

Spending

Generosity on a budget: how to give back without overspending

You don't need to be wealthy to be generous. Give time, a little money, or things you no longer use, and plan it so it fits your budget.

5-minute read • Updated October 2026 • Checked against its sources



The short version

- ✓ Most generosity isn't big checks. In 2023, 54% of Americans helped a neighbor, and 28% volunteered through an organization.
- ✓ Decide your giving ahead of time. A small monthly amount you can keep up beats a big gift you later regret.
- ✓ Check a charity before you give and keep records. Starting with tax year 2026, you may deduct some cash gifts even if you don't itemize.

From a nonprofit. Every volunteer adviser is a fiduciary, which means they must put your interests first. We never sell your information.

Rather talk it through?

A volunteer financial adviser can help with your situation, one-on-one, for free.



Point your phone's camera at the code, or go to:

go.advisersgiveback.org/start

1

Most generosity isn't about money

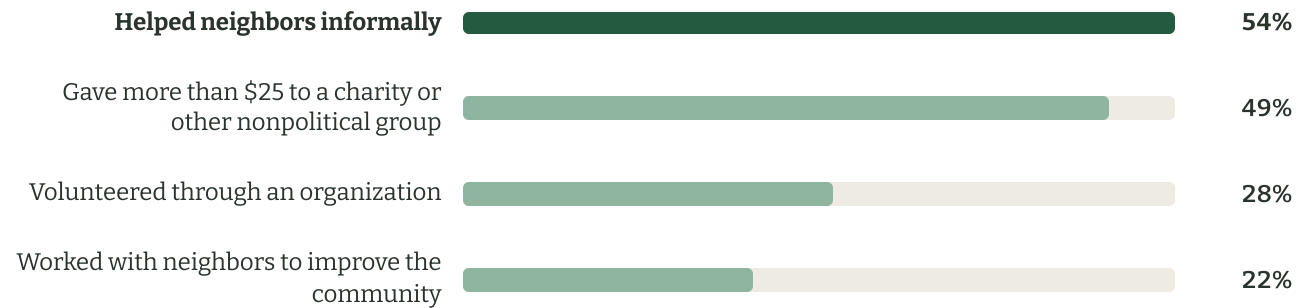
Generosity doesn't have to come with a big price tag. You can give time, a little money, or things you no longer use. And most people already do.

Between September 2022 and September 2023, more than half of Americans age 16 and older helped a neighbor informally, and about 28% volunteered through an organization. ¹ ² Informal help means things like house sitting, watching each other's

children or lending tools. And almost half gave more than \$25 to a charity or other nonpolitical group.¹

Helping a neighbor is the most common way people give back

Americans age 16 and older who did each, September 2022 to September 2023



Informal help means things like house sitting, watching a neighbor's children or lending tools. People could do more than one. Rounded to whole numbers.

Source: AmeriCorps, Office of Research and Evaluation, Renewed Engagement in American Civic Life (Volunteering and Civic Life in America Research Summary) (November 2024)

In other words, a lot of generosity happens in small, everyday ways. If you've ever picked up groceries for a neighbor or driven a friend to an appointment, you're already part of it.

*You don't need to be wealthy to be generous.
Giving back is about intention, not income.*

2

Why giving can feel good

Many people describe a good feeling after helping someone. Researchers have tried to test it. In a 2008 experiment, 46 college students were given \$5 or \$20 to spend by the end of the day, either on themselves or on someone else. That evening, the ones who spent it on others were happier, whether they'd had \$5 or \$20.^{3 4}

That was a small study, so the same researchers later tested the idea again with far more people. In a group of 712 students, those who bought something for a stranger in need were happier than those who bought for themselves. In two much larger studies, where people remembered a time they had spent money, one found no difference and the other found a small one. Their conclusion: giving does seem to lift happiness, but how much depends on how it's measured, and the lift is often small.⁴

Volunteering is also linked with better well-being. A review of long-term studies found that volunteers had lower rates of depression, higher life satisfaction and a lower risk of dying during the studies, though not better physical health. But experiments haven't

confirmed these results, so it's not clear that volunteering is the cause.⁵ It could be that healthier, happier people are simply more able to volunteer.

3

Give your time

Your time is one of the most valuable things you can give. Read to kids at the library, sort donations at a food pantry, or help at a school event. Libraries, schools, food banks and places of worship often know where help is needed.

If your schedule is tight, look for ways to help from home. In 2023, 18% of people who volunteered through an organization did some or all of it online.^{1 2}

18%

of people who volunteered through an organization did some or all of it online, 2023

It was the first time the survey asked about volunteering online.

Source: AmeriCorps, Office of Research and Evaluation, Renewed Engagement in American Civic Life (Volunteering and Civic Life in America Research Summary) (November 2024)

Set limits that protect your own energy. Volunteering works best when you can keep it up. One shift a month that you enjoy beats a big promise that wears you out.

4

Set a small, steady gift

You don't need to give hundreds to make a difference. A \$5 or \$10 monthly gift is easy to budget, and it makes giving a regular part of your life, not just something you do when you feel inspired. Over time, it can become part of who you are.

1 Pick one cause.

Choose something you care about: hunger, animals, your local library, a place of worship.

2 Pick an amount you won't miss.

Start small. You can raise it later.

3 Put it on a schedule.

A monthly gift on the same day as another bill is easy to plan around.

4 Keep the record.

Save the receipt or bank record for each gift.



Giving and taxes, starting with tax year 2026

Beginning with tax year 2026, if you don't itemize, you may deduct up to \$1,000 (\$2,000 if you file jointly) in cash gifts to certain qualified organizations. Gifts to individuals aren't deductible.⁶

For any cash gift, you need a bank record or a written note from the charity with its name, the date and the amount. For a gift of \$250 or more, you need a written acknowledgment from the charity.⁶ Rules and amounts can change, so check the [IRS page on charitable contributions](#) before you file.

5

Declutter for a cause

Donating things you no longer use clears space at home and helps meet someone else's real needs. Gently used books, clothes, kitchen items and even furniture can find new life through local shelters and community groups.

Call or check online before you drop things off. Many groups can only accept certain items, and a quick question saves you a wasted trip. If you itemize, you can generally deduct the fair market value of property you give to a qualified organization. The new deduction for people who don't itemize covers cash gifts only.⁶

6

Give wisely

A little checking helps make sure your gift does the good you intend. The Federal Trade Commission suggests a few habits:⁷

- **Don't let anyone rush you.** Pressure to give right now is something scammers do.
- **Pay by credit card or check.** If someone asks for cash, a gift card or a wire transfer, don't do it.
- **Check the charity.** The IRS [Tax Exempt Organization Search](#) tells you if a gift would be tax deductible.
- **Watch your statements.** Make sure you're charged only what you agreed to, and that you weren't signed up for a recurring gift by mistake.



Try this this month

Pick one cause and one way to give: a small monthly gift, one volunteer shift, or one bag of things to donate. Put it on your calendar. Then notice how it feels.

Giving fits best in a budget when you plan it, just like any other goal. If you'd like help building a giving plan that fits your values and your budget, a volunteer adviser can help you think it through, one-on-one and for free.

Questions to bring to your adviser

A volunteer adviser is ready when you are.

A volunteer adviser can look at your numbers with you and help you decide what to do first.

go.advisersgiveback.org/start



Sources

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