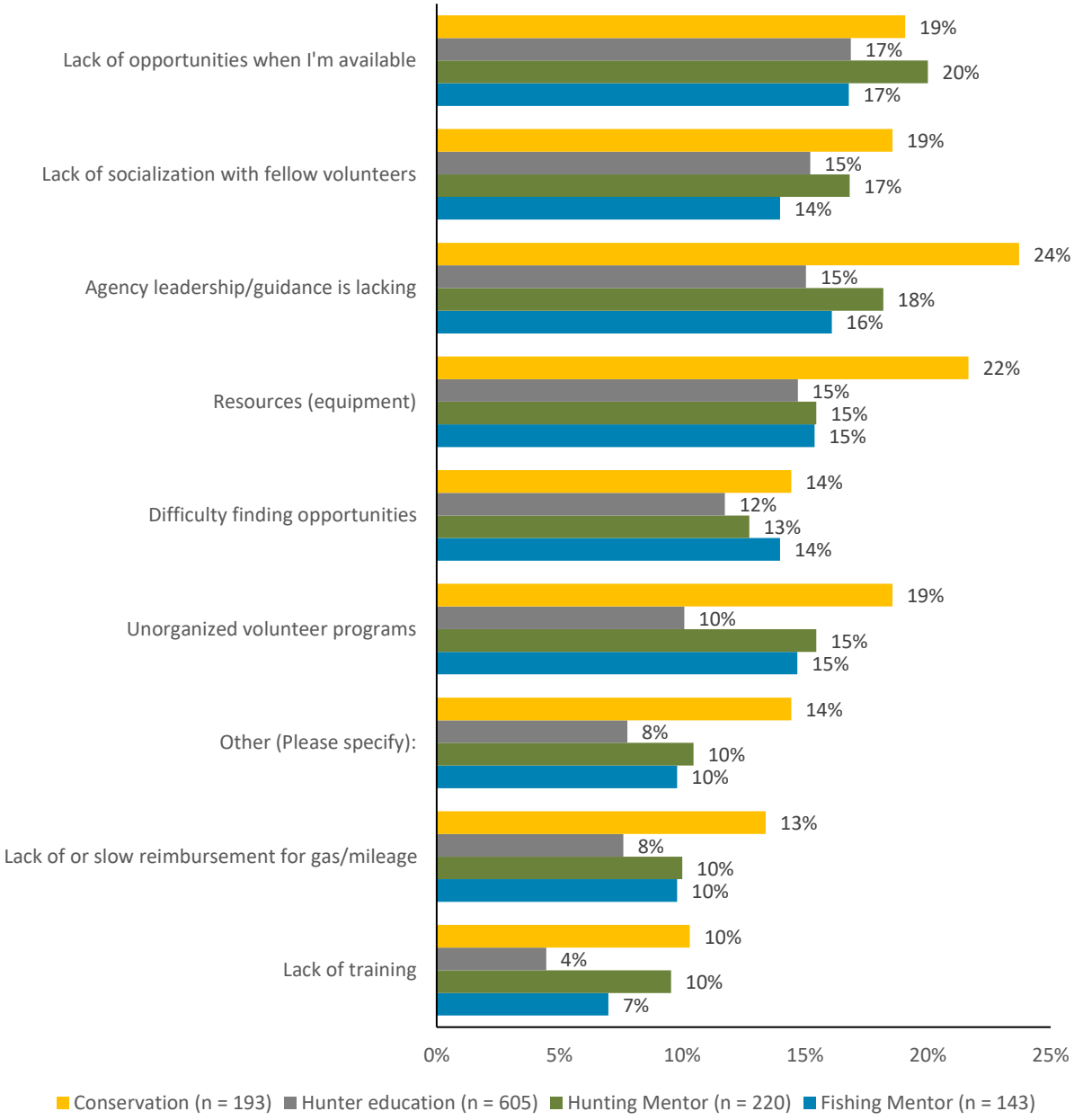
To better understand which aspects of the volunteer experience needed improvement, respondents were asked whether their program had any shortcomings. While no area overwhelmingly needed improvement, respondents said that a lack of opportunities to volunteer (17%), agency leadership (15%), and a lack of socialization with fellow volunteers (14%) were areas that could be improved (Figure 14). Socialization, while never the top issue, appears to be a common concern among current volunteers and, in the following survey, potential volunteers. Setting up programs where volunteers work in tandem or in groups may help recruit and retain volunteers.

Figure 14. Volunteer program shortcomings, skill types combined.



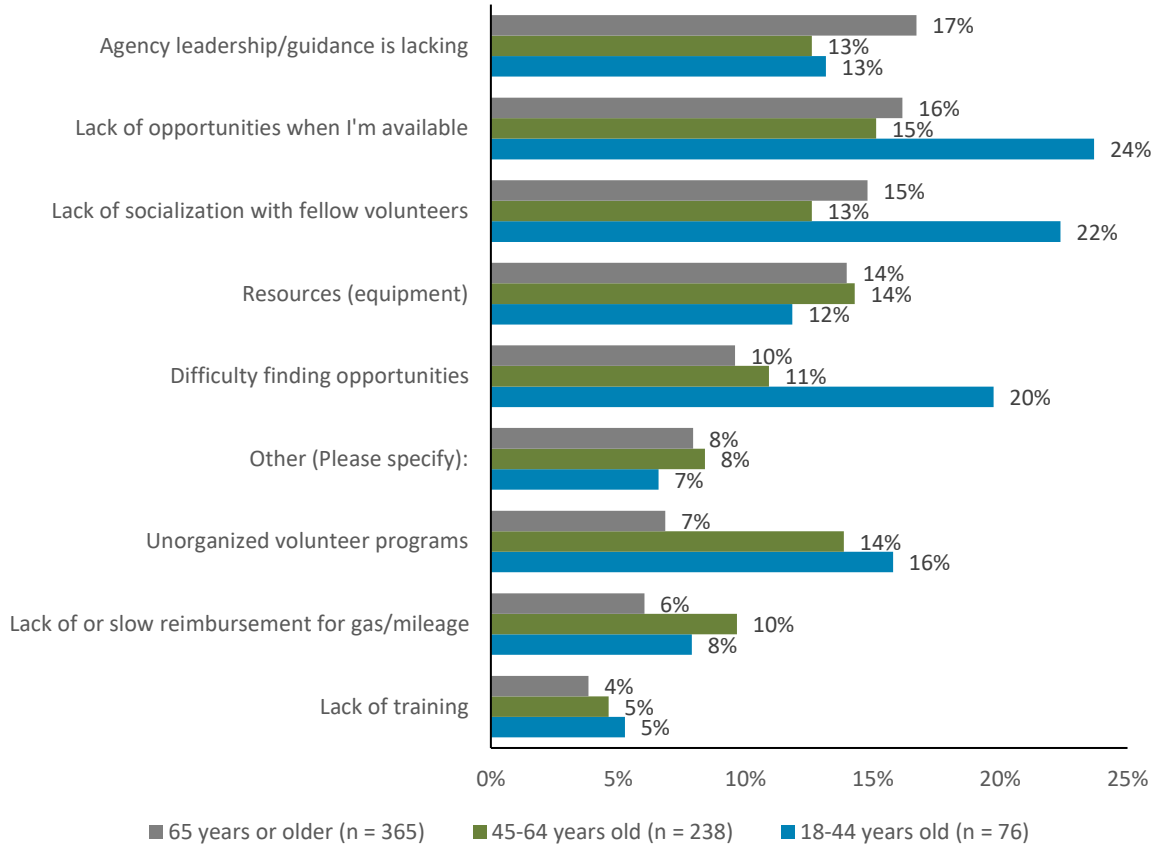
By volunteer type, fishing and hunting skills mentors and hunter education instructors reported similar shortcomings, while conservation volunteers were generally more likely to have difficulties with their programs (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Volunteer program shortcomings, sorted by hunter education volunteers.



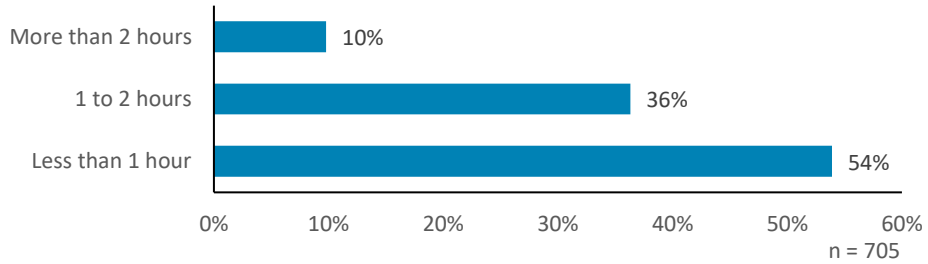
Younger volunteers were more likely to say that there was a lack of opportunities, or that they were difficult to find (Figure 16). They also thought there was a lack of socialization with fellow volunteers.

Figure 16. Volunteer program shortcomings, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



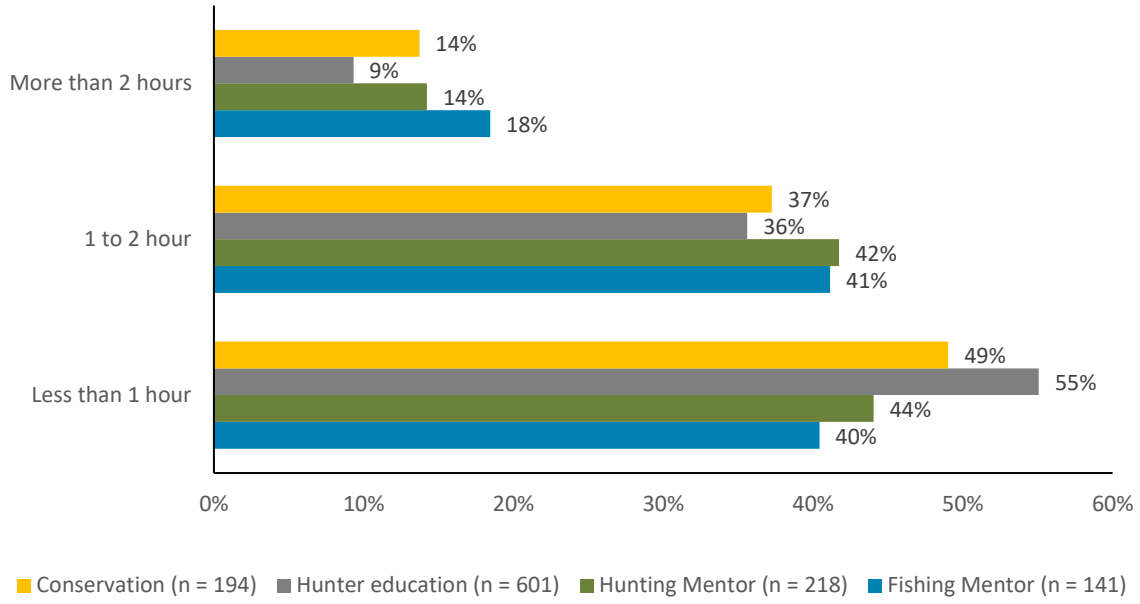
In the previous focus groups, many volunteers expressed a willingness to travel far distances, often more than 2 hours, to volunteer for a single-day event. As a result, this question was asked again in the volunteer survey. It appeared that most volunteers had less of an appetite for driving long distances. Most were willing to drive up to 1 hour (52%) for a single-day event, and only 10% would travel more than 2 hours (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Single-day event driving distance, skill types combined.



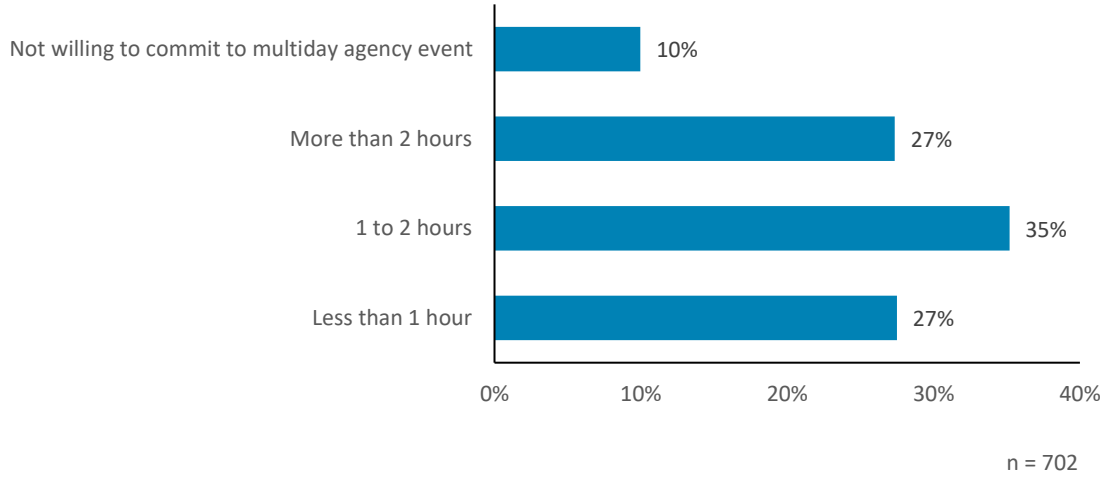
Compared with other volunteers, fishing and hunting mentors were more willing to travel over an hour to volunteer (Figure 18). There were no differences across age groupings.

Figure 18. Single day event driving distance, by volunteer type.



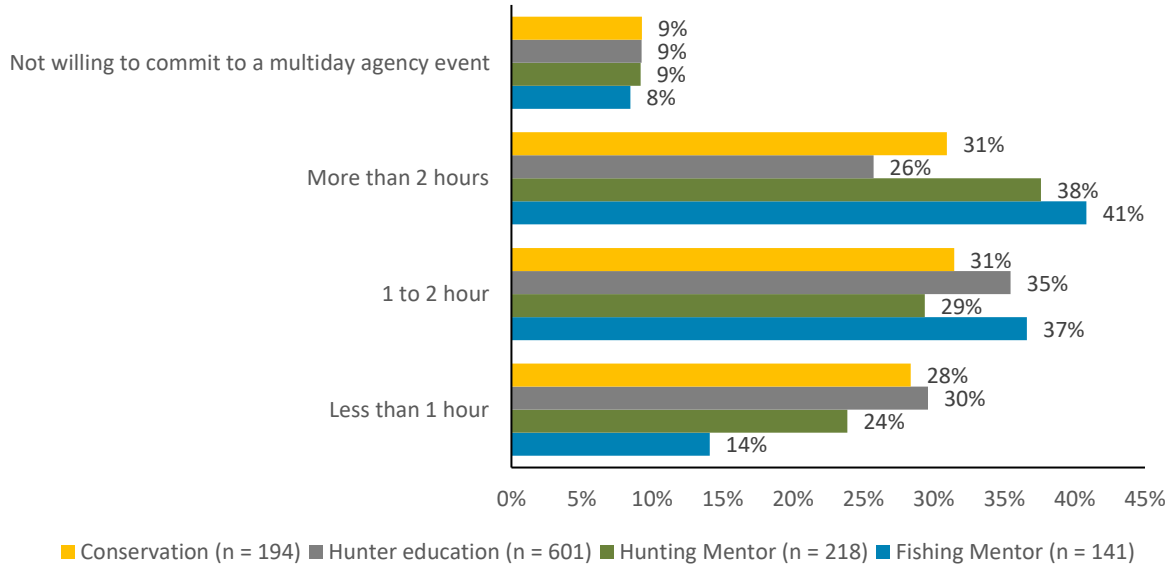
In contrast, when asked about a multi-day event, the most common response was that they would travel for up to 1-2 hours (35%) (Figure 19). Additionally, slightly more than a quarter of volunteers were open to traveling more than 2 hours.

Figure 19. Multi-day event driving distance, skill types combined.



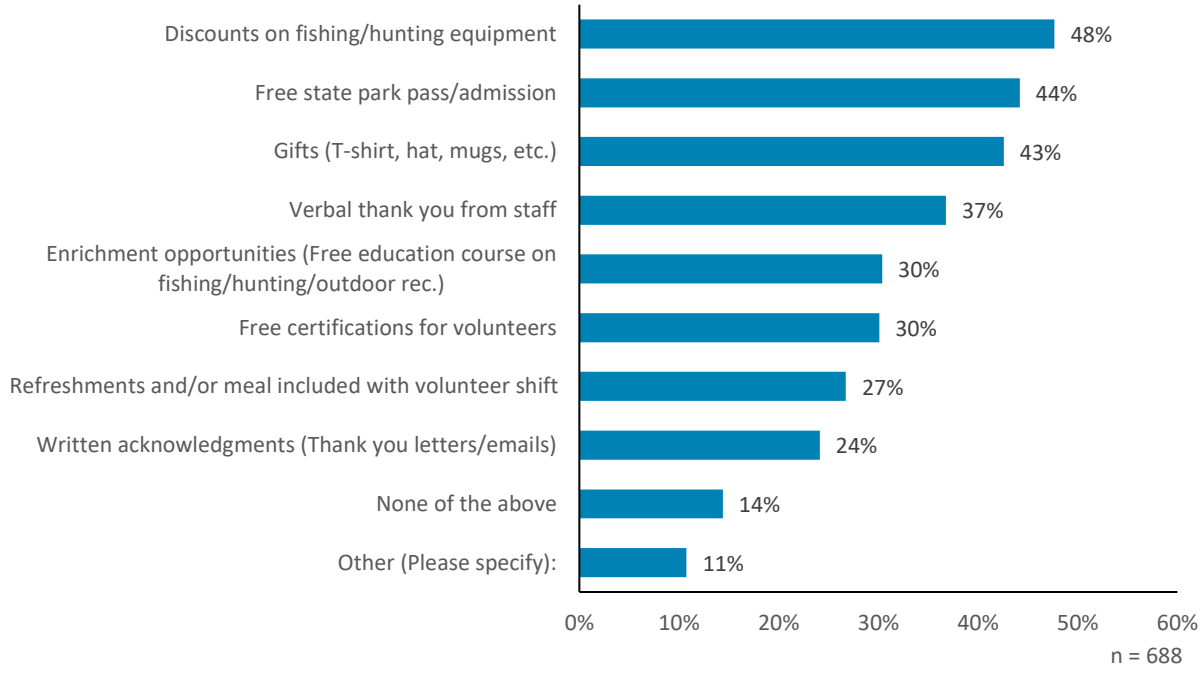
Fishing and hunting mentors were also more willing to travel farther for multi-day events (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Multi-day event driving distance, by volunteer type.



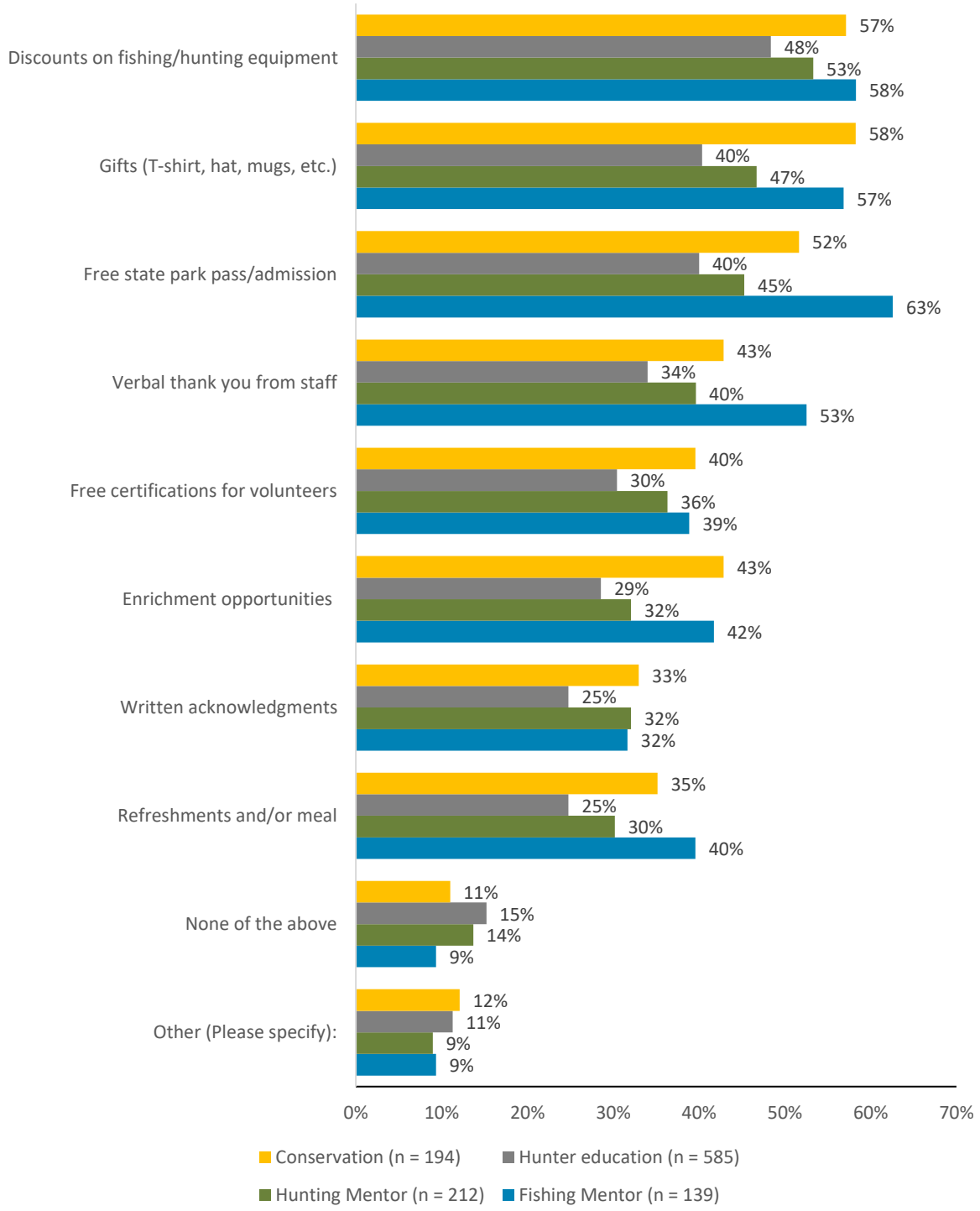
Given the many barriers to volunteering, incentives can help attract potential volunteers. According to current volunteers, the best incentives were discounts on fishing/hunting equipment (48%), free state park passes (44%), and gifts such as T-shirts, hats, or mugs (43%) (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Volunteer incentives, skills types combined.



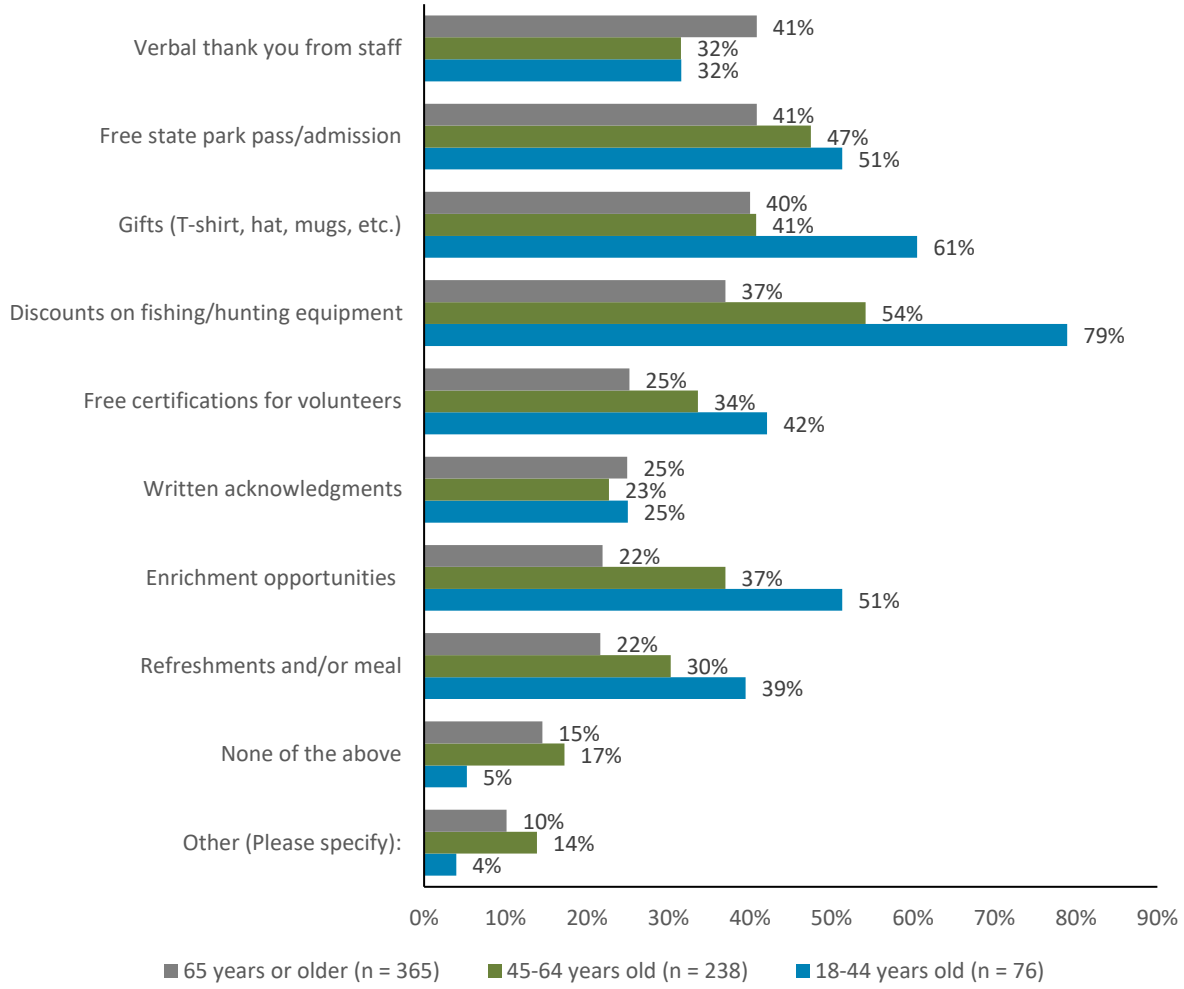
Across the board, hunter education volunteers were less interested in receiving incentives as tokens of appreciation for their volunteer efforts (Figure 22). Among fishing volunteers, who were relatively more interested in incentives than other volunteers, verbal acknowledgment was highly appreciated (55%).

Figure 22. Volunteer incentives, sorted by hunter education instructors.



Younger volunteers were more frequently drawn to potential incentives. The majority of them expressed interest in discounts on fishing equipment (85%), gifts such as T-shirts, hats, or mugs (69%), and free state park passes (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Volunteer incentives, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



Volunteer Importance Statements

Volunteer respondents were also asked to rate the importance of various elements that contribute to a successful program. Two factors were very or extremely important to almost every volunteer: an engaging program (85%) and clear expectations (85%) (Table 10). Volunteers also emphasized the importance of supportive staff who set them up for success. To run a program, most want assurance that they'll have access to the necessary gear and consistent opportunities they can count on when planning. In short, when a program offers reliable logistical support, volunteers are more likely to enjoy their experience and feel confident.

Table 10. Very-extremely important volunteer program components.

Importance	An engaging program	Clear expectations	Helpful staff	Free gear to run program	Consistent scheduling
Not at all	0%	0%	2%	3%	2%
Slightly-Moderately	15%	14%	16%	22%	28%
Very-Extremely	85%	85%	82%	75%	70%

Almost all volunteer's also said socialization was at least slightly important to volunteering, but fewer viewed it as very or extremely important (Table 11). Transportation-related concerns (coordinated transport or mileage reimbursement) and free snacks were also lower on the list but appreciated by most volunteers.

Table 11. Slightly-moderately important volunteer program components.

Importance	Socialization with volunteers	Coordinated transportation	Free snacks	Mileage reimbursement
Not at all Important	6%	33%	30%	43%
Slightly-Moderately	49%	44%	51%	38%
Very-Extremely	44%	23%	20%	19%

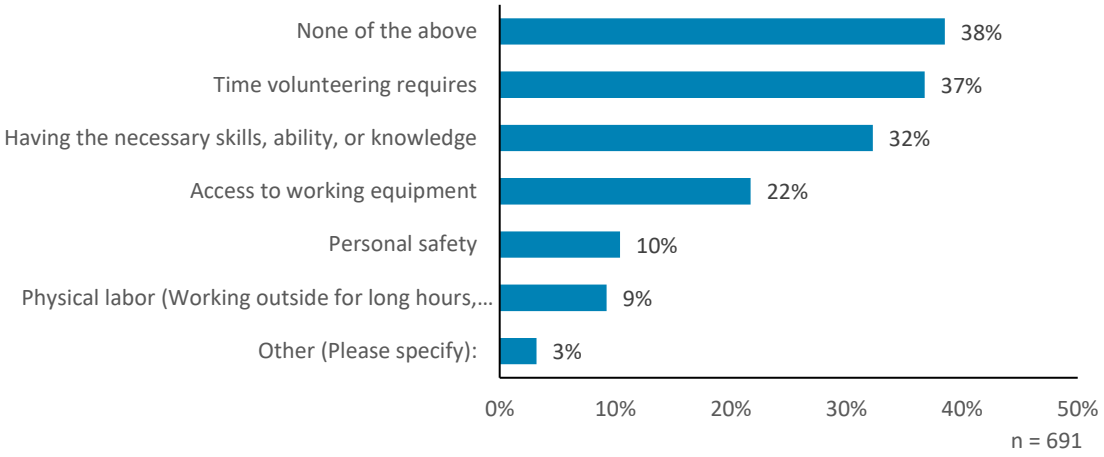
While no differences were observed by volunteer type, volunteers over the age of 65 were more likely to value socializing with fellow volunteers (Table 12), potentially indicating that retirement-age volunteers may be seeking to make up for socialization they may be missing in retirement, a sentiment expressed by some volunteers during the focus groups.

Table 12. Volunteer interest in socialization by age.

Importance	18-44 years old (n = 69)	45-64 years old (n = 219)	65 years or older (n =336)
Not at all	7%	7%	6%
Slightly-Moderately	62%	57%	46%
Very-Extremely	30%	36%	48%

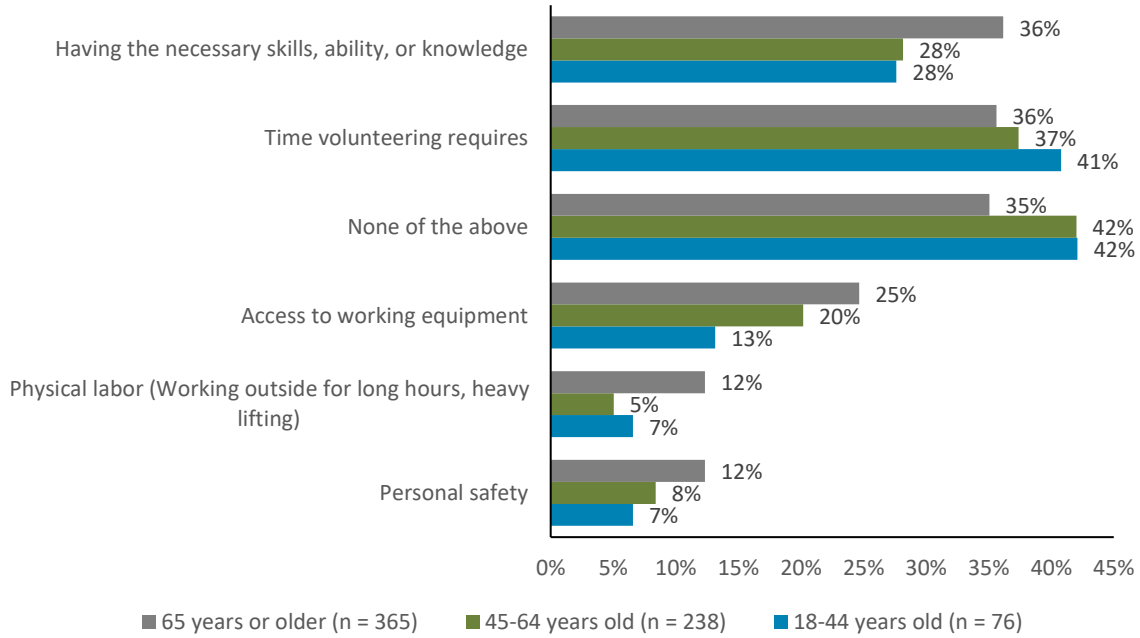
When it comes to volunteering, the most common concerns among volunteers included whether they had the free time (37%) or the necessary skills (32%) required to effectively operate their given program (Figure 24). However, most volunteer respondents reported that they had no concerns prior to volunteering (38%).

Figure 24. Volunteering concerns, skill types combined.



Regardless of the volunteer program, respondents were concerned with the same issues. By age, however, volunteers over 65 were more concerned about potential roadblocks to volunteering, with the exception of the time it requires (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Volunteering concerns, sorted by respondents 64 years or older.



Just as many volunteers had no concerns prior to volunteering, most volunteers were not at all intimidated by the idea of volunteering for their program, and if they were, they were rarely very or extremely intimidated (Table 13). Emphasizing the support that states offer volunteers may help recruit people who are concerned about their skills.

Table 13. Intimidation prior to volunteering.

Intimidation	Fishing Mentor	Hunting Mentor	Hunter Education	Conservation
Not at all	56%	49%	46%	48%
Slightly-Moderately	43%	50%	51%	51%
Very-Extremely	1%	1%	3%	1%

The younger the volunteer, the more likely they were to be intimidated by leading a program (Table 14). Signaling that the younger generation may be less confident in their skills and need greater support when they start volunteering.

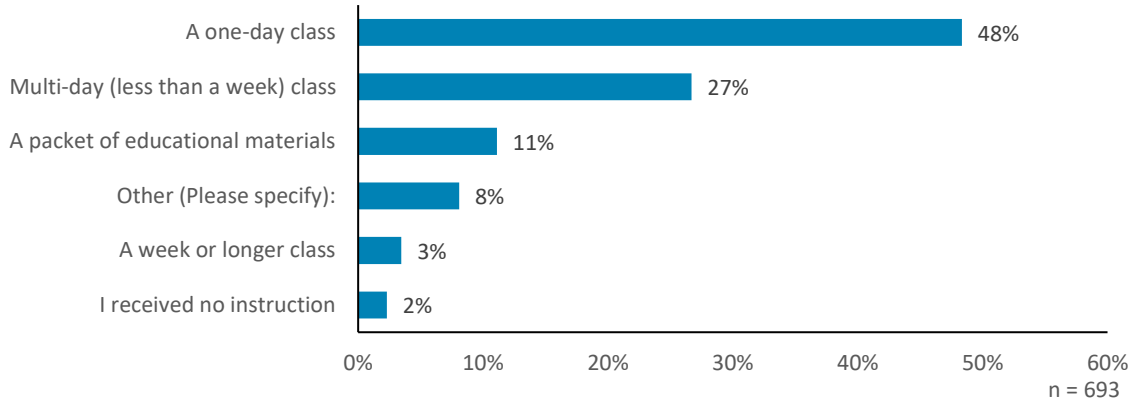
Table 14. Intimidation prior to volunteering, by age.

Intimidation	18-44 years old (n = 76)	45-64 years old (n = 219)	65 years or older (n =336)
Not at all	27%	46%	48%
Slightly-Moderately	67%	53%	49%
Very-Extremely	6%	1%	3%

Volunteer Training

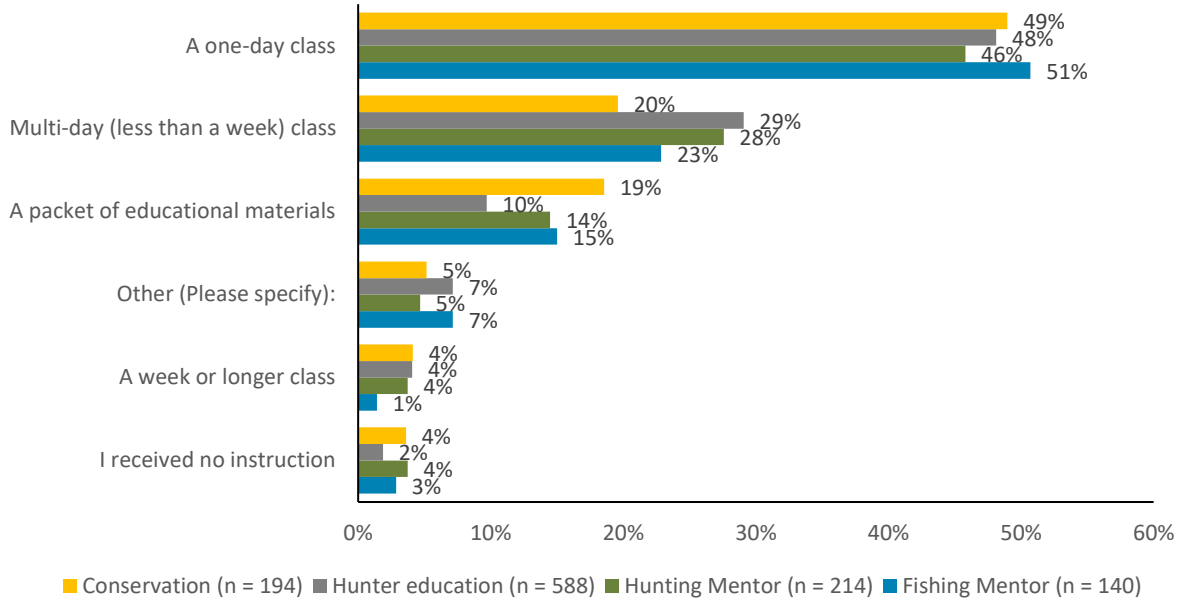
When asked about their onboarding process, about half of current volunteers (48%) indicated that they received a one-day class to prepare them for their volunteer role. Slightly more than one-quarter (27%) received multi-day instruction (Figure 26).

Figure 26. Volunteer onboarding process, skill types combined.



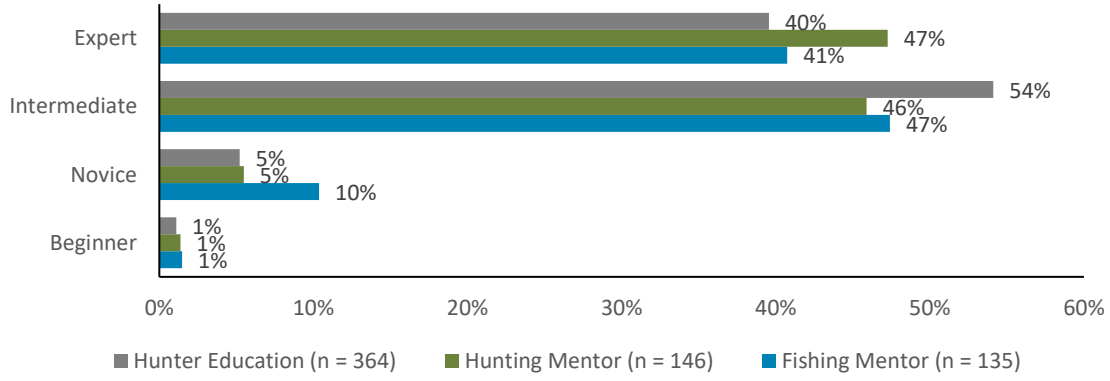
Hunter education instructors had a more involved onboarding process, with nearly a third of volunteers taking a multi-day class (Figure 27). For conservation volunteers, a packet of educational materials was the second-most-likely training.

Figure 27. Volunteer onboarding process, sorted by hunter education instructors.



To better understand the volunteers' backgrounds, respondents were also asked to rate their experience. While many of these respondents considered themselves experts, hunting education instructors and fishing mentors were more likely to rate their hunting and fishing abilities as intermediate (Figure 28). While many people may not feel confident in their abilities prior to volunteering, around 1 in 10 fishing volunteers thought of themselves as novice anglers. Emphasizing to the potential volunteers that they don't need to be experts to help as volunteers may improve recruitment of new volunteers.

Figure 28. Self-rated ability of hunters, by volunteer type.



Potential Volunteer Survey Results

Introduction

The volunteer focus groups and survey helped clarify how current and former volunteers were recruited and what they enjoy and dislike about their roles. Put together, they highlight several themes and questions that state agencies must address to strengthen recruitment efforts of potential volunteers.

1. **Volunteers rarely learn about opportunities through formal promotion.** Most volunteers learn about programs through word of mouth from current volunteers, family members, or agency employees. To reach a new audience, potential volunteers in this survey were asked what promotional methods they though would be effective.
2. **Targeted promotion would improve recruitment.** Volunteer respondents pointed to increased social media advertisements and ads where they buy their license as potential strategies. These methods of promoting opportunities were further examined in this survey.
3. **The current volunteer base is narrow.** Today, volunteers are primarily retirement-age men who've been volunteering for more than 10 years. This leaves an untapped pool of hunters and anglers who have never been engaged. Understanding how these groups can be reached is essential to long-term program success.
4. **Motivations for volunteering center on passing on the tradition and giving back to the community.** Passing on the tradition of hunting and fishing to the next generation and giving back to the community were the strongest motivations for current volunteers (Figure 3). This survey examined these motivations to determine if they also resonated with non-volunteers.
5. **Volunteers enjoy staying close to home and socializing.** Currently, volunteers don't want to travel more than 1 hour and often volunteer to socialize. This survey sought to confirm those findings with anglers and hunters who fit the mold of potential volunteers.

Using these findings, a potential volunteer survey was developed to answer the questions outlined above, as well as many more, to understand why hunters and anglers with an interest in volunteering do not already (Appendix C). Given that today's volunteers skew older, helping states attract more and potentially younger volunteers is crucial in ensuring these programs remain strong for years to come.

Sampling Frame

The potential volunteer survey was fielded to a sample of hunters and anglers from Qualtrics panels. Responses were collected using demographic quotas to prevent over representation of any particular group. These groupings mirrored U.S. population demographics, leading to a sample of respondents that fit the following distributions:

- Gender: 51% female, 49% male.
- Age: 29% 18-35 years old, 33% 35-54 years old, 38% 55+ years old.
- Region: 17% Northeast, 39% South, 20.5% Midwest, and 23.5% West.

The survey was conducted in July of 2025, and after data cleaning, 1,997 responses were analyzed. Respondents who completed the survey were required to report some level of interest in volunteering for at least one of the following programs: hunter education, hunting skills instruction/mentoring, or fishing skills instruction/mentoring. These respondents were also asked about their interest in volunteering for a habitat or wildlife conservation program.

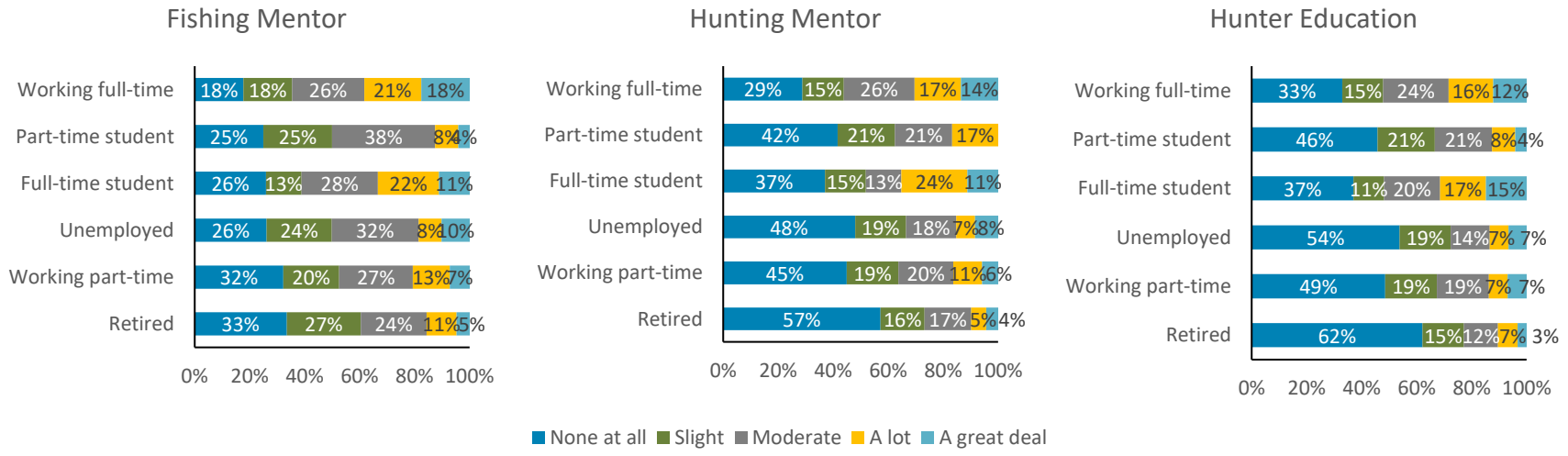
Among respondents who qualified for the survey, interest in conservation volunteering was highest, followed by fishing skills, hunting skills, and hunter education (Table 15).

Table 15. Volunteer interest.

	Hunter Education	Hunting Skills	Fishing Skills	Habitat Conservation	Wildlife conservation
None at all	45%	40%	25%	10%	10%
Slight	16%	16%	21%	21%	21%
Moderate	19%	22%	27%	38%	35%
A lot	12%	12%	16%	18%	21%
A great deal	9%	10%	12%	13%	14%

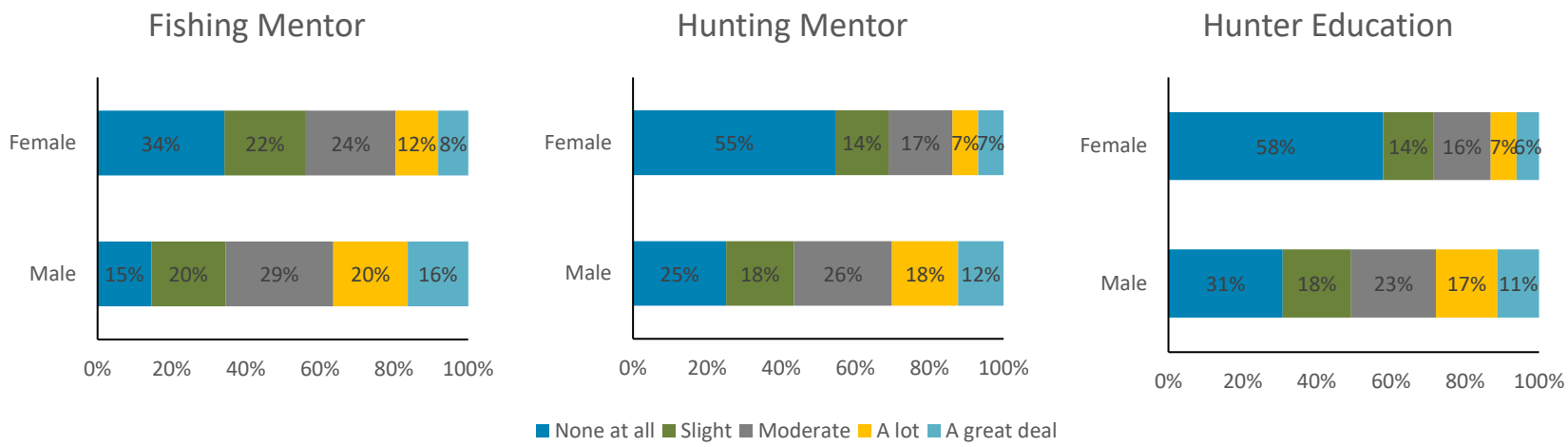
Surprisingly, although most respondents in the survey of current volunteers were retirement age, those who identified as retired had the least interest in volunteering (Figure 29). In contrast, people who worked full-time or were full-time students had the most interest in volunteering.

Figure 29. Volunteer interest, by employment.



Male respondents were generally more interested in teaching volunteer programs than female respondents (Figure 30). Fewer than half of all female respondents were interested in volunteering as part of a hunting program, while only 1/3 were interested in teaching fishing programs.

Figure 30. Volunteer interest, by gender.



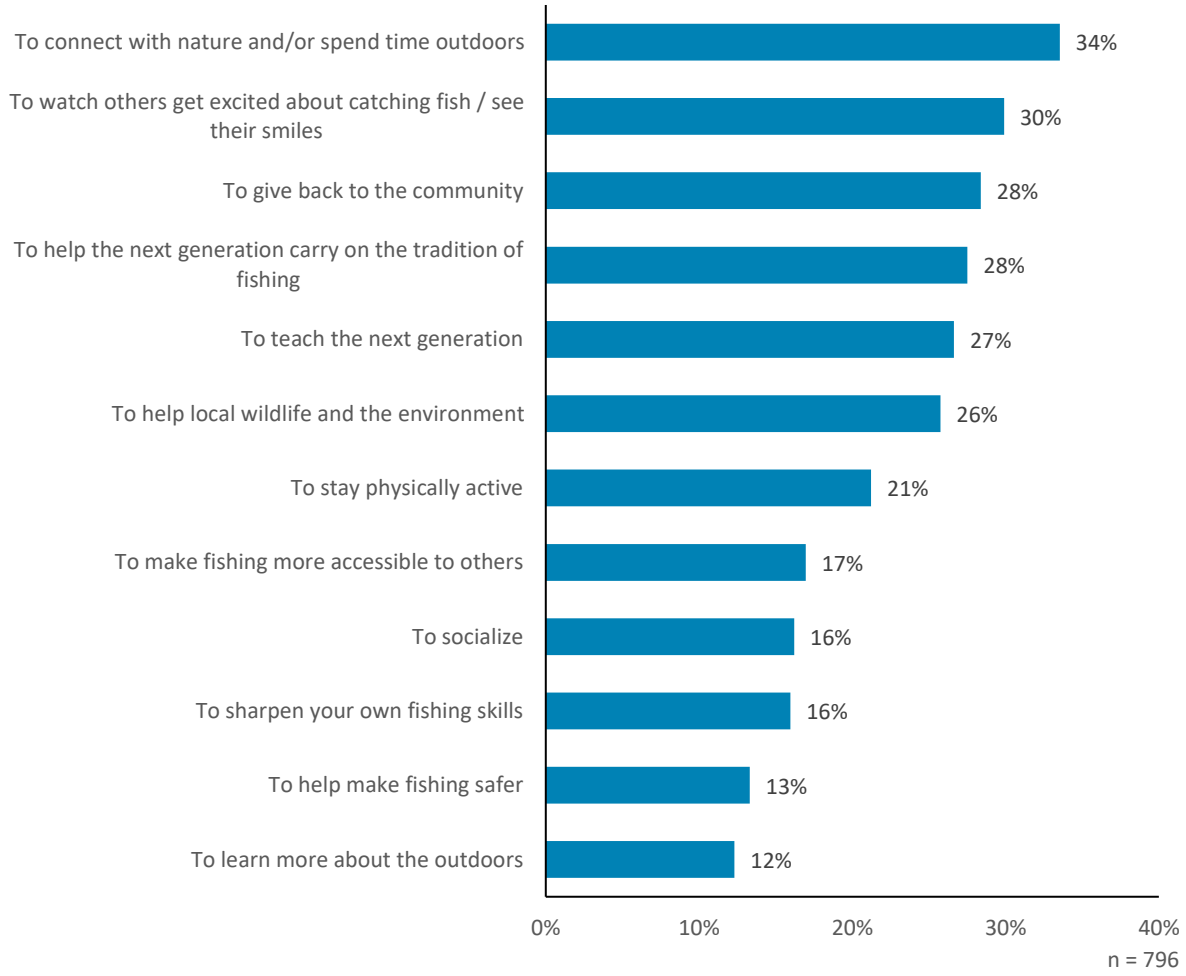
Results

Volunteer Interest

To understand what would inspire hunters and anglers to volunteer, respondents were asked to choose up to 3 reasons for their interest in volunteering. Those who expressed interest in multiple programs answered the motivation question only once. This was done to reduce survey fatigue by administering a battery of follow-up questions to better understand these specific programs. Respondents were interested in conservation programs; however, all answered the motivation question because this section did not include any follow-ups.

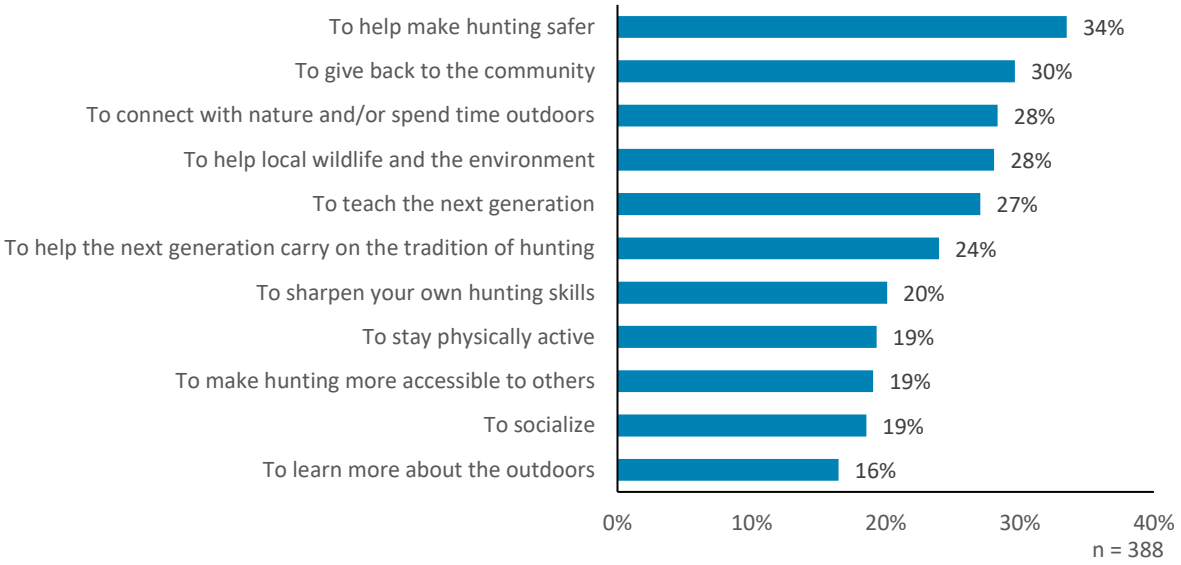
Among respondents interested in volunteering for a fishing program, most were motivated by connecting with nature (34%) or by seeing the excitement of people making their first catch (30%) (Figure 31). These were followed by motivations expressed by current volunteers in the previous survey: to give back to the community (28%) or to pass on the tradition of fishing (28%).

Figure 31. Motivations for volunteering as a fishing skills instructor.



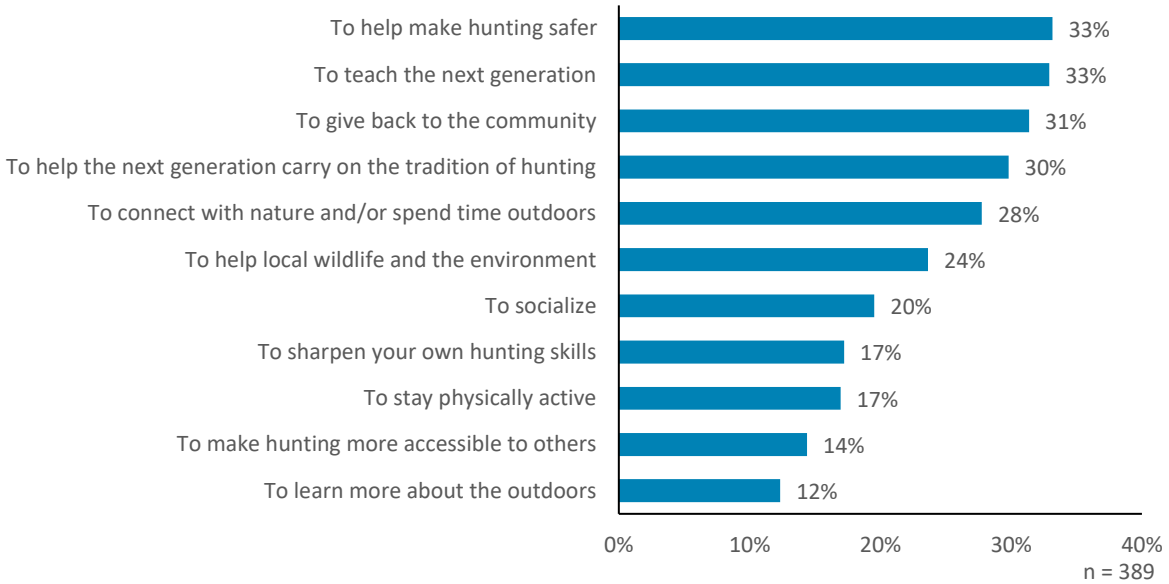
When it came to potentially volunteering as a hunting skills instructor, the top reasons were to make hunting safer (34%) and to give back to the community (30%) (Figure 32). Other common responses were to connect with nature (28%), help local wildlife (28%), and to teach the next generation (27%).

Figure 32. Motivations for volunteering as a hunting skills instructor.



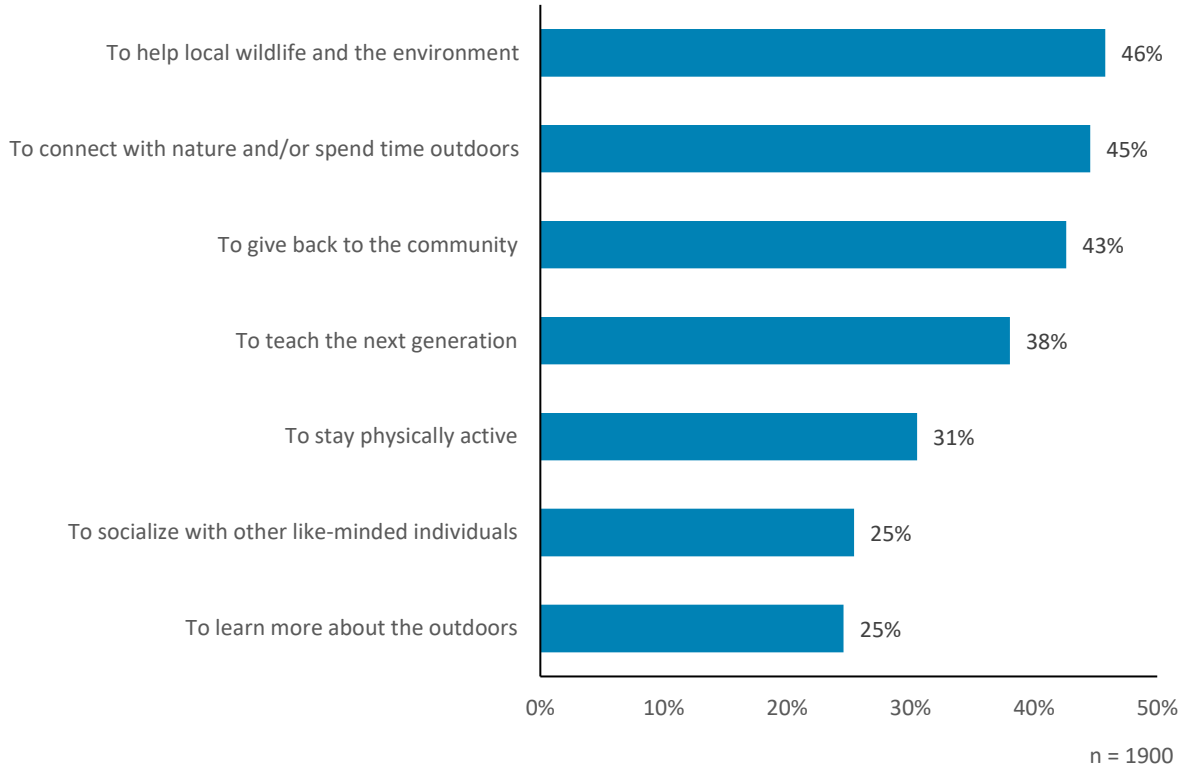
Potential hunter education instructors were also motivated to make hunting safer (33%), to teach the next generation (33%), and to give back to the community (31%) (Figure 33). Across these programs, current volunteers were motivated for many of the same reasons, but potential volunteers appear to feel more strongly about making activities safer and connecting with nature or the environment.

Figure 33. Motivations for volunteering as a hunter education instructor.



Potential conservation volunteers were more interested in volunteering for environmental reasons than those interested in leading a fishing or hunting program (Figure 34). The leading motivations for these respondents were helping local wildlife (46%), connecting with nature (45%), and giving back to the community (43%).

Figure 34. Motivations for volunteering as a conservation volunteer.



Volunteer Interest Types

Ungrouped motivation frequencies are informative, but they mask the distinct subsets of potential volunteers who share stronger, overlapping motivations. Clustering reveals these groups and the patterns that the ungrouped analysis cannot. With each respondent able to select up to three reasons for volunteering, a Gower distance cluster analysis was used to create groupings that highlight shared motivations and tell the story of why people volunteer. Among potential fishing volunteers, 4 groups emerged, 3 of which had clear shared interests. Around 60% of potential fishing volunteers fall into these three groups, each with the following core principles: education, tradition, and activity. Among the education group (18% of respondents), 91% said they were interested in volunteering for the opportunity "to teach the next generation". For respondents in the tradition group (15% of respondents), 100% were interested in helping "the next generation carry on the tradition of fishing". Activity-motivated volunteers (27%) were less of a monolith, but 67% wanted to volunteer to stay physically active. The remaining 40% of volunteers fit into a group with no dominant motivations, but a third to a half wanted to volunteer to help local wildlife, connect with nature, or give back to their communities (Table 16).

Table 16. Cluster analysis of potential fishing skills volunteers

Education (18%)		Tradition (15%)		Activity (27%)		Undefined motivations (40%)	
Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent
To teach the next generation	91%	To help the next generation carry on the tradition of fishing	100%	To stay physically active	67%	To help local wildlife and the environment	49%
To watch others get excited about catching fish and see their smiles	44%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	33%	To sharpen your own fishing skills	36%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	41%
To help the next generation carry on the tradition of fishing	38%	To give back to the community	32%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	33%	To give back to the community	34%
Count	142		211		308		117

Among respondents interested in becoming a hunter education instructor, four groups emerged. These were: safety and education, community, tradition, and a loose group interested in socialization. The safety and education group (29% of respondents) was primarily interested in making hunting safer (75%) and teaching the next generation (59%) (Table 17). Over 90% of the community group were interested in giving back to the community, and everyone in the tradition group (19% of respondents overall) said they wanted to help the next generation carry on the tradition of hunting.

Table 17. Cluster analysis of potential hunter education volunteers

Safety and Education (29%)		Community (20%)		Tradition (19%)		Socialization (32%)	
Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent
To help make hunting safer	75%	To give back to the community	91%	To help the next generation continue on the tradition of hunting	100%	To socialize	45%
To teach the next generation	59%	To teach the next generation	54%	To give back to the community	39%	To sharpen your own hunting skills	42%
To help the next generation continue on the tradition of hunting	29%	To help local wildlife and the environment	36%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	35%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	35%
Count	109		74		72		122

Among potential hunting skills instructors/mentors, three groups were formed, but their motivations were less clearly defined. The first group of respondents was interested in the safety and communal aspects of volunteering (36% of respondents). In this group, around 50% were interested in making hunting safer (51%), giving back to the community (50%), and passing on the tradition (49%) (Table 18). The second group (23% of respondents) was interested in volunteering to socialize and stay active. Nearly two-thirds of this group wanted to stay physically active (65%), and over half (56%) were drawn to the socialization aspect. Among the third group, no single motivation was dominant but spending time outdoors and helping local wildlife were the most common responses.

Table 18. Cluster analysis of potential hunting skills volunteers

Safety and Community (36%)		Activity and Socialization (23%)		Undefined Interest (41%)	
Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent
To help make hunting safer	51%	To stay physically active	65%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	44%
To give back to the community	50%	To socialize	56%	To help local wildlife and the environment	39%
To help the next generation continue the tradition of hunting	49%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	33%	To sharpen your own hunting skills	36%
Count	140		88		160

Among potential conservation volunteers, three groups emerged. The first being community-oriented (25% of respondents), of which 95% were interested in volunteering to give back to the community (Table 19). The second group (43% of respondents) were labeled as environment-oriented and around 2/3rds of these respondents wanted to volunteer to connect with nature or help local wildlife. The third group (32% of respondents) labelled activity-oriented was primarily interested in volunteering to stay physically active (89%).

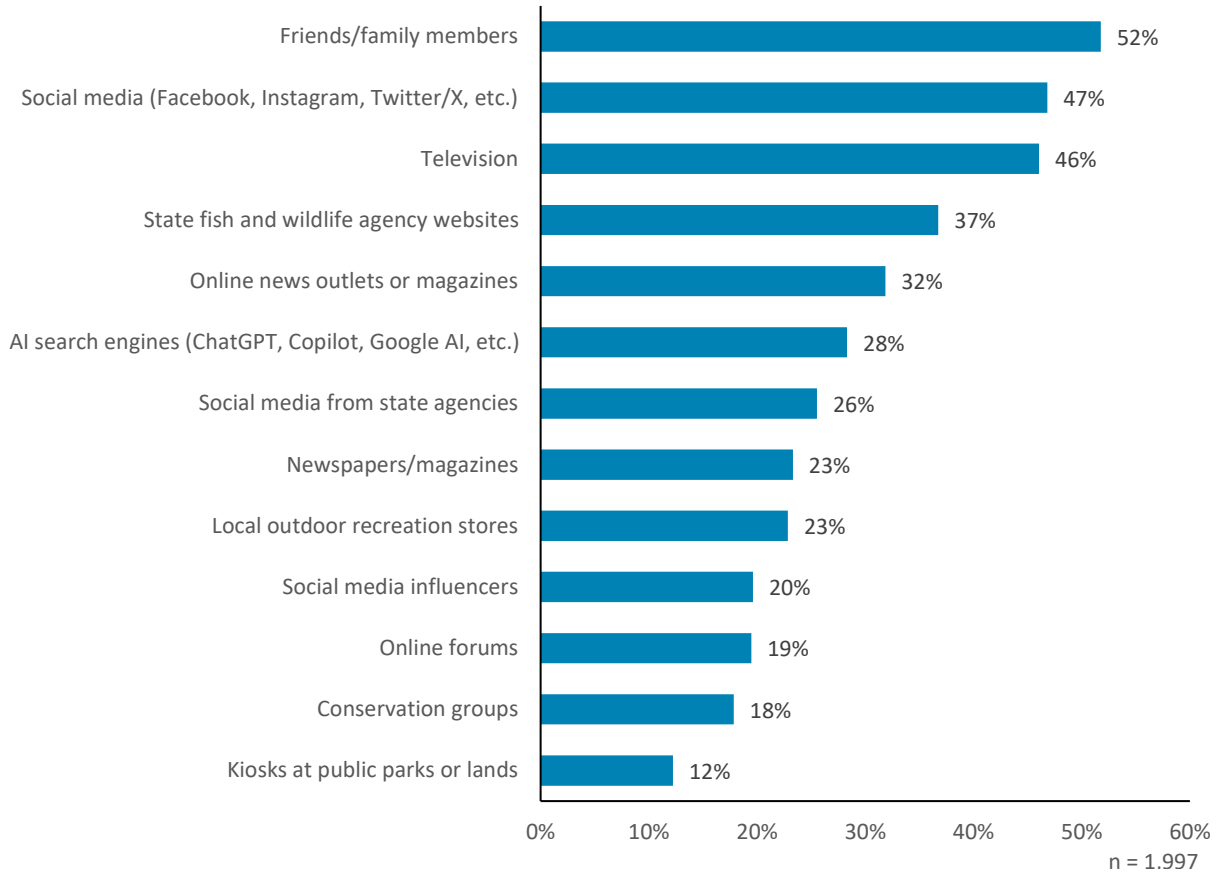
Table 19. Cluster analysis of potential conservation volunteers.

Community (25%)		Environment (43%)		Activity (32%)	
Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent	Interest Driver	Percent
To give back to the community	95%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	69%	To stay physically active	89%
To help local wildlife and the environment	51%	To help local wildlife and the environment	61%	To connect with nature and or spend time outdoors	42%
To teach the next generation	40%	To teach the next generation	49%	To give back to the community	36%
Count	465		804		589

Volunteer Opportunity Promotion

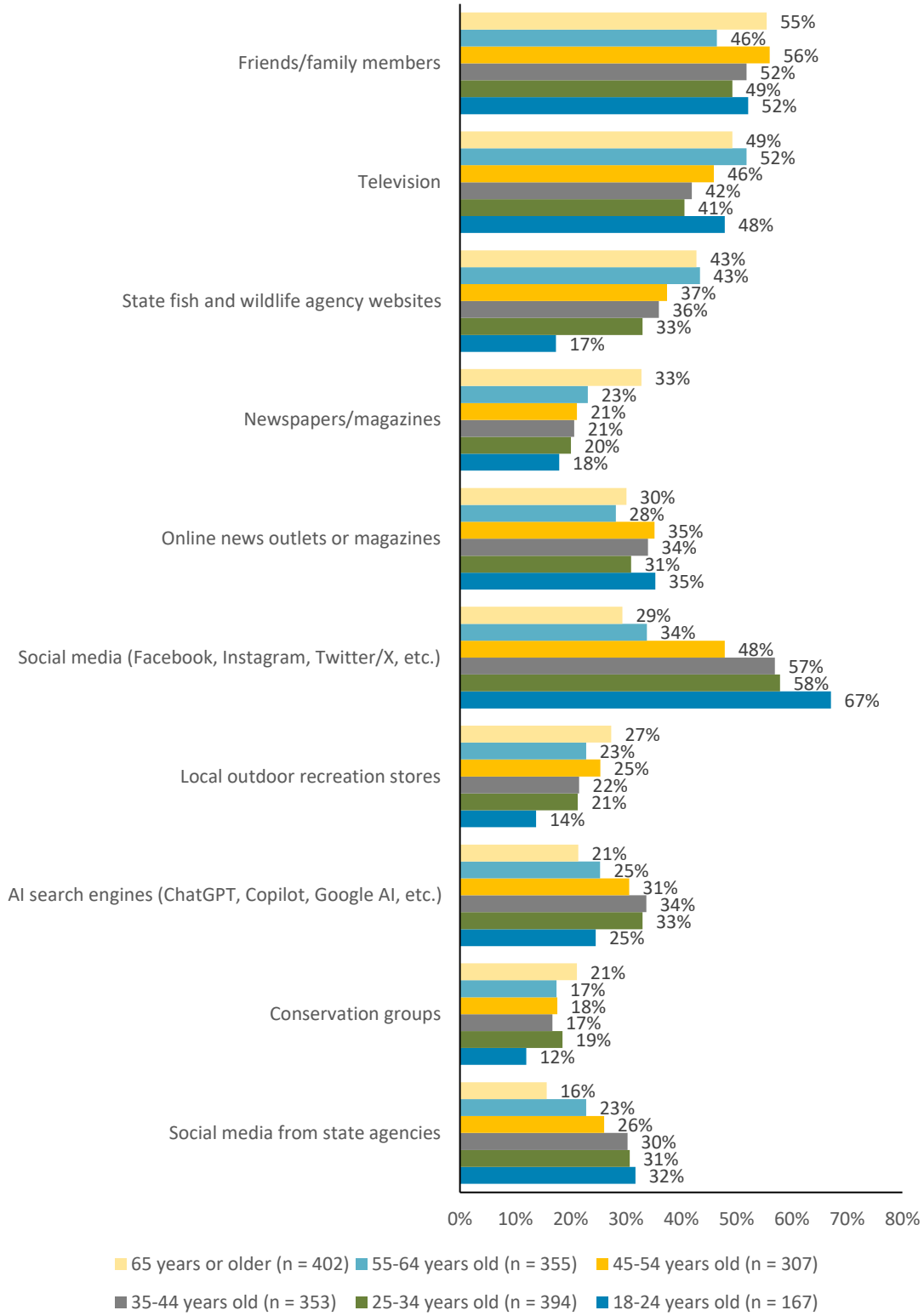
A consistent theme across the focus groups and volunteer survey was that most volunteers did not learn about their program through state agency promotion. Identifying effective outreach strategies is therefore essential. To support this effort, the survey included several questions to determine which promotional methods should be used in the pilot campaigns. Respondents were first asked where they typically seek information about the outdoors/nature. The most common sources were from friends/family members (52%), social media (47%), and television (46%) (Figure 35). Notably, around 1/3rd of respondents learn about the outdoors from AI search engines. If these search engines effectively describe volunteer opportunities within a state agency, they could drive recruitment as their use continues to grow.

Figure 35. Outdoor information sources.



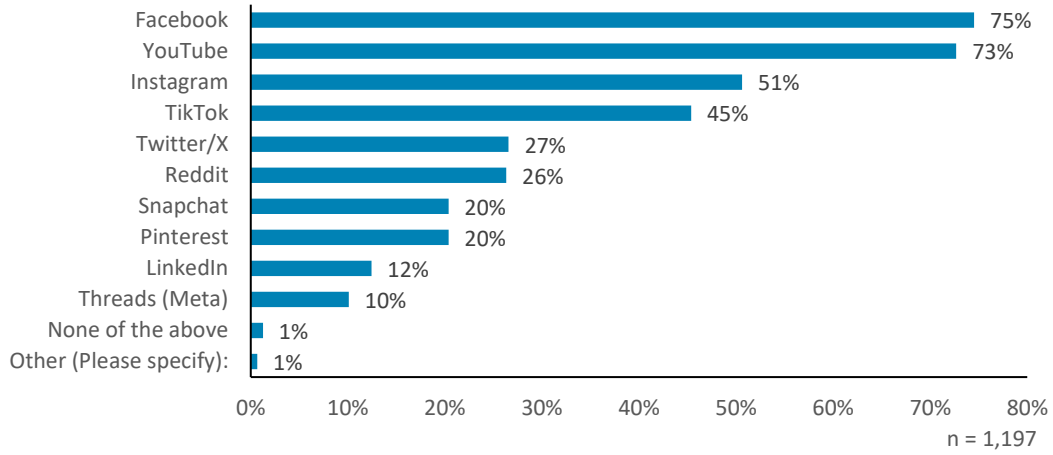
Looking at differences by age, younger respondents were more likely to get their information from social media, whether it be posts they see on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, etc., from influencers they follow, or from specific state agency social media (Figure 36). In contrast, older respondents were more likely to consult a state agency's website or newspapers/magazines. A mix of increased promotion on social media and state websites is a strategy states should pursue.

Figure 36. Outdoor information sources, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



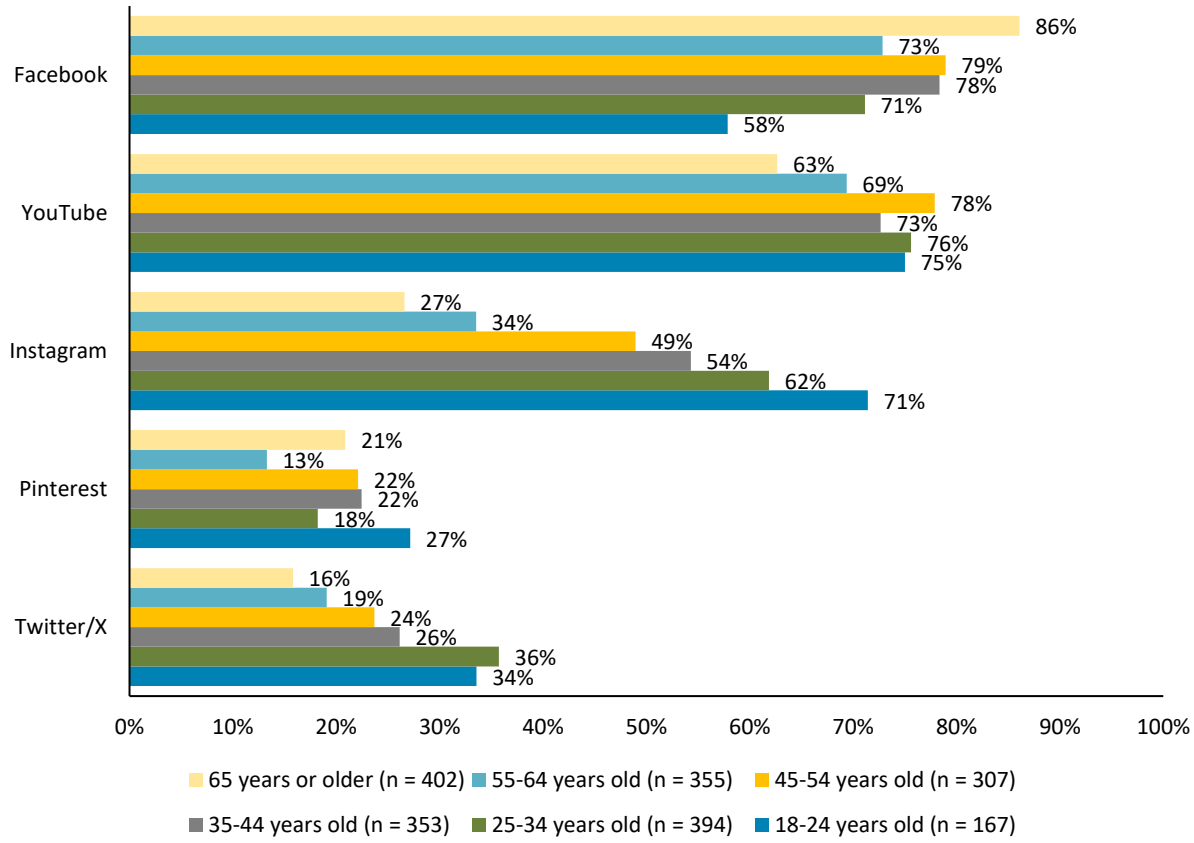
Among respondents who turn to social media for information, most use Facebook (75%) and YouTube (73%), while a smaller but substantial portion go to Instagram (51%) and TikTok (45%) (Figure 37).

Figure 37. Social media platforms.



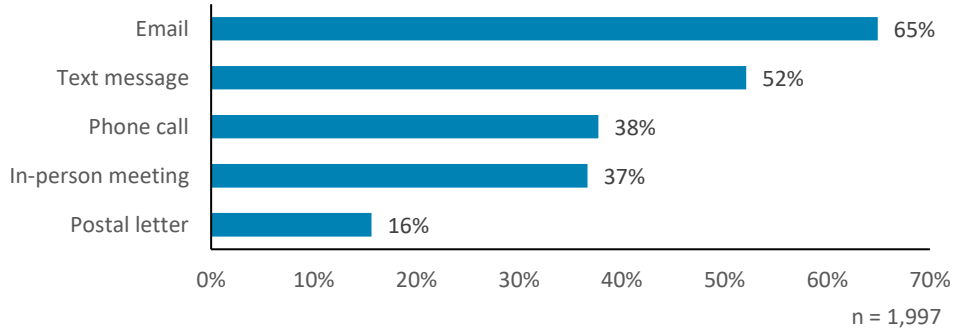
Among younger respondents Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were more popular social media platforms, while Facebook was the most popular with respondents over the age of 65 (Figure 38).

Figure 38. Social media platforms, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



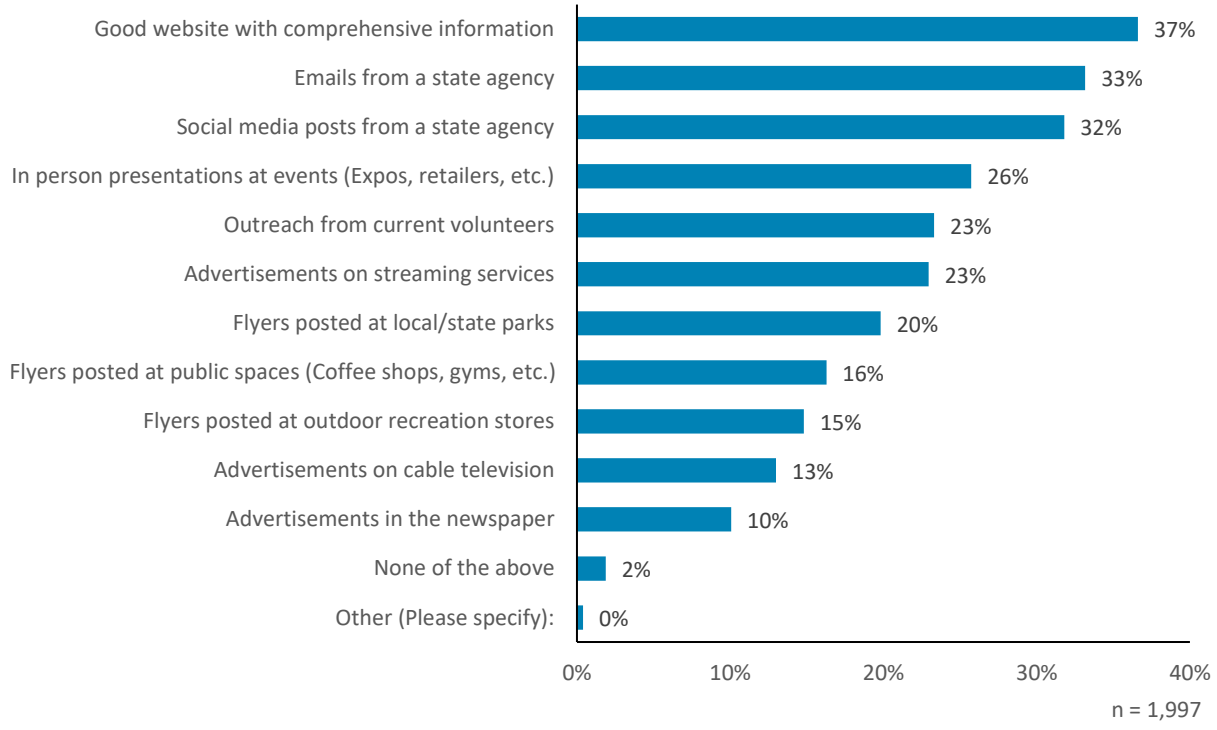
If these respondents were to sign up to volunteer or express interest in volunteering, they prefer to communicate via email (65%) and text message (52%) (Figure 39). No differences were observed across age or potential volunteer type.

Figure 39. Preferred communication method.



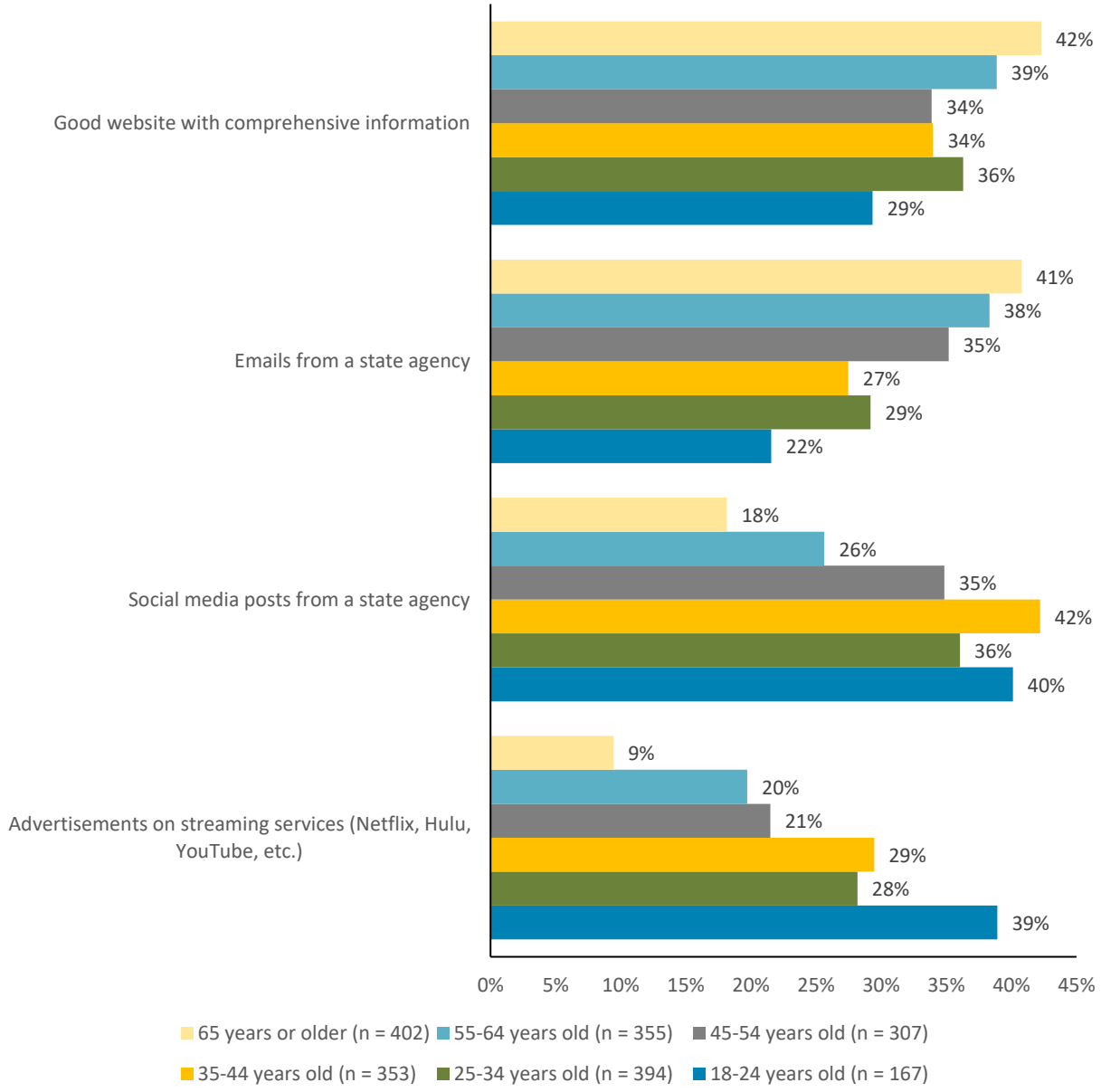
These potential volunteers believed that a good website (37%), emails from a state agency (33%), and social media posts (32%) would be the most effective promotional methods (Figure 40). In the survey of current volunteers, many respondents reported that they thought posting ads where licenses can be purchased (e.g., outdoor recreation stores, state park kiosks) would be effective. It appears that potential volunteers do not agree (16% for public spaces, and 15% for at outdoor recreation stores). To increase recruitment, an increased virtual presence (social media and website) will be necessary.

Figure 40. Promotional methods.



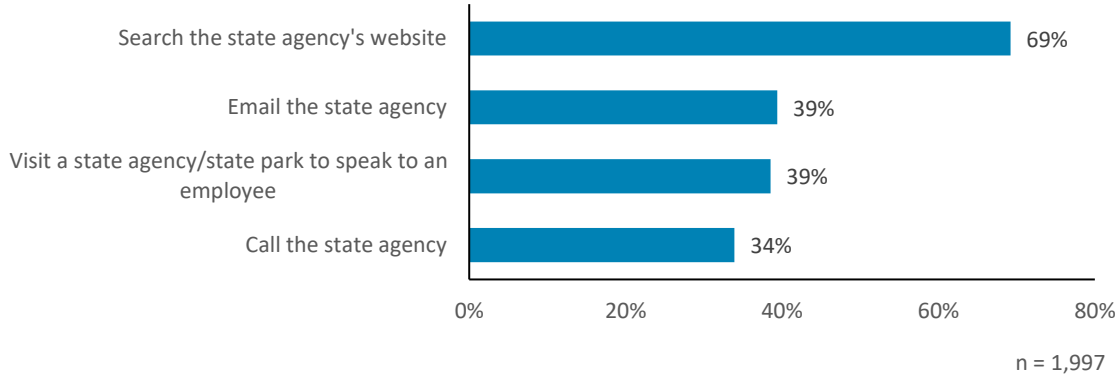
While many promotional methods elicited similar responses across generations, younger respondents thought social media/streaming advertisements would be effective, whereas older generations were more supportive of emails and a comprehensive website (Figure 41). Given 18–24-year-olds' inclination towards social media, tailoring ads that launch via social media to a younger audience may be effective.

Figure 41. Promotional methods, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



After learning about a volunteer opportunity, respondents were asked where they'd go to learn more. The majority would turn to a state agency's website (69%), but a significant portion would learn more in-person with an employee (39%) or call the state agency directly (34%) (Figure 42). While a comprehensive website is clearly important, many people still want to speak directly with another person. Making sure staff are informed and able to answer questions about the volunteer programs is necessary.

Figure 42. Volunteer information sources.



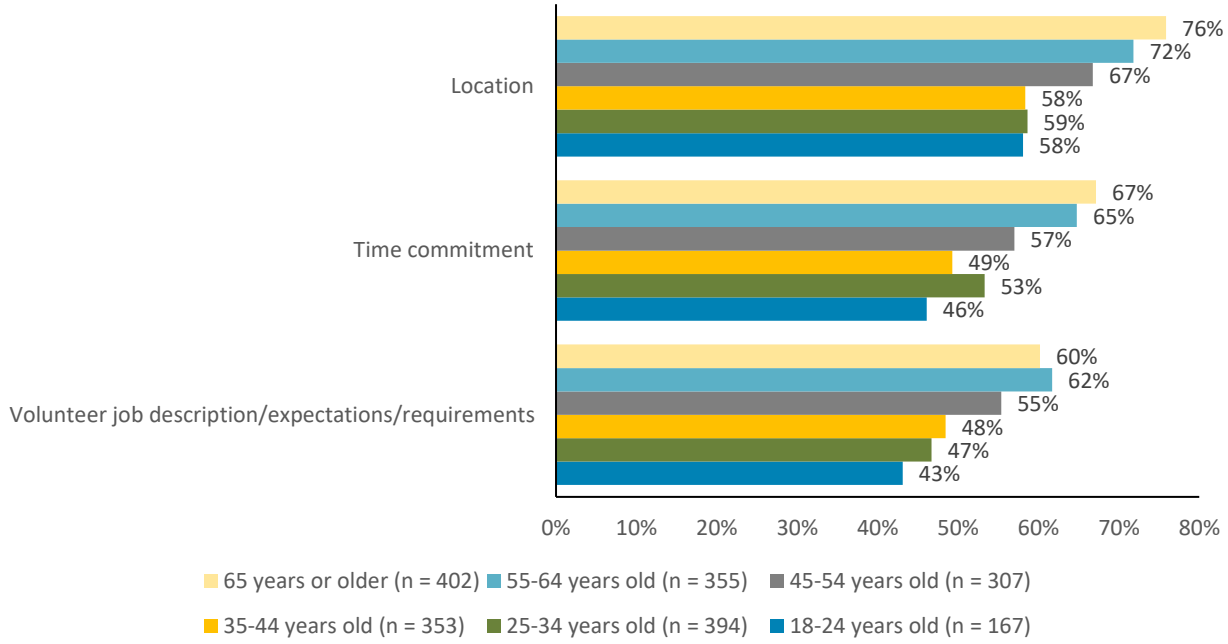
Before someone signs up to volunteer, they need to know the details of the opportunity; potential volunteers want to know the location (66%), time commitment (57%), and description of a volunteer position (53%) (Figure 43). While incentives may help grab someone's attention, only 27% of respondents said they would search for them before signing up.

Figure 43. Necessary information.



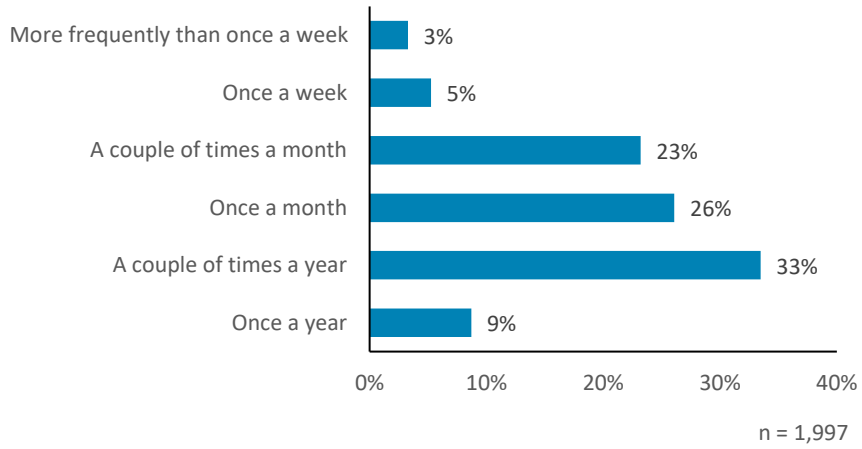
Across most options, older generations were slightly more likely to seek out that information source. However, they were significantly more likely to want to know the description, time commitment, and location (Figure 44).

Figure 44. Necessary information, sorted by respondents 65 years or older.



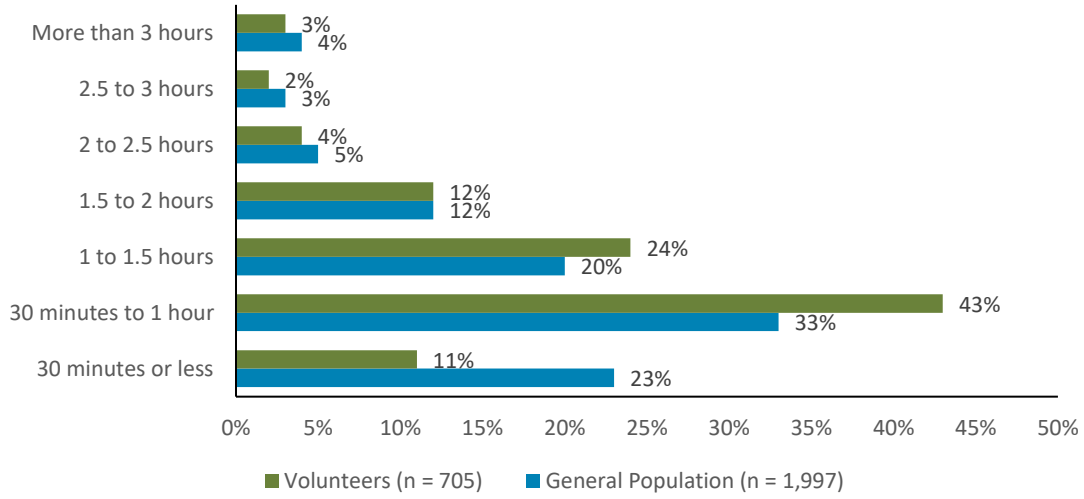
The time commitment for volunteering is likely a major factor in someone's decision to volunteer, so respondents were asked how often they could volunteer. Most were able to commit to either a couple of times a year (33%) or once a month (26%) (Figure 45). Balancing opportunities that help a state agency out, while not requiring a significant time commitment, will be necessary.

Figure 45. Volunteering commitment.



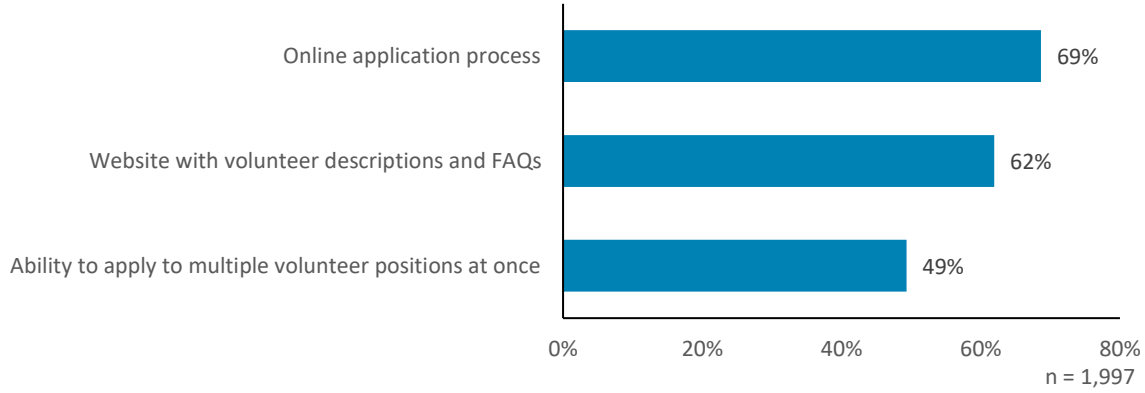
In the volunteer survey, current volunteers expressed a desire to stay within an hour and a half of their home. Among the potential volunteer respondents, this held true; however, around a quarter were only willing to volunteer within 30 minutes of their home (Figure 46).

Figure 46. Driving distance, potential volunteers compared to current volunteers.



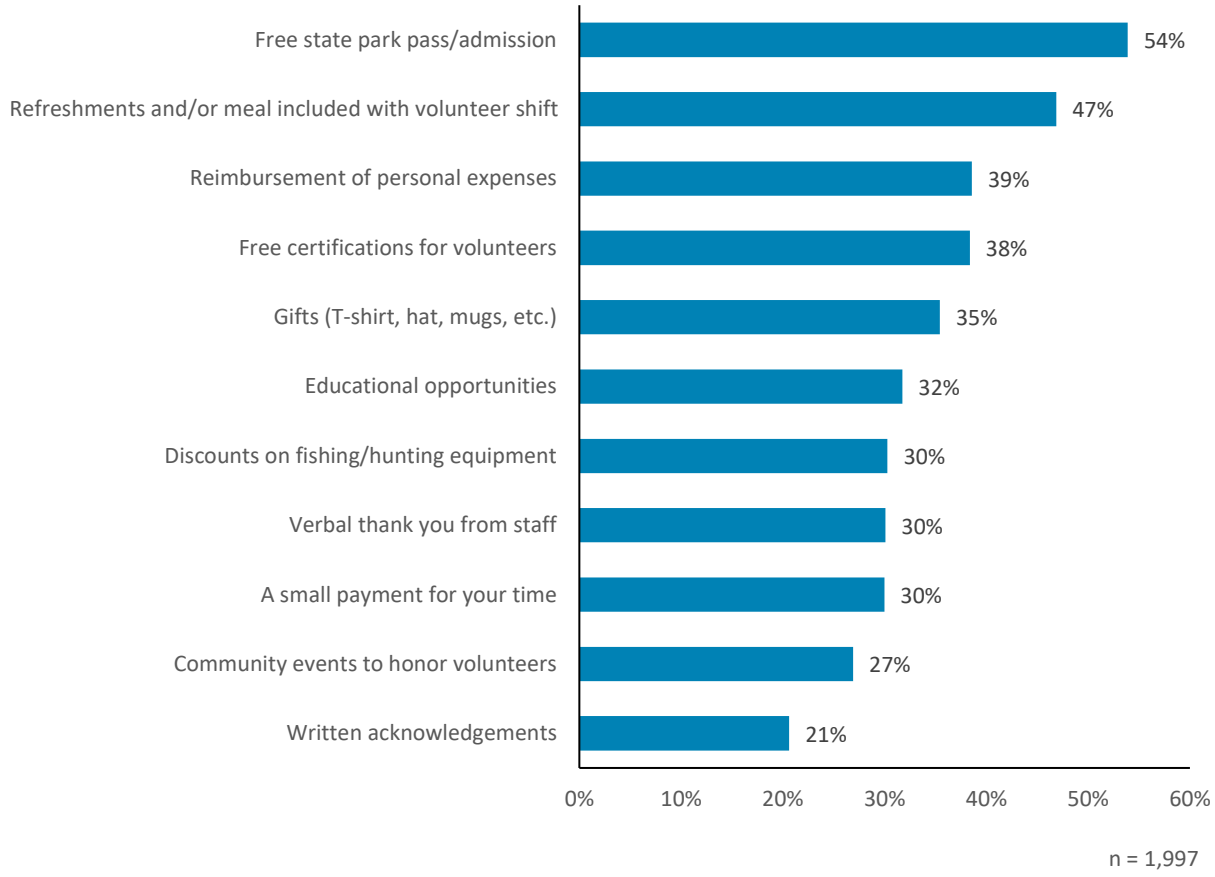
During this project Southwick Associates also fielded a short survey to R3 practitioners. The intent of this survey was to informally gain a better understand of the onboarding process that states have in place. In total 38 states responded to this survey, of which only half reported having an online volunteer application. To see the full survey refer please refer to Appendix D. Many states also expressed that they did not have volunteer descriptions with FAQs on their website, or the ability to apply to multiple positions at once. To assess which elements might reduce barriers to applying, respondents were asked if any would increase their likelihood of submitting an application; the most influential was an online application (70%), with descriptions and FAQs close behind (62%). Around half of respondents also want to be able to apply to multiple positions at once (49%) (Figure 47).

Figure 47. Ways to boost volunteer applications.



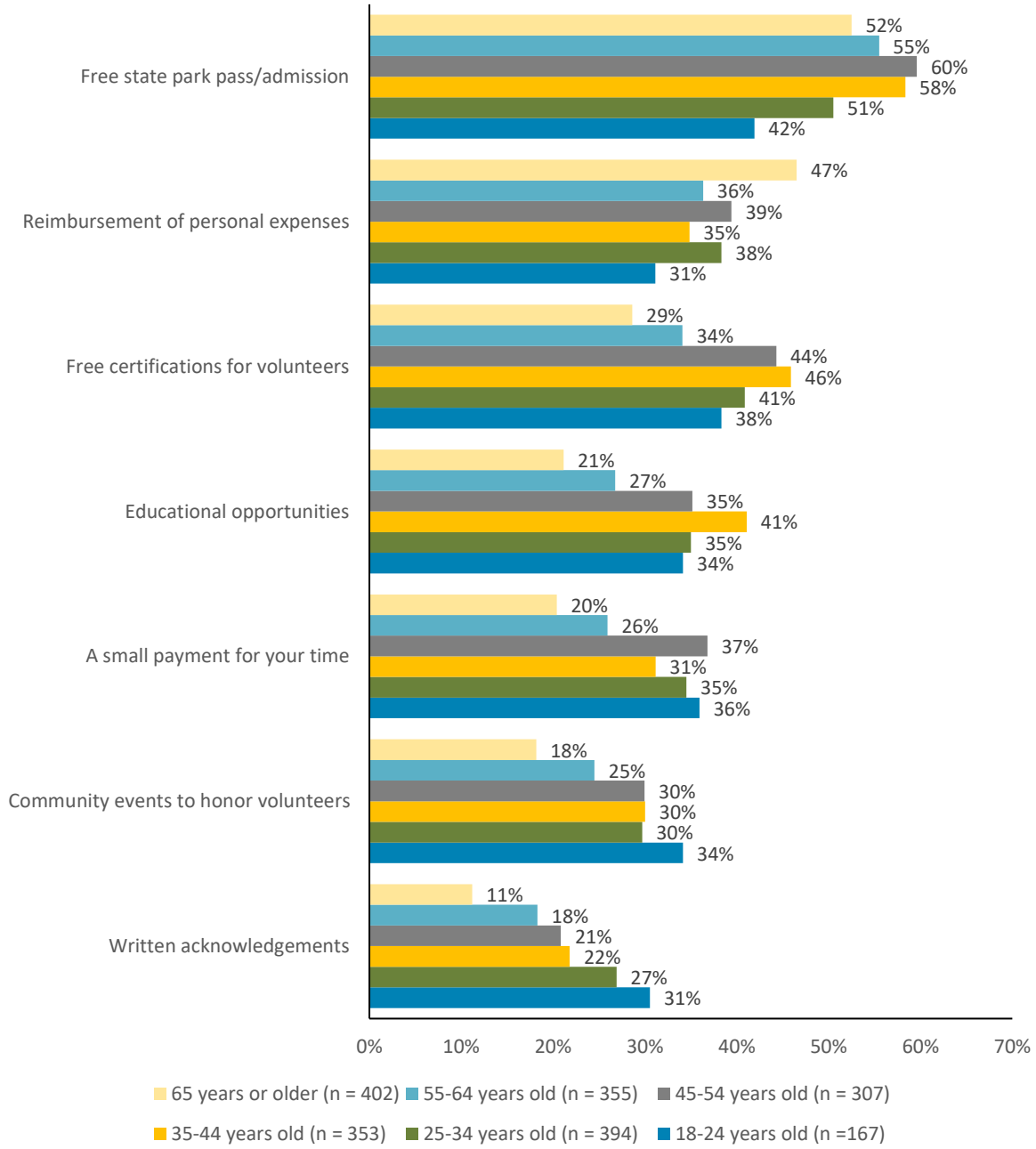
The potential volunteer survey also asked respondents what incentives they'd want to receive for volunteering. As with current volunteers, people were most interested in free state park passes (54%) (Figure 48). Compared with current volunteers, the potential volunteers were much more likely to be incentivized by refreshments or a meal (47%). Promoting that, as a volunteer, someone will be treated to refreshments and admission to state parks will likely be an effective recruitment strategy.

Figure 48. Potential volunteer incentives.



Respondents 65 years or older were the most interested in the reimbursement of personal expenses, and middle-aged respondents (45-54 years old) were most likely to want free state park passes or admission (Figure 49). Respondents under the age of 55 also expressed a higher interest in educational opportunities.

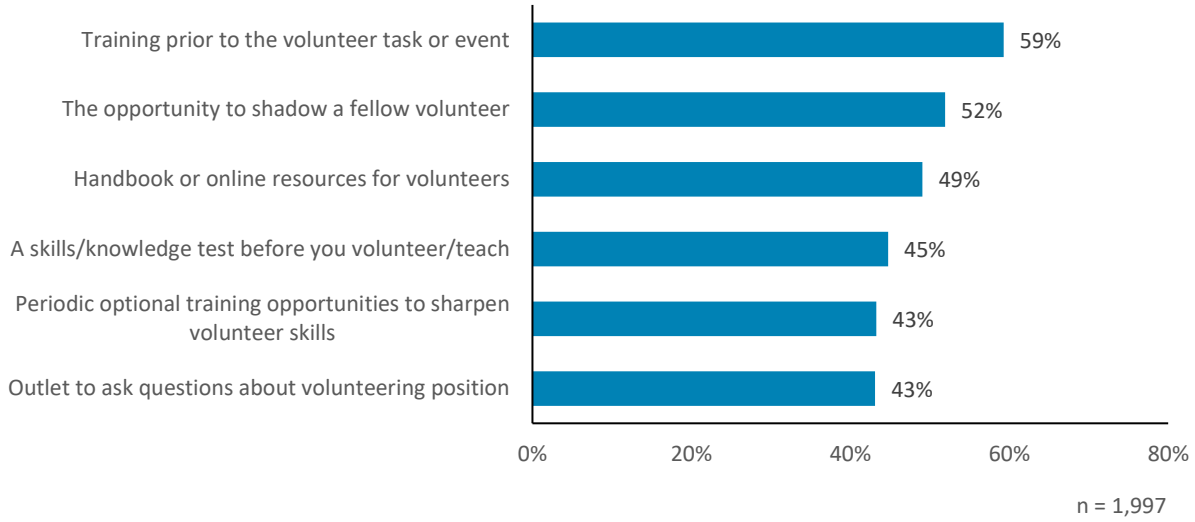
Figure 49. Potential volunteer incentives, by age.



While many people may be interested in volunteering, they may lack confidence in their ability to teach someone else. Providing volunteers with resources may help them overcome these hurdles. At least

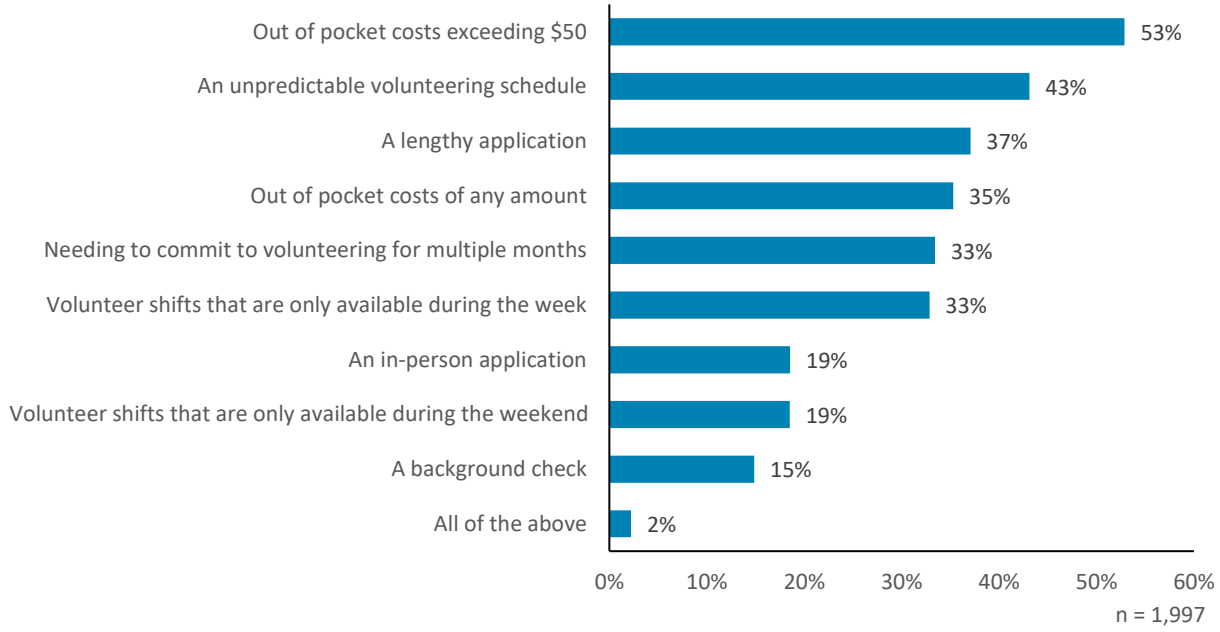
40% of respondents were interested in every resource option, but training (57%) and the opportunity to shadow a volunteer (52%) were the resources that most people wanted to receive (Figure 50).

Figure 50. Potential volunteer support resources.



While many roadblocks to volunteering are beyond a state agency's or NGO's control, there are controllable barriers. Among barriers that state agencies can control, respondents reported that out-of-pocket expenses over $50 (53%) and an unpredictable schedule (43%) were most likely to dissuade them from volunteering (Figure 51).

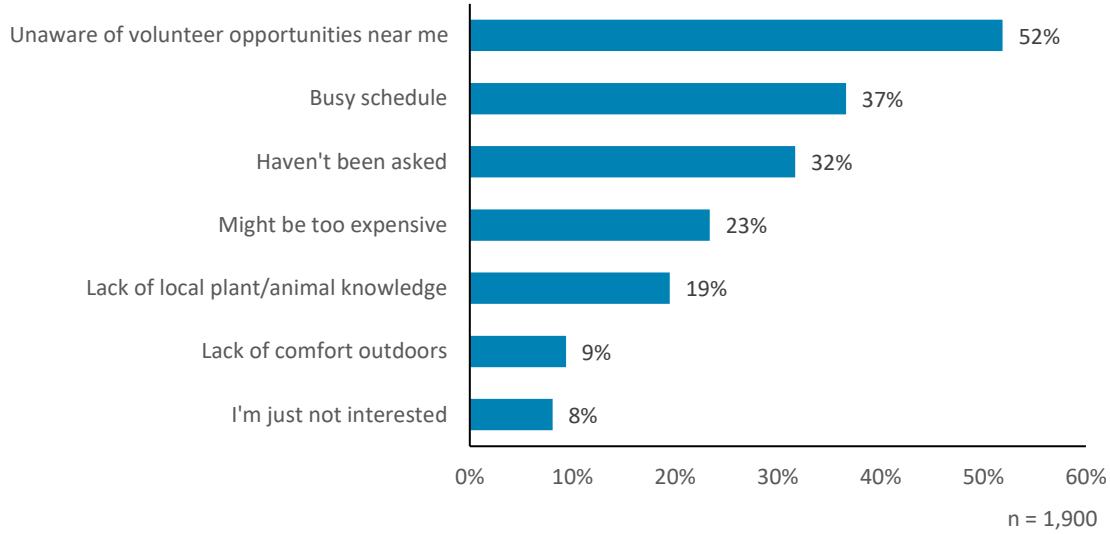
Figure 51. Aspects that may dissuade someone from volunteering.



Volunteer Program Specific Questions

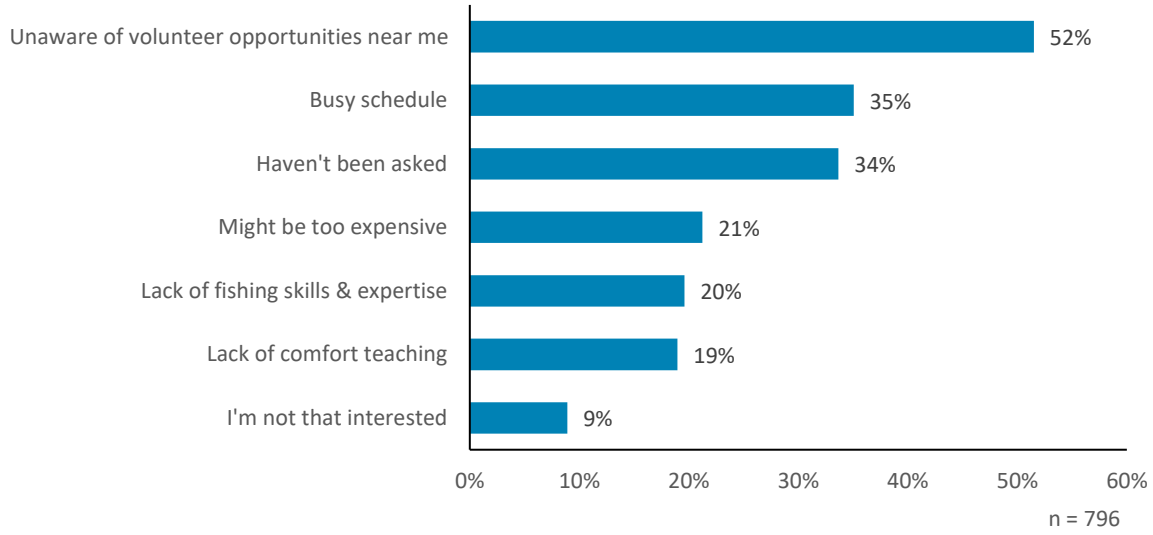
Respondents who expressed interest in conservation volunteering were also asked why they don't already volunteer. The most common response, even above having a busy schedule, was that they weren't aware of opportunities near them (52%) (Figure 52).

Figure 52. Reasons people do not already volunteer for conservation programs.



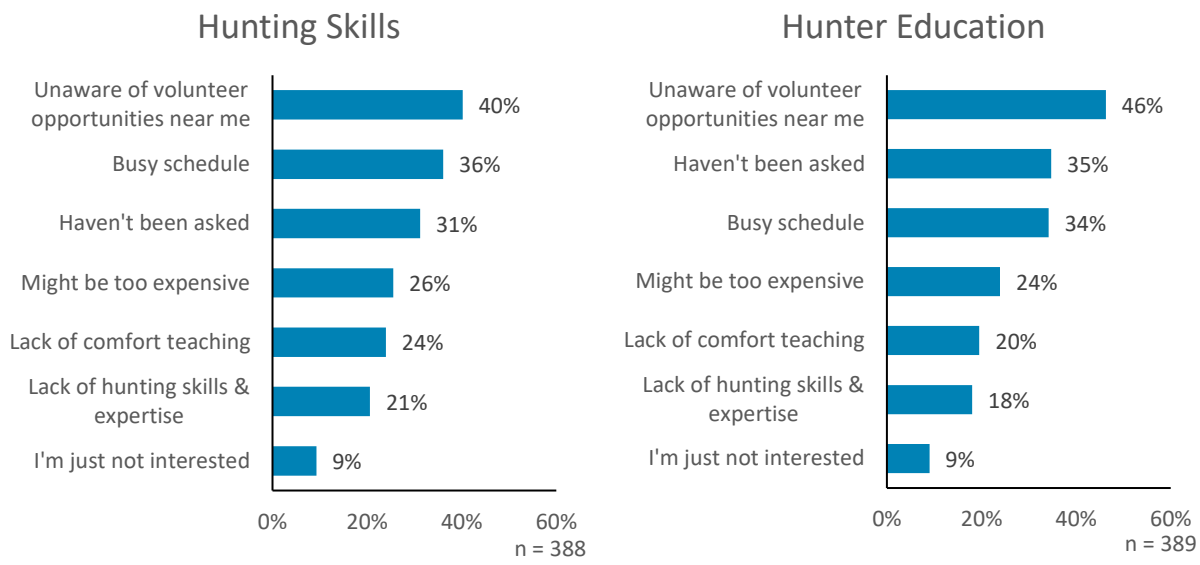
Among respondents interested in becoming a fishing volunteer, a lack of awareness about opportunities was also the most common reason (52%) (Figure 53).

Figure 53. Reasons people do not already volunteer for fishing skills programs.



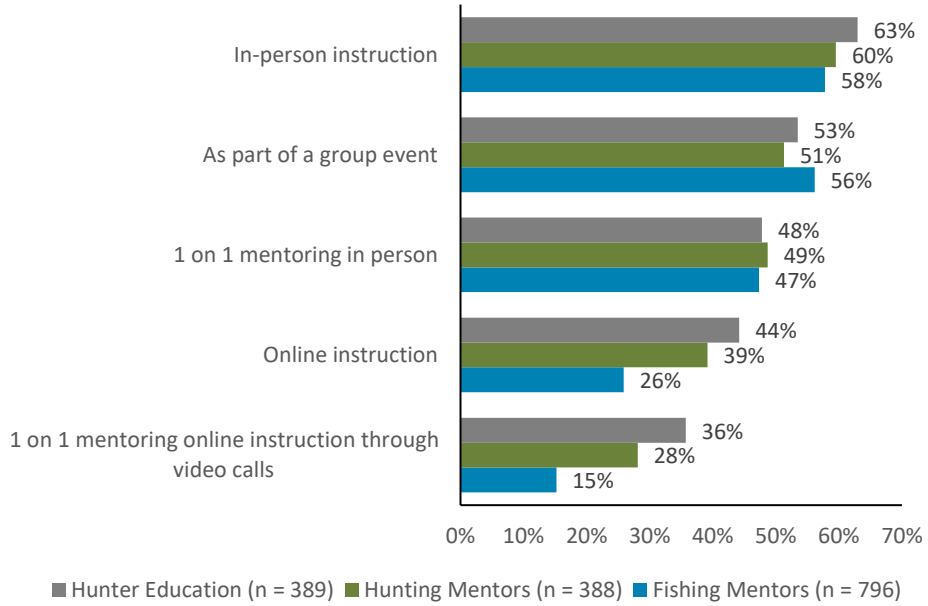
Respondents interested in hunting skills or hunter education programs were also often unaware of opportunities (Figure 54). Only around 20% of prospective volunteers did not feel confident enough in their hunting skills to volunteer in these roles. Given that for each program the biggest barrier was not a busy schedule, increased promotion of volunteer opportunities will likely boost recruitment.

Figure 54. Reasons people do not already volunteer for hunting skills or hunter education programs.



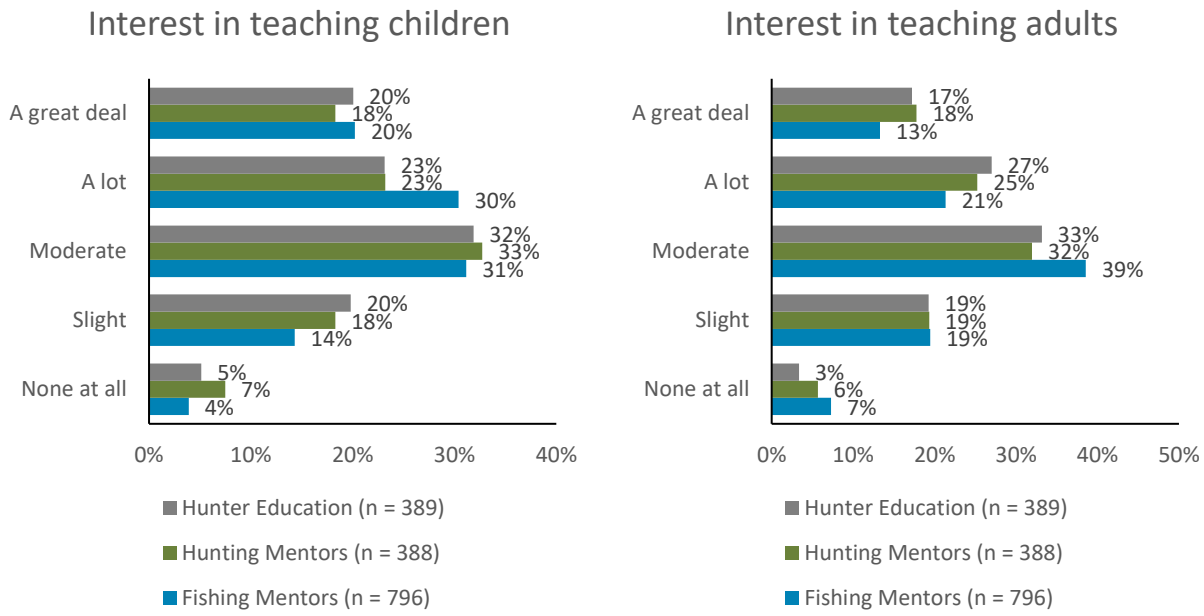
When it comes to the type of volunteer program respondents would be willing to lead, most prospective volunteers were open to in-person instruction and as part of a group event (Figure 55).

Figure 55. Volunteer formats respondents are open to, sorted by fishing mentors.



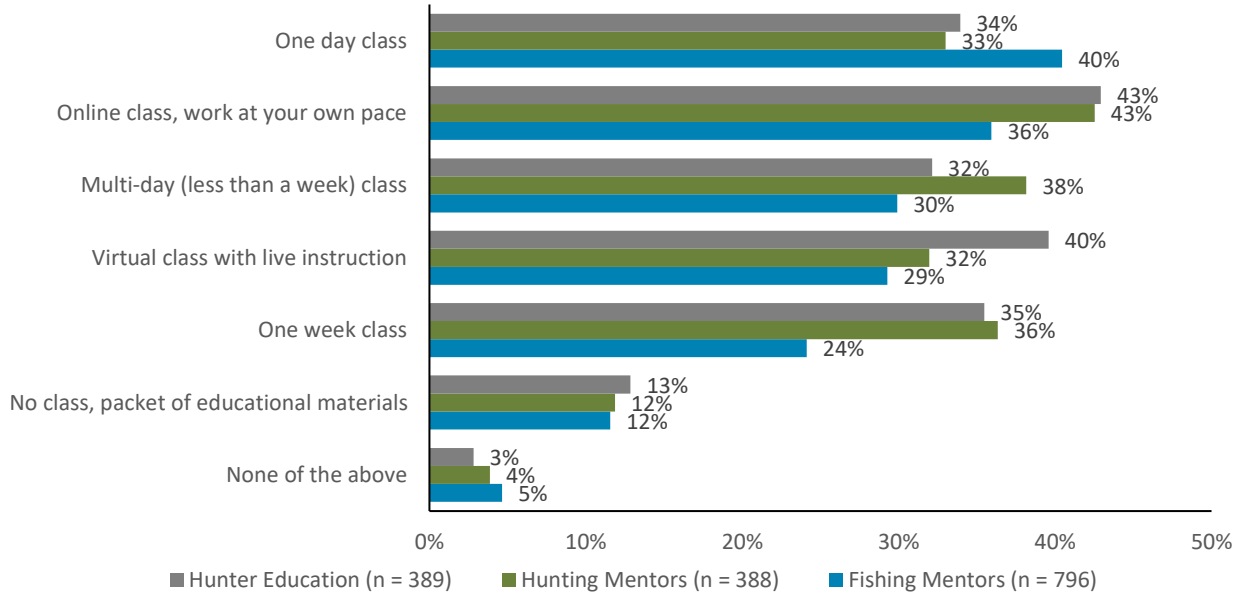
The age of a potential student/mentee does not appear to matter to potential volunteers. Regardless of the program type or student age, respondents generally had moderate to a great deal of interest in teaching adults and children (Figure 56).

Figure 56. Interest in teaching children and adult volunteer programs.



When it came to what training respondents want, potential fishing volunteers were interested in a one-day class (40%), while potential hunting skills and hunter education instructors were more interested in an online or full week class (Figure 57).

Figure 57. Desired onboarding experience, sorted by fishing mentors.



Survey Takeaways

This survey provided an informative look into the minds of hunters and anglers who do not yet volunteer but have some level of interest. These respondents, like the volunteers in the focus groups and surveys, were attracted by the opportunity to teach, give back to the community, and help carry on the tradition of hunting and fishing. However, beyond current volunteers, they are also motivated by the opportunity to spend time outdoors and to make activities like hunting safer.

The focus groups and volunteer survey made it clear that most volunteers did not learn about their program through state agency promotion. This trend was confirmed, with roughly half of the survey respondents reporting that they were unaware of volunteer opportunities near them.

What is the most effective way to reach interested hunters and anglers? Respondents in this survey relied heavily on their friends, family, and social media for information on the outdoors. These respondents also believed that the most effective way to recruit them would be through a comprehensive website, email, or social media posts, direct from a state agency. A well-built website is incredibly important, as around 7 in 10 respondents said that if they heard about a volunteer program, they'd search the website to learn more. On their website, it would be prudent for the state to have an online application. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said that an online application would make them more likely to apply.

When it comes to deciding whether they actually volunteer, people most need to know the location, time commitment, and what the position/program entails. They also want a program that requires a time commitment of a couple of times a year to a couple of times a month, at most.

When recruiting volunteers, offering a state park pass or refreshments is the top incentive respondents want. These people are also likely to view any support and training they receive very positively.

Combined with the takeaways from the focus group and volunteer survey, these insights were used to develop a pilot advertising campaign in Colorado, Connecticut, and Iowa. These campaigns put these takeaways into practice by recruiting new volunteers through social media promotion, email campaigns, and a clear landing page.

Pilot Campaign

Focus groups and survey message testing identified themes that ultimately guided the development of messages for pilot campaigns in Connecticut, Iowa, and Colorado. The pilot campaigns tested whether the themes resonated with potential volunteers by inviting them to apply with their respective state agencies.

Market strategy

Researchers worked with the three pilot states to develop a marketing strategy most effective for their state agencies. Messages were developed around concepts previously identified and tested in the focus groups and surveys.

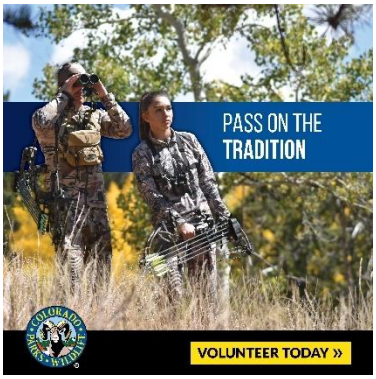
Message creation

Creative strategy

Focus groups and survey results were used to develop creative assets to attract potential new volunteers for the state agency. Among those themes were community growth and unity, supporting the next generation, passing on tradition, and helping nature thrive (Figure 58). The full ad creatives used for the pilot campaign can be found in Appendix E.

Figure 58. Pilot campaign advertisement examples.









Each creative was then tailored to the specific discipline – hunting, fishing, conservation work, and environmental education – to strengthen the call to action. Each creative included the same call to action: "volunteer today."

Target audience

Focus groups and surveys suggested that recruiting from groups with experience, such as hunting and angling license lists, could increase participation in state agency volunteer programs. However, those groups said they were not likely to move into other volunteer opportunities. General recruitment also needed to include other conservation volunteer opportunities in order to appeal to a wider range of people.

Target audiences were developed using the following characteristics:

- Propensity to volunteer.
- Age (split by discipline).
    - Angling was 18 to 75 years old.
    - Hunting was 21 to 75 years old (leaning conservatively to adjust for firearm legalities).
    - General conservation was 18 to 75 years old.
        - This allowed volunteers to be able to drive to volunteer locations and still be physically able to perform their duties.
- Recruited from a related-skills base.
    - Hunting volunteers coming from: hunting newsletters, license database, hunting content pages.
    - Angling volunteers coming from: fishing newsletters, license databases, fishing content pages.
    - Conservation volunteers coming from a wider range of audiences generally interested in conservation, nature, and other outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, biking, etc.

Each of the pilot states had additional target audience requests to meet their state-agency objectives. These were added to their target audience builds for the state marketing strategy. Connecticut sought to engage younger volunteers, women, and Hispanics in a specific geographic area for its DEEP & CARE program (angling). Colorado used geotargeting to reach specific ZIP codes in high-demand areas for its angling and hunting programs. Iowa was looking to engage younger volunteers statewide in any of their volunteer programs (hunting, angling, and conservation).

Messaging

Hunting and angling volunteers were drawn to the same "community involvement and growth" and "next generation" messaging. However, hunting volunteers were attracted more strongly to the "pass on the tradition" message than their angling counterparts. Angling volunteers reacted more strongly to the "next generation" messaging.

General conservation recruitment for volunteers tested three messages: "nature needs you," "next generation," and "growing community," as all three resonated in the focus groups and surveys.

Pilot media runs

Media Placements

Three main media channels were selected for volunteer recruitment efforts (Table 20. Pilot campaign strategies.Table 20). Emails to newsletter and license databases, organic social media, and paid social media. The numbers that were sent out for each state, as well as the application results, are listed in the tables below (Table 21-Table 24), and appear in Appendix F.

Table 20. Pilot campaign strategies.

	Email	Organic Social Media	Paid Social Media	Applications Received
Colorado	2	16	4	23
Connecticut	1	1	2	85
Iowa	1	18	8	136
			Campaign Total Applications	244

Table 21. Media analytics

	Total Impressions	Total Clicks
Colorado	266,169	5,814
Connecticut	162,526	2,105
Iowa	725,761	10,738
Campaign total	1,154,456	18,657

Table 22. Email results

	Total Impressions	Total Clicks	Total applications
Colorado	Not provided	Not provided	Not provided
Connecticut 4/1	90,267	Not provided	80
Iowa	131,523	3,652	Not provided

Table 23. Organic social media results

	Total Impressions	Total Clicks	Total applications
Colorado	71,500+	228	Not determined
Connecticut 3/30	14,400	25	5
Iowa	1,196	7	Not determined

Table 24. Paid social media results.

	Total Impressions	Total Clicks	Total applications
Colorado	266,169	5,814	Not determined
Connecticut	162,526	2,105	Not determined
Iowa	725,761	10,738	Not determined

As several message themes were used across the various pilot states, comparisons can be made between the themes and disciplines. The following are the results of message themes during the pilot campaign.

Industry-average click-through rates provide some indication of how a message might perform, with that rate approximately 1.2 percent (Table 25). Most of the hunting messages trended above that industry average, indicating successful message creation and response.

In Iowa, hunting ad creatives received an additional split between all-adult images and images featuring only "teenagers." Creatives that featured teenagers performed better than those with all adults.

Table 25. Hunting theme results

	Colorado	**Iowa**
Hunting Pass on the Tradition		
Clicks	2,507	989
Likes	152	60
Shares	0	0
Comments	11	1
Click-Through Rate	1.97%	1.40%
Hunting Community		
Clicks	64	2,745
Likes	11	36
Shares	12	0
Comments	1	0
Click-Through Rate	1.09%	1.27%

Next-generation-themed angling messages performed well above the industry average (1.2%), indicating strong resonance with target audiences (Table 26). While the community was closer to the industry average, it still performed well enough to consider using future campaigns to reach the broadest possible audience.

Table 26. Angling theme results

	Colorado	Connecticut	Iowa
Angling "Next Generation"			
Clicks	3,104	484	2,451
Likes	143	36	49
Shares	0	0	0
Comments	3	1	2
Click Through Rate	2.61%	1.45%	1.89%
Angling "Community"			
Clicks	139	1,621	536
Likes	28	51	64
Shares	0	0	0
Comments	1	0	3
Click Through Rate	1.01%	1.26%	1.22%

General conservation themes performed better than the industry average (1.2%), suggesting that potential volunteers are attracted to more general messages about volunteer efforts in the conservation space (Table 27). These can be used by states seeking more than hunting and angling mentors or educators.

Table 27. Conservation theme results

	Iowa
Conservation Next Generation	
Clicks	115
Likes	17
Shares	0
Comments	0
Click Through Rate	1.41%
Conservation Work	
Clicks	3,796
Likes	280
Shares	0
Comments	7
Click Through Rate	1.53%
Conservation Environment	
Clicks	106

Likes	19
Shares	0
Comments	0
Click Through Rate	1.29%

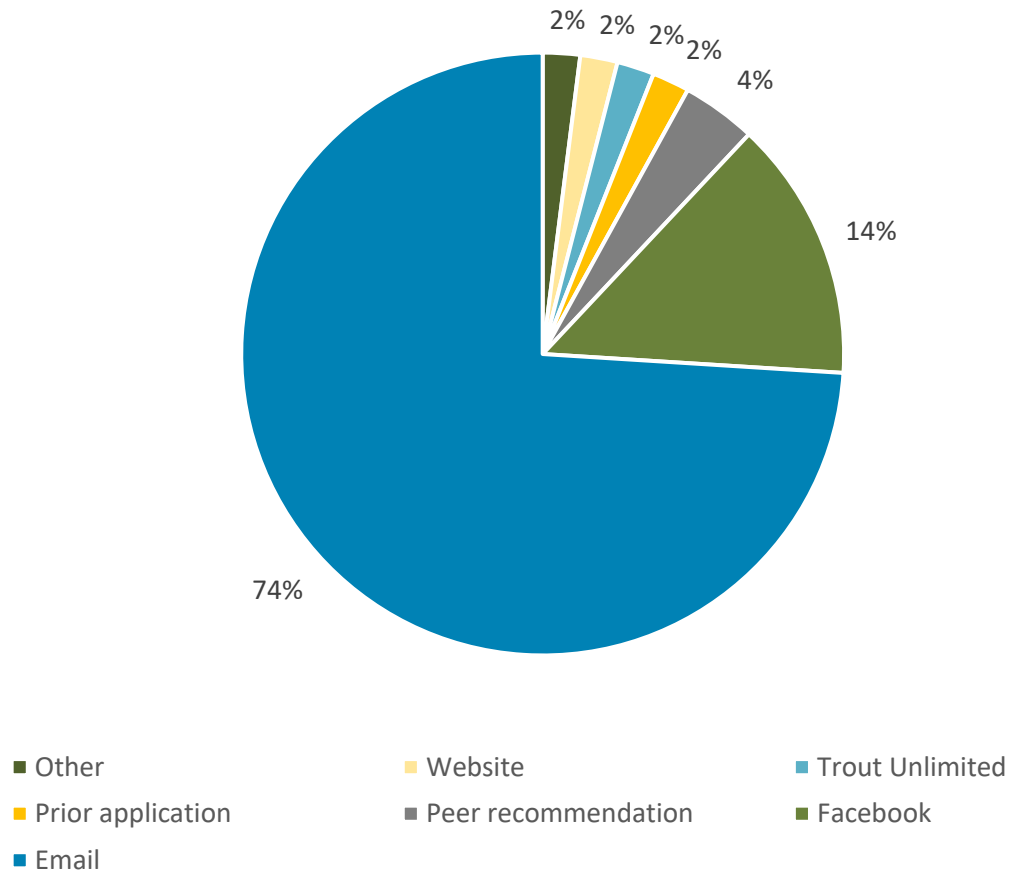
Target Audience Objective Status

Connecticut Demographics

Connecticut provided additional analytic data, providing a deeper analysis of the campaign's objective achievement with women, younger volunteers, Hispanics, and location-specific demographics. 85 volunteer applications were submitted by the end of the campaign.

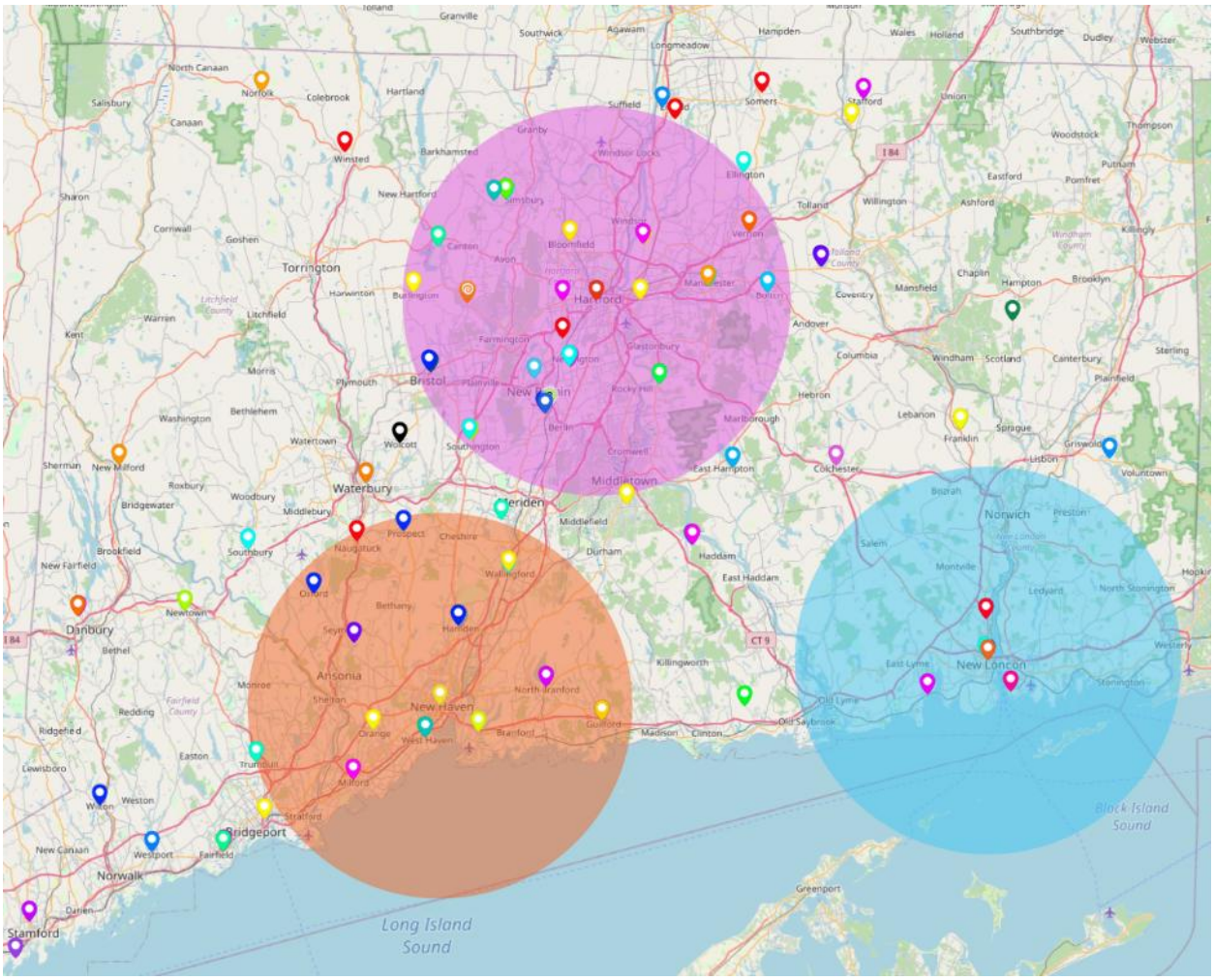
Of those, applicants identified emails as the driver for applying (47%), with Facebook (14%) the next-highest selection (Figure 59). Regarding Facebook traffic, it cannot be determined whether organic or paid social media was the cause, though Connecticut reported that monthly organic posts generally bring in up to 5 applicants.

Figure 59. Where did volunteers learn about CARE.



When applications were uploaded to a coverage map and compared to the three target locations: New London, New Haven, and Hartford, it is reasonable to assume that paid social media efforts achieved the goal of targeting these areas, where email communications achieved covering the rest of the state (Figure 60). The colored circles around the location center are 15-mile radii.

Figure 60. Map of Connecticut volunteer applications.



It was an objective of Connecticut to engage younger potential volunteers. While those 65 years old and up had the highest click-through rates (CTR), the targeted age group of 18–34-year-olds had the highest percentages of impressions, link clicks, and landing page views (Table 28 & Table 29). The campaign was successful in getting this younger audience to the landing page, though less successful in getting them to apply. Click-through rates were highest among 65-year-olds (1.81%), and Cost Per Click was lowest in the 45–64-year-old age bracket.

Table 28. Connecticut impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	Sum of Impressions	Sum of Link clicks	Sum of Landing Page Views	Average Cost Per Click of Landing Page Views	Click Through Rate
18-24	36,545	367	293	$1.09	1.00%
25-34	45,488	514	405	$1.17	1.13%
35-44	27,234	375	302	$1.22	1.38%
45-54	18,035	250	221	$0.96	1.39%
55-64	16,624	262	222	$0.95	1.58%
65+	18,596	337	275	$1.35	1.81%
Grand Total	162,522	2,105	1,718	$1.12	1.30%

Table 29. Percentage of Connecticut's impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	% of Impressions	% of Link Clicks	% of Landing Page Views
18-24	22%	17%	17%
25-34	28%	24%	24%
35-44	17%	18%	18%
45-54	11%	12%	13%
55-64	10%	12%	13%
65+	11%	16%	16%

Connecticut hoped to reach more women to encourage them to volunteer. Females seemed to engage best, with a 1.41% click-through rate, though their percentages for impressions, clicks, and landing page views remained low (Table 30 & Table 31).

Connecticut also sought to reach Hispanic demographics; however, these results could not be reported, as Meta does not collect ethnicity or race in its base-level reporting. 3rd party data will need to be used to measure this objective in the future.

Table 30. Connecticut impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by gender.

Gender	Sum of Impressions	Sum of Link clicks	Sum of Landing Page Views	Average of Cost Per Click for Landing Page Views	Click Through Rate
female	56,540	800	671	$1.18	1.41%
male	104,760	1,286	1,031	$1.14	1.23%
unknown	1,222	19	16	$1.04	1.55%
Grand Total	162,522	2,105	1,718	$1.12	1.30%

Table 31. Percentage of Connecticut's impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by gender.

Gender	% of Impressions	% of Link Clicks	% of Landing Page Views
female	35%	38%	39%
male	64%	61%	60%
unknown	1%	1%	1%

Iowa

Iowa had an objective of reaching younger potential volunteers across the state. These younger age brackets maintained click-through rates in line with industry averages or slightly below, indicating the objective was achieved, albeit at a lower level than in other categories. They also made up the lowest percentages of impressions, link clicks, and landing page views across all three disciplines. This was especially low (2%) within the general conservation theme, suggesting it did not resonate as well with that audience. Iowa received 136 applications: 4 for hunting, 26 for fishing, 73 for conservation work, and 33 for environmental education (Table 32 - Table 37). The number of applications received was greater than anticipated, however, the bulk of the applications surprisingly came for general conservation work rather than hunting- or fishing-specific volunteer efforts.

The highest engagement rates across all three disciplines were among females and those aged 65 and up. 65-year-olds and older accounted for nearly a quarter of all impressions, clicks, and landing page views across disciplines. Their click-through rates were 2.19% for fishing, 1.48% for hunting, and 1.73% for conservation.

Females accounted for 51% of those engaged in the conservation campaign, though representation dropped to 40% for hunting and fishing. Their click-through rates were 1.99% for fishing, 1.39% for hunting, and 1.65% for conservation.

Table 32. Iowa fishing impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	Sum of Impressions	Sum of Link clicks	Sum of Landing Page Views	Average of Cost Per Click for Landing Page Views	Click Through Rate
18-24	17,134	193	125	$0.88	1.13%
25-34	25,784	322	239	$1.02	1.25%
35-44	31,731	461	399	$0.65	1.45%
45-54	27,606	480	419	$0.64	1.74%
55-64	30,034	621	545	$0.71	2.07%
65+	41,516	910	794	$0.72	2.19%
Grand Total	173,805	2,987	2,521	$0.77	1.72%

Table 33. Percentage of Iowa's fishing impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	% of Impressions	% of Link Clicks	% of Landing Page Views
18-24	10%	6%	5%
25-34	15%	11%	9%
35-44	18%	15%	16%
45-54	16%	16%	17%
55-64	17%	21%	22%
65+	24%	30%	31%

Table 34. Iowa hunting impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	Sum of Impressions	Sum of Link clicks	Sum of Landing Page Views	Average Cost Per Click for Landing Page Views	Click Through Rate
25-34	43,066	572	462	$0.53	1.33%
35-44	67,509	805	677	$0.60	1.19%
45-54	58,192	685	597	$0.62	1.18%
55-64	57,976	779	689	$0.62	1.34%
65+	60,378	893	785	$0.56	1.48%
Grand Total	287,121	3,734	3210	$0.59	1.30%

Table 35. Percentage of Iowa's hunting impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age/

Age	% of Impressions	% of Link Clicks	% of Landing Page Views
25-34	15%	15%	14%
35-44	24%	22%	21%
45-54	20%	18%	19%
55-64	20%	21%	21%
65+	21%	24%	24%

Table 36. Iowa conservation impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	Sum of Impressions	Sum of Link clicks	Sum of Landing Page Views	Average of Cost Per Click for Landing Page Views	Click Through Rate
18-24	5,619	69	54	$0.59	1.23%
25-34	31,410	405	326	$0.61	1.29%
35-44	51,247	678	577	$0.54	1.32%
45-54	50,117	726	645	$0.63	1.45%
55-64	59,395	982	863	$0.53	1.65%
65+	67,045	1,157	1,009	$0.55	1.73%
Grand Total	264,833	4,017	3,474	$0.57	1.52%

Table 37. Percentage of Iowa's conservation impressions, link clicks, and landing page views, by age.

Age	% of Impressions	% of Link Clicks	% of Landing Page Views
18-24	2%	2%	2%
25-34	12%	10%	9%
35-44	19%	17%	17%
45-54	19%	18%	19%
55-64	22%	24%	25%
65+	25%	29%	29%

Colorado

Colorado targeted geographic areas closer to its high-traffic, high-demand locations. These areas included the cities of Denver Metro, Alamosa, Durango, Ridgway, the northeast Region, and the southeast Region. Colorado did not provide additional information to determine if this targeted effort was effective. Colorado received 74 clicks on their application link and 23 completed applications.

Similar to the other two states, females had the highest click-through rates across the hunting and fishing disciplines, with fishing at 2.83% and hunting at 2.18%. In fishing, females represented 44% of the impressions, 51% of all clicks, and 52% of landing page views. In hunting, the split was wider with 38% of impressions, 43% in clicks, and 44% of landing page views.

For hunting, the highest engagement rate came from the 55–64-year-old age bracket, with a 2.26% click-through rate and only 15% of impressions. For fishing, 65-year-olds and older remained at the higher engagement level, with a 3.71% click-through rate, and accounted for only 18% of impressions.

Pilot Campaign Recommendations

Results from the pilot campaign suggest using multiple resonant messages and incorporating different media platforms to effectively reach new volunteers. Some messages and media may be more effective than others. However, this research shows that if an agency or organization asks for volunteers, people will respond, and this is potentially the greatest result of this project. Based on the pilot state feedback, people may even respond at a volume even higher than was expected.

Messages

The most effective message for continuing and potential volunteers is helping the “next generation”. Volunteers are attracted to teaching new generations to connect with hunting, fishing, and other conservation practices. While Iowa used its campaign to evaluate how ads enticed volunteers based on the perceived age of the learner pictured in the ad, the data remained inconclusive as to whether an adult learner or youth learner image was stronger.

Community-based messages performed in line with industry-average click-through rates (~1.2%), so a mix of message content proved most useful in volunteer recruitment campaigns.

Conservation-specific and environmental education messages tested slightly above industry average (~1.2%). These can be used effectively in volunteer recruitment campaigns if states have opportunities to do so.

The most effective volunteer recruitment campaigns use at least one message from each theme to broaden the impact and resonance with potential volunteers.

Media

A variety of media platforms proved effective in reaching audiences both within and beyond an organization's typical reach. A mix of these platforms is most effective; however, if an organization must narrow down selections, the following ranking is provided:

1. Email.
2. Organic Social Media.
3. Paid Social Media.

Emails offer a no-cost option to engage with audiences already connected to an organization and with whom a level of trust has been established. This allows for skills-based list targeting, such as looking for angling volunteers using a fishing-based list, or seeking general conservation volunteers by utilizing larger, more generalized lists of people who enjoy outdoor recreation. If a targeted demographic or geographic audience is needed, email lists paired with a Customer Relations Management system can help achieve this goal.

Organic social media is a no-cost option for engaging potential volunteers. It allows broad reach among people who follow an agency or organization. The downside of this method is that targeted efforts are unavailable.

Paid social media is an effective option for volunteer recruitment; however, it comes at a price. Even for low-budget options, paid social media can reach a wide range of people to convey the message. Due to Meta's advanced capabilities and knowledge of its users, highly detailed targeting can be designed for a campaign (it should be noted that Meta cannot collect location, ethnicity, and some other categories without additional purchase of 3rd-party data). It can reach out to people with interests, hobbies, and behaviors that align with volunteer opportunities an agency or organization is offering. This proves important and effective when attempting to reach outside the normal realm of mentoring or skills-based volunteer opportunities.

Although paid social media performed better than organic social media in every pilot state, researchers rank it third in the order of prioritization for two reasons: First, because it requires budget to implement, which can make it challenging for agencies or organizations to operate. Additionally, it requires staff understanding of Meta purchasing procedures, audience segmentation and targeting, optimization, and analysis. For states that don't have this expertise or marketing budget, these barriers can be significant.

To put it simply, this project found that if agencies ask their constituents to volunteer, they will, as long as the communication they receive from the agency was clear, supportive, and reasonable from start to finish. Recruiting new volunteers for an organization's hunting, fishing, or general conservation opportunities can be done effectively with minimal effort. This can be accomplished through multifaceted message composition and media platform use that requires little to no cost. Volunteers want to engage with organizations that align with their outdoor recreation interests, and they will respond if a trusted organization makes a request.