



9th September 2025

EVENT REPORT

REIMAGINING NONPROFITS

Leadership, Community, and
Volunteer Power



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WHY THIS CONVERSATION MATTERS?

Nonprofit organizations across the U.S. share a core mission: to deepen civic participation and deliver meaningful social impact. But right now, nonprofits are being stretched thin. Nearly 3 in 4 nonprofits say demand for their services has gone up, and at the same time, they face mounting pressure to expand impact without expanding administrative overhead.

In the middle of this pressure, volunteerism, which was once central to nonprofit identity and impact, appears increasingly sidelined. More than 70% of Americans are not engaged in formal volunteering, despite robust civic engagement national programs like AmeriCorps and the Volunteer Generation Fund.

Too often, volunteers are viewed as 'extra hands' rather than as essential leaders who bring skills, networks, and vision. This narrow framing risks leaving untapped one of the sector's greatest strengths.

This is why we convened the Policy Cafe. The aim was simple: to reimagine how volunteers can be nurtured as leaders and how volunteer-led organizations can be governed effectively. This conversation matters because unlocking the full potential of volunteers means shaping a nonprofit sector that is sustainable, equitable, and prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

HOSTS



Srikanth Gundavarapu,

President of Sewa International USA led Sewa's COVID-19 relief efforts and now guides the organization with vision and community trust.



Rakhi Israni,

Vice President of Public Relation and Government Relations at Sewa International USA experienced in public policy and stakeholder engagement.

MODERATORS

Kusuma Buddhiraju,

Pursuing a Master's in Public Administration at Columbia University, she blends tech and policy expertise to advance innovation and social impact.



Sairakshitha Ramesh:

Volunteer with Sewa for four years, currently serving on the Youth Engagement & Alumni Outreach team. Finance student at Rutgers Business School.



MEET OUR PANELISTS

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



S.P. Kothari, Gordon Y. Billard Professor of Accounting and Finance at MIT Sloan School of Management and former Chief Economist at the SEC, he advances global standards in governance and corporate accountability.

THEME I: NURTURING VOLUNTEER LEADERS: MODELS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND CHALLENGES

Geoff Green, CEO of CalNonprofits, leads a statewide alliance of over 10,000 nonprofits. With 25 years of experience, he advances equity-focused initiatives in education, housing, and environmental sustainability.



Mike Young, Executive Director of California EnviroVoters, brings two decades of experience in campaigns and organizing, advancing environmental leadership and accountability in California's political and community landscape.

Dr. Murali D. Nair, Adjunct Professor in the Department of Leadership, Management & Entrepreneurship at Columbia University's School of Social Work, he brings four decades of experience across five universities advancing social innovation and wellbeing.



MEET OUR PANELISTS

THEME II: GOVERNING A VOLUNTEER-LED ORGANIZATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



Ade Oguntoye, Founder and Executive Director of One World Link, leads community-driven initiatives in Georgia that use local resources, technology, and research to advance social change and sustainable development.

Dr. David O. Renz, Director Emeritus of the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, he has guided 250+ governing boards and published extensively on nonprofit governance and policy.



Luis Vergara, Partner and Head of Practice at La Piana Consulting, works with organizations to advance equitable community impact, drawing on leadership experience in marketing, youth development, and nonprofit management.

Monisha Kapila, Founder and former Co-CEO of ProInspire, led the organization for 15 years, expanding it to 500 partners and training over 8,000 leaders across sectors in equity and leadership development.



MOMENTS THAT MATTERED



1. Economic Realities of Volunteerism:

Professor S. P. Kothari highlighted the widening gap between growing nonprofit demands and limited long-term volunteer engagement. He emphasized that without structured recognition and growth pathways, organizations risk losing their most dedicated contributors.

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“Nonprofits can’t do everything. With demand high and supply scarce, clarity of objectives is key. Focus on a few areas and be excellent in them.”

-Dr. S.P. Kothari



3. Culture as the Core of Leadership:

Mike Young emphasized that leadership pipelines depend as much on culture as on skills. He noted that connecting volunteers’ work to organizational vision and shared values strengthens commitment and collective purpose.



2. Evolving Meaning of Volunteerism:

Dr. Murali D. Nair noted that volunteerism is now seen as both a civic identity and a social responsibility. He cautioned that authentic leadership must stay rooted in the communities it serves.



4. The Challenge of Succession:

Geoff Green underscored that with most U.S. nonprofits run entirely by volunteers, sustainability depends on deliberate succession planning. He emphasized the need to cultivate future leaders to ensure smooth organizational transitions.

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“Leadership succession is the biggest challenge for volunteer-led nonprofits. They should build a pipeline of future leaders for smooth succession”

-Geoff Green

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED



5. Rethinking Overhead Costs:

Ade Oguntoye highlighted the financial constraints facing volunteer-driven organizations, noting that the 5% cap on indirect costs is too restrictive. He suggested raising this limit to 25% to strengthen the viability of smaller nonprofits.



7. Balancing Capacity and Complexity:

Luis Vergara explained that the sustainability of volunteer-led governance depends on two factors: capacity—how well organizations can support incoming volunteers—and complexity, the need to manage specialized functions like finance, insurance, and HR.

“Before moving beyond a volunteer-only model, remember: capacity and complexity are the real tests. Can you handle both?”

-Luis Vergara



6. Strengthening Volunteer Governance:

Dr. David O. Renz noted that while volunteer governance has long anchored the nonprofit sector, it must be actively nurtured. He emphasized creating smaller, well-defined roles to enable meaningful engagement without overburdening volunteers.

“‘Volunteer’ is a label for a relationship, and relationships only work when there’s reciprocity, authenticity, mutual appreciation, and value.”

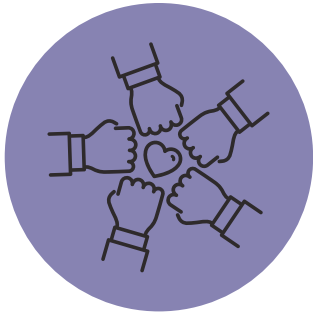
-Dr. David O. Renz



8. Investing in Hybrid Models:

Monisha Kapila argued that successful nonprofits combine volunteers with paid staff. She emphasized that to achieve scale, volunteer-led models must invest in infrastructure that channels volunteers’ professional skills effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS



Volunteers

- Choose organizations that offer **clear roles and structured pathways** for leadership and recognition.
- Engage in **causes aligned with your values** to avoid burnout. Focus on building **leadership within your community** through consistent service and shared purpose.



Nonprofits

- Invest in **infrastructure that enables volunteers to function at scale**, through clear roles, training, and coordination supported by shared motivation.
- **Balance capacity and complexity.** Assess whether volunteer governance can meet organizational demands and add staff when necessary.



Foundations

- Provide multi-year funding and **raise overhead allowances** from 5–10% to around 25% to help smaller nonprofits plan sustainably and strengthen capacity.
- Treat **volunteer engagement as an investment** in civic participation and community resilience.



Policymakers

- Modernize nonprofit support systems by **revisiting reporting requirements** to better serve volunteer-driven organizations.
- Strengthen leadership pipelines through incentives such as **academic credits, fellowships, and public recognition programs.**

NEXT STEPS



01

Build collaboration across nonprofits, academic institutions, funders, and grassroots groups to promote volunteer-driven models of leadership and governance.

02

Develop a handbook for nonprofits that outlines strategies to adopt cost-effective, decentralized, and value-driven approaches to volunteer engagement and leadership.

03

Advance **advocacy and awareness** to highlight the importance and impact of **volunteer-led leadership**, engaging sector stakeholders, policymakers, and the broader nonprofit community to encourage adoption of these models.

THANK YOU!

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