DRAFT FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

Maine State Service Strategy 2027-2030

Service and Volunteerism as a Strategy for Maine

Maine has a proud tradition of neighbors helping neighbors. Across the state, people step up to coach a youth team, serve on a town committee, deliver food to a neighbor, staff a community event, respond to an emergency, care for an aging family member, or lend a hand when a neighbor needs it. This culture of service is one of Maine's greatest community assets. It is also a resource that can be more intentionally understood, harnessed, and strengthened.

Maine faces a range of interconnected challenges affecting the well-being of its communities, including an aging population, food insecurity, housing affordability, transportation, workforce development, youth engagement, social isolation, and limited places where people can build relationships and a sense of belonging. These challenges cannot be addressed by government, nonprofits, businesses, or individuals acting alone. They require communities to work together and to find new ways to engage people in volunteering their time, skills, relationships, and ideas.

Volunteerism and service are force multipliers, a cost-effective complement to the work of professionals, extending the reach of paid staff and enabling organizations to serve the public good in ways that would otherwise be impossible. Across Maine, nonprofits, municipalities, schools, community organizations, and other institutions depend on volunteers to deliver critical services. Volunteerism and service also create benefits for both the person serving and the community receiving that service. Service can develop workforce skills, leadership, responsibility, and civic knowledge. It can create pathways for young people to explore careers and for adults to build networks and develop experience and professional skills. It can help people find purpose, connection, and belonging.

What we did to produce this strategy

Volunteer Maine, the state's service commission, conducted a statewide public engagement process to gather input for this 2027–2030 State Service Strategy. Between May and August 2026, Volunteer Maine Commissioners and staff led 20 listening sessions involving 155 participants, supplemented by ten one-on-one interviews and a statewide stakeholder survey. The process combined regional conversations in Augusta, Bangor, Brunswick, Portland, Van Buren, Machias, Norway, Rockland, and Lewiston and with sessions focused on critical sectors including emergency management, higher education, youth, older Mainers, the private sector, AmeriCorps programs, and organizations serving people with disabilities.

The listening sessions were designed to provide Volunteer Maine with an opportunity to recenter partnership, convening, and listening as critical functions of Volunteer Maine. The process also helped listening session participants connect with each other in important ways, leaving everyone with a better understanding of the critical needs in Maine and the ways in which organizations are working together to address them. An enthusiastic participant declared to the room, "Don't leave here without my business card," a sentiment widely felt across sessions.

Challenges to Service and Volunteerism in Maine

The public engagement process highlighted that Maine's volunteer and service infrastructure is strained. What emerged is not a picture of a state lacking civic spirit. Maine has high levels of civic participation and a population that cares about its communities and are willing to contribute. The challenge is to build systems that allow that willingness to become sustained, meaningful action.

Needs were identified on multiple levels:

- **The way people volunteer is changing:** Maine has a strong culture of service, but organizations described volunteer interest shifting away from routine, long-term commitments toward more episodic, flexible, project-based service. This makes program planning significantly more difficult for organizations that have long relied on consistent volunteer engagement. Many communities are also confronting an aging volunteer base and uncertainty about who will take the place of longtime volunteer leaders. This trend has a particularly acute impact on municipalities that rely on volunteers to fulfill roles on committees and boards critical to the functioning of municipal governance.
- **There are barriers to volunteerism and service**: Transportation availability and cost, work schedules, geography, and cost of living all effect who can participate in volunteerism. In rural Maine, participants in listening sessions cited long distances, winter weather, early sunset times, and technology literacy as key challenges to serving. Full-time stipended service member roles like AmeriCorps volunteers and Maine Service Fellows are particularly affected by Maine's lack of affordable housing. Political divisiveness has also affected people's interest in volunteerism and service, particularly in roles that involve municipal governance. Young people want more opportunities to contribute, but they do not always know where to find them, and organizations often do not have the capacity to accommodate them, particularly this under 18.
- **Organizations don't have enough capacity:** Key gaps identified in the listening sessions are volunteer recruitment and capacity for effective volunteer

management. Smaller nonprofits and municipalities often need volunteers the most while having the least capacity to manage them. We heard repeatedly: “Volunteers don’t manage themselves.” Organizations need staff time, leadership, training, systems, and resources to recruit volunteers and service members, match them with meaningful opportunities, supervise them, and keep them engaged.

- **Volunteers are being asked to take on a lot:** In a time of more limited state and federal resources and growing capacity gaps across the board, there is concern that volunteer roles are expanding beyond the scope of what is reasonable. Service is not a substitute for government, professional staff, or sustained investment in community institutions. Long-term volunteers are experiencing burnout as they take on increasing responsibilities. There is also frustration among some over whether the roles they are being asked to fill should be full or part-time jobs.
- **The volunteer managers need a ‘quarterback’:** We learned that in some regions, organizations working to address similar community challenges are not always aware of each other. They shared that they want to better collaborate and have more opportunities to convene, coordinate and share resources. Again and again, participants identified pooled resources, collaboration, and shared efforts as important strategies, but emphasized that these approaches require leadership—a 'quarterback' or 'ringleader'—to bring them together and make them effective. Also referenced was the importance of relationships to achieving community impact and the need for co-creation, follow through, and locally defined agendas.

Champion, Connect, and Strengthen Volunteerism and Service in Maine

The needs facing Maine are significant, but so is the potential within its strong culture of service. Volunteer Maine’s greatest value is not in building a large, centralized service delivery system, but in strengthening the statewide systems, relationships, and partnerships that help organizations effectively engage volunteers and integrate service into their work.

This requires championing service as a strategy for addressing community needs, connecting people, programs, and resources so organizations are not working in isolation, and building shared infrastructure so our partners have the ability to recruit, engage, support, manage, and retain volunteers and integrate service effectively.

Achieving this vision also requires continued investment in relationships and Volunteer Maine is committed to being a collaborative, responsive partner to nonprofits, legislators, state agencies, and communities across Maine.

This strategy organizes Volunteer Maine's role around three mutually reinforcing pillars: Champion, Connect, and Strengthen.

Pillar 1: CHAMPION

Goal

Service and volunteerism are valued as vital strategies for addressing community challenges, strengthening civic life, and improving quality of life across Maine.

Objectives

Objective 1: Increase public understanding of the value and impact of volunteerism and service.

Objective 2: Reduce barriers to participation in service and volunteerism for all Mainers, particularly those from underrepresented populations.

What Volunteer Maine Will Do

Volunteer Maine will strengthen awareness, recognition, and participation in service by engaging policymakers, employers, funders, and community leaders; sharing stories and data that demonstrate volunteer impact; and recognizing volunteers and service organizations statewide. Volunteer Maine will also provide hands-on support to expand inclusive volunteer opportunities, conduct outreach to populations facing barriers to participation, and develop measures to track and report volunteer engagement and participation trends over time.

The Change We Want to See by 2030

More Mainers of all ages and backgrounds regularly participate in service and volunteerism. Volunteer opportunities are more visible, accessible, and designed to engage people with diverse interests, skills, and life experiences. Employers, policymakers, funders, and community leaders recognize volunteerism as a valuable investment in Maine's economic, civic, and social well-being.

Pillar 2: CONNECT

Goal

Organizations, communities, and volunteers are connected through strong networks that strengthen collaboration and increase access to service and volunteer opportunities across Maine.

Objectives

Objective 1: Establish new and reinforce existing relationships among statewide, regional, and local partners to support collaboration, resource sharing, and collective action.

Objective 2: Increase awareness of and access to volunteer and service opportunities for Mainers.

What Volunteer Maine Will Do

Volunteer Maine will strengthen connections and collaboration across Maine's service and volunteerism sector by convening partners, supporting existing and emerging regional collaboratives, and providing funding, training, and technical assistance to build their capacity. Volunteer Maine will expand access to volunteer opportunities by supporting organizations to incorporate shared recruitment strategies, community outreach, volunteer-matching platforms, and service placements while promoting best practices for inclusive volunteer engagement. Volunteer Maine will also establish measures to track collaboration, volunteer participation, and access to service opportunities statewide.

The Change We Want to See by 2030

Organizations, communities, schools, businesses, and volunteers are connected through strong local and regional networks that make collaboration easier and more effective. Organizations know where to turn for support, share resources instead of duplicating effort, and work together to address community needs. More Mainers can easily discover meaningful volunteer opportunities, and the pathways to service are visible, accessible, and welcoming. Maine has a stronger infrastructure for service and volunteerism because the people and organizations advancing this work can find one another and act together.

Pillar 3: STRENGTHEN

Goal

Maine effectively leverages service and volunteerism to strengthen communities, develop talent, and address critical needs.

Objectives

Objective 1: Increase the number of service opportunities — including Maine Service Fellows and AmeriCorps programs — in Maine.

Objective 2: Expand service-to-workforce pathways that connect service experiences to career exploration, skills development, credentials, and employment.

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Objective 3: Strengthen the capacity of organizations and municipalities to recruit, engage, develop, and retain volunteers and volunteer leaders.

What Volunteer Maine Will Do

Volunteer Maine will strengthen organizational capacity and expand service opportunities through grants, training, technical assistance, and individualized support focused on volunteer recruitment, engagement, leadership, and retention. Volunteer Maine will invest in existing and emerging service programs, expand Service Enterprise training and certification, and support initiatives that address community needs and create pathways to employment. Through partnerships with workforce, education, economic development agencies, employers, and policymakers, Volunteer Maine will align service opportunities with workforce priorities and support service members through career development and connections to employment, apprenticeships, and credential programs. Progress will be measured through organizational capacity, volunteer and service participation, program growth, and service-to-workforce outcomes.

The Change We Want to See by 2030

Organizations and municipalities across Maine have the capacity and expertise needed to effectively engage volunteers and service members. Volunteers have meaningful experiences, develop new skills, and remain engaged longer. Small nonprofits and local governments can access training, resources, and support to solve volunteer engagement challenges. Service programs are increasingly used to address community priorities and strengthen civic engagement. Service-to-workforce pathways help more people explore careers, gain valuable experience, earn credentials, and enter employment in fields important to Maine's future.

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