Virtual volunteering entails activities that are conducted, in whole or in part, via computer, smartphone or other device that allows internet access. Some examples of virtual volunteering include tutoring, mentoring or instruction, facilitating online discussion groups, and offering legal or medical expertise to clients.

Although virtual volunteers are not typically used as a substitute for traditional, in-person volunteering, providing opportunities to serve remotely can significantly enhance and expand an organization’s effectiveness and reach.

United Ways can plan and coordinate virtual volunteer projects that build relationships with individuals and corporate partners, and drive outcomes in education, financial stability and health. What follows are tips to introduce a virtual volunteer program to your United Way that supports your efforts to create a community where everyone has the opportunity for a better life.

**GETTING STARTED**

United Ways can create a virtual volunteer experience to fit the interests and needs of volunteers, as well as beneficiaries. A few key steps include:

➤ **Connect the experience to long-term goals.**
Your project will be better suited to help advance your United Way’s community impact goals if it is integrated into strategic planning and execution from the outset. Describe how your virtual volunteer initiative will support your existing mission and work and set specific goals and expectations for what the program will accomplish.

➤ **Brand the effort as a United Way experience.**
Virtual volunteering should be branded as a United Way experience as much as possible. From volunteer and beneficiary recruitment to the materials used in supporting participants, help everyone involved understand United Way’s role and how the program is tied to community impact goals. As part of your volunteer orientation you might invite staff or leadership volunteers to talk about United Way’s vision of a world where all individuals achieve their potential through education, financial stability and good health. Capture photographs of volunteers wearing “Live United” T-shirts for future promotions and reflections. Add volunteers’ contact information to United Way’s communications channels and keep them engaged in other aspects of United Way’s work.

➤ **Budget appropriately.**
When considering the program budget it is important to evaluate all components including any software costs, hardware costs, monthly service provider fees, long distance charges, background checks, etc. Consider the cost to purchase, use and maintain the online technology (including upgrades) and the cost to ensure that all parties can use it to access the internet. Consider free programs like Skype, Facetime, Google Hangout, etc.

➤ **Identify beneficiaries.**
Think about organizations that would benefit from a virtual volunteering effort, including your United Way or your local school. While reading, tutoring or mentoring during the school day is a popular choice, evenings and weekends are also good times for working people to volunteer. Don’t limit your ideas to education; financial literacy coaching.
or boosting healthy habits could be done through a virtual volunteering program.

➤ **Secure funding.** Companies whose employees use computers may be inclined to provide both financial support and employee volunteers when they understand the impact employees can have by volunteering during a small portion of their day without leaving the office. Foundations, schools and other not-for-profit partners may also be able to help cover costs.

➤ **Recruit and train volunteers.** When preparing to recruit volunteers for a virtual volunteer project it is important to communicate how the online interactions will look and feel. Training volunteers should include how a volunteer interacts with their client, including introductions, how to build rapport, how to solve common issues, how to transition a client to a new volunteer and how to end a relationship. In addition, ensure volunteers are aware of supervision and organizational policies regarding face-to-face meetings, inappropriate behavior and accessibility to archived exchanges. Offer training and practice sessions so that volunteers can learn to use the virtual volunteering tools and to ensure the candidate writes well and responds appropriately. Also, train volunteers on how to speak with vulnerable populations and appropriately respond to emotional situations.

➤ **Ensure safety and appropriate behavior.** It is important to protect volunteers’ and clients’ privacy. Consider how to prevent opportunities for abuse or exploitation of any participants, protect youth and other vulnerable clients from inappropriate or harmful activities, screen out people who would abuse or exploit participants, and protect the privacy of personal information.
Mile High United Way

With a phone, an internet connection and just thirty minutes a week, volunteers with Mile High United Way (Denver, CO) are helping children in fifty first-grade classrooms to build communications skills in addition to improved fluency, comprehension and word knowledge through a program called TutorMate (http://www.innovationsforlearning.org/tutormate/).

TutorMate is an online volunteer tutoring program helping tens of thousands of first grade students in low-income communities learn to read. Nearly 125 of the country’s most prominent corporations and organizations partner with Innovations for Learning, the creator of TutorMate, to recruit volunteers to help young students in their disadvantaged communities. Mile High United Way first piloted TutorMate in 2011, in a collaboration with the Denver Public Schools Foundation and Denver Public Schools. Within four years, the Denver initiative has grown to an average of fifty schools.

Volunteer tutors learn the basics of the program through an introductory webinar provided by TutorMate. Each week after that, a software program walks volunteers step by step through a lesson. If technical issues arise, TutorMate staff are on call at all times to offer help by telephone or chat room. In a typical 30-minute lesson, volunteers select and read a story with their student, ask questions to see how well their student understands the story, and play word games and activities. All of the readings and activities are designed to be appropriate for the student’s reading level.

Tutors work with the same student throughout the school year in order to build a meaningful rapport and mentoring relationship. Teachers schedule the available times for tutoring, preventing any interference with instruction time. Furthermore, TutorMate provides training materials to make the experience uniquely flexible and convenient for volunteers.

The success of the effort is fueled by committed Mile High United Way corporate partners, who provide a combination of employee volunteer time, in-kind contributions and financial resources to meet the specific needs of their partner school. Some corporate partners sponsor multiple classrooms, by providing the necessary funding and volunteers to operate the program, whereas others adopt a single classroom and recruit ten employee volunteers to connect with a student each week throughout the school year. If a company doesn’t have enough volunteers for an entire classroom, Mile High United Way will sponsor it and recruit additional volunteers. During the 2014-15 school year, 38 companies participated, including some of the world’s most recognized brands like UPS, US Bank and PwC.

TutorMate provides an opportunity for students to have individualized support, instruction, and encouragement as they develop literacy skills. The volunteers inspire a love for reading, making it a highly rewarding and impactful experience for everyone involved.

United Way of Lee County

Through its I Read You Read initiative, United Way of Lee County (Sanford, NC) engages volunteers to help students gain self-confidence and develop stronger reading skills. The reading program engages more than sixty volunteers and students from three elementary schools.

Once a week during lunchtime, volunteers and students connect online via Skype and read alternate pages of a book aloud for twenty to thirty minutes. The program runs for eight sessions, typically from early February to late March, ending before spring break if possible. This timeline allows for make-up days if schools are closed due to bad weather. At the end of the program, volunteer tutors and their students meet for the first time at a volunteer celebration, organized by United Way.

While the time commitment of only thirty minutes per week over an eight week period may seem minimal, it has lasting impact on students. Enrolled children not only develop stronger literacy skills and behavioral skills, but also build deep bonds and form meaningful relationships with their reading tutors. In addition to helping struggling readers, the I Read You
Read program has proven to be an effective way to develop relationships with members of the community. United Way of Lee County helps to recruit volunteers, making it easy for individuals 18 years and older to find opportunities and sign up through Lee County’s online volunteer center. Each partnering school covers most of the costs to run the program, including a computer for use by the student, a volunteer background check, and a short training on effective strategies to help students practice their reading.

The program’s success attracted a substantial grant from the Duke Energy Foundation in 2016. United Way is using the grant to expand the program and provide students with additional books of their own.

For more information contact:
Mei Cobb
Volunteer and Employee Engagement
United Way Worldwide
mei.cobb@unitedway.org