



# THE PROBLEMS OF TRAINING VOLUNTEERS IN NPOS

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Around the globe, volunteers contribute billions of dollars' worth of work and millions of man-hours every year to non-profit organizations (NPOs). These volunteers dedicate their time and money to causes they believe in. Every year people are made happier and safer thanks to the work of these volunteers.

Volunteers can bring in a wealth of skills from their own experiences. However, volunteers can struggle to work in a way that is safe, secure and healthy without direction. Many poorly trained volunteers have found themselves in dangerous and sometimes fatal situations.



**Jason Smith is survived by his wife and two daughters**

**Jason Smith** from Balko, Oklahoma volunteered as a firefighter for his township. Unable to handle the fires in the community, the department called for volunteer help. Jason's selflessness was of great help to the community, but like many others, he was sent on the field with only the bare minimum in professional training. On May 8th, 2022, a fire truck rollover injured a colleague and took Jason's life.

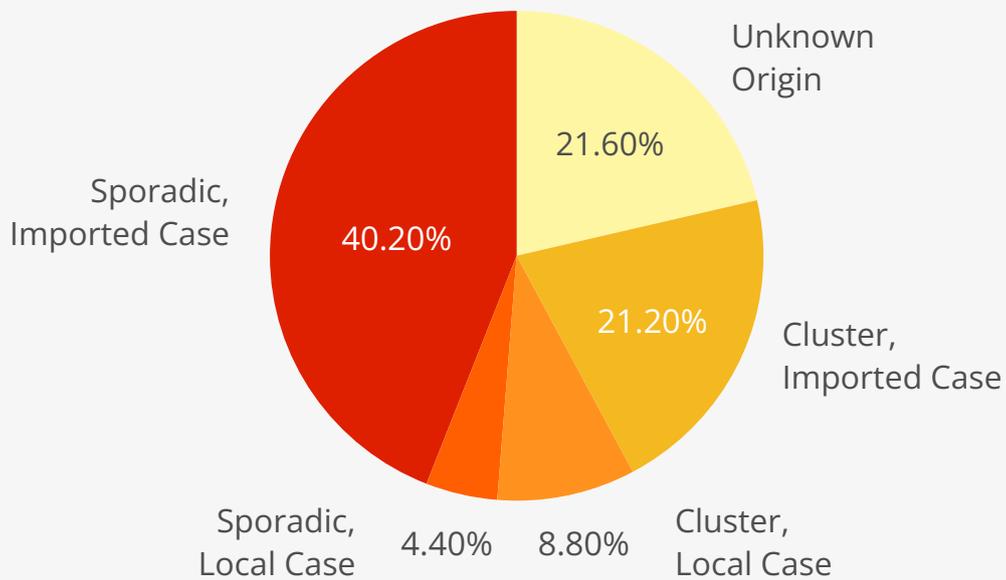
Jason's story is just one of hundreds. Volunteers in war-torn or disaster-struck areas can suffer terrible consequences due to poor preparation and training.

The rise of covid-19 in 2020 resulted in many dangers to volunteers and beneficiaries. NPOs were under extreme pressure to distribute food, clothing, and other necessities to those in need while adhering to safety guidelines.

There were financial strains like the need to test volunteers and provide PPE kits, and logistical strains like enforcing social distancing regulations on both volunteers and beneficiaries. Due to these pressures, several NPOs ignored the need for important volunteer training and infrastructure.

In many parts of the world, volunteers **violated safety guidelines** around social distancing. Volunteers would reuse PPE kits long after they were no longer safe. Some even continued to volunteer without a PPE kit. These breaches of regulation resulted in many volunteer drives becoming super-spreader events. While this behaviour was motivated by selfless kindness, the consequences were severe. Specialists at John Hopkins Medical University claimed that unsafe volunteer drives typically **damage communities more than help**. Alicia Wilson, vice president of the John Hopkins Health System, encouraged volunteers to "immediately leave drives where organizers are not sufficiently safeguarding the health of their volunteers".

## Estimated Origin of Covid-19 Cases in UK and EEA in 2020



Approximately **30% of all Covid-19 cases** reported in the UK and EEA in 2020 were caused by super-spreader events, including many charity drives and other NPO initiatives

NPO organizers have a responsibility to manage volunteer efforts. Through training and learning initiatives for volunteers, organizers can improve the effectiveness of their volunteer work.

SAMHSA, an American NPO fighting substance abuse, claims that "In terms of training, the four primary problems the charitable sector tends to face are lack of strategic planning, lack of maintenance, lack of network, and of course, lack of funds." By identifying each of the four problems in detail, NPOs can take measures to overcome these challenges.

# 1. Lack of Strategic Planning

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Many NPOs struggle to organize support in a cohesive way. Large NPOs with international support can sometimes refuse or delay volunteer work. However, many grassroots organizations have to accept any help they can get. These organizations rarely have time to properly align volunteers with strategy and policies. Thus, volunteers are often rushed onto the field without proper training.

Kaumudi Nagaraju, founder and director of Learning Space Hyderabad, a NPO in India, said “Even when it’s done for their safety, many volunteers get frustrated by having to delay because of policy.” Many smaller NPOs will have extremely simple onboarding programs. Some will ignore them entirely to get volunteers out more quickly. This can result in a lack of direction and endanger both volunteers and beneficiaries.

# 2. Lack of Maintenance

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Many NPOs that begin with a defined structure cannot maintain those structures as they scale. Even large organizations like the United Nations can struggle with this. Without properly training volunteers on the organization’s goals, any organization cannot maintain cohesion. In 2016, [UN peacekeeping troops in South Sudan](#) were unable to act quickly enough to protect a Doctors Without Borders camp in Malakal. The camp came under attack by Sudanese armed forces amidst a bloody civil war. The assault led to 65 deaths, including several MSF volunteers. At least 25 more were treated for gunshot and shrapnel wounds after the attack. MSF claimed in a press release that “UNMISS did not fulfil its mandate to protect civilians as set by the Security Council”. They argued the tragedy was caused by ground troops in South Sudan ignoring UN protocol.



**Almost 50,000 Sudanese civilians were sheltered in the UN compound**

## 3. Absence of Network

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**Technologies like mobile learning can help train volunteers remotely even in areas with poor digital infrastructure**

Poor or disorganized network can cause duplicated efforts and conflicting strategies. These result in a waste of financial resources and time invested by workers and volunteers. To establish a strong network, an NPO needs to be able to communicate effectively. This includes within itself, with other NPOs with similar goals, with governments, and with communities.

PATH, a global health organization based in Seattle, believes many of these problems can be solved with technology. PATH warns that “many NPOs do not maximize the use of current technologies that could facilitate better communication”. NPOs should prioritize technology in efforts to organize, create exposure, raise funds, and train volunteers.

Early outreach programs have proven highly successful. The ESRC and Oxford University developed a [mobile learning program](#) for nursing staff and volunteers in East Africa. The program teaches learners how to care for patients with infectious diseases like Covid-19. Access to up-to-date information about effective precautions has been instrumental in Kenya’s fight against Covid-19.

## 4. Lack of Funds

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Lack of funds has been one of the most common concerns in the charitable industry. Many NPOs struggle to get sufficient and continuous funding. Local and international donors can often be difficult to reach out to effectively. Current donors may also shift priorities and withdraw funding.

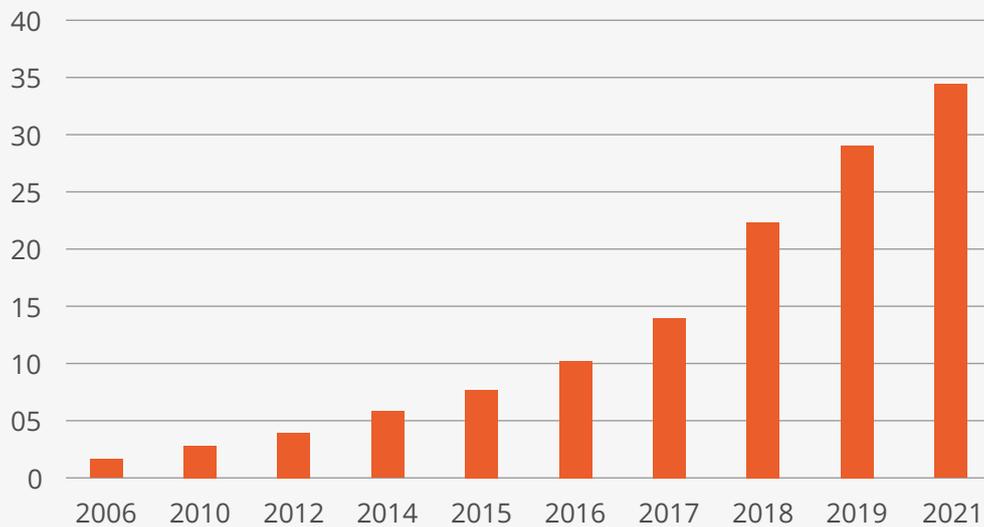
While this problem is not going away, improvements in technology have created tools to help. Organizations today can create exposure and encourage people to contribute time and money.

domestic NPOs are forming extensive social media presences to spread awareness of their causes. And this new movement of NPOs to the digital space has had great results.

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Sheelagh Cooper, chairwoman of Habitat for Humanity Bermuda [reported in January of 2022](#) that “The outpouring of support, not only for Habitat, but for so many others in the charitable sector has really been an indication of the increased level of understanding of the nature of poverty and its impact on those facing it.” Sheelagh’s optimistic message is encouraging for the future of the charitable industry.

### Millions of People Served by Habitat for Humanity



[Habitat’s exponential growth](#) is reflective of a huge influx of support for the NGO sector each year

# Digital Training and its Role in Resolving the Four Core Problems

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