New research shows volunteer value in supporting people in need during COVID-19

October 6 2020, by Rebecca Ferguson

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Volunteers around the country who helped serve their local communities during the recent lockdown formed a crucial part of the national response to the coronavirus pandemic, new research has found.

Mobilizing Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) brought together the

Universities of Sheffield, Hull and Leeds to see how best volunteers can be deployed to help vulnerable people during the coronavirus pandemic.

The first findings from the 18 month study found that informal volunteering and 'good neighborliness' have been key to providing support and serving communities. Finding also that there is a necessity to free local communities to respond quickly to the needs in their own area; empowering volunteers and taking a less bureaucratic approach to emergency responses.

From helping to collect shopping and medication for shielding residents, to befriending and transporting patients home who have been discharged by the NHS, thousands of volunteers mobilized across the UK; often through informal channels such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

The first phase of the research—funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19—invited local authorities and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organizations in England, Scotland and Wales, to be interviewed and they were asked to reflect on key lessons from the national lockdown period.

Professor Joe Cook, co-investigator of the study from the Hull University Business School, said: "By working with local authorities and the VCS, the new research helps to understand the important role played by volunteers and maximize learning as we head into a second wave.

"If we are to harness the energy and goodwill that communities have shown in the last six months, we will need to invest in our communities. Their flexibility was crucial to the speed and effectiveness of responses, and in many cases challenges the more conventional notions of volunteering."

However, participants in the research also reflected on the frustration that many of these volunteers were under-utilized, often never called upon and that they had trouble connecting volunteers into organized local responses.

Dr. Harriet Thiery, MoVE researcher from the University of Sheffield, said: "Underpinning many of the concerns about the national volunteer schemes has been a view that these processes represented a top-down, centralized response to local challenges. Consequently, the participants were unable to understand and reflect the unique needs, assets and resources of different communities. By contrast, local volunteering schemes in many cases were able to respond quickly, playing a crucial role feeding and supporting their communities during the time of crisis. The VCS adapting their activities to join this decentralized approach to mobilizing volunteers will remain extremely valuable during any second wave."

The findings are significant following the recent publication of a UK Parliamentary report by Daniel Kruger MP: Leveling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant commissioned by the Prime Minister.

In his introduction to the report, the PM and former political secretary states that it "sets out a vision for a more local, more human, less bureaucratic, less centralized society in which people are supported and empowered to play an active role in their neighborhoods."

The findings from the MoVE project's first phase offer important insights and caveats around the government adopting such an approach.

Dr. Fiona Walkley, from Hull University Business School, said: "We hope the findings from this research will help maximize the effectiveness of volunteer responses and address the logistical challenges

around how best to coordinate the support for those most vulnerable in their communities during a time of crisis."

The first findings from the research include:

- Local level measures and not national volunteering platforms, have proved vital to responding to community needs during the pandemic.
- Responses have accelerated existing models of community engagement and built stronger community relations.
- Existing local infrastructure and community support networks have underpinned successful community responses.
- Key to these successes are 'freeing communities' to respond to local need, and their resourcefulness during the pandemic.
- The pandemic highlights the need to rethink volunteering so that more informal volunteering and 'good neighborliness' momentum can be harnessed.
- This is a complex ask if we are to avoid reverting to type and seeking to formalize this swell of community action.
- Arguably suggestions emerging around training, passports, paid work are arguably the very mechanisms that discouraged community action pre-COVID, and an entirely new approach is needed.
- Foremost, Local Authorities (LA) 'who get it' are engaging with communities by respecting their autonomy, and seeking to support rather than institutionalize.
- Mutual aid group perspectives reflect the centrality of relationships and relational working within informal personal spaces. Others reflect the need for this engagement to be supported and not seen as a quick or free fix for gaps left by services.
- The VCS has been vital to mobilizing volunteers and meeting needs during the pandemic and has proved its worth ten-fold.

- VCS participants talked widely about their newfound respect and voice in decision-making achieved through their emergency response role and that the challenge now was how to build upon this and make sure systems do not retrench back to type as the pandemic eases.
- One of the great leaps forward from coordinating community responses has been the breaking down of systemic bureaucratic barriers to working collaboratively, including reducing risk averseness, flexibility in finance, funding and sharing data.
- The key challenges facing us all now is how to embed these gains to resist the bureaucratic creep and retain these great leaps forward.
- The pending cliff edge and the likely 'tsunami of demand' was a central concern; in particular, the impending funding crisis facing LAs, VCS and communities.
- At the same time though optimism exists about the opportunity COVID-19 presented to change what many felt were essentially broken systems.
- Recovery must not therefore be simply a return to "business as usual" and as we seek to capitalize on the energy of volunteers, we mustn't simply "offload" responsibility and accountability onto communities themselves.

  More information: Lessons from Lockdown #1: The Power of Community: [doit.life/esa/experiences/1392 … 9?containerId=190701](doit.life/esa/experiences/1392)

Provided by University of Sheffield