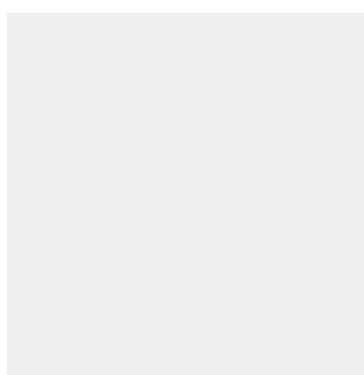
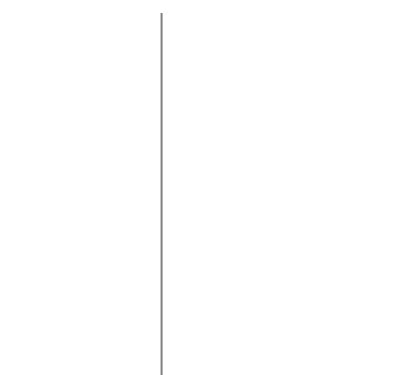
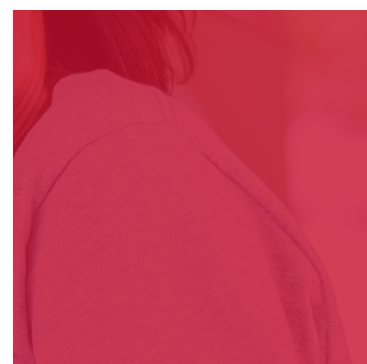
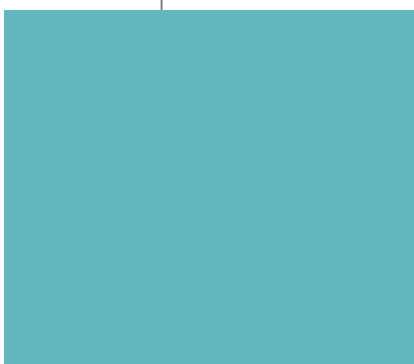


Good Health  
& Well-Being

# Communities of Practice

Published September 2025





# Introduction

Multiple sources confirm that global well-being has experienced a decline in recent years, despite some measures showing improvement. The COVID-19 pandemic severely reversed a decade of progress in global health metrics, triggering a rise in mental health issues, social isolation, and financial strain. While happiness levels have somewhat rebounded since 2020, they remain lower than pre-2011 figures. This decline is also unevenly distributed, but key drivers of this downturn include persistent global political instability, economic pressures, environmental crises, and a rise in noncommunicable diseases.

The *New York Times* recently reported on the skyrocketing rates of loneliness, citing the finding that 25 percent of Americans are lonelier today than they were before the pandemic, as well as the decision by the World Health Organization to make loneliness an official global public health concern. Studies have correlated feelings of loneliness with an increased risk of depression, and loneliness has been linked with cardiovascular disease and other illnesses. Research has also shown that loneliness, social isolation, and living alone increase the risk of premature death at a rate similar to cigarette smoking or obesity.

However, this same article also referred to volunteering as ‘an overlooked cure’, noting its role in bolstering social connections and adding to the safety net that helps people feel cared for. In delivering services and solutions to problems, they also provide a sense of optimism and hope and create a visible pathway for others to engage.

It is in this global context that this Communities of Practice report brings together six written summaries contributed by presenters from two thematic Practice Seminars held during IAVE’s 27th World Volunteer Conference in Busan, South Korea, in October 2024. Focused on Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), both seminars explored the powerful role of volunteering in addressing some of today’s most pressing health and social challenges.

The first seminar highlighted how volunteers are creating healthier, more connected communities by combating isolation, fostering intergenerational support in rural areas, and offering compassionate listening to society’s most vulnerable. The second seminar showcased volunteer-driven initiatives tackling key issues such as social isolation, suicide prevention, and the complex realities of ageing populations. Together, these case studies illustrate how volunteer action is advancing community well-being, resilience, and inclusion around the world.



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# Volunteering to Combat Loneliness and Create Healthy Communities

By Lejla Šehić Relić (DKolektiv/CEV, Croatia) & Casper Bo Danø (FriSe, Denmark)

## Loneliness

Loneliness is one of the most pressing social challenges of our time, affecting individuals across all age groups and backgrounds. [Loneliness is a growing concern across Europe](#), with 13% of EU residents feeling lonely most or all the time, and 35% experiencing loneliness occasionally. This trend has been exacerbated by social changes, digitalization, aging populations, and the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While volunteering has been shown to significantly reduce loneliness, [research from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre](#) highlights a paradox: Individuals experiencing deep loneliness often perceive themselves as ignored or disconnected from society, leading to self-focused behaviors and a reduced likelihood of participating in volunteer activities. This presents a challenge for organizations seeking to engage those who could benefit the most from volunteering. This insight underscores a crucial





challenge: attracting those who feel most lonely to volunteering. Tailoring policies and organizational practices to encourage their participation is key to leveraging volunteering as a tool for social integration.

Denmark has recognized the severity of loneliness and launched a national strategy to reduce loneliness by 50% in the population (16+ years) by 2040. However, across Europe, there is still a lack of coordinated efforts to integrate volunteering into health and social policies as a structured way to combat loneliness and foster community resilience.

The [Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering](#) project, conducted across 10 EU countries, highlights best practices in engaging volunteers to address loneliness. One key insight is that people prefer not to participate in activities as “victims of loneliness” but rather as active participants or contributors to their own well-being and community connections.

## Role of Volunteers

Volunteers play a critical role in combating loneliness, strengthening social cohesion, creating inclusive spaces, and supporting individuals to become active members of their communities.

One way is that voluntary associations provide social support through structured activities that encourage communication, interaction, and emotional well-being. Volunteers help guide individuals toward active participation in community and civic life, ensuring that community activities are welcoming, stigma-free, and adapted to diverse needs. By consistently showing up and providing a safe and supportive space, they build trust and foster a sense of belonging.

Through awareness-raising events, public dialogues, and social gatherings, volunteers engage the wider community and help reduce the stigma surrounding loneliness. Creative initiatives, such as arts, crafts, and knitting workshops, provide opportunities for self-expression and meaningful engagement, while social activities like walks, board games, card games, and shared dining experiences encourage informal connections.

Volunteers also operate helplines and provide one-on-one support, ensuring that individuals in crisis or those in need of guidance have someone to turn to.

Beyond direct support, volunteers contribute by delivering workshops and education programs focused on personal empowerment and skill-building, helping individuals regain confidence and a sense of purpose. They create and sustain social cafes, community centers, and youth networks, fostering intergenerational and peer-led engagement or ongoing social support.

Volunteers also play a role in arts and music-based engagement, organizing music groups, performances, and cultural events as a means of fostering social interaction.



Sports activities further contribute to both physical and mental well-being while strengthening community ties. These volunteer-led initiatives all help reduce loneliness, enhance social cohesion, and empower individuals to take an active role in their communities. They demonstrate the transformative power of volunteering in addressing social challenges, reinforcing the need for continued investment and support.

Some of these activities are documented in the "Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering: [Good Practice Compendium](#)," which showcases successful volunteer-led initiatives aimed at reducing loneliness and fostering social inclusion. This compendium highlights practical examples of how volunteering can be a tool for social connection, well-being, and resilience. It provides insights into programs and best practices that organizations across Europe have implemented to engage volunteers in meaningful ways, addressing social isolation and strengthening community ties.

## Challenges

Despite the proven benefits of volunteering in combating loneliness, several challenges persist that limit its reach and effectiveness. One of the main barriers is the stigma surrounding loneliness, as many individuals hesitate to participate in volunteer-led activities due to the fear of being labelled as "lonely". This reluctance often prevents those who could benefit the most from seeking support. Additionally, limited access to volunteering opportunities remains a challenge, as many initiatives fail to effectively reach the loneliest individuals, highlighting the need for improved outreach strategies and more inclusive engagement efforts. Another critical issue is the lack of inclusive volunteer structures, with many programs not fully accommodating people with disabilities, language barriers, or mental health challenges, making it difficult for marginalized groups to participate. Furthermore, volunteering is still often viewed as an informal intervention rather than a key component of public health strategies, leading to a lack of formal recognition and integration into policy frameworks. Addressing these challenges requires a more structured, strategic approach. Denmark's national strategy for loneliness reduction offers a promising blueprint for overcoming these barriers by emphasizing structured collaboration between volunteer organizations, municipalities, and the health sector, ensuring that volunteering becomes an integral part of community well-being and social inclusion efforts.





## Outcomes and Impacts

The impact of volunteer-led interventions in addressing loneliness is both qualitative and measurable, demonstrating significant improvements in individuals' well-being and community resilience. Based on best practices from the European consortium of organizations in the "Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering" project, key outcomes highlight the transformative role of volunteering. Individuals who engage in volunteer-supported activities report higher levels of happiness, self-worth, and confidence, leading to improved mental and social well-being.

Volunteer engagement often leads individuals to shift from being beneficiaries to becoming active contributors, strengthening civic participation and creating a continuous cycle of community involvement and empowerment. Additionally, programs that integrate volunteers into health and social support services contribute to the development of more inclusive and resilient communities, strengthening social ties and fostering a culture of mutual care. One of the most significant impacts of these initiatives is their scalability and adaptability.

Denmark's volunteer-centered approach to loneliness reduction serves as a replicable model that can be adapted to various national and local contexts across Europe, providing a framework for sustainable, community-driven solutions to social isolation.



"For some people, coming here is the only day of the week, they feel they can go out. Right now, we have someone who stopped going to school around age 15 due to his anxiety. From then until he started coming here, he hardly saw anyone. He was too anxious to go out and felt very lonely all the time. Then someone convinced him to come here. At first, he was only here for about 5 minutes, but then he started staying for 15 minutes, then 30 minutes, and soon he was coming here all the time. And staying for 2-3 hours. Then I took him with me to a volunteer activity, where he also overcame his fear of heights because I climbed him up a tree and encouraged him from below. He came down with a smile, and it was the best thing he had ever experienced."

Daniel, Volunteer Coordinator, Youth



## About the Organizations

FriSe – Volunteer Centres and Self-Help Denmark is a national network of volunteer centers and self-help organizations that promotes volunteer engagement as a key component of health and social well-being. Through its digital platform, FriSe connects citizens, volunteer organizations, and public services to facilitate seamless referral and community integration. [www.frise.dk](http://www.frise.dk)

DKolektiv is an organization in Croatia dedicated to promoting active citizenship, volunteering, and civil society development. DKolektiv promotes community-driven solutions, enhances social resilience, and strengthens democratic participation. Additionally, it coordinates the work of the national volunteering focal point, the Croatian Volunteer Development Centre, contributing to the systematic development and support of volunteering at the national level. [www.dkolektiv.hr](http://www.dkolektiv.hr) [www.hcrv.hr](http://www.hcrv.hr)

The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) is a European network of over sixty organizations across thirty countries dedicated to strengthening volunteering through advocacy, research, and capacity-building initiatives. CEV supports policies that recognize and enhance the role of volunteers in fostering democratic participation, social cohesion, and community resilience. [www.europeanvolunteercentre.org](http://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org)



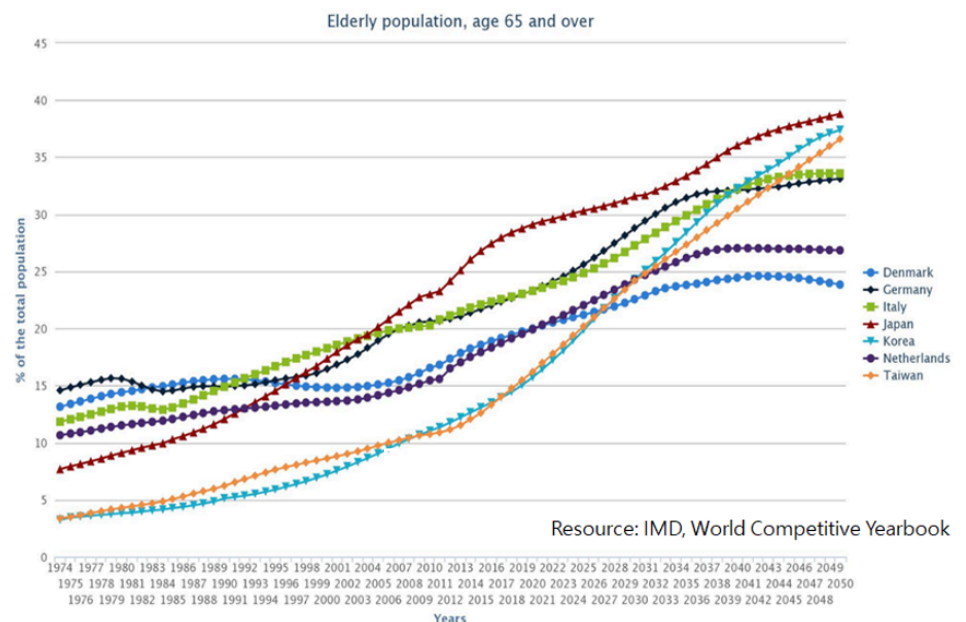
# Taiwan Senior Volunteers Engaged in Community Sustainable Development

Debbie Huang & Joyce K.P. Hsia (Volunteering Taiwan, Chinese Taipei)

## The Issue

The global aging population is rapidly increasing, with the number of individuals aged 65 and above projected to more than double from 727 million in 2020 to over 1.5 billion by 2050. Asia is expected to experience the most significant growth in elderly populations, with nearly two-thirds of the world's senior citizens residing in the region. This demographic shift presents challenges and opportunities, particularly in Taiwan, where policies and initiatives aim to promote active aging through senior volunteering.

The increasing number of elderly individuals who are no longer part of the formal workforce creates challenges such as social isolation, loss of purpose, and economic dependency. The government of Taiwan, along with community organizations, recognizes the need to address these challenges by encouraging seniors to remain active contributors to society through volunteer work.



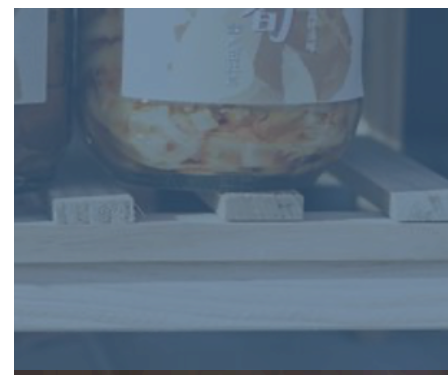
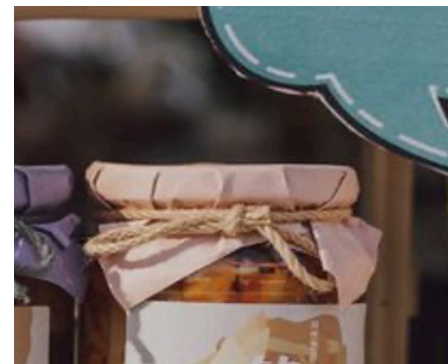
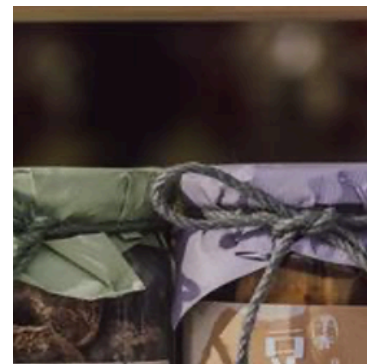


Volunteering serves as an essential bridge between aging populations and sustainable community development. It provides opportunities for older adults to stay physically active, mentally engaged, and socially connected while making meaningful contributions. The integration of senior volunteers into key community roles helps alleviate economic disparities and enhances local resilience.

## Role of Volunteers in TaDian Community

The TaDian Community has become a leading example of how senior volunteers can contribute to sustainable development. Volunteers play a crucial role in addressing social and economic challenges by actively engaging in community-driven initiatives. The primary roles of volunteers in TaDian Community Development Association include:

- **Handmade Processing of Agricultural Products** – Seniors process surplus crops into products such as taro noodles, pickled radish, and bamboo pickles, reducing waste and generating income for the community. This initiative enables seniors to participate in the local economy while promoting sustainability and resource efficiency.
- **Inheritance of Traditional Arts** – Elderly artisans pass down traditional cultural practices, such as bamboo drum performances, to younger generations, preserving the region's heritage. By mentoring younger residents, seniors ensure the continuity of cultural identity and foster intergenerational relationships.
- **Eco-tourism Mentorship** – Senior volunteers guide visitors in eco-tour programs, providing farming instruction and cultural insights that promote sustainable tourism. Their vast knowledge of local ecology and traditions enriches the tourism experience, drawing more visitors and supporting the local economy.







- **Public Venue Recreation** – Volunteers contribute to the revitalization of public spaces, such as the Half Cup Café and the community farmer’s market, transforming them into hubs for economic and social interaction. These efforts create opportunities for community gatherings, knowledge exchange, and economic transactions.

Senior volunteers in TaDian receive training from local development organizations, equipping them with skills in agricultural processing, tourism management, and entrepreneurship. This support ensures that they can effectively participate in and sustain these initiatives. Training workshops cover key areas such as financial literacy, marketing techniques, and sustainable business practices, enabling volunteers to optimize their contributions.

## Challenges

While the senior volunteering movement has been largely successful, it faces several challenges:

- **Health Constraints** – Many elderly individuals face physical limitations that can restrict their ability to participate actively. Solutions include assigning flexible and less physically demanding tasks, working and involving more youth volunteers in cross-generational projects. By incorporating health-focused community activities, the elderly will be able to improve their overall well-being.
- **Lack of Awareness** – Some seniors are unaware of volunteering opportunities or isolate from public affairs. The local community agency is the core bridge to develop the health programs, including lifelong learning courses and volunteer activities, for the elderly to participate regularly.
- **Financial Barriers** – Some elderly volunteers need financial support to participate. Community enterprises and micro-financing initiatives help provide income-generating opportunities for senior volunteers. The subsidies and small grants from the government and private donors help cover costs related to training programs, enterprise, and a friendly environment.



By developing innovative solutions such as part-time volunteering roles, skills-based contributions, and incentives for participation, TaDian has been able to overcome these challenges to a great extent.

## Outcomes and Impact

Senior volunteers have made a significant impact on both individual lives and community sustainability. The key outcomes include:

- **For Elders:**
  - Promotes active aging by delaying the aging process and enhancing cognitive and physical well-being.
  - Reduces loneliness and strengthens community ties, fostering a supportive environment.
  - Preserves traditional knowledge by passing down valuable skills to younger generations.
  - Provides economic support by supplementing the incomes of low-income families in remote areas.
  - Encourages lifelong learning and skill development, increasing confidence and self-worth among elderly participants.
- **For the Community:**
  - Enhances community productivity by engaging senior volunteers in local enterprises and sustainable economic development.
  - Attracts younger generations back to rural areas by creating work opportunities and preserving cultural traditions.
  - Develops sustainable social business models that leverage local resources for long-term impact.
  - Strengthens community resilience by fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment where different age groups work together toward common goals.

## About the TaDian Community Development Association

The TaDian Community Development Association is a grassroots organization promoting sustainable development through senior volunteer engagement. By combining traditional knowledge with modern economic opportunities, it empowers elders to actively contribute, preserve cultural heritage, and revive community public spaces.

Through training, resources, and partnerships with local stakeholders—including government, businesses, and non-profits—the Association develops long-term solutions to social and economic challenges. It shares updates and success stories on Facebook, inviting visitors to join community-led events and workshops. With strategic partnerships, ongoing training, and active community involvement, TaDian strengthens resilience, inclusivity, and prosperity for all generations.



# The Listening Haven: Volunteering to Combat Isolation and Build Healthy Communities

Elsie Yuen-Yee Wan (Agency for Volunteer Service, Sowers Action, Hong Kong SAR)

## The Issue

Mental health issues are, directly or indirectly, everybody's issues, and many who cannot manage stress are advised to reach out for help. Emergency Helplines are very common nowadays for people yearning for help. However, there are a lot more socially isolated people who are not aware of their mental health issues or are not motivated to look for help, and they are bound to be the protagonists of tragedies.

Providing the isolated with relevant social care and welfare, continuous connection is, therefore, very essential indeed. Other than home visits and specially designed activities, a Hong Kong NGO – SOWERS ACTION – arranges constant caring calls to the most vulnerable from well-trained volunteers.

This project has proved to be most beneficial. It is not only a caring service, but also a safe and compassionate platform for the isolated to be socially connected; to speak out freely about anything; to be listened to their hearts, to be empathized and recognized without judgement; to be respected and cared with compassion, to be encouraged/supported and inspired without direct instruction.

## Role of Volunteers

Compassionate volunteers are recruited and well-trained in proactive and experiential formats. They have gone through role-play practicum and strict tests before being officially appointed as Volunteer Listeners. Each Volunteer Listener is matched with an experienced volunteer as their mentor, providing continuous personal training. role-play practices, consultation, guidance, evaluation, encouragement, and support.



The qualified volunteer needs to be a non-judgmental, mindful listener with no preconceived surmises and hypotheses. He/she can respond to service recipients with proper empathy, recognition, encouragement, and support, offering caring and trustworthy companionship and also coaching services when appropriate.

All Volunteer Listeners are obliged to keep confidential all personal information about the service recipients and his/her life stories.

The listening service is normally provided biweekly through a specifically employed phone system for security and record purposes. The first call is pre-arranged by the program-in-charge.

The Volunteer Listeners need to report each call on a standard Post-call Report Form, and also debrief with her/his Volunteer Mentor, for assessment/evaluation for enhancement, and follow-up action required.

Volunteer Listeners are encouraged to attend scheduled monthly Review/Sharing Meetings and tailor-made Learning/Training Workshops/Role-Play Practicum with Team Members. They are also invited to carry out home visits with experienced volunteers and/or project staff, and also attend welfare social activities organized for the service recipients and their families.

## Challenges

For the Organization, the major challenges of the Listen to Heart Program are the recruiting, training, and managing of Volunteer Listeners to serve properly through listening and coaching, not in the traditional way of giving and/or helping.

In this regard, both the organization and volunteers acknowledge the vision and mission of creating and maintaining a Listening Haven for the Vulnerable, and all are fully committed to spending considerable time and effort to establish a new concept and pattern of servicing. Under these special objectives, appropriate training, supervision, monitoring, and most importantly of all, continuous peer support in review/evaluation are effective strategies for overcoming such challenges.

At the same time, most volunteers have to adjust their mindset and habits of servicing from "helping" as a priority, to "listening with full attention and responding with empathy." Through active and continuous participation/contribution to this Listen to Heart program, volunteers have undergone highly effective nurturing to become professional Heart-Listeners.

Ongoing challenges of volunteering could be sustaining mental health for all humankind and learning to grow together and be independent, which have proven to be the keys to



healthy communities. Therefore, a service to facilitate learning, self-help, and self-empowerment for the isolated could be the key objectives of volunteering for sustainable good health and well-being.

## Outcomes and Impact

The Listen to Heart Volunteer Service Program is not just a kind of “to-give and/or to-help” service. This Program also creates mutual benefits for all parties in society, including self-independence, growth, and transformation for betterment.

The service recipients are mostly the underprivileged with low social status and social esteem, in particular those with SEN children. They could rarely have comfortable and safe occasions to discuss their worries, disappointments, and emotions. Most of them eventually have mental health problems. However, upon receiving the Listen to Heart service calls, they could feel socially connected to compassionate listeners who are well-trained to accompany/help them become aware of their emotions and find ways to manage problems. They feel safe and comfortable talking and are encouraged to express themselves. They sense that they are respected, cared for, empathized with, and recognized. This, in turn, empowers them to take proper care of themselves, their families, and those around them. They are also inspired, guided, and supported in establishing better lives on their own and are willing to integrate into society, to change for good. Most stop taking mental health medicine, and some eventually become volunteers at welfare centers. Some also share their experiences/stories to support other participants of the Listen-to-Heart Program. All people around them benefit.

On the other hand, Volunteer Listeners are undergoing a unique learning and practicum communication program at the same time they are serving. They grow along with their service recipients and together contribute to sustainable, healthy communities.

All the outcomes and impacts mentioned above have been identified through constant home visits and observations during activities, interviews, and review meetings with volunteers, as well as service call reports, which recorded the instant conditions of both the service recipients and volunteers at the service.

## About SOWERS ACTION

Established in 1992, [SOWERS ACTION](http://www.sowers.hk) is a non-religious, non-political, non-profit organization in Hong Kong dedicated to advancing education and supporting livelihoods for disadvantaged groups worldwide. Its work includes school construction, student and teacher sponsorship, and community development. In 2022, it opened the Shamshui Po Service Centre to assist low-income families locally, and today supports projects in Hong Kong, China, Nepal, Myanmar, and Thailand. Learn more at [www.sowers.hk](http://www.sowers.hk).



# Sunday Streets: How Volunteers Shape Healthier, More Connected Communities

Deirdre Araujo (Exploratorium, United States)

## The Issue: Addressing Urban Health and Community Engagement

Urban environments are often characterized by high levels of car congestion, limited green spaces, and restricted opportunities for physical activity. These factors contribute to a range of public health issues, including sedentary lifestyles, mental health challenges, and social isolation. Like many cities, San Francisco faces these challenges as it strives to create healthier, more livable spaces for its residents. The Sunday Streets program, managed by the nonprofit Livable City, is a transformative initiative that seeks to address these urban health challenges. The program temporarily closes car-congested streets and reopens them to the community for physical activities such as walking, cycling, fitness classes, and cultural events. Inspired by Bogotá, Colombia's Ciclovía initiative, Sunday Streets has become a key tool in promoting community health, well-being, and engagement in San Francisco.

The need for such programs became even more apparent after the COVID-19 pandemic, which further isolated communities and disrupted routines. With the help of dedicated volunteers, Sunday Streets not only resumed but also gained momentum in post-pandemic years, drawing tens of thousands of participants annually.

## Role of Volunteers: Key to Success

Volunteers contribute to multiple aspects of the initiative. Livable City recruits, orients, and trains Sunday Streets volunteers about its mission, health guidelines, safety protocols, event logistics, and how to engage participants to foster inclusivity and



community spirit. Volunteers also receive guidance on assisting individuals with varying mobility needs and are encouraged to embody the program's core values: inclusivity, engagement, and social connection. Volunteers are not just event staff but ambassadors for the program's mission of creating a healthier, more connected community. They are passionate about their work and driven by the knowledge that they make a tangible difference in their neighbors' lives.

An essential part of Sunday Streets is the partnership with San Francisco's **Exploratorium**, a renowned science center and the only museum to support this work post-pandemic consistently. The Exploratorium's enthusiastic and skilled volunteer corps provides hands-on STEAM and environment-related activities, helping to provide an educational experience that deepens community engagement.

## Role of Volunteers: Key to Success

The Exploratorium is known for the hands-on exhibits it builds on-site at Pier 15 and its commitment to fostering curiosity and independent thinking. The volunteer corps is integral to its mission of inspiring lifelong learning and exploration.

*First, there is the camaraderie of setting up the booth and seeing new ideas from fellow volunteers come into the fold - the fractals Camille made, Rae's Lego earrings, etc.*

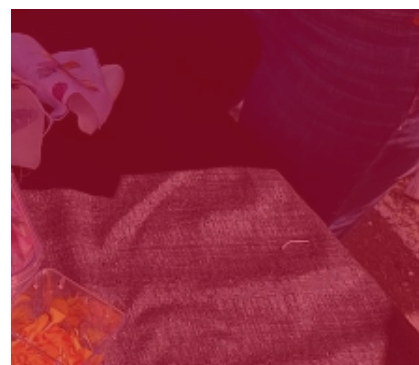


*Second, watching the joy unfold with the kids (and adults!) as they explore the tataki zome. Tentative taps become excited pounding as the flowers reveal themselves. Unique personal ideas come out - careful compositions of individual blooms, pulverized masses of whole flowers, and everything in between.*



*But by far, my favorite moment is when I get to give a free pass to someone whose curiosity was really sparked!*

**-Sue Graham Johnston,  
Exploratorium Volunteer**





After the pandemic halted in-person volunteer-led programs, the museum welcomed the opportunity to participate in Sunday Streets Phoenix Day in neighboring Chinatown. We were warmly greeted by their high school volunteers, who helped carry supplies to our booth. As we hung our banners and set out materials for the day, many community elders joined in the activities. After an hour or so, we asked, "Where are all the children?" and learned they weren't sure they could trust us. Seeing museum volunteers wearing masks outdoors, they felt reassured health and safety would be respected and returned soon after with excited grandchildren.

*At the Exploratorium, you don't look at exhibits—you play with them. Dance with your own shadow, levitate, touch a tornado, mix colors and break light apart, stop time, start a conversation, capture a wave, explode your mind; it all can (and does) happen here.*

Since 2021, over fifty Exploratorium volunteers have supported Sunday Streets, visiting the Tenderloin, Western Addition, SOMA, the Excelsior, Bayview – Hunters Point, and the Mission. Each has led to new invitations for Juneteenth, Suicide Awareness Day, Arbor Day, Chinatown's Winter Wonderland, and more.

In preparation for Sunday Streets seasons, volunteers gather at the museum and online to review past activities, share favorite moments, and find new ways to bring the museum experience outdoors, without electricity, using easy-to-source materials. By reviewing local newsletters and library posts and learning from area historians, they continue to deepen their understanding of these neighborhoods.

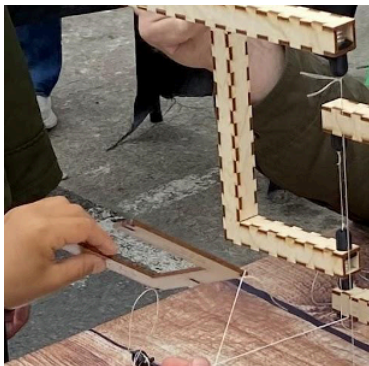
Exploratorium volunteers continue to foster curiosity and spark creativity through automata-building, printmaking, and tataki zome (Japanese plant imprinting). These hands-on experiences bring the museum's educational mission to the public, making STEAM more approachable and fun.

Volunteers also promote the museum's partnership with the public library system's Discover & Go program and highlight discounted admission to EBT cardholders, ensuring more residents can enjoy the museum in person. For many, the Sunday Streets activities may be their first introduction to the Exploratorium; for others, it's been a chance for former High School Explainers to reconnect, often 20+ years later; we love hearing how that role opened a new world of possibilities.



*I personally find that engaging with folks outside of the museum is always refreshing and inspiring. Introducing activities I've developed, like cardboard automata, zoetropes, and tensegrity sculptures, and watching their eyes light up as their piece comes together is super gratifying — I love hearing that they want to share what they've learned with others.*

**-David Bliss, Exploratorium Volunteer**



## Benefits of Volunteering

### Strengthening Community Connections and Promoting Well-Being

Sunday Streets is not just about physical activity—it's about fostering social connections and trust within the community. Volunteers, including those from the Exploratorium, are critical in creating an inclusive environment where people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities feel welcomed and supported. Sunday Streets prioritizes accessibility, ensuring individuals of all mobility levels can participate in the activities and creating a space where everyone—regardless of age, physical ability, or background—can enjoy the experience.



## Volunteering and the Psychological Benefits of Giving Back

Beyond the positive impact on community health, volunteering at Sunday Streets also benefits its volunteers. Many, including those from the Exploratorium, report feeling a sense of purpose and fulfillment in these roles. Research has shown that volunteering can reduce stress and enhance life satisfaction. This is especially important as the pandemic led to increased isolation and anxiety for many people.

For volunteers, Sunday Streets is an opportunity to give back to their communities, make new connections, and see the tangible impact of their efforts. The benefits of volunteering extend beyond the event itself, as many volunteers continue to stay involved in other community programs, furthering their commitment to improving the well-being of their neighbors.

## Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

During the pandemic, many SF companies shifted to remote work, pausing team-building activities like on-site service projects hosted by the Exploratorium. Meanwhile, museum volunteers wanted to attract more senior passersby at the family-friendly activity tables. After consulting local elders, we discovered their love for "good deals" and collecting freebies from government booths. The museum partnered with corporate service coordinator, HandsOn Bay Area, to distribute herb garden kits assembled by Google, Genentech, Levi Strauss, and Visa staff. Exploratorium volunteers added soil packets and offered them exclusively to older adults. These kits became so popular that seniors now arrive early at Sunday Streets to collect them. Corporate volunteers are pleased to know their contributions made a real impact.

## Outcomes and Impact

*Environmental Education and Action: Addressing Climate Change and Sustainability* – In addition to promoting physical health, Sunday Streets, in collaboration with the Exploratorium, focuses on environmental education and sustainability. Volunteers lead discussions and activities related to climate change, sustainable practices, and environmental conservation. Exploratorium conversation starters like "Where Do You Stand?" and exploring the map produced by Nature in the City invite residents to reflect on their ecological values and how they can reduce their carbon footprints. These activities tie directly into the Exploratorium's mission of fostering lifelong curiosity and learning, encouraging people to think critically about global challenges and explore ways to take action.

*New Focus: Disaster Preparedness* – Given San Francisco's vulnerability to natural disasters, Sunday Streets has reimaged October's Phoenix Day to focus on disaster preparedness. City representatives and volunteers lead discussions on emergency



planning, providing participants with strategies to stay safe during earthquakes, fires, etc. These activities help build resilience within the community, equipping residents with the knowledge and tools to face crises and ensuring that everyone has access to the resources they need.

Sunday Streets stands as a shining example of the transformative power of volunteers in promoting health, social connection, and environmental awareness. Livable City Volunteers, the Exploratorium, local nonprofits, and city departments work together to create a space that prioritizes the health and well-being of all residents. As Sunday Streets evolves, with an increasing focus on disaster preparedness and ecological sustainability, it will continue to be a key element of San Francisco's efforts to create a healthier, more connected, and resilient community.

## About the Organizations

**Livable City** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating healthier, more vibrant, and sustainable communities through programs like Sunday Streets. By transforming public spaces and encouraging active transportation, Livable City seeks to enhance the quality of life for all San Francisco residents. For more information about the Sunday Streets program or to get involved as a volunteer, [click here](#).

**The Exploratorium** is a museum of science, art, and human perception, offering interactive exhibits and programs that inspire curiosity. The museum's volunteers play an integral role in its mission of fostering learning and exploration. For more information about the Exploratorium's volunteer opportunities and educational programs, [click here](#).

**HandsOn Bay Area** is a nonprofit organization that connects companies and people with high-quality volunteer projects through its extensive network of local nonprofits and schools in need. For more information about this organization, [click here](#).



*Sunday Streets has given me a deep connection to San Francisco, service, and science! It's been a real joy to facilitate forays into STEAM and see the smiles on everyone's faces!*

**-Taylor N. Lacey, Exploratorium Volunteer**



# A Healthy Community is Equivalent to Healthy Residents

Sujin Yoon (Taeon Volunteer Center, South Korea)

## The Issue

As of 2021, the number of suicides per 100,000 people in the Republic of Korea was 24.6. This is more than twice the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) average. Isolation and suicide can be recognized as our problems because they are not specific to any age or social situation. Isolation is not a simple issue in our society; finding and protecting those who are isolated but do not reach out through social welfare services is also a practical challenge. However, when residents care for one another, they can form a safer community. A project to create a resident-led safety village was launched to train residents in villages where two suicides occurred every year for three years, from 2016 to 2018.

## The Role of Volunteers

Community volunteers were actively engaged in the implementation of the plan to create a healthy and safe community through leading and participating in a range of initiatives:





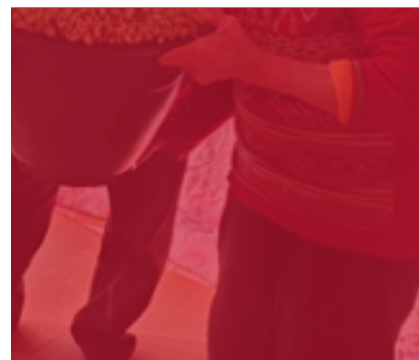
Depression tests were conducted for villagers, and all residents were able to observe the impact on volunteers and beneficiaries simultaneously through connections with mental health experts or volunteers, regular village idea meetings, food sharing, weekly tea sessions, and village broadcasts for residents.

Examples of activities that were organized and run by community volunteers include:

- Creating a Community of Togetherness
  - Disinfection volunteer service
  - Neighborhood cleanup
  - Community mural project
  - Community environmental improvement/Tree planting
- Building a Sharing Community
  - Community meal sharing
  - Seniors' participation in sharing
  - Rice sharing
- Building a Community of Neighborly Communication
  - Village music broadcast
  - Neighborhood coffee buddy dates
  - Mini garden sharing
  - Monthly residents' meeting

## Challenges

A key challenge was building trust and confidence in the community to create volunteer involvement that could provide ownership of the project and deliver practical support through the various initiatives. This was a three-year journey from a starting point in 2020





to connect with and get to know the village and the residents. Working to strengthen community-led initiatives that led to empowering community self-sufficiency. This resulted in 2023 in the establishment of a leading pioneering village where suicide rates had dropped, healthy outcomes were being sustained, and the community felt more resilient.

## Outcomes and Impact

As a result, the village, which had the highest suicide rate, was able to reach an effect of 0% suicide rate during its involvement in the three-year project. A highly successful project and one that confronted social biases.



So why is the Volunteer Center involved in addressing suicide issues? It is involved because it recognizes that the only power to develop citizenship that makes residents take care of their fellow residents is through volunteering.

## About the Organization

The Taeon County Volunteer Center is an organization for volunteers that was established in 2003. The Volunteer Center is committed to training community volunteers to tackle social issues, including isolation, and to building healthy local communities. Taeon County Volunteer Center has been working on this project to cultivate a volunteer culture by training villagers as volunteers for six years. For additional inquiries, contact [Sujin Yoon](#) at Taeon County Volunteer Center.



# Growing Older Together Mattering & Participating through Volunteering

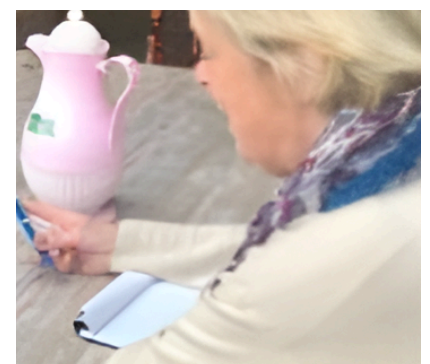
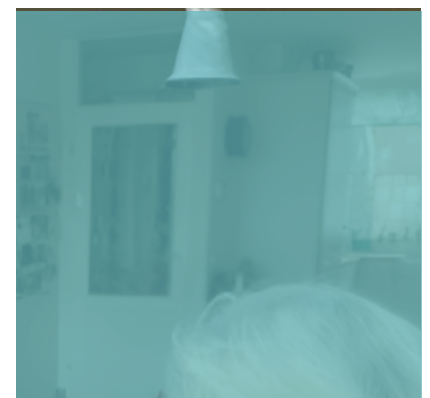
Petra van Loon and Willem-Jan de Gast (Growing Older Together, NOV – Platform Vrijwillige Inzet, Netherlands)

How to deal with voice and volunteering in an ageing society? Like in many countries, the population of the Netherlands is ageing rapidly. Staying active, especially as a volunteer, is a proven way to remain healthy, prevent loneliness, and postpone healthcare costs. However, both governments and volunteer-involving organisations often talk about the elderly instead of with them. Moreover, the elderly are still framed as a burden to society and as a group that can no longer contribute in ways that matter.

**New focus and vocabulary** – In order to break with these frames and practices and come up with viable alternatives, a national program was designed and is implemented: Growing Older Together. The starting point for all actions and projects has been to come into contact with the elderly and ask them about their ideas, needs, and wishes. In this way, we have spoken with hundreds of older volunteers, active citizens, and informal caregivers. The simple fact that we talked with the elderly instead of about them, in many places, was a breakthrough. The voice of the elderly has become audible.

## **The Pink Teapot**

*In several projects, our local staff used accessible and fun ways to engage with the elderly. The pink teapot has become a famous example. In a small city, the local staff member filled a bright pink teapot with hot tea and set up a table with cups and cookies at a small shopping mall. Inviting elderly people for a cup of tea, she started conversations with them, leading to often meaningful exchanges. She then followed up this action by asking interested elderly to start a small exchange group.*





The outcome of these encounters was that we have shifted our focus and, by that, our vocabulary. For example, instead of talking about 'fighting loneliness', we have learned that it is far more empowering to ask people what is meaningful and what matters to them, and how they want to matter to others. Also, many of the elderly people we reached did not relate to volunteering or identify as volunteers. Instead, we have learned to use the phrase 'becoming or staying active in the community.'

**Equality and reciprocity** – Once you start listening to what matters to elderly people and how they want to matter, volunteering becomes more than a one-way process in which a 'strong' volunteer helps a 'vulnerable' person. Equality and reciprocity have become key features of all interventions. A person can be both strong and vulnerable, and can both receive and give support and attention. In this way, being voluntarily active becomes a meaningful encounter between persons, each with their own talents.

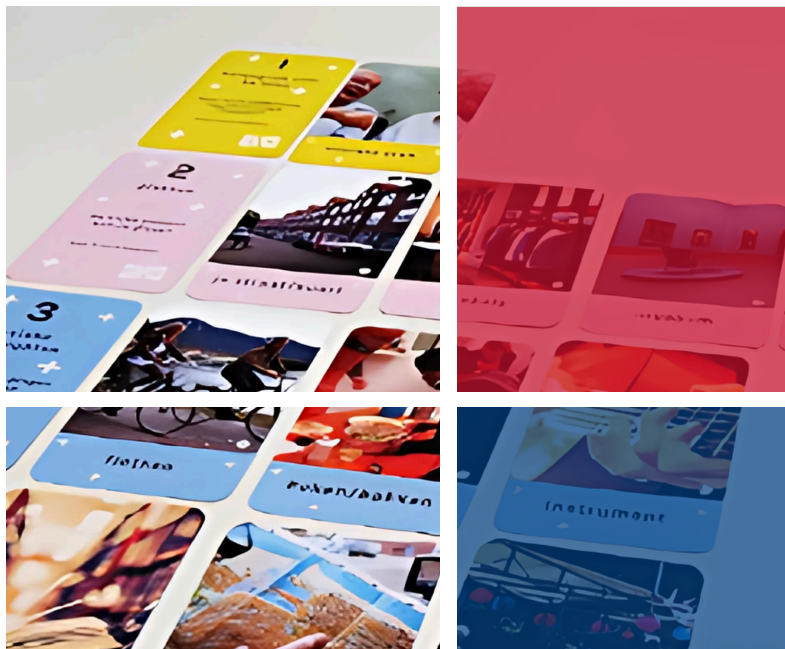
**Collective encounters** – A logical next step in the program has been to shift our attention from one-on-one encounters to collective meetings. Community organizing and building lead to more opportunities for people to contribute in ways that fit them. Moreover, by investing in collectivities, the resilience of these communities is enhanced. In this process, we discovered the importance of having small-scale, accessible, safe, and nearby meeting places.

## Involving volunteers of all ages in new roles

Both locally and nationally, individual older volunteers and associations of the elderly are involved in the design and implementation of projects, training sessions, and materials. Depending on the municipality, local associations of the elderly or other volunteer-involving organisations take the lead in approaching, recruiting, and managing older volunteers. Because of our emphasis on intergenerational volunteering, hundreds of young volunteers and student volunteers are involved. All in all, thousands of volunteers of all ages have become active.

### Talent Scans

Several partner organizations have developed card games that encourage the elderly to (re)discover their skills and competencies, and direct them towards volunteering opportunities where they can utilize or develop their talents. When using these talent scans in practice, it often becomes clear that many elderly people have not been approached or thought about themselves in this way for a long time. Asking someone what they want to do and can do appears to be very empowering.





They told their inspirational stories, which were spread locally and nationally. They were trained in dialogue methods to engage in conversations about life-changing events. They acted as hosts in communal living rooms, serving coffee, tea, and attention. They visited vulnerable groups in their own homes. During COVID, they set up online support groups and local shopping and pet-walking services. In this way, they connected to and made a difference in thousands of lives.

## Challenges

In any innovative approach, you encounter challenges. The first one is how to reframe the way many people still look at the elderly and at volunteering. As long as too many decision-makers in government and business see the elderly mainly as a burden and volunteering as 'nice-to-have', not enough attention, money, and time will be given to the value of volunteering and the way it can be meaningful for older people, both by being a volunteer and by receiving volunteering. We have collected and distributed many convincing examples, and will continue to do so. For example, we now emphasize the role employers have in making arrangements for a smooth transition from a full-time job to part-time volunteering and retirement.

The second challenge is how to convince partners that a learning and development approach is the best guarantee for sustainable impact. We do not work with pre-conceived plans, and we believe that the process of engaging with the people you want to reach, involving them from the start, and coming to workable solutions together, is how you get positive results. Luckily, we can show a wealth of good examples.

Finally, we experience that volunteer-involving organisations are the most stable partners in local networks. The turnover rate of paid staff at formal and volunteer organisations is high, meaning that cooperation suffers and that the partners sometimes have to restart.



### **Looking after each other**

*Due to the loss of logical meeting places for the elderly because of societal changes and economic cutbacks, it has become harder to meet others, especially for the elderly with diminished mobility. In many municipalities, we have taken the lead or assisted in the formation of small-scale communities that look after each other. These communities can be very informal, gathering once a week around a park bench to drink a cup of coffee or forming a walking or cooking club. They can also become more formalized in the form of neighborhood living rooms or preventive care circles. They may then also act as a liaison between the individual members and formal care organizations. What is visible in all these communities is that people can take on different and changing roles: participant, flexible volunteer, constant volunteer, organizer etc.*



## Outcomes and Impact

Building and sustaining viable, volunteer- and elderly-inclusive communities can be seen as the long-term goal of the program. This means that we have invested heavily and will continue to invest in getting all relevant partners on board. At the national level, this means that we invited Ministries, the Association of Dutch municipalities, universities, research institutes, the national council for the elderly, employers' associations, and workers' associations to think and work along, using our reframing approach of the role of the elderly in society. Also, we have become partners of national networks.

At the local level, associations of the elderly, municipalities, welfare and care organisations, volunteer-involving organisations, citizens' initiatives, cultural organisations, and companies were approached and became part of local networks. These networks became and still are responsible for the local projects and activities, often in a project team that is a mix of older volunteers and paid staff.

Because of our national scope, we can collect and share many inspiring stories and examples. Also, we develop methodologies, handbooks, and practical tools that are free to use by anyone. Moreover, by commissioning practical and academic research, we make sure that our program results become more robust and that we add to the growing body of knowledge of what works when you want the elderly to matter and participate through volunteering.

## About the Organization

The Netherlands Association for Volunteer-Involving Organizations (NOV), together with 11 members, started an 8-year nationwide programme: Growing Older Together. Together with the elderly and local networks, we developed projects in almost 50 municipalities, focusing on themes such as meaningful and reciprocal contact through volunteering, community building, and intergenerational and culture-sensitive volunteering. We also design training modules, tools, and materials, and engage in action research.

More information can be found here:

[Growing older together](#)

[Home | NOV - Platform Vrijwillige Inzet](#)





# About IAVE

Since 1970, IAVE has nurtured and grown volunteer leaders across the world, promoting the ideas and values of volunteering as the foundation of civil society. Our diverse member network includes volunteers, government agencies, multi-national agencies and institutions, academics, NGOs, businesses, and volunteer leadership organizations in over 100 countries.

The key areas of IAVE's work include advocacy, thought leadership, leadership development and convening to recognize, support and develop volunteering globally.

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