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*The Governor's
Commission on Service*

Report to Community on Volunteer Forum: Mesquite, 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 May 5, 2016, Nevada Volunteers and Cooperative Extension hosted a Community Forum in Mesquite, 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 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.

Twenty-nine people registered for the Mesquite Community Forum, with twenty-five people attending the Forum. Participants represented each of the five categories (individual, government, nonprofit, 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 Mesquite 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 Mesquite?

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 35 entities that offer volunteer and engagement opportunities within the Mesquite community (Figure 3).
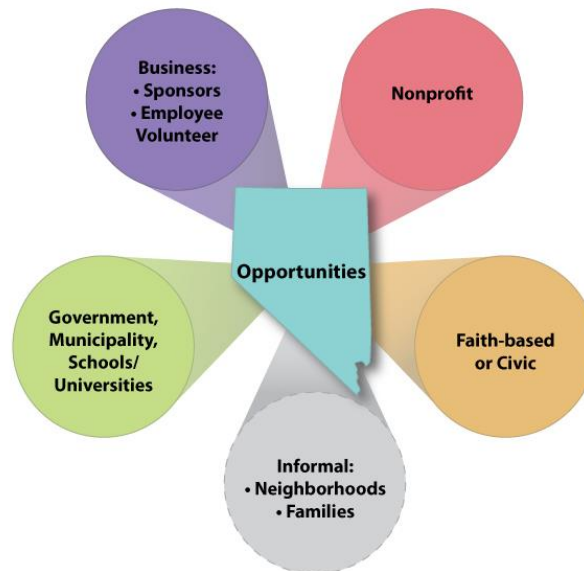
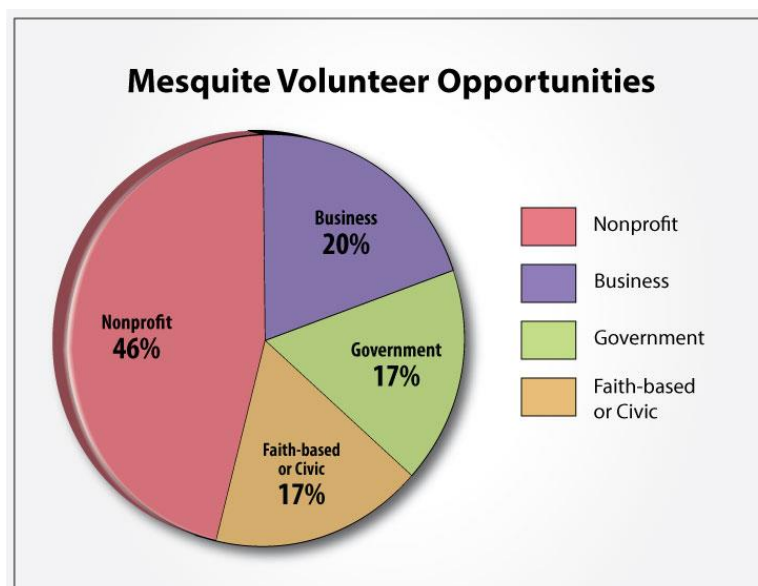

Figure 2. Volunteer ecosystem.

Figure 3. Volunteer and engagement opportunities in Mesquite.

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). <u>The examples provided are not comprehensive but merely provide a few examples as shared by participants in the forum.</u>

Linking Volunteer Efforts
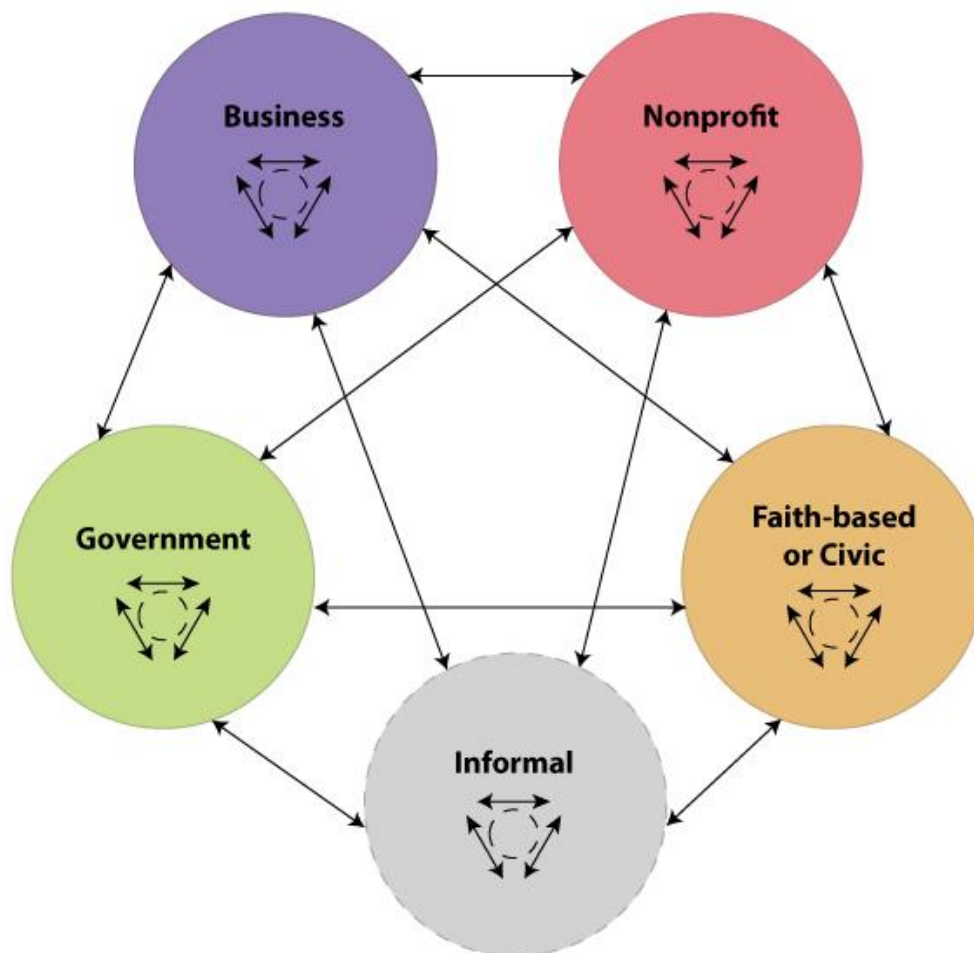## Within Sectors and Outside Sectors

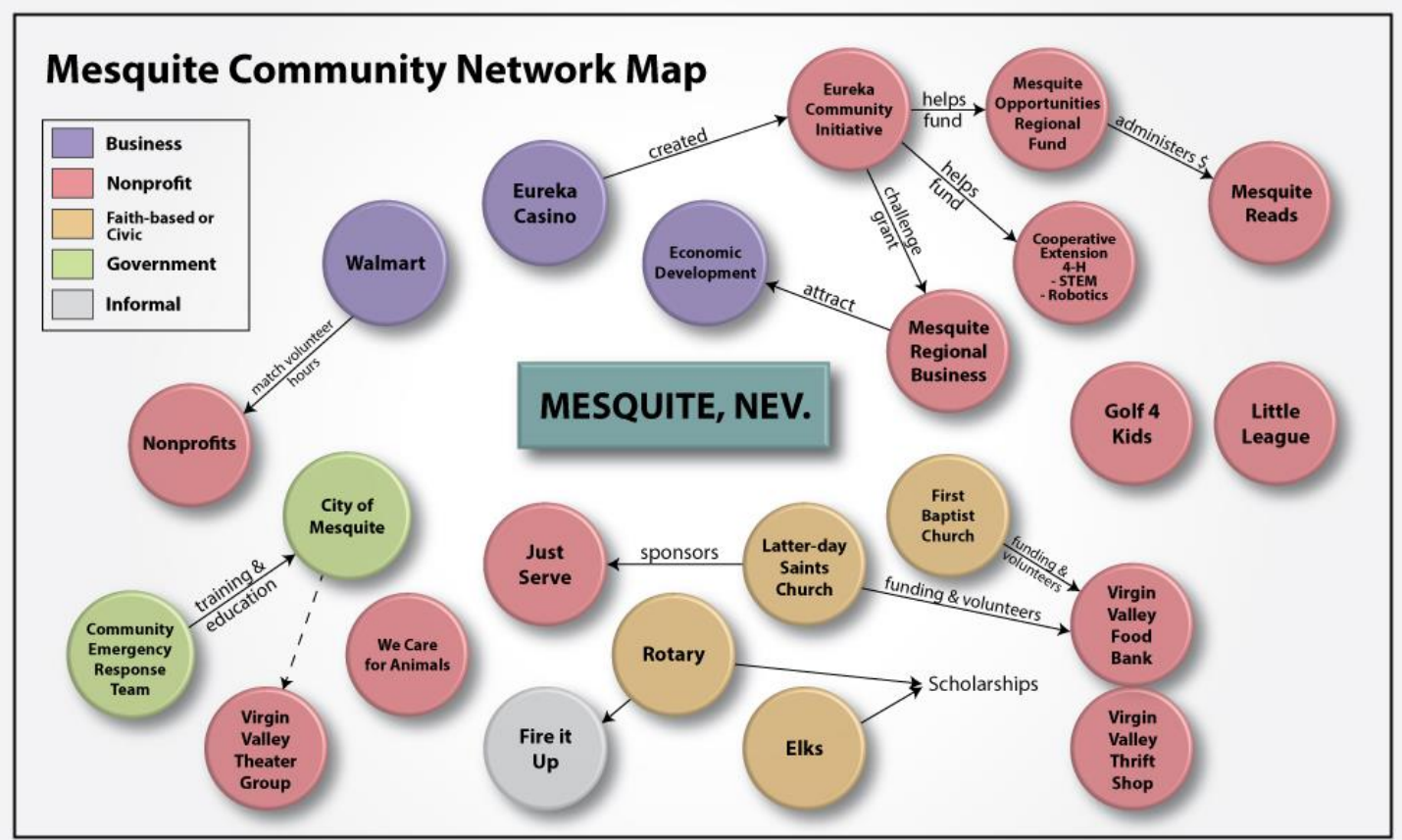Figure 4. Building a stronger community network across sectors.

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 and examples provided, it seems Mesquite has a strong community network among the various entities with some cross-over occurring among nonprofits, businesses, government entities and municipalities, and faith-based and civic organizations. While numerous examples were provided in discussions, a graphic display showing all the connections could not be replicated without a sophisticated social network analysis program, and hence not all of the examples provided are contained in Figure 4.

Volunteerism seems to be widely valued and supported in Mesquite. There are close-knit relationships among organizations and individuals who are engaged, which promote strong "bonding" social capital (tight connections within similar sectors and among known individuals) and are important for community engagement. Although bonding social capital is important in a community, it can exclude individuals and organizations and hence limit the opportunity for "bridging" social capital (Putnam 2000). Bridging social capital, linkages across different groups, is important because it can help to create a dense network of volunteers and expand levels of community trust and reciprocity among different community sectors (Putnam 2000). There do not appear to be formal intra- or inter-sector networks in Mesquite to promote communication, collaboration and awareness.

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 Mesquite. The following two strategies were identified as the top two priorities to strengthen volunteerism in the community. Lists of strategies with specific comments are included in Table 1.

(1) Community-based volunteer information or connector hub. (17 votes)

(2) Database or clearinghouse of nonprofits and volunteer opportunities. (6 votes)

Participants worked in two small working groups to begin outlining action steps for the top two priorities. There were some additional topics of discussion and prevailing themes that could guide work in the future for resource development or allocation.

Table 1. Identified strategies to strengthen volunteerism in Mesquite.

Votes	Strategies
17	Community-based volunteer information or connector hub. An information or connector hub for volunteerism could provide more opportunities to expand and build a stronger network of volunteerism in Mesquite, to share ideas and build stronger collaborations and networks across various entities.
6	Create database/clearinghouse of nonprofits and volunteer opportunities. The discussion focused on finding ways to share volunteers within specific interest areas (such as mentoring or environmental) with increased visibility of options including have some central point of contact.
5	Training for staff/volunteers to run quality volunteer programs. Training is also a critical factor, especially if it is provided locally to reduce cost. - Unique to program Mesquite Regional Visitors Bureau? - Organization leaders / volunteers / volunteer super - Partnering with similar for broad resource issues (youth, heat issues, safety – first aid/CPR/etc.).
5	Incentives that promote stronger volunteer engagement.
4	Increase the visibility of volunteer opportunities/impact.
4	Increase access/opportunities for youth and student service.
3	Influence key decision makers in the community about value/importance/impact of volunteering.
3	Business employee volunteers provide needed capacity and internal operations support.
2	Increase Access/Opportunities for those who have left the workforce.

1	Strategic focused effort to address community need(s).
1	Collect common metrics to measure volunteer impact and contributions.
1	A community engagement leadership team for ongoing conversation/focus.

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

Mesquite has numerous strong community leaders from various sectors (the arts, environment, finance) that actively engage others in civic and service efforts. This leadership is a community strength and provides an opportunity to invest in strategies as discussed in the forum to impact access to volunteerism.

Mesquite has a significant proportion of retirees and seniors who are active and engaged in the community. Many of these same volunteers leave the area for a portion of the year, which impacts volunteer service and the programs that rely on services for support.

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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