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Report to Community on Volunteer Forum: Fallon, Nev.

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Introduction

Every three years, Nevada Volunteers revises and updates their State Service Plan. The State Service Plan is a strategic planning document developed to assess the robustness of voluntarism across the state, increase stronger partnerships for volunteerism, and identify strategies to strengthen volunteer and engagement efforts across Nevada. As part of the planning process, Nevada Volunteers, in partnership with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, conducted six community forums across the state in Reno, Fallon, Las Vegas, Mesquite, Elko and Tonopah in spring of 2016 as a means of outreach to both rural and urban communities. The purpose of the forums was to gather information and share ideas about volunteerism, service and community engagement.

On April 14, 2016, Nevada Volunteers and Cooperative Extension hosted a Community Forum in Fallon, Nev. Information gathered from the forums will be incorporated into the Nevada Volunteers three-year State Plan of Service and can be accessed here: http://nevadavolunteers.org/about_us/reports-facts/. The *Report to the Community* reflects only the information provided by the specific community.

Announcements of the forums were provided through a media release, email contacts, local community calendars and other communication channels used by Nevada Volunteers. An effort was made to encourage participation from a wide variety of stakeholders, including businesses, individual volunteers, faith-based groups, nonprofits, civic organizations, and municipal or governmental agencies. Forum sites were selected to have a wide representation of the state's geographic uniqueness. Total attendance for all six forums across the state included 106 participants.

Ten people registered for the Fallon Community Forum, with 10 people attending the forum. Participants represented each of the five categories (individuals, government, nonprofits, faith-based and civic groups, and businesses). The contents of this report include the information and thoughts about the community as seen from the perspective of these participants. This report is not intended to be a comprehensive picture of the entire area, but merely a snapshot as provided by those in attendance.

Background Information

Strong, resilient communities have layers of connections that assure residents have access to and relationships with others and to services and activities they need. Community volunteerism and engagement are important components of a healthy and resilient community. A term often used to describe a network of community engagement and social trust is *social capital*. Social capital describes the various social networks and the resources of these networks that people have access to, including the type and depth of relationships and connections within a community. The number of volunteers within a community is a strong measure of community engagement and one aspect of social capital. Higher rates of volunteerism and engagement in a community are associated with improving government services, preventing crime, increasing graduation rates, fostering economic development and increasing community responsibility for problem-solving (Levine 2013; Mathews 2014; Opportunity Nation 2014; Pancer 2015; Putnam 1995; and Schneider 2004).

In addition to building social capital, volunteer service has positive effects on volunteers as individuals. Volunteers report greater life satisfaction and better physical health than do non-volunteers, and their life satisfaction and physical health improve at a greater rate as a result of volunteering. Interestingly, those who give support through volunteering experience greater health benefits than those who receive support through these activities, especially among the elderly (Wu 2011).

Participants in the Fallon forum were provided information from the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) regarding volunteerism and engagement. Based on this data as outlined in the report *Volunteering and Civic Life in America*, 19.4 percent of Nevadans volunteer, compared to the national volunteerism average of 25 percent, thus ranking Nevada 49th among the 50 states and Washington, D.C. Nevadans who did volunteer in 2014 contributed 56.9 million hours of service, as compared to the national average of 7.9 billion hours of service (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2014). In addition, Robert Putnam’s assessment of social capital across all 50 states classified Nevada’s social capital as “Very Low” (Putnam 2000, p.293).

Despite Nevada’s low ranking in the *Volunteering and Civic Life in America* report, residents consistently comment the statistics from the U.S. Census and other reports do not reflect the real situation in Nevada. The national data was shared with participants in the forum. Participants were asked to provide one to a few words in reaction to this national data. Prompting questions included “Do you find yourself in this data?”, “Do you feel this is reflective of your community?”, and “Does this surprise you?”. Participants’ reactions to these data points are captured and depicted as a Word Cloud (Figure 1). A word cloud was used to visualize the participant reactions to the data, as a “snapshot” of a response. Word clouds identify trends or patterns that can often be difficult to visualize. A word cloud is a tool to present qualitative data by using the frequency of the words provided. The more prominent a word is displayed on the cloud, the higher frequency it was cited by participants.

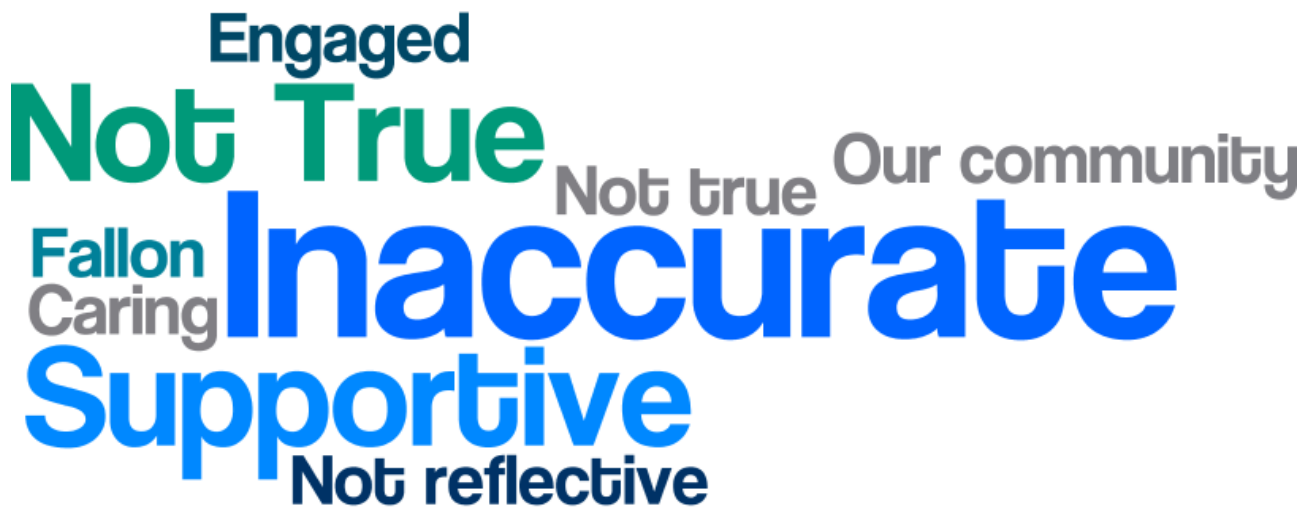


Figure 1. Participant reactions to U.S. Census data ranking Nevada 49th among 50 states and Washington, D.C.

Residents who are engaged and do volunteer have strong beliefs about the value of volunteerism in their community, and these dedicated residents are clearly making a difference. Their service and commitment represents a story of volunteerism that goes well beyond metrics and national data. Nevada has many giving, talented and committed people engaging in issues that matter to them and benefit their community.

What opportunities exist in Fallon?

Participants in the forum were provided a framework that included businesses, nonprofits, civic or faith-based groups, municipalities or governmental entities, and individuals (Figure 2). The framework was provided to highlight what is needed to have a flourishing volunteer infrastructure. Participants were asked to describe what existed in the community related to each of those areas. The conversation in every community included comments from participants about how difficult it was to actually know what was available and what was happening around opportunities for engagement and volunteerism. Participants identified 33 entities that offer volunteer and engagement opportunities within the Fallon community (Figure 3).

Opportunities for Volunteerism and Engagement in Our Communities

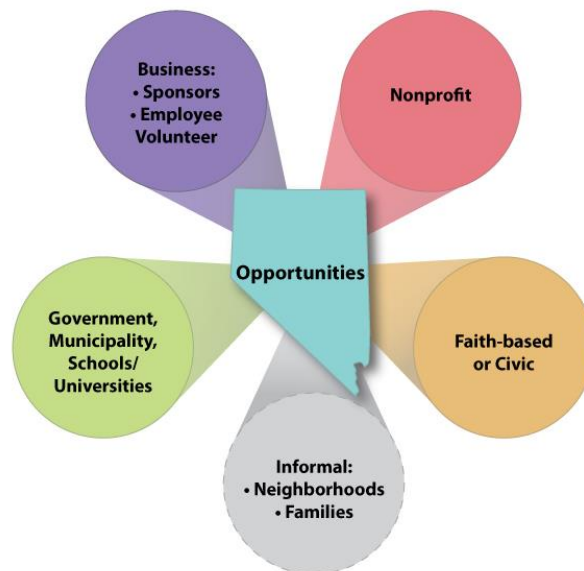


Figure 2. Volunteer ecosystem.

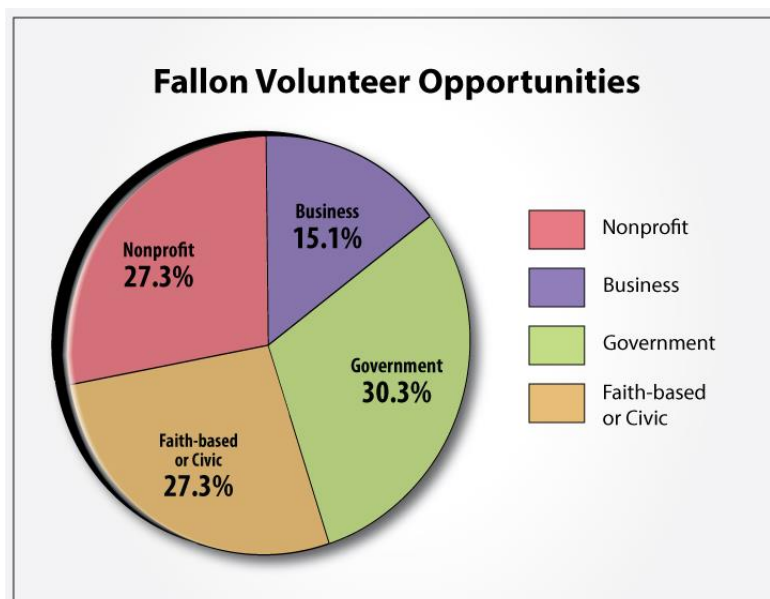


Figure 3. Volunteer and engagement opportunities in Fallon.

How are volunteer efforts leveraged across various sectors?

To examine the degree to which community sectors work together or “network” to have greater impact, each community was asked to provide examples of volunteer activities that involved collaboration among the sectors. Building a community network is vital to enhancing and engaging more citizens in volunteering and service. The cross-sector network concept was depicted in another visual graphic (Figure 4), and participants were asked to describe the type of connections and networks that they individually use or were aware of in the community. Examples provided by participants in the forum of such networks are listed below (Figure 5). The examples provided are not comprehensive but merely provide a few examples as shared by participants in the forum.

Linking Volunteer Efforts Within Sectors and Outside Sectors

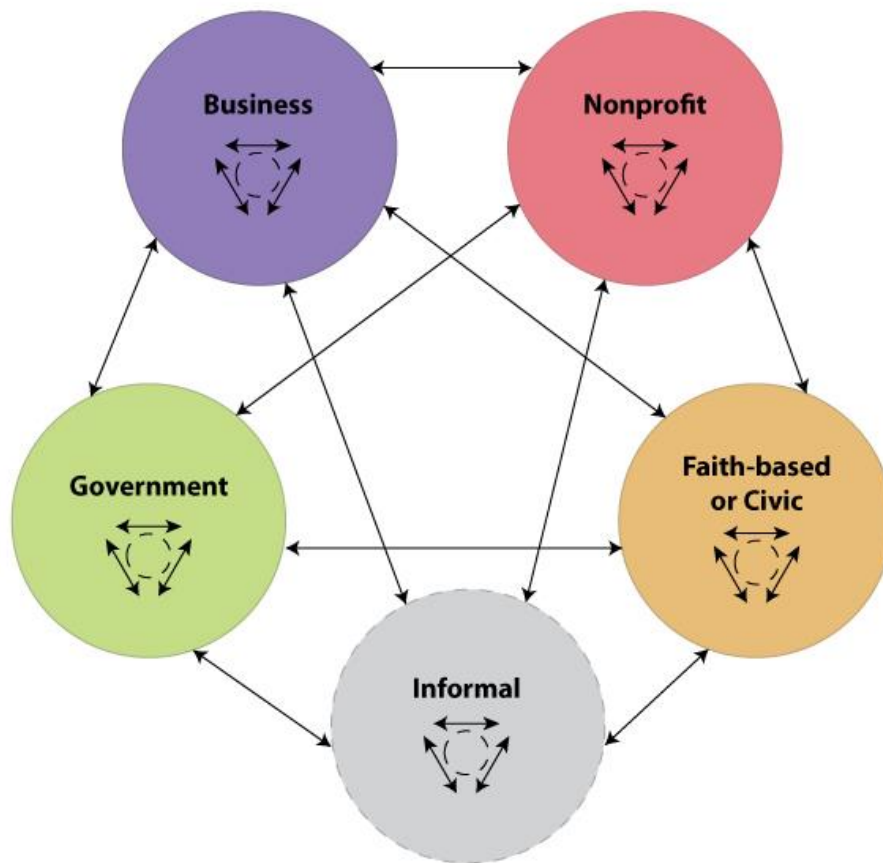


Figure 4. Building a stronger community network across sectors.

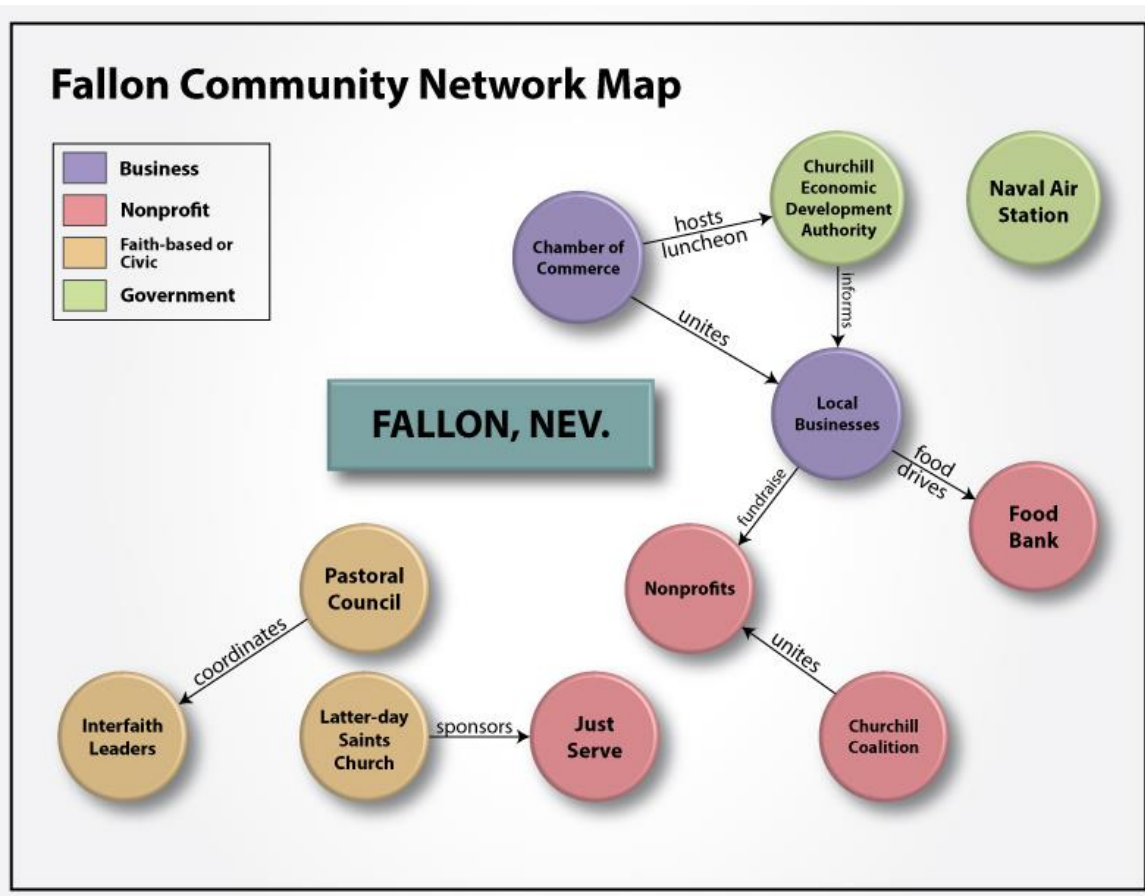


Figure 5. Community network map from examples shared in the forum.

In summary to the question *“How are volunteer efforts leveraged across various sectors?”*, a picture that emerges is one of dedicated people and organizations operating as best they can to improve and support issues in their community. While each sector has its champions and leaders who are excelling, Nevada currently lacks the infrastructure to strengthen and leverage opportunities across the state. Although there is a strong “will” of caring and dedicated people in the community, an infrastructure to strengthen the will of organizations and individuals does not currently exist. Based on the discussion, it seems that the primary avenues for networking in Fallon occur essentially based on “who you know,” rather than formal structures. This makes the network map very relationship-centered and based on close bonding connections. Heavy reliance on one type of networking represents a risk to social capital if or when people move, change or lose interest in their volunteer activity, or if a person changes jobs or leaves the community.

What strategies would strengthen volunteerism in the community?

Finally, participants were presented with examples of possible strategies from surveys and national best practices that enhance volunteerism. Participants were asked to identify a few strategies that they felt had the most potential for moving volunteering and service forward in Fallon. The following two strategies were identified as the top priorities to strengthen volunteerism in the community. Lists of strategies with specific comments are included in Table 1.

- (1) Creating an information/resource hub for volunteering.
- (2) Increasing access and opportunities for those who have left the workforce.

Table 1. Identified strategies to strengthen volunteerism in Fallon.

Priorities	Strategies
1	<p>Creating an information/resource hub for volunteering.</p> <p>Some efforts are underway that might impact this outcome (Chamber project). It would be ideal to have two physical sites and an enhanced digital presence for posting and finding volunteer opportunities. Currently the newspaper, Fallon 411, Just Serv, social services with Lyon County and schools are providing some functions. Resources needed would include site sponsors and volunteers to coordinate the site(s).</p>
2	<p>Increasing access and opportunities for those who have left the workforce.</p> <p>To accomplish this goal, all sectors should be involved including governmental agencies, nonprofits, businesses, civic groups and faith-based groups. Currently senior centers are the core area for this group to find access to volunteer opportunities. Fernley events are shared via Facebook, the Chamber provides e-blasts, and there are other reader boards. Resources that could support this outcome would require bridging organizational separations and gaps, overcoming historical turf/personalities, and a desire to focus on the commonalities that would create a better outcome for all. Other resources are civic-minded, skilled NAS retirees or others who choose to return to or retire in the community.</p>

Among all six communities, participants in both urban and rural settings conveyed a consistent message of three core themes.

Theme 1. Nevada needs to have a volunteer connector or “hub” system in local communities, whether virtual or physical, to serve as a place for all things volunteer-related.

Theme 2. Nevada needs to increase the visibility of volunteer needs, volunteer efforts and volunteer impact to widen the awareness and interest of community members and leaders in local areas. This awareness can help highlight the power and impact of volunteer work.

Theme 3. Communities need training to be provided (either locally or regionally) for volunteer managers and programs to increase the effectiveness and retention of volunteers.

Overall Takeaways

Fallon is a unique rural community with embedded long time structures (civic events, parades, annual fundraisers) that are the basis for civic engagement. The presence of the Naval Air Station (NAS) that comprises a significant percentage of the residents increases the transitory nature of a sizeable percentage of the population. The station or base was mentioned repeatedly as a robust source of volunteers when needed. The strategy calling for increasing efforts to track volunteerism created a lively discussion but no answers about how or to what end such data would be used. Many of the known volunteer efforts are based on who you know rather than formal structures, which makes these efforts very relationship-centered but also represents a risk if people move or change.

Nonprofits need support to integrate the practices for sound financial oversight, management, personnel practices and resource development. This need for capacity within the nonprofit sector impacts a community's ability to attract funding and grant resources from local, state and federal sources, and to connect with business resources. Using skilled professionals in volunteer positions will boost nonprofit capacity at the local level. This practice is emerging as a national trend, but it needs structure and support to be widely applied in Nevada.

Nevada Volunteers and Cooperative Extension are grateful for the time, interest and energy given by these local residents to participate in the forum. As follow-up to the forum, this report is being provided to each participant, and the information is being used as a foundation for the development of the State Service Plan, which will guide the efforts and resources of Nevada Volunteers for the next three years.

Potential next steps include the convening of individuals and organizations to continue the conversation to implement strategies to support further engagement of citizens; identifying a liaison in each community who would serve as a contact point for volunteer information and awareness, working in tandem with Nevada Volunteers, and promoting the utilization of national service resources as a mechanism for meeting community needs.

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