



INCREASING VOLUNTEERS FOR STATE AGENCY PROGRAMS





Overview

State fish and wildlife agencies rely on volunteers to run conservation, fishing, hunting, and shooting sports programs and R3 events. However, recruiting and retaining volunteers can be challenging, as many people juggle busy schedules with other commitments.

To help strengthen volunteer recruitment and retention, the International Hunter Education Association-USA (IHEA-USA) and Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation (OSCF) partnered with states to gather insights from current and potential volunteers. The goal was to better understand how to maintain volunteer support for conservation, fishing, and hunting R3 and education programs. As a part of this effort, DJ Case + Associates and Southwick Associates conducted focus groups and surveys of current and potential volunteers. Findings from this research informed pilot recruitment campaigns that tested the effectiveness of key takeaways on the recruitment of new volunteers.



Dual Project funded by a Multistate Conservation Grant (F25AP00111 & F25AP00489), from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and jointly administered with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.



Key Takeaways

The main takeaway:

State fish and wildlife agencies that set clear expectations for their volunteer programs, use messages that motivate volunteers to give back, and have accessible digital applications can increase the number of volunteers recruited to their programs.

To achieve this, states should focus on:

- **Creating a well-organized volunteer program.** States need to clearly explain the time commitment, the support volunteers will receive, and what the role involves. When programs are well-organized and expectations are easy to understand, people feel comfortable getting involved and feel a strong call to stay engaged.
- **Messaging that emphasizes responsibility and purpose.** Messages that help a volunteer understand their potential impact performed the best. During the pilot campaign, ads with the message “**give back to the next generation**” generated the highest click-through rate, followed by “**give back to your community.**”
- **Cultivating a strong online presence.** A well-designed landing page paired with social media and email advertisements is essential. This approach attracted **244 volunteer applicants** during the pilot campaign, and current and potential volunteers emphasized the importance of an online application process and social media promotion during the surveys and focus groups.



Research Methodology

Focus Groups

- Colorado, Iowa, Maine, and South Carolina DNR's provided lists of fishing, hunting, and conservation volunteers. These states provided contact lists of fishing, hunting, hunter education, and conservation volunteers.
- Volunteers from these lists were invited to take part in a 2-hour focus group in exchange for a \$200 incentive.
- Focus groups of 8-9 participants were conducted between May 28th – June 4th, 2026.

Surveys

- In addition to the state fish and wildlife agencies that participated in focus groups, New York and Pennsylvania joined for the volunteer survey.

Volunteer Survey:

- 780 current and former fishing, hunting, hunter education, and conservation program volunteers responded to the survey.
- Fielding occurred July 9th – July 23rd, 2025.

Potential Volunteer Survey:

- 1,979 hunters (998) and anglers (989) with interest in becoming a volunteer responded to the survey.
- Fielding occurred August 15th – 29th, 2025.

Pilot Campaign

- Colorado, Connecticut, and Iowa agencies ran pilot campaigns including organic social media, paid social media and emails.
- Iowa recruited volunteers for fishing, hunting, and conservation programs.
- Colorado recruited volunteers for fishing and hunting programs.
- Connecticut recruited volunteers for fishing programs.
- Pilot campaigns ran from March – April 2026, and in total 244 volunteer applications were received.

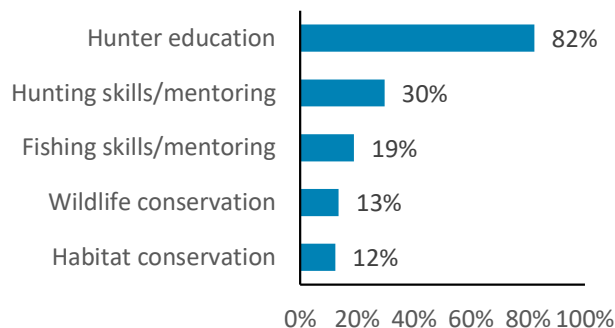


Current Volunteers

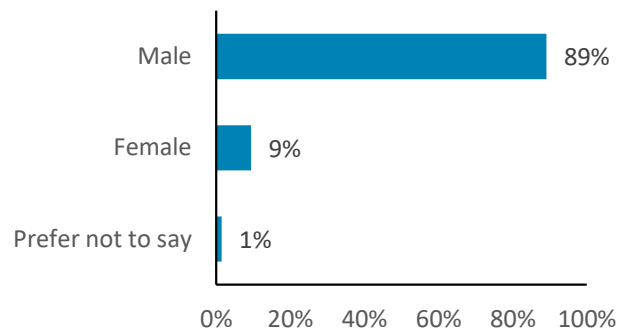
What do volunteers look like today?

- Many volunteers participate in more than one program, with a majority serving in some capacity as a hunter education instructor (82%).
- Most volunteers are male (89%), over the age of 65 (54%), and identified as an intermediate or expert hunter or angler.

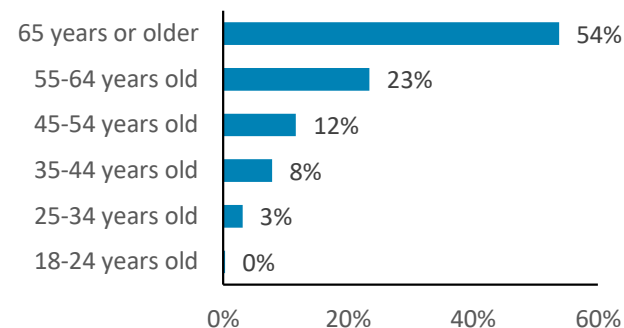
Volunteer Type



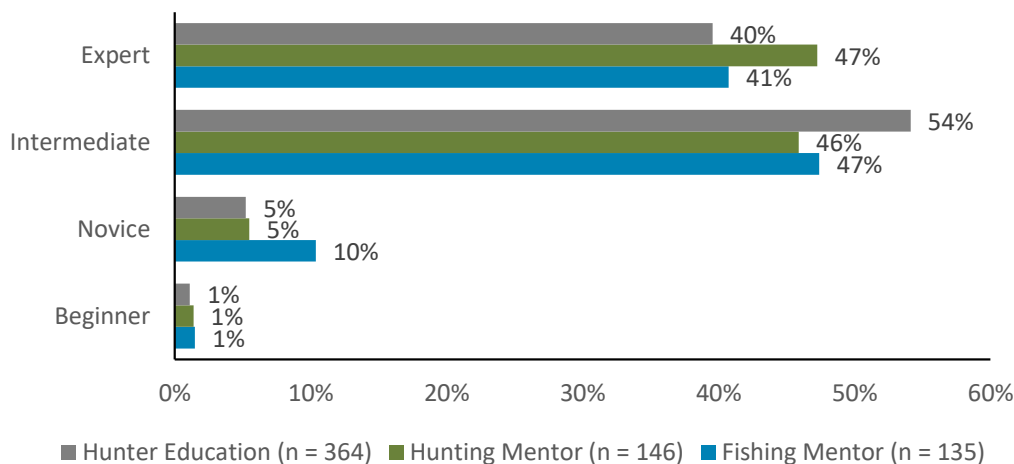
Volunteer Gender



Volunteer Age



Hunting and Angling Experience





VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE





Volunteer Experience

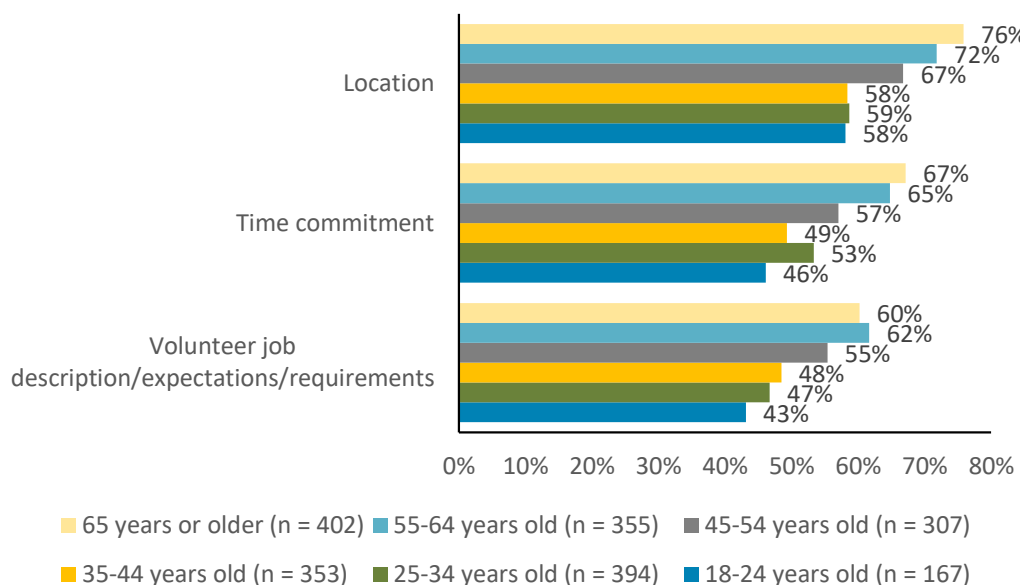
What do current and potential volunteers need?

- **Above all else, volunteers want an engaging program, clear expectations, and a helpful staff.** Focus group participants and survey respondents also noted the importance of having gear provided and a consistent schedule.
- Potential volunteers prefer to receive information by email (65%) or text message (52%).
- As volunteers age, they place greater importance on knowing the **location, time commitment, and volunteer description.**

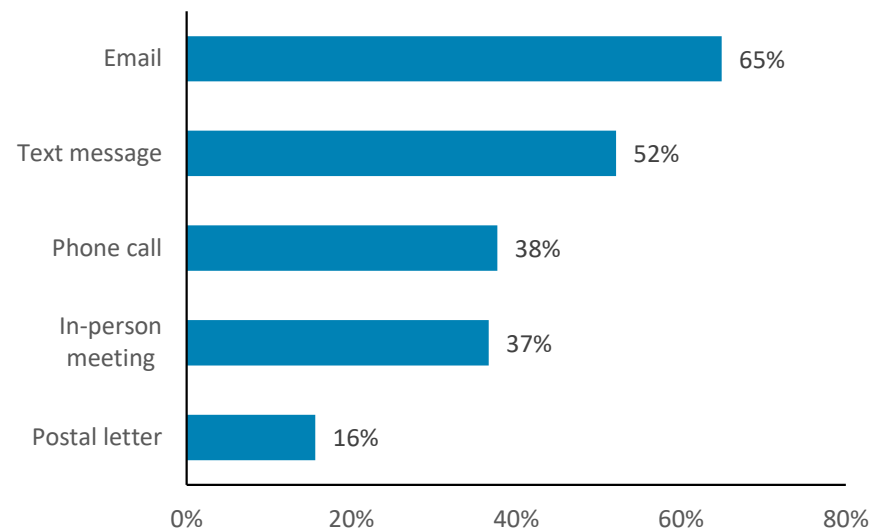
Most important components of the volunteer experience, according to current volunteers.

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

Necessary Pre-Volunteer Information



Potential Volunteer's Communication Preference



n = 1,997

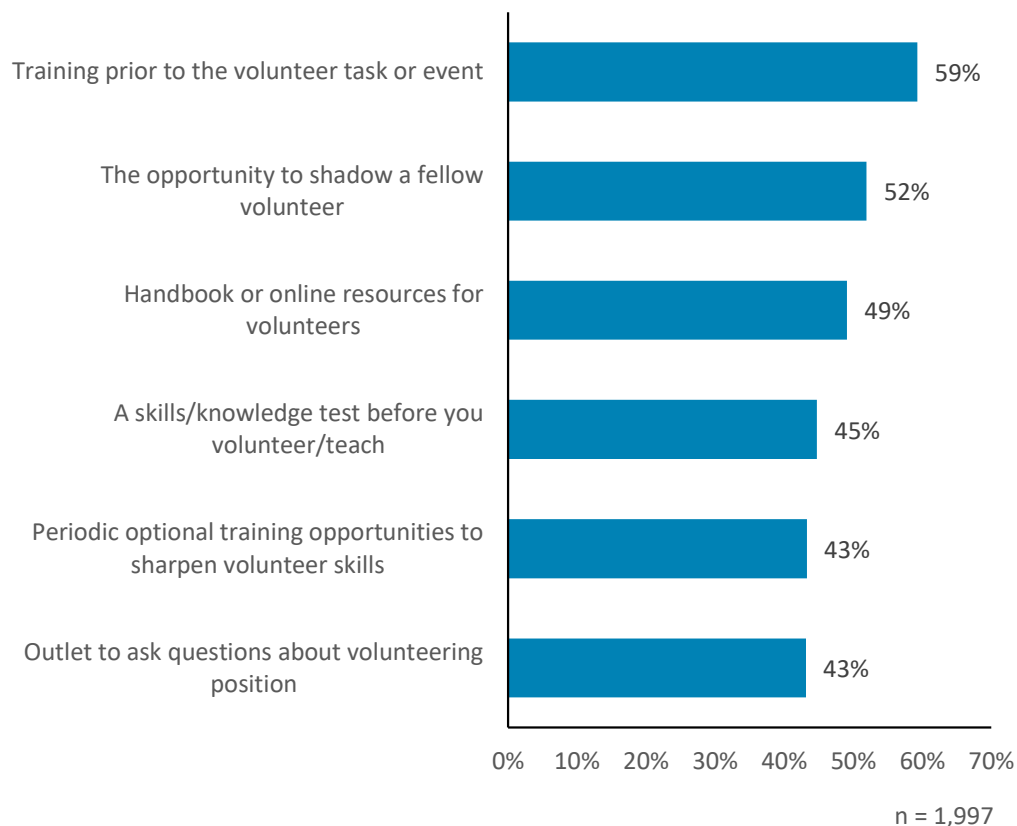


Volunteer Experience

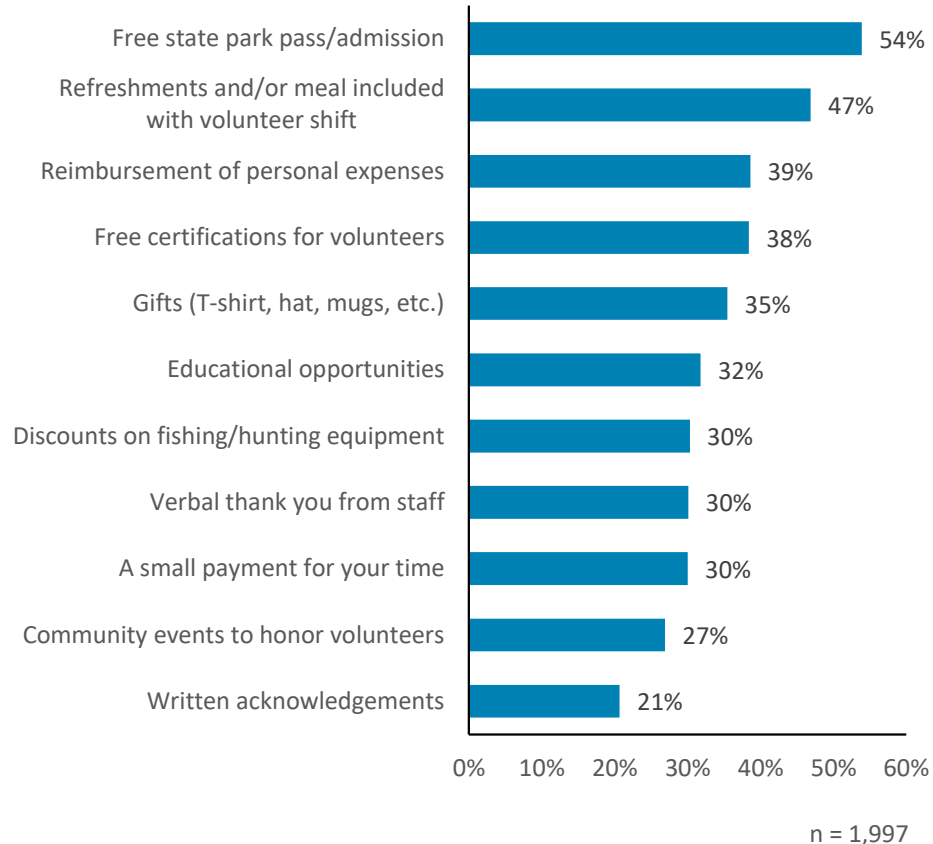
What training and incentives do potential volunteers want?

- **Potential volunteers value any support a state can offer.** Most importantly, people want to receive training (59%) and the opportunity to shadow a fellow volunteer (52%).
- In terms of incentives, potential volunteers were most interested in a **free state park pass** (54%) or **refreshments** (47%).
- Offering volunteer support, along with practical incentives, will help get people involved.

Preferred Volunteer Support



Preferred Volunteer Incentives





RECRUITMENT METHODS



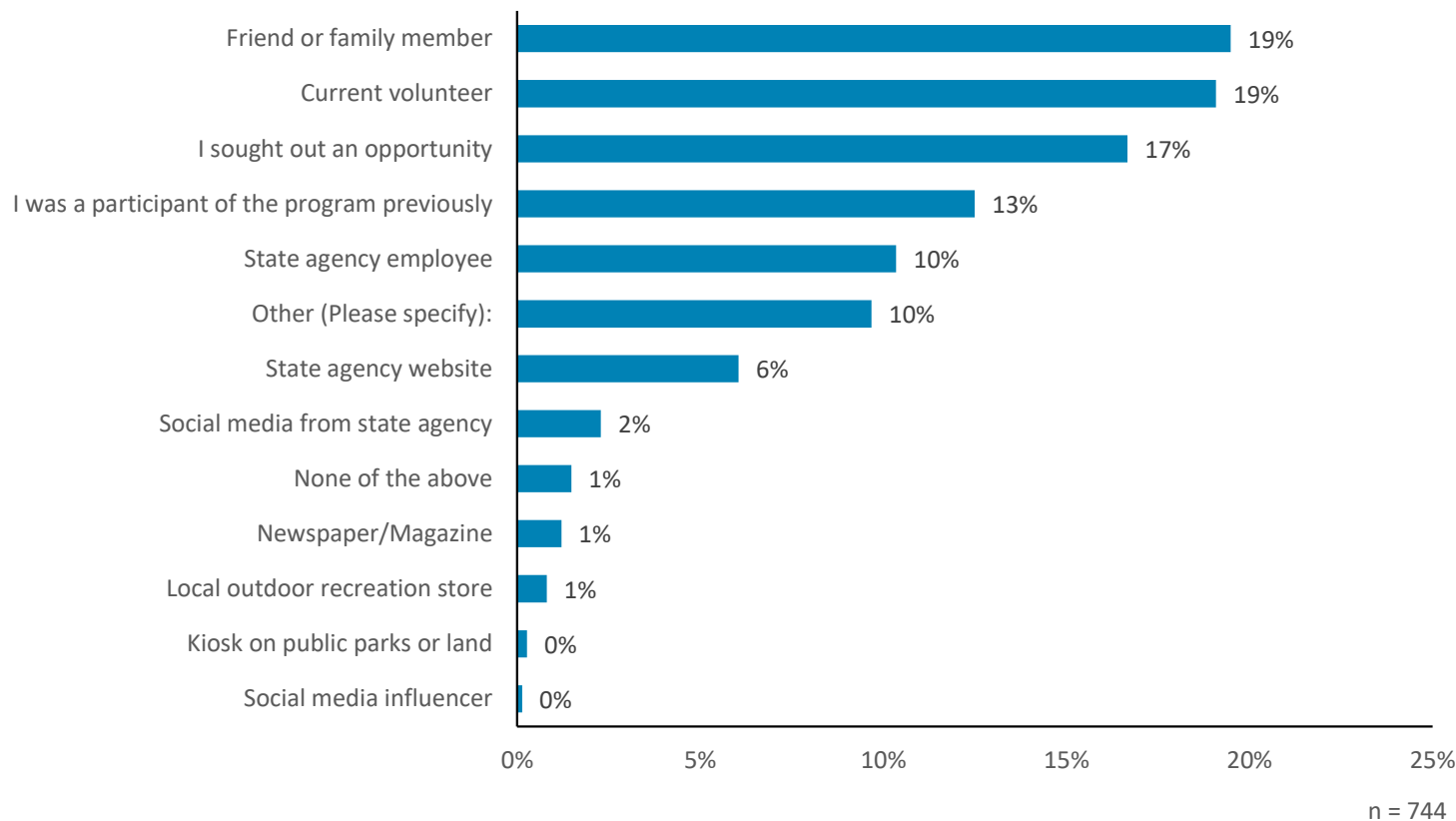


Recruitment Methods

How were current volunteers recruited?

- **Currently very few volunteers are recruited through agency promotion.** Only 2% of volunteers reported being recruited from state agency social media posts, and only 6% by a state agency website.
- **Most current volunteers learned about opportunities through personal connection.** Recruitment often came from friends and family (19%), current volunteers (19%), or from a state agency employee (10%).

Current Volunteer Recruitment Routes



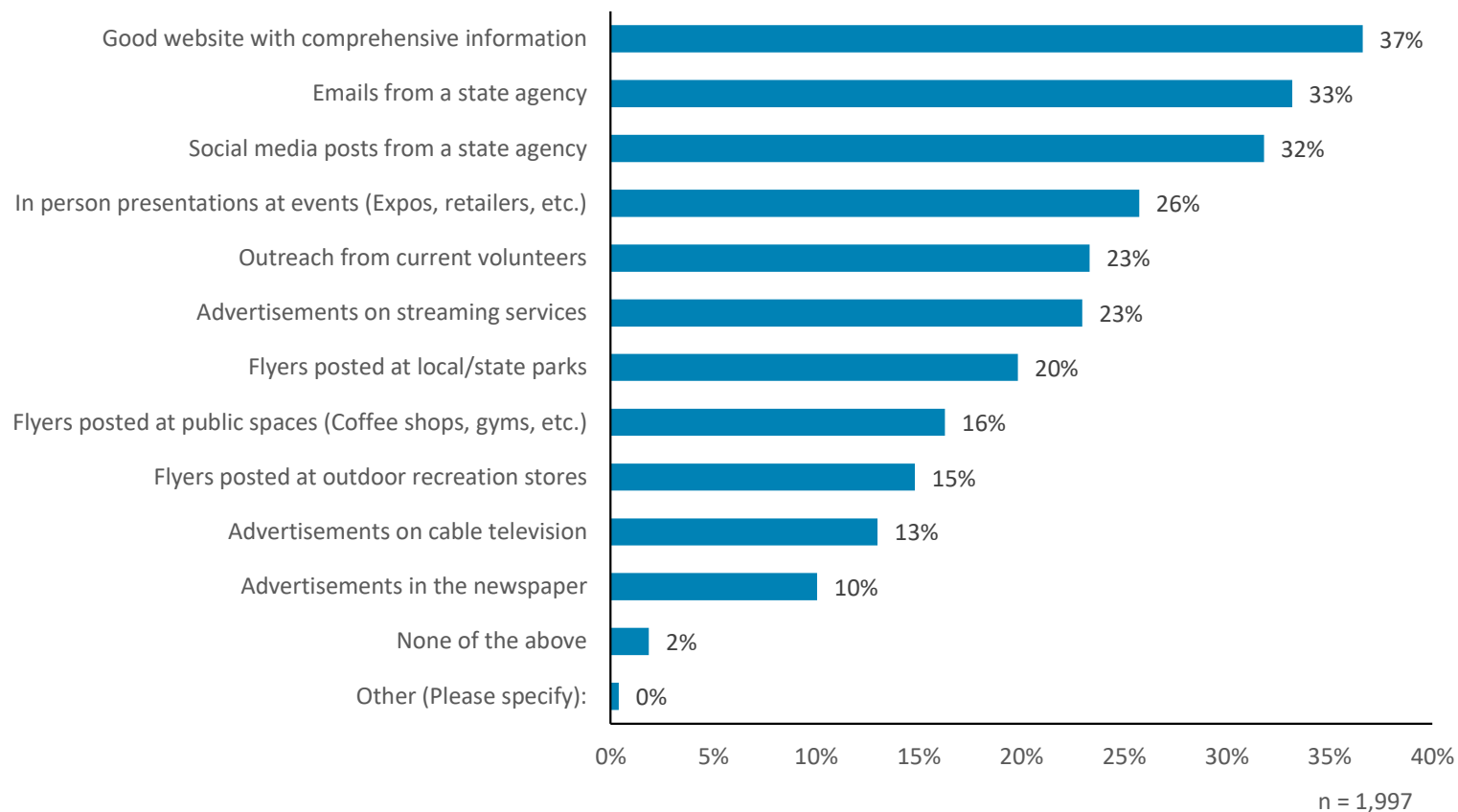


Recruitment Methods

How can states reach potential volunteers?

- Despite low recruitment numbers, state agency promotion was viewed as the most effective method. Potential volunteers thought a comprehensive website (37%), emails from a state agency (33%), and social media posts (32%) would be most effective. Additionally, 55% of current volunteers also agreed that social media posts would be effective.

Potential Volunteer Promotional Methods



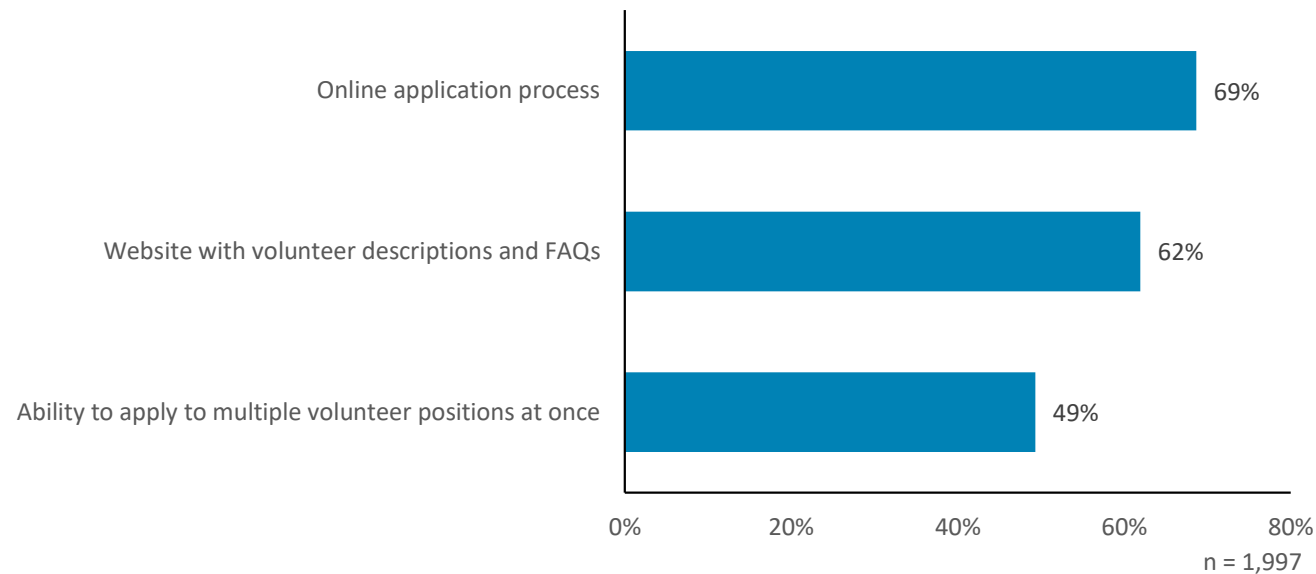


Recruitment Methods

Online applications are also essential.

- A survey of R3 practitioners revealed that 50% of states do not provide an online application, yet, 7 in 10 potential volunteers said having one would make them more likely to apply.

Ways to Boost Volunteer Applications





TESTED RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES





Recruitment Strategies

What are the most effective recruitment strategies?

- **Email lists** support the greatest recruitment, allowing states to reach out to people who resemble likely volunteers. With access to a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, outreach can be refined by demographics, behavior, or geography.
- **Organic social media** provide broad no-cost promotion, but lacks targeting capabilities.
- **Paid social media** reaches a large audiences and detailed recruitment by geography and interests but requires a promotional budget and knowledge base from staff on Meta ad purchasing.

Colorado Email Example:



Hunter Outreach and Angler Education

Are you interested in sharing your hunting or fishing expertise and passion with the community? Take a look below for our Hunter Outreach and Angler Education volunteer programs. Apply yourself and help us spread the word by sharing with friends, family, and on social media!

Community Grows When We Give



Teaching others to hunt means passing on more than knowledge - it also means community, respect and care for nature. If you don't already, [volunteer with our Hunter Outreach program today!](#)



**NOW IT'S
YOUR TURN.**

IOWA DNR
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

VOLUNTEER TODAY »

Connecticut Fish and Wildlife
March 30 · 🌐

Now It's Your Turn

Someone once handed you a rod, tied your first knot, and showed you how to cast. Now it's your turn to reel in the next generation. Volunteer today with Connecticut DEEP Fisheries.

<https://portal.ct.gov/.../fish-with-care-coach-certification> 🌐 See less

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN.

VOLUNTEER TODAY »

👍 32 💬 2 ➦ 15

Aaron Herlihy

Three surgeries later. Thank you Bill Ferrigno

6w Like Reply 1 🌐

Bill Ferrigno

Aaron Herlihy we all have different learning curves and skill levels. The knowledge you have is priceless 🙏🙏🙏 📺 📺 📺 📺 📺 📺 📺 📺 📺 📺

6w Like Reply



Landing Page Look

How should the landing page look?

After someone clicked on an ad, they were directed to a landing page that highlighted the key details focus group participants and survey respondents said were essential for deciding whether to apply. Landing pages should include:

- Volunteer descriptions
- Requirements
- Time commitment
- Benefits/Incentives
- Recruitment messaging



Get Involved: Volunteer Services - Hunt Mentor



→ Hunt Mentor

Description:

Each year, hundreds of Coloradans experience hunting and shooting sports for the first time through educational seminars, skills clinics and unique hunting opportunities made possible by volunteers.

What You'll Do:

- **Share Your Skills:** Assist with mentored hunts, skill clinics and special events, teaching essential skills like ethics, shooting accuracy, and processing.
- **Educate:** Help beginners understand ecology and how to identify local game species.
- **Prep the Gear:** Assist with the annual maintenance, assembly, and equipment.
- **Inspire:** Represent CPW at community events and hunts to promote outdoor recreation.
- **Aid Hunt Leads:** Help hunts run smoothly by helping with many background tasks that are essential to a great hunt camp.

Volunteer Requirements:

- **Have Hunting Knowledge:** Safety comes first, so some hunting knowledge is a must. Those looking to advance will be required to showcase knowledge and skills.
- **Registered Volunteer:** Must be registered as a CPW volunteer.
- **Background Check:** Prospective mentors must be able to pass a background check.
- **Initial Orientation & Training:** This is required of all individuals who want to become hunting volunteers. It is offered once a year and includes 8 hours of training.

Options to Advance: Hunter Outreach Assistant and Hunt Support positions help to ease volunteers into higher roles such as Hunt Leads and Senior Hunt Leads that require more certifications and experience.

Time Commitment:

Mentored hunts, clinics and other events vary in their time requirements and can have early mornings, late nights, prolonged hours each day, and be on weekends.

Volunteer Benefits:

- **Support the next generation:** There is nothing quite like the excitement of helping someone harvest their very first animal.
- **Skills development:** CPW continually offers its volunteers opportunities to advance their hunting knowledge.
- **Strengthen your communities:** Spend time outside while growing your community through teaching hunting.
- **Appreciation incentives:** Receive hats, t-shirts, and Colorado State Park passes for your service.

Ready to pass on the tradition? If you have good people skills and an interest in hunting, we want you on our team! Submit an application to become a mentor.



VOLUNTEER MESSAGING





Volunteer Messaging

What messaging performed best?

- Advertisements centered on helping the next generation performed best. These ads produced the highest click through rates:
 - Hunting volunteers: 1.40% - 1.97%
 - Fishing volunteers: 1.5% - 2.6%
- Messages about giving back to the community also performed well, meeting or slightly exceeding industry averages.

Click Through Rates	Colorado	Connecticut	Iowa
Next Generation & Pass on the Tradition Messages			
Angling	2.61%	1.45%	1.89%
Hunting	1.97%	—	1.40%
Conservation		—	1.41%
Community based messages			
Angling	1.01%	1.26%	1.22%
Hunting	1.09%	—	1.27%



CONCLUSIONS

Programs that are well-organized and provide straightforward training opportunities are the most successful at recruiting volunteers.

States that actively recruit new volunteers through their own email lists and through social media promotion (organic and/or paid) will see strong results.

Potential volunteers responded most strongly to messages about teaching the next generation and giving back to their community.





APPENDICES





Focus Group Metrics

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

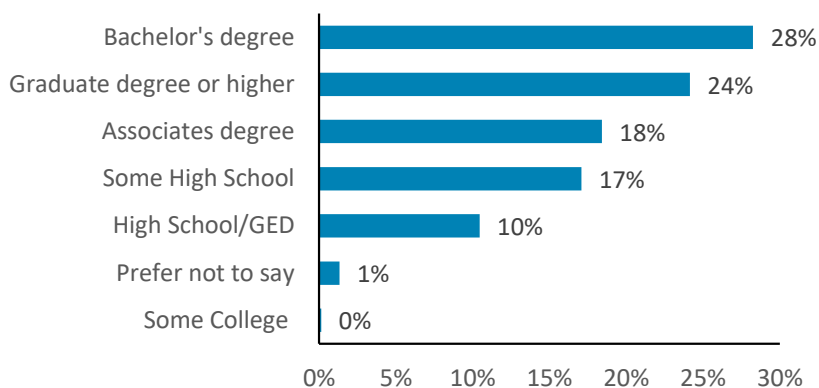
Focus Group	Participants
Volunteer Hunt Focus Group 1	9
Volunteer Hunt Focus Group 2	9
Volunteer Fish Focus Group 1	10
Volunteer Fish Focus Group 2	10
General Population Potential Volunteers Focus Group 1	8
General Population Potential Volunteers Focus Group 2	8



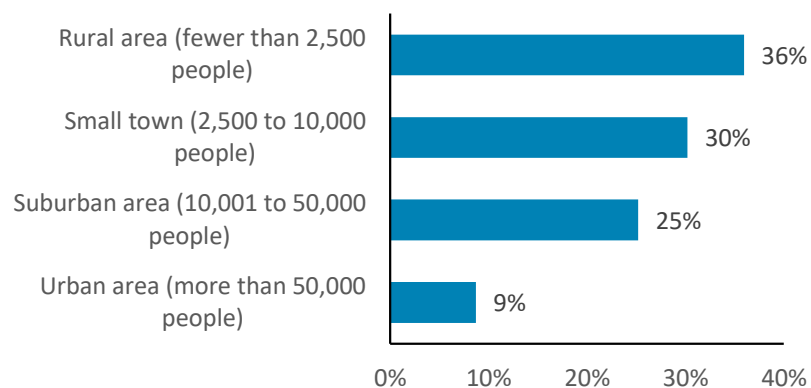
Volunteer Survey Demographics

Most volunteers were male (89%), white (96%), and over 65 years old (54%). Very few volunteers were younger than 45 years old (11%). These volunteers were also highly educated, with 70% holding at least an associate's degree, and primarily lived in rural areas (36%) and small towns (30%).

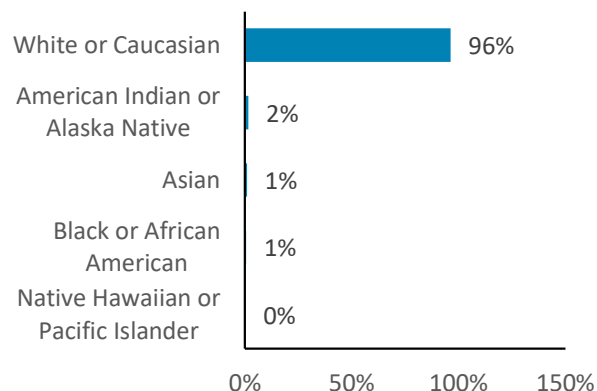
Volunteer Education



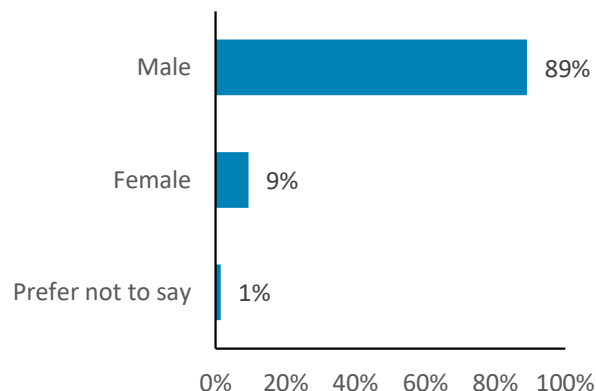
Volunteer Community



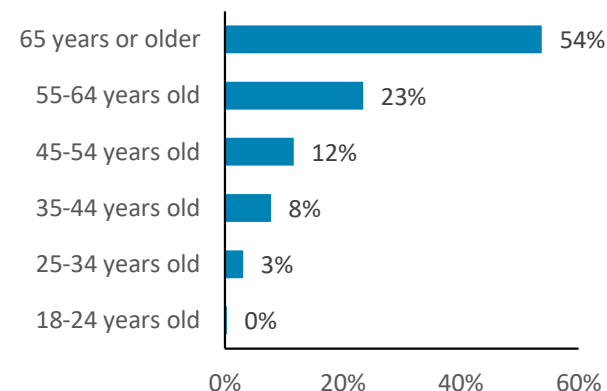
Volunteer Ethnicity



Volunteer Gender



Volunteer Age





Potential Volunteer Interests

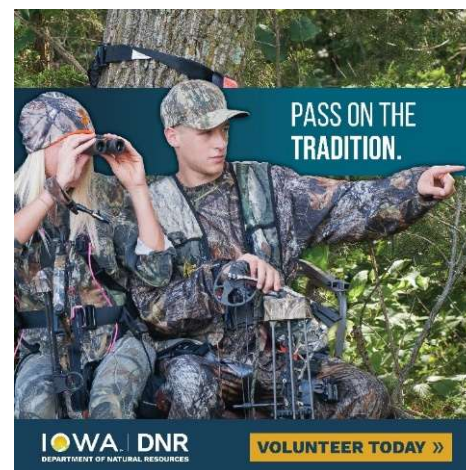
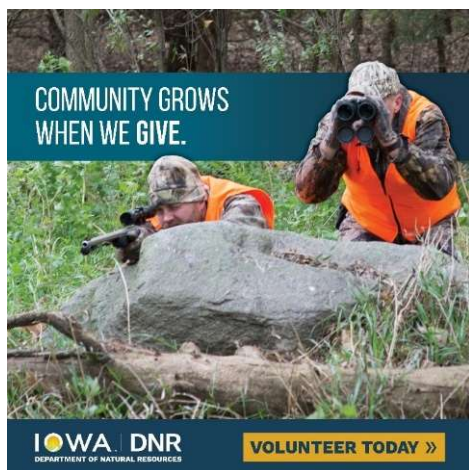
The potential volunteer survey was fielded to a click-balanced sample of hunters and anglers designed to mirror U.S. population demographics. Respondents were:

- 51% female and 49% male
- 29% 18-35 years old, 33% 35-54 years old, and 38% 55+ years old
- 17% were from the Northeast, 39% from the South, 20.5% from the Midwest, and 23.5% from the West

	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%



Pilot Campaign Advertisements – Hunting





Pilot Campaign Advertisements – Fishing





Pilot Campaign Advertisements – Fishing. Additional Social Media Posts Promoted by Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation **View posts on Instagram @OutdoorStewards**



An additional recommendation is for fish and wildlife agencies, manufacturers, media, and nonprofit groups to combine efforts and work together to promote volunteer opportunities.

OUTDOOR STEWARDS OF CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

GET A NEW VOLUNTEER HOOKED.

.....

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Inspire for life.

OSCF *Learn more at:*
OutdoorStewards.org

OUTDOOR STEWARDS OF CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

GET MORE VOLUNTEERS TO BITE.

.....

Start with an invitation.
Build a legacy.

OSCF *Learn more at:*
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Pilot Campaign Advertisements – Conservation

