

# **Volunteerism as a Wellness Intervention: Research Findings & Practice Implications**

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## What is volunteering?

“...someone who contributes time to helping others **with no expectation of pay or other material benefit**

“ Wilson and Musick, 1999



## Who volunteers?

- 23.2% of Americans participate in formal volunteering
- Generation X (41-56) had highest rate of volunteering across age groups
- We experienced our largest drop in volunteerism during the pandemic, 7 percentage points

Source: AmeriCorps & U.S. Census

# How Maine Ranks

State	2021 Formal Volunteering Rate
Utah	40.7%
Wyoming	39.2%
Minnesota	35.5%
Maine	34.9% ←
District of Columbia	34.2%
South Dakota	34.2%
Nebraska	33.9%
Kansas	31.5%
Montana	31.1%
Missouri	30.5%

State	2021 Informal Helping Rate
Montana	68.8%
Nebraska	66.4%
Maine	65.0% ←
Delaware	63.9%
Vermont	63.9%
Minnesota	61.9%
Utah	61.6%
West Virginia	60.5%
Iowa	60.3%
Pennsylvania	60.1%

Source: AmeriCorps & U.S. Census

**Why look at  
volunteering  
from a health  
lens?**



# Background: Benefits of Volunteering



Health



Mental  
Health



Life  
Satisfaction



Health  
Behaviors



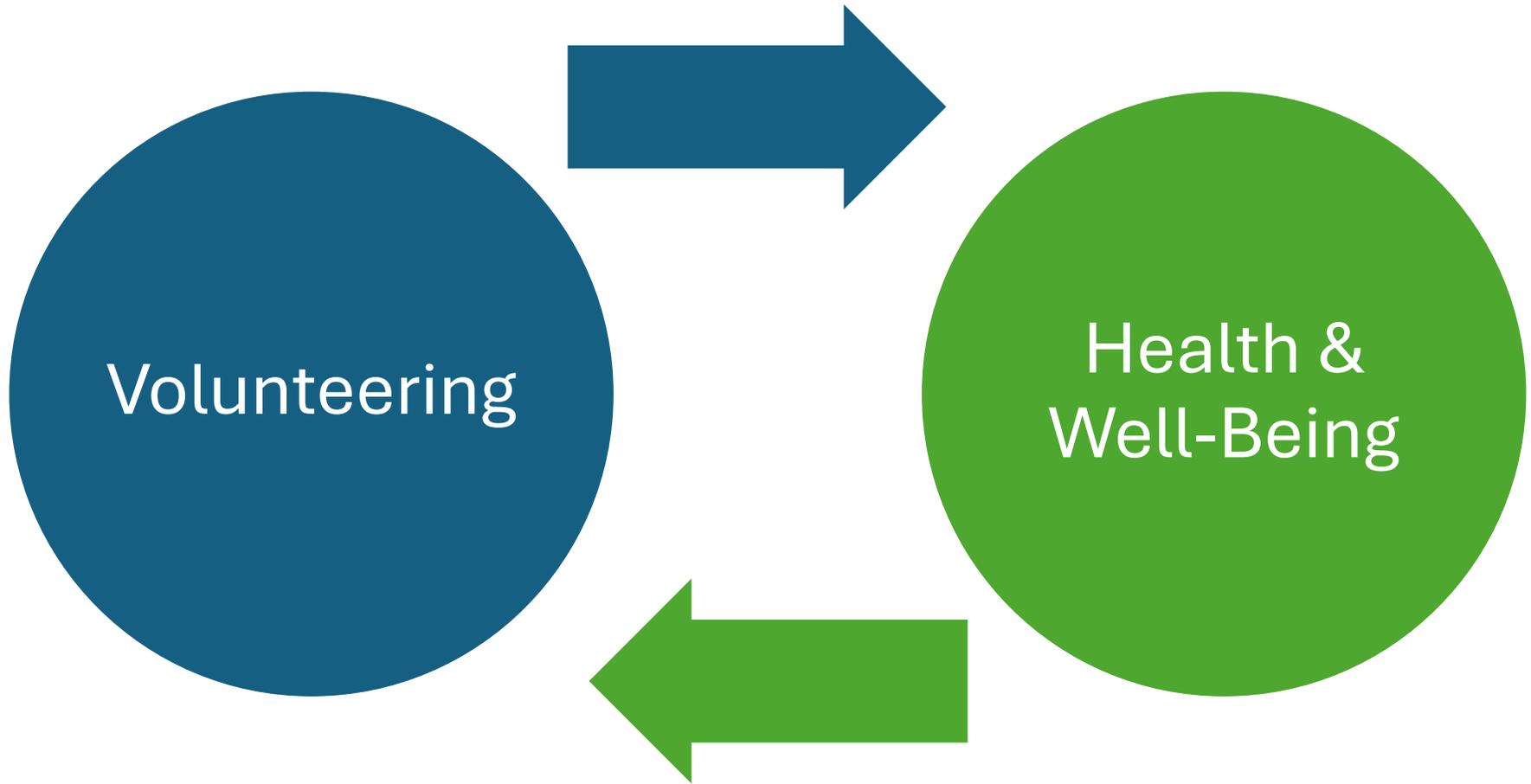
Longevity

## Why do people leave volunteering?

- Burnout
- Time constraints
- Social interactions negatively associated with turnover
- Poor health and well-being
  - Will vary by age group and circumstance



# Reciprocal Relationship







# **Loneliness and Social Isolation**

# Defining Social Isolation and Loneliness

## Social Isolation

- Objective

## Loneliness

- Subjective

# Poll: How many adults report being lonely on a weekly basis?

Source: American Psychiatric Association (2024)

10%

20%

30%

50%

Poll: How many adults report being lonely on a weekly basis?

10%

20%

30%

50%

Source: American Psychiatric Association (2024)

# Risk Factors

Loss of  
mobility

Hearing  
loss

Vision loss

Disability

MH  
Diagnosis

LGBTQ  
populations

Immigration  
status

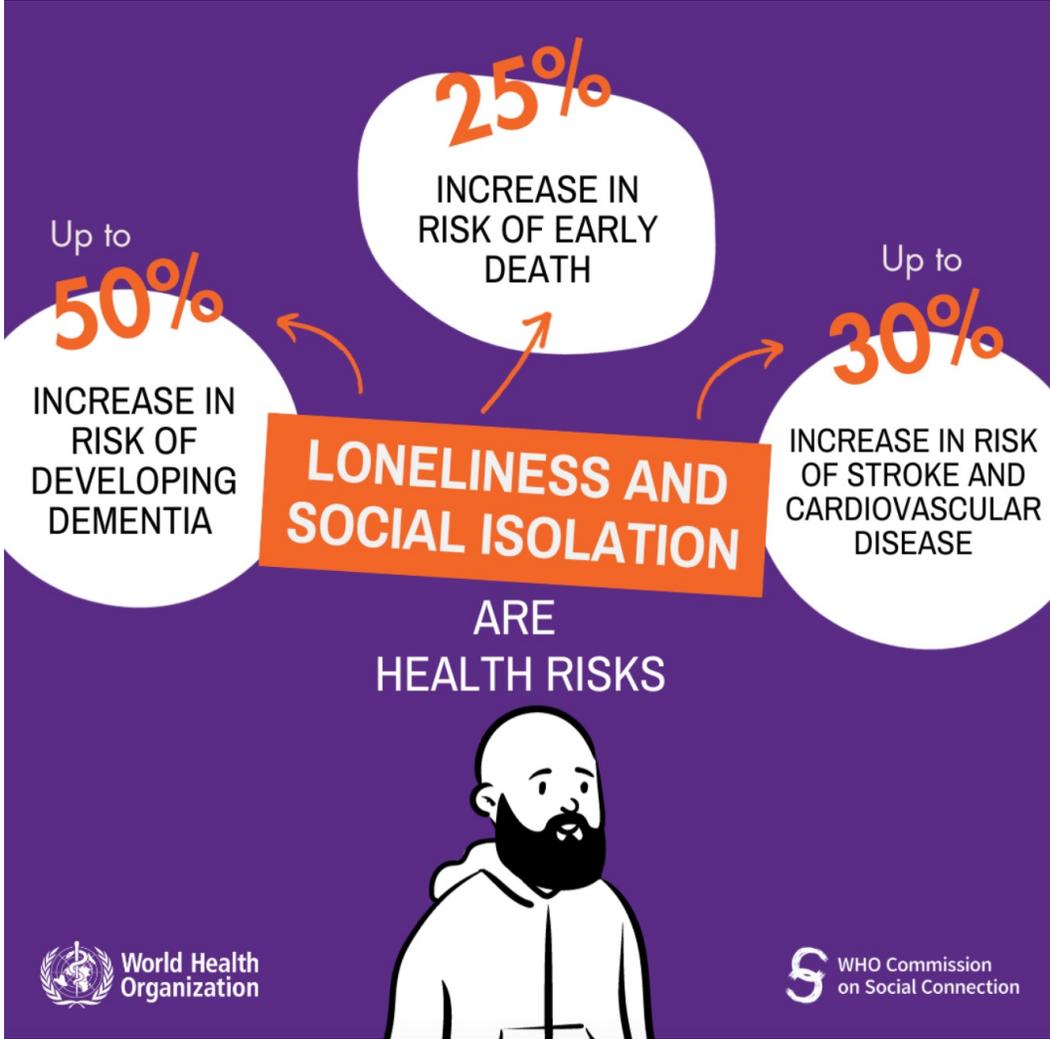
## **Additional Risk Factors**

**Social risk  
factors**

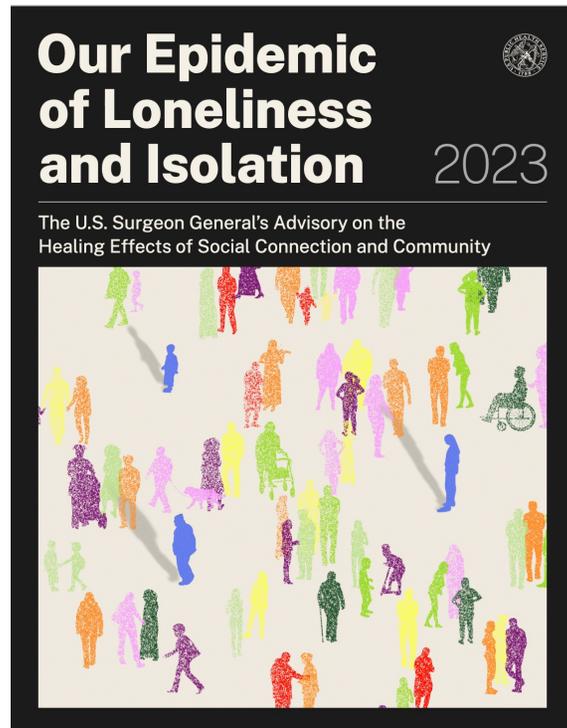
**Economic  
risk**

**Logistical**

# Impacts of Social Isolation



# Surgeon General's Report



- **Create and provide education, resources, and support programs** for community members and key populations such as parents, youth, and at-risk populations. These could include community-wide social events, **volunteering** and community service activities, network-building professional development, and organizational opportunities for involvement by the community.



**The New York Times**

# An Overlooked Cure for Loneliness

Science tells us the solution may lie in what we do for others, not ourselves.



By **Christina Caron**

Published Dec. 21, 2021 Updated June 22, 2023



## How does volunteering address social isolation and loneliness?

- Creates opportunities for social connection and relationship building
- Activity/roles matter, some examples:
  - Telephone/friendly check-in programs.
  - Reduced loneliness and increased social network
  - Intergenerational programs

## Volunteering as a strategy to combat social isolation-Margaret's story

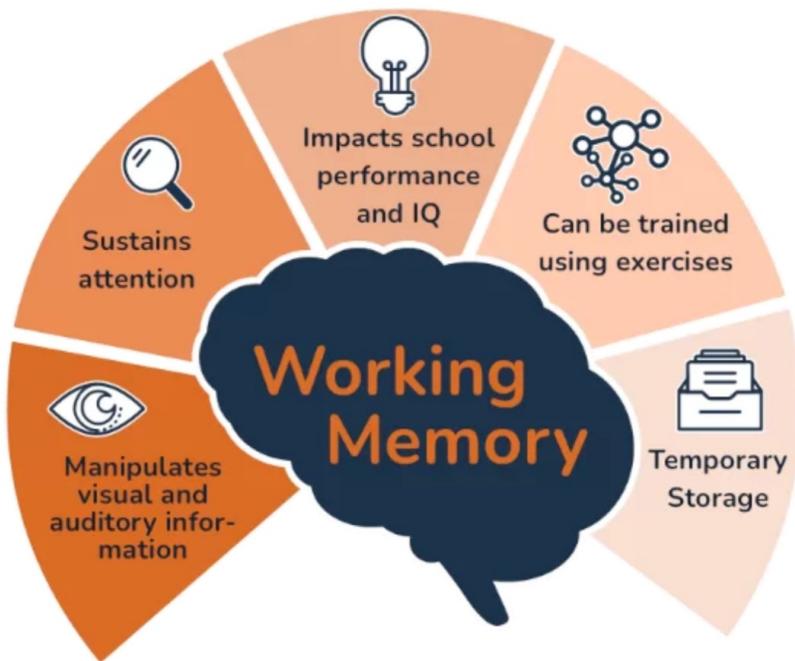
If it were not for being a volunteer, I would be sitting on my couch with a “woe is me” attitude. After all these years in this town, I still only know three or four people. This [volunteer program] has enabled me to meet new people. . . .Thirty plus years at my job kept me in my extrovert mode, and I interacted with so many people. Some were just acquaintances and others became friends. But it seems like once you retire and you're no longer part of that “inner circle,” you get forgotten rather quickly. Thanks for letting me be a part of this great program—it's making me whole again and has given me purpose.

Source: Crittenden, 2019

# Cognitive Benefits



# Cognitive Benefits



- Improves working memory and processing for adults 50+
- Improves executive functioning for teens and older adults
- Improved problem-solving skills

Photo courtesy learnfully.com

# Pathways to Cognitive Benefits

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NOVEL  
EXPERIENCES



COMPLEX  
SITUATIONS



PROBLEM  
SOLVING



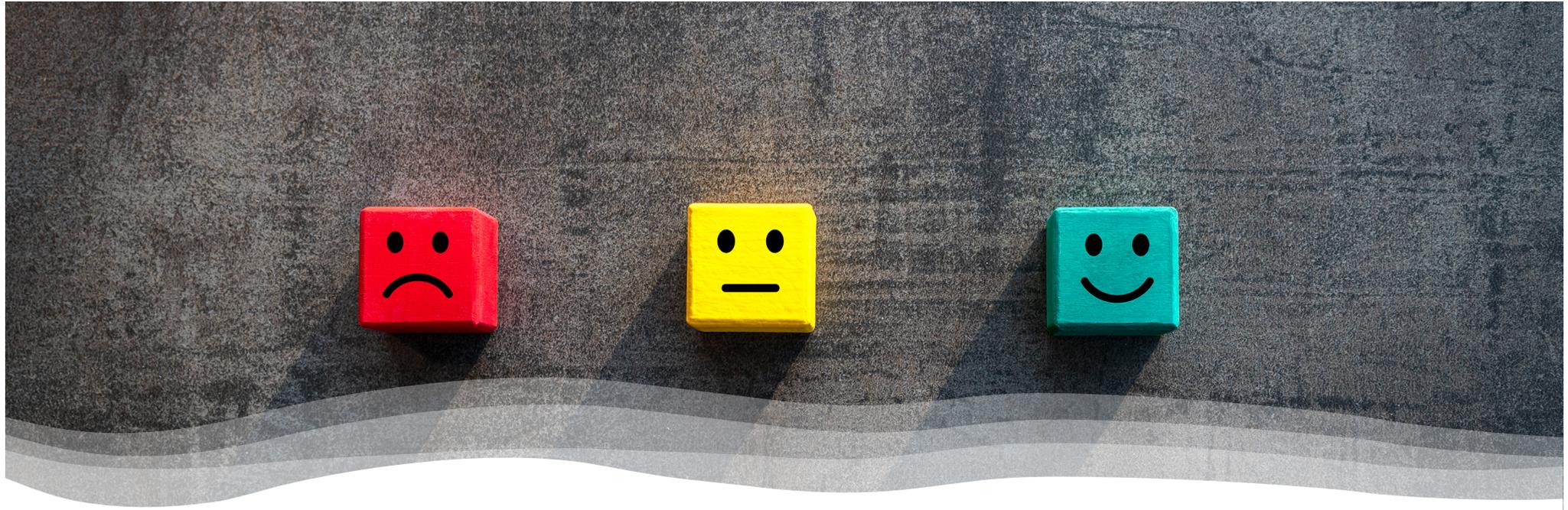
PHYSICAL  
ACTIVITY

# Experience Corps



Photo courtesy Experience Corps

- Increased physical activity compared to control group
- Memory and executive function improvements
- 98% of volunteer tutors reported being more active, having more skills.
- 96% reported feeling better about themselves.
- More than 85% felt their lives had improved because of their involvement with Experience Corps.

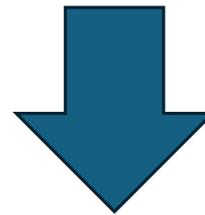
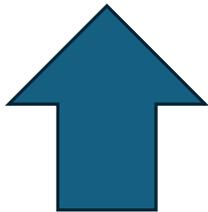


## **Mental Health and Well-Being**

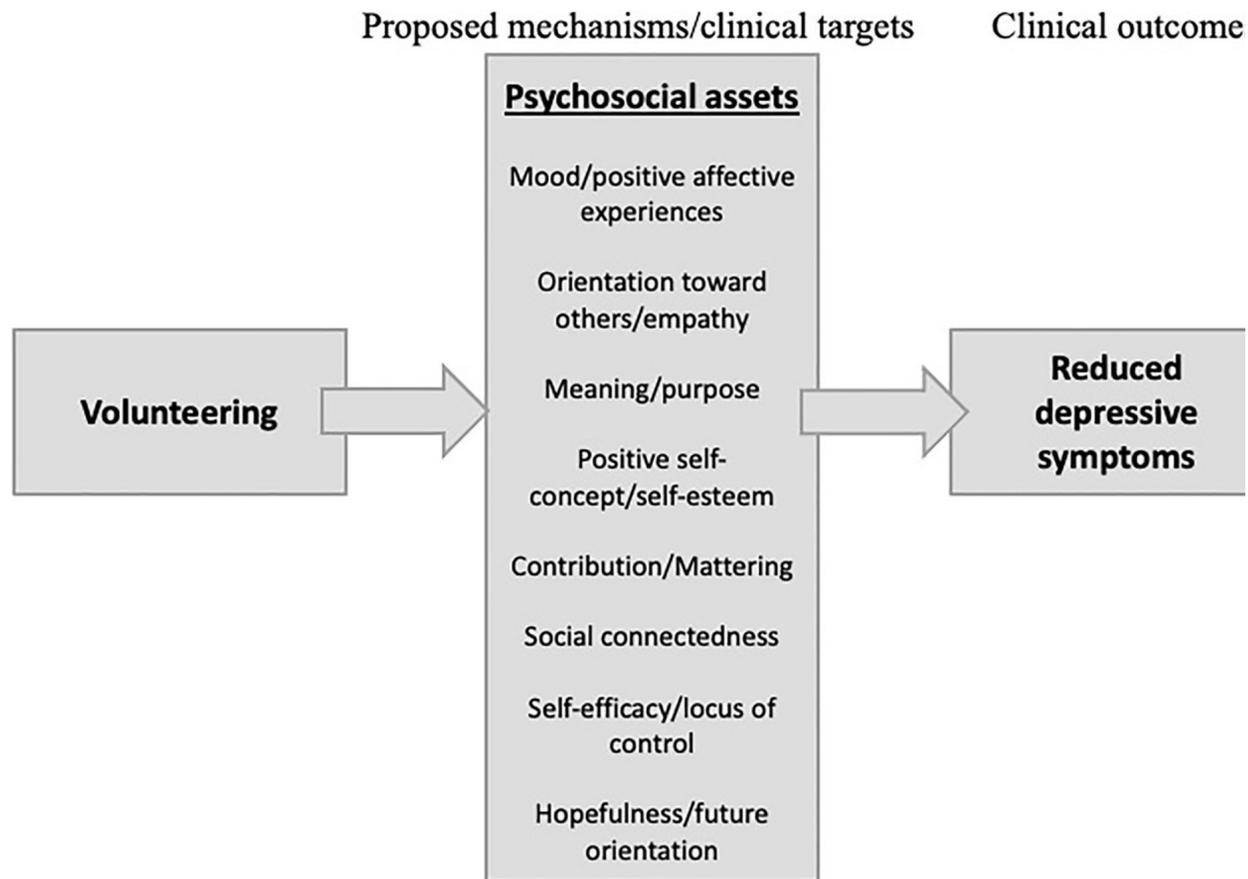


# MH & Well-Being Gen Facts

- Positive affect
- Optimism
- Purpose in life
- Self-esteem



- Depressive symptoms
- Hopelessness
- Loneliness
- Stress



Ballard et al., 2021



# Pathways to MH & Well-Being Improvements

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- Social integration
- Access to new resources, information
- Religion/fait-based volunteering strengthens group identity
- Social skills that improve relationships (adolescents)
  - Improved relationships –correlates with school performance
- Benefits are moderated by type of volunteering, intensity, **reciprocity**, and the concept of choice



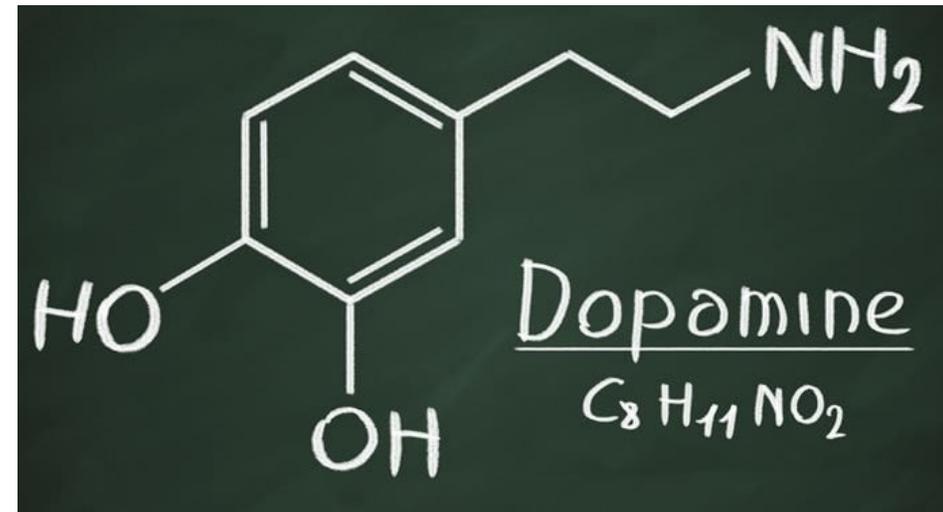
## Sense of Purpose/Mattering

- Meaningful social roles and purpose important across the lifespan
- For older adults, one in four reported less purpose in life during the pandemic
- Promotes sense of purpose for both young and older adults
  - Role of pro-social motivations

Photo: Jamie Street for Unsplash

# Dopamine Connection

- Neurotransmitter-reward and pleasure
- Brain regions that produce dopamine are activated when making charitable donations (Moll et al., 2006)
- May explain the positive mental health and rewarding feeling associated with volunteering





# Caregivers and Volunteering

# Caregiving

- Caregiving is increasingly common
  - 53 million caregivers in the U.S.
- 1 in 5 adults is currently a caregiver
- Half of individuals over the age of 50
- Caregivers have higher levels of stress than non-caregivers



# Caregivers as Volunteers

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- Caregivers more likely to volunteer than non-caregivers
- Volunteer more hours
- Caregivers derive more benefits than non-volunteers





## Volunteering as Respite

*For the short time I am volunteering at RSVP, it is like a vacation from my caregiving. I am able to put my worries on hold... #8013 (caregiver)*



# Physical Health

# Cardiovascular Health

- Scherer Study on cardiovascular health (2013) from JAMA
- Adolescents in Canada randomly assigned to volunteer
- Significant reductions in inflammatory markers, cholesterol, and BMI
- Lower blood pressure over time for adults 50+

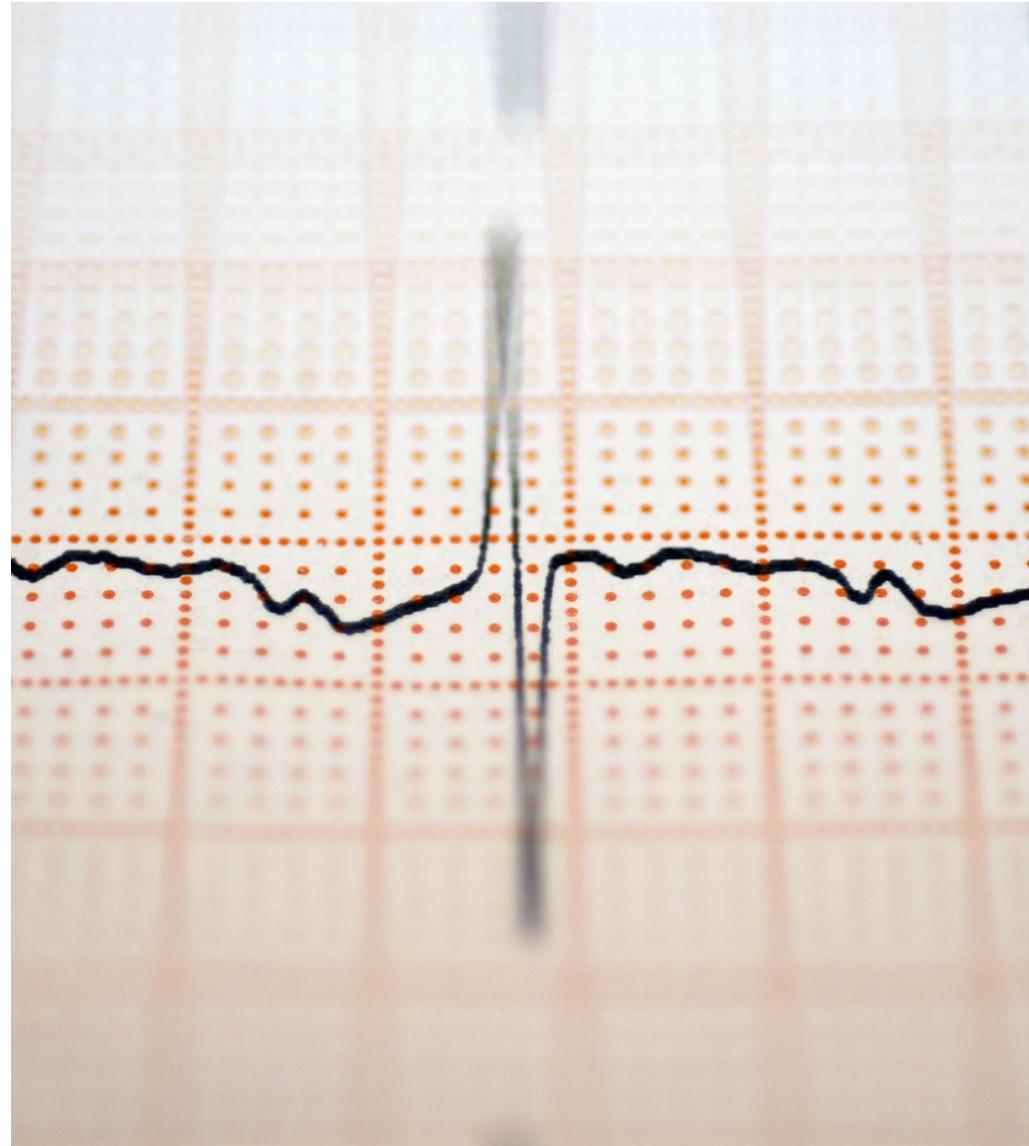




Photo: Elise Klysa, FRAME

# Health Impacts

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- Higher levels of physical activity
  - Intention by design- such as environmental volunteering
  - Indirect-Experience Corps
- Self-reported health improvements
  - Higher for older adults than younger adults
- Longevity/mortality
  - Volunteers live longer than non-volunteers
  - Self-oriented versus other-oriented motivation

# Pathways to Health Impacts



Increased physical activity



When we feel better about ourselves we take better care of our health



Addressing loneliness and isolation reaps health benefits as well



# A note about dosage...

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How much is enough?  
How much is too much?



Poll: What is the minimum volunteer commitment for health and well-being benefits?

50 hours/year

100 hours/year

200 hours/year

400 hours/year

Poll: What is the minimum volunteer commitment for health and well-being benefits?

50 hours/year

100 hours/year

200 hours/year

400 hours/year





## **At least 100 hours/year 1-3 hours/week**

- Cho & Xiang (2023) study on loneliness found 100 hours or more per year for reducing loneliness (2-3 hours/week)
  - No protective factors for < 100 hours
- Windsor et al. (2008) study of adults 64-68, found more than 100 hours, less than 800 for well-being
- Schreier et al., 2013: 1-1.5 hours/week among adolescents to reduce cardiovascular risk

## How much time (cont'd)

- Kim et al., 2023: used large-scale data to establish that 200+ hours of volunteering = lower blood pressure in adults 50+

### **Depressive symptoms**

- Depression among undergraduates, 1-9 hours/week for effects (Lederer et al., 2015)
- Whillans et al. 2017, Randomly assigned college students (18-19 yr. olds) to Service Learning assignments for 10-12 hours per week.
  - No effect on depressive symptoms

# Programmatic Considerations



## Discussion

How can  
organizations/programs  
support health and well-being  
for volunteers?



# Fostering Health Among Volunteers



Offering health-related trainings, in-services



Consider ourselves “connectors”



Incorporate physical activity, for varying levels of involvement



Offer “sick time” ability to take breaks

# Fostering Health Among Volunteers



Offering health-related trainings, in-services



Build in social connections

## Example of health-related learning...

“I will look at my primary care or health provider in a different way. Now, you know, I might ask more questions ... I felt like it was a bit of a revelation about the healthcare system.” -Older Adult Simulation Volunteer

# Supporting Caregivers





## Inclusion of Care Recipient

“...one of our volunteers takes her husband with her to a food distribution. He sits there in a wheelchair and watches while she works. She says they both enjoy getting out.”  
-RSVP Program #21

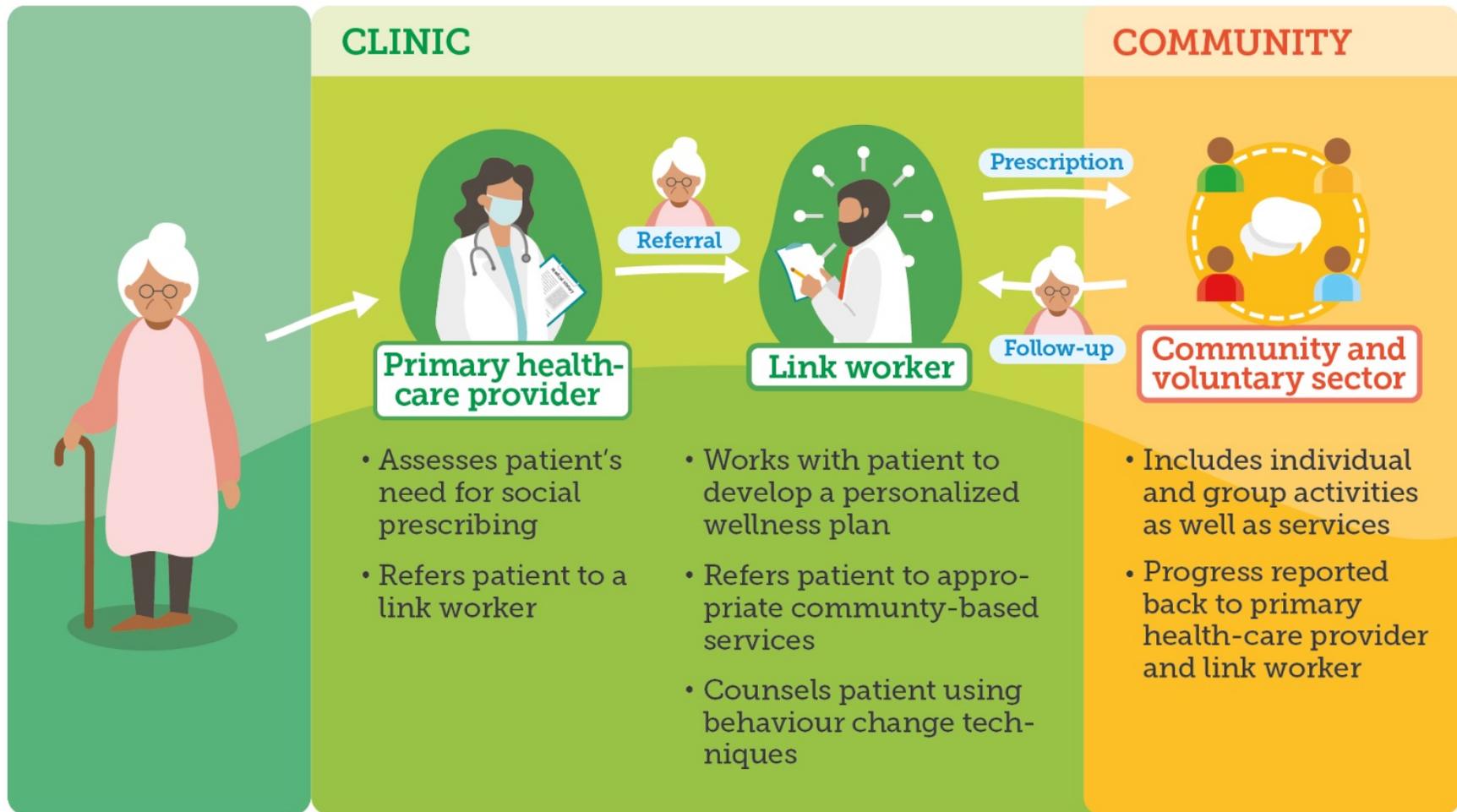
## Expressing Care & Empathy

“As volunteer coordinator, I maintain contact via occasional emails and phone calls to let the volunteer know they are thought of by our organization during their time of caregiving. Thinking of you cards and notes are sent to the caregiving volunteer, likewise the person the volunteer is caring for, as appropriate.” RSVP Program #4

# Social Prescribing-Reducing Barriers



1. Meet people where they are
2. Make it personal
3. Put wellbeing at the heart
4. Build circles of support
5. Make it social
6. Remember it's a journey
7. If you treasure it, measure it



Source: Husk et al. (1)

Image: WHO, 2022

# Virtual Volunteering

Increases accessibility to volunteering

Opportunities for social connection

Infrastructure needs

- Training
- Technology
- Access to internet



## Takeaways

- Volunteering is a health and wellness intervention
- Volunteer managers are wellness practitioners
- Health focus can help to build and retain your volunteers

How does viewing volunteerism from a health and wellness frame create new opportunities for:

- Configuring volunteer opportunities
- Marketing your volunteer roles
- Partnerships
- Funding opportunities

# mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/older-adult-volunteer-study/



### Supporting older workers and caregivers

#### Tips for volunteer managers

Volunteering has been linked to a number of positive outcomes for older adults such as good health and mental health, social connections, and a sense of purpose. However, older adults are increasingly giving their time to paid work, caregiving, and other important activities. For many older adults, especially those who are employed and those who are caring for loved ones, finding the time to volunteer can be a challenge. Volunteer programs can encourage older adults to volunteer by offering flexible and appealing programs.

A recent study was carried out with older adult volunteers and volunteer managers across the country to understand how they and their managers can successfully manage their multiple commitments. Based on that survey, as many as one out of every seven older adult volunteers are working for pay in addition to their volunteer work. As many as a third of older adult volunteers are also working as a caregiver to a loved one.

**Benefits of volunteer**

- Gave them new skills and knowledge that they can use in their paid work or caregiving.
- Provided them with information on different programs, services, and resources that could be used in their paid role.
- Helped them to connect with new employment opportunities.
- Provided an opportunity to meet new people and build a network that helped them in their paid work.
- Provided a valuable opportunity for cross-sector.

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### Getting the most out of your volunteer experience

#### Tips for caregivers

Are you an older adult who is juggling life's demands and trying to find time for yourself? Volunteering is a great way to support your health and well-being while making a difference in your community.

Volunteering has been linked to a number of positive outcomes for older adults such as good health and mental health, social connections, and a sense of purpose. However, for many older adults, especially caregivers, finding the time and energy to volunteer can be a challenge.

A recent study was carried out with older adult volunteers and volunteer managers across the country to understand how they and their managers can successfully manage their multiple commitments. Based on that survey, as many as 39% of current volunteers are also caregivers, meaning they are caring for someone 18 or older who is unable to care for themselves.

**Benefits of volunteer**

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### Getting the most out of your volunteer experience

#### Tips for older workers

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## Contact Info

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## Older Adult Virtual Volunteerism Study



[mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/vvstudy](http://mainecenteronaging.umaine.edu/vvstudy)



**Questions?**

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