



of Northern Illinois

STRATEGIC PLAN

SUMMARY REPORT



March 28, 2024

Dear Nate Kloster,

I am pleased to submit to the Voluntary Action Center, the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan and Summary Report. This plan reflects the organization's goals, commitment to measurable outcomes, and the delivery of quality services to the community.

It has been a pleasure assisting the Voluntary Action Center with this important project, including updating Voluntary Action Center's Vision, Mission, and Values. I particularly wish to thank Nate Kloster, CEO, the Board, and the staff members involved in the process.

Yours truly,

Cory Poris Plasch

President/CEO

CP2 Consulting

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Executive Summary

Beginning in November 2023, the Voluntary Action Center engaged in a strategic planning process. The process generated strategic goals covering 2023-2026.

The plan consists of four strategic goals, identified as the issues of greatest importance to Voluntary Action Center over the next three years. Each goal has an associated outcome, key outcome indicators, and performance targets. These were determined through a facilitated process, including the board and staff, and incorporated stakeholder feedback from focus groups and a survey of area faith communities.

As part of the Strategic Planning Process, the Vision, Mission, and Values were evaluated. The Voluntary Action Center chose to update their Vision, Mission, and Values.

A cross-functional team of staff helped to further develop the Strategic Plan by identifying initiatives to achieve the Strategic Goals. This team will continue to work to develop and implement project plans for each initiative and create a communication plan to ensure that all Voluntary Action Center staff understand the overall goals, as well as being able to meaningfully incorporate action steps to achieve those goals into their overall responsibilities.



Vision, Mission, Values

VAC VISION

To support individuals, caregivers, and communities by preserving and extending independent living and improving quality of life.

VAC MISSION

Voluntary Action Center promotes dignity, health, and self-sufficiency and reduces social isolation by providing trusted, high-quality transportation and nutrition services.

VAC VALUES

Accountability

Taking ownership and responsibility in our shared successes and failures and acting ethically in all things we do as we report to our stakeholders.

Community

Responding to the needs of our diverse neighbors through leadership, engagement, and collaboration to create the best outcomes for our communities.

Compassion

Having empathy and respect for the experience of our clients and team members; understanding that our behavior directly affects the people we serve.

Professionalism

Achieving excellence by conducting our work with skilled competence and expertise, in accordance with the highest standards of ethics and proficiency.

Safety

Creating an environment where we safeguard our team members, clients, the public, and the Agency. We reflect on our actions and safety culture before executing tasks safely.

The Strategic Planning Process

The Strategic Planning Process seeks to answer five questions:

1. Where are we right now? (Plan Development)
2. Where do we want to be? (Plan Development)
3. How do we get there from here? (Plan Implementation)
4. How will we know when we get there? (Plan Implementation)
5. Are there changes in the future external environment that we need to consider?

DEVELOPMENT

Where are we now?

Scan the Environment
Conduct Internal and External Analysis
(SWOT)
Develop a Strategic Profile
Identify Strategic Challenges

Where are we going?

Define Our Mission
Articulate Core Values
Set a Vision
Identify Key Intended Outcomes

IMPLEMENTATION

How will we get there?

Develop Initiatives
Define Performance Measures
Set Targets and Thresholds
Spread Throughout Organization

How will we know?

Create Detailed Action Plans
Establish Accountability:
Who, What, When
Identify Success Indicators

Assessing the Current Environment

The Strategic Planning Process began with a meeting with the consultant and Voluntary Action Center staff. The meeting included a review of strategic planning principles, a discussion of organizational value proposition, the status of vision and mission statements, and a tutorial on preparing an Environmental Scan. The session concluded with a timeline for the planning process, assignments for preparation of the Environmental Scan, and a process for conducting the stakeholder outreach.



Stakeholder Engagement

To answer the question “**Where are we now?**,” the Strategic Planning Process began with gaining an understanding of the operating environment. This is the first activity in developing a Strategic Plan as internal and external forces, dynamics, and constraints must be considered to arrive at the most effective strategy.

Assessing the environment included:

- A survey of area faith communities
- Focus groups of staff, local government officials, other nonprofits, and other stakeholders

As environmental factors change over time, they need to be evaluated and incorporated into the strategic thinking and planning process using current data. As a result, the Focus Groups were limited in scope and consisted of Voluntary Action Center staff and external stakeholders. Each Focus Group discussed what participants saw as strengths of Voluntary Action Center along with opportunities for change. The questions for the Focus Groups centered on services provided by VAC and the nutrition and transportation needs of individuals in the communities served.

The results of these efforts were presented to the Voluntary Action Center Board of Directors at the first Strategic Planning Session on January 11, 2024. They are summarized below along with links to the complete results.

Environmental Scan

The Environmental Scan is a description and analysis of the Voluntary Action Center, including both internal and external forces and constraints. As the initial phase of the Strategic Planning Process, it provides an opportunity to understand how current and emerging trends interact and provides a framework for understanding relevant issues in planning its future. Staff presented a review of internal operations and current challenges facing the organization.

Key Takeaways

- Politics impact Voluntary Action Center. Due to the legislative mapping, there are five state representatives and four senators who cover Voluntary Action Center's geography. Voluntary Action Center has been proactive in contacting them and communicating VAC's needs in the past two years.
- Voluntary Action Center is feeling the economic impact of inflation as well as the challenge of a lack of available workers.
- The job market is tight. It has been difficult to find new drivers and kitchen staff.
- Voluntary Action Center has not experienced significant issues with social factors such as client behavior and cultural attitudes.
- Voluntary Action Center has not been a technology intensive organization.
- Voluntary Action Center is soon transitioning to a Volunteer Scheduler program to help with the volunteer driver process.
- Voluntary Action Center lacks the ability to communicate with all employees through the email system. Since a number of employees do not work behind a computer, they do not have company emails. This is inhibiting better communication with a broad base of employees.
- Capital assistance for the nutrition program is lacking. Both the LaSalle and Sycamore kitchens are too small for the volume of meals produced.

Focus Group Results

As part of the Voluntary Action Center's Strategic Planning Process, Focus Groups were conducted on December 6, 12, 15, and 21, 2023, and also January 3, 2024. Participants were employees, local nonprofit personnel, local government representatives, and local businesses, all recruited by Voluntary Action Center staff.

A Focus Group is a small-group discussion, guided by a trained facilitator, used to gather in-depth information about a community's thoughts and opinions about a designated topic. The interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences. The facilitator's role is to gather information in an impartial and confidential manner, manage the pace of the discussion, and ensure that everyone has a chance to participate. The process included a set of questions and follow-up discussion within the small group.

Key Takeaways

- External stakeholders generally hold Voluntary Action Center in extremely high regard. The organization is seen as an important community partner and provides services that no one else does in a way that is client-centered, compassionate, and respectful.
- VAC provides needed community jobs.
- Concerns about long-term sustainability of VAC with the aging population, a growing economic divide and increasing costs to deliver services are prevalent.
- There was also overall consensus that VAC needs to prioritize: they can't do everything; prioritization will bring external clarity to their mission and services.
- Staff are seen as abundantly friendly and committed to the cause. Whether it's inquiries from staff from other organizations, clients, or family calling, VAC has always been "wonderfully responsive."
- Retention concerns exist, as staff are seen putting in long hours to get the job done; and there are fears that, with financial challenges, if staff aren't being paid appropriately, it will be hard to keep them. Staffing feels too tight and mandatory overtime is a challenge, participants said. Some staff are unable to stay and work later, causing stress. Vacation time often accumulates because people feel guilty if they take time off because they don't want a coworker forced to work overtime.
- Focus group participants noted that leadership continues to evolve in a positive direction, and the level of professionalism has continually improved.

Focus Group Results

Key Takeaways

- Lines of communication from leadership to frontline staff or between sites is seen as not consistent and can lead to not understanding resources needed or policy/procedure changes. Technology can help, but the process needs to be formalized regarding who is responsible for communicating what so that messaging is consistent throughout the different sites and levels of the organization.
- Increased collaboration with other social service nonprofits will be important for the future to make sure that services are not duplicated but integrated.
- Every focus group recognized funding as a concern for Voluntary Action Center. More drivers, routes, trucks, kitchen space and food for meals and for groceries were all seen as pressing needs. Participants noted that funding has been lacking for senior programs and Meals on Wheels as there is not enough help statewide. Significant concerns exist about how to fund essential programs long term.
- The creation of a position dedicated to fundraising was an opportunity discussed in several groups. The discussion was that the changing landscape, post-COVID, requires someone who can dedicate time solely to navigating grants and diversifying revenue sources. The need for a staff member with blocks of time solely dedicated to diversifying the volunteer base was also discussed.
- The fleet of vehicles is aging, and funding is not there for new vehicles. If one of them breaks down, which is increasing because of the high mileage of the fleet, there are associated impacts.
- Transportation for health care is an ongoing concern and people are starting to use 911 to access transportation to health care because they have no other way available.
- The loss of the DeKalb and Sycamore contracts to Transdev was discussed in several groups. There is concern that the loss of contracts may impact the financial viability of Voluntary Action Center.
- Meals on Wheels is extremely important since it provides both nutrition and social interaction for homebound individuals who may not see any other people otherwise. The continual increase in food costs had some focus groups concerned about the availability of the program for all individuals needing the services.
- Several focus groups said that the name "Voluntary Action Center" is confusing and does not explain what the organization does and the clients they serve. There was also discussion about Voluntary Action Center determining exactly what it wants to be and focusing on those core services to build a recognizable identity.

Understanding the Environment

An integral part of the Strategic Planning Process is a SWOT Analysis, which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It provides a situational overview of the environment in which strategic planning takes place and allows a systematic examination of factors impacting the community. **Strengths and Weaknesses** examine the internal operating environment, while **Opportunities and Threats** evaluate the external operating environment.

To provide ample opportunity for reflection, a SWOT survey was distributed to the Board Members and staff prior to the Strategic Planning session. During the Strategic Planning Retreat, the SWOT data was reviewed to determine key themes and strategic issues.



SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trusted resource • Trusted partner • Dedicated staff and volunteers • Strong reputation • Community partner/reputation/longevity • Board of Directors engaged and committed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility inadequate • Funding • Aging fleet • Staffing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality • Succession • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding: Individual, community, grants, government, sponsorship, contracts, partnerships • Reaching a new generation of donors • Marketing and Engagement: Storytelling, government officials, satisfaction, partnership • Volunteer/Staff Engagement: Rebuilding workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to meet increasing demands • Uncertainty of state and federal money/funding • Competition for donors • Continually rising costs • Lack of volunteers • Hiring difficulties • Necessity of capital improvements

The **Strengths** and **Opportunities** groups combined to discuss how internal strength coupled with external opportunities could be enablers of success.

The **Weaknesses** and **Threats** groups combined to discuss how internal weaknesses coupled with external threats could be challenges to success.

Finally, the groups combined, and all participants reviewed the key themes. A list of strategic issues was determined, and included funding uncertainty, staffing, an aging population, diversifying the donor base, facilities, prioritization for the future, VAC's identity, focus area of service for the future, and community partnerships.

Finally the most important organizational priorities were finalized taking into account information gathered throughout the process, including the Environmental Scan.

Through this analysis, four Strategic Goals were identified: Workforce Development, Asset Optimization, Community Engagement, and Financial Vitality.

Participants then were divided into cross-functional groups. They determined desired Outcomes (what success looks like), Key Outcome Indicators (how to measure progress towards success), and Performance Targets (a measurable goal achieved by a defined date) for each strategic priority.

Targets by Strategic Goal

STRATEGIC GOAL	OUTCOME	KEY OUTCOME INDICATOR	TARGET
Workforce Development	<p>Adequate staffing to meet service demands</p> <p>Enhanced Employee Communication</p> <p>Well-Trained Workforce</p>	<p>Plan milestones met</p> <p>Staffing ratios met</p> <p>% of communications received</p> <p># of roles cross-trained</p> <p># of training programs implemented</p>	<p>Succession Plan Adopted by 9/30/24</p> <p>Operational capacity needs determine for 7 sites by 12/31/24</p> <p>100% of staff and key volunteers receive critical communications by 6/24</p> <p>Employee feedback system implemented by 3/31/25</p> <p>100% of critical roles cross-trained by 12/31/25</p> <p>XX of formal training programs implemented in transportation by 6/30/26</p> <p>XX of formal training programs implemented in nutrition by 6/30/26</p>
Asset Optimization	<p>Sycamore Transportation Building Improved</p> <p>Appropriate Kitchen Facilities Available</p> <p>Vehicle Fleet Replacement</p>	<p>% of identified improvements complete</p> <p>100% of LaSalle Kitchen occupied by 4/30/25</p> <p>Sycamore Kitchen Project milestones</p> <p>% of fleet upgraded</p>	<p>100% of building improvements completed by 6/27</p> <p>100% of Permanent LaSalle Kitchen Facilities Occupied by 4/30/25</p> <p>Sycamore Kitchen Architectural Specifications documented by 6/27</p> <p>100% of vehicle fleet upgraded by 12/27</p>
Community Engagement	<p>Updated Organizational Identity</p> <p>Increased Awareness of VAC</p> <p>Increased Volunteer Base</p>	<p>Project milestones</p> <p>Website hits</p> <p>% Social media followers</p> <p>% increase in volunteer organizations</p> <p>% increase in individual volunteers</p>	<p>Identity updated by 12/31/24</p> <p>≥ XXXXX incoming website hits by XX/XX/XX</p> <p>Social media followers increase by 20% annually</p> <p>≥ 15% in volunteer organizations annually</p> <p>≥ 15% in individual volunteers annually</p>
Financial Vitality	<p>Increased Sponsorship and Individual Giving</p> <p>Nutrition is self-supporting</p> <p>Operational Reserve Established</p>	<p>\$ of Sponsorship; \$ in individual giving</p> <p>% of nutrition funded by nutrition dollars</p> <p># weeks cash in reserve</p>	<p>≥ 10% in organizational giving annually</p> <p>≥ 10% in individual giving annually</p> <p>100% of nutrition services are funded by nutrition dollars by 6/30/27</p> <p>12 weeks cash in reserve by 6/30/27</p>

Strategic Plan Implementation

Implementation is the final step in the Strategic Planning Process and consists of staff developing Initiatives to support the Strategic Goals determined during the Strategic Planning Process. The following Initiatives will be reported on regularly, showing the measurable progress Voluntary Action Center is making towards their Strategic Goals and associated Performance Targets.

Workforce Development

- Develop Nutrition Training Program
- Develop Transportation Training Program
- Develop Training Needs Analysis Framework
- Develop Annual Face-to-Face Communication Plan for each site
- Create "Listening Session" program for top management at each site
- Identify Optimal Staffing Levels for each Program
- Develop a Succession Plan

Asset Optimization

- Implement Fleet Optimization Plan
- Develop Site Renovation Plan for Sycamore Kitchen Facility
- Develop Site Improvement Plan for LaSalle Kitchen Facility
- Renovate Sycamore Transit Facility

Community Engagement

- Develop an Expanded Volunteer Strategy
- Develop an Identity and Branding Strategy
- Establish a Client Feedback System
- Create an Enhanced Technology Strategy

Financial Vitality

- Develop a Comprehensive Corporate and Government Giving Program
- Develop a Comprehensive Individual Giving Program
- Create a Reserve Strategy
- Evaluate Feasibility of an Expanded Transportation Program
- Develop Fundraising Events Strategy

Strategic Plan Participants

The strategic plan was developed with the hard work and dedication of many individuals. The Voluntary Action Center Board and Staff led the way, taking time out of their schedules to commit to long-term thinking. They defined a direction and a set of outcomes that are important to the community stakeholders with whom they partner and serve.

Executive Committee

Joel Maurer, President
Keith Foster, Vice President
Tasha Sims, Secretary
Cindy Green-Deutsch, Treasurer
Kate Noreiko
Michael Haines, Past President
Elizabeth Bass

Members at Large

Phil Haugen
Maria Lombardo
Dawn Roznowski
Steve DeVlieger
Marcy Billington
Lynn Borio
Steve Curatti
Linda Linden

Voluntary Action Center Staff

Nate Kloster, CEO
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