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Report to Community on Volunteer Forum: Tonopah, Nev.

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Special Publication 16-13

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

A partnership of Nevada counties; University of Nevada, Reno; and U.S. Department of Agriculture

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 18, 2016, Nevada Volunteers and Cooperative Extension hosted a Community Forum in Tonopah, 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.

The Tonopah forum was attended by four people representing various categories (individuals, government, nonprofit, faith-based and civic groups). Participants represented three of the targeted categories (i.e., government, nonprofit, and civic groups). 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 Tonopah 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 as compared to the national 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 Tonopah?

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 Tonopah community (Figure 3).

Opportunities for Volunteerism and Engagement in Our Communities



Figure 2. Volunteer ecosystem.

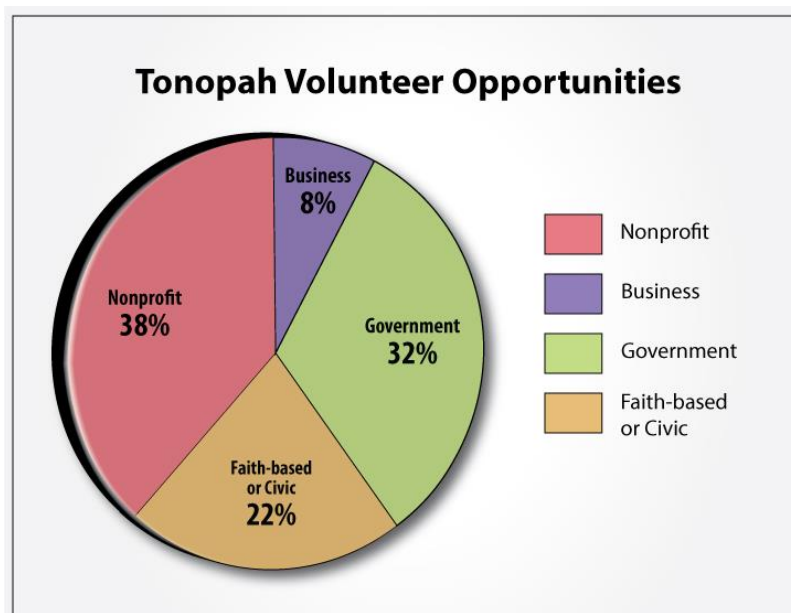


Figure 3. Volunteer and engagement opportunities in Tonopah.

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

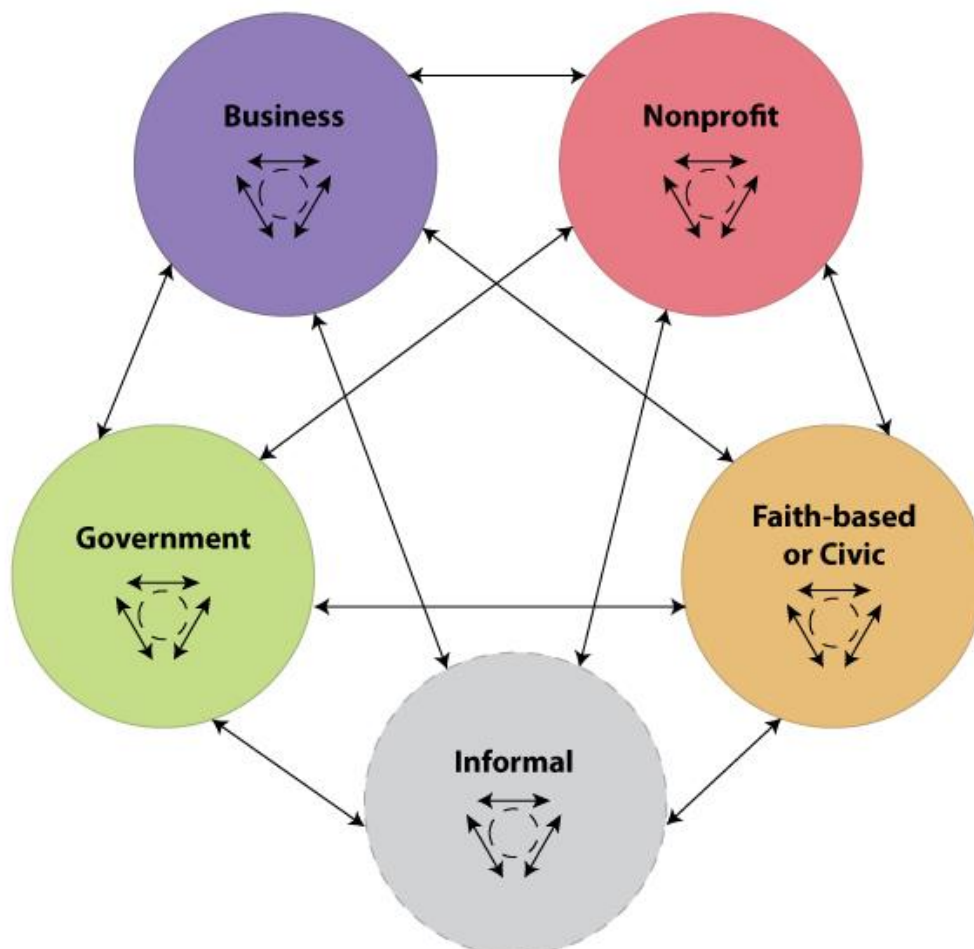


Figure 4. Building a stronger community network across sectors.

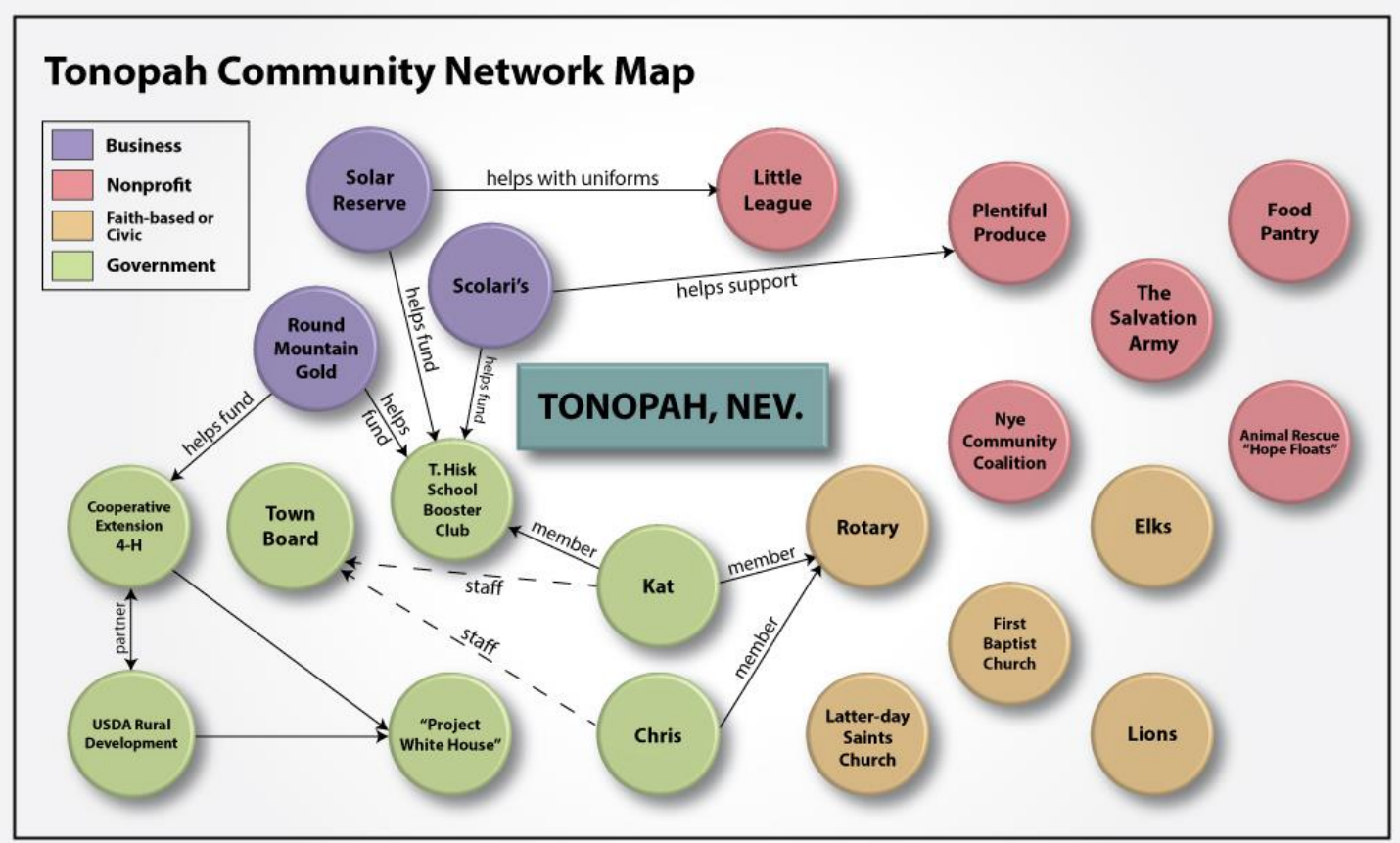


Figure 5. Community network map from examples shared in the forum.

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 participant discussions, the primary avenues for networking in Tonopah occur based on a few highly engaged individuals rather than on formal structures. These volunteer and engagement opportunities appear to be more relationship-centered, as typical in many small rural communities. Opportunities and the ability to network are based primarily on “who you know” in the community. While engaged individuals are very passionate and involved, opportunities for volunteerism and engagement may be at risk when key individuals leave the community or lose interest in their volunteer activity.

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 Tonopah. 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) Increase the visibility and access to volunteer opportunities (online, newspaper, etc.).
- (2) Provide student and youth volunteer opportunities.

Table 1. Identified strategies to strengthen volunteerism in Tonopah.

Priorities	Strategies
1	<p>Visibility of volunteer opportunities (online, newspaper, etc.).</p> <p><i>Provide a link to the Nevada Volunteer website.</i></p> <p><i>Move from dependence on word of mouth to something else, such as having a page on the town website that would provide information about volunteer opportunities.</i></p>
2	<p>Increase student and youth volunteer opportunities.</p> <p><i>Currently USDA Rural Development is partnering with youth through the Cooperative Extension 4-H Program on a national initiative known as "Project White House." Cooperative Extension has also provided a civic engagement curriculum (Policy Education and Civic Engagement, PEACE) to potentially be used with the high school for this initiative and as a format to provide more student and youth volunteerism and engagement avenues in Tonopah.</i></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

Tonopah is a small town, and the participants often wear multiple hats, bringing varied perspectives to the conversation. For example, one participant represented the municipality with whom she worked but also had personal connections with various service groups, church activities and businesses. A portion of the population of Tonopah is there on short-term job assignments (mining, solar plant) and may not be inclined to invest in the community.

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 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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