



The Belonging Forum

2027 Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program

Partner Organization: Serve the City Belgium

Project Title: Belonging on Both Sides: Measuring the Impact of Volunteering on Beneficiaries and Volunteers

2027 Samuel Fellows in Belonging:

Project Proposal

Partner Organization: Serve the City Belgium

Serve the City is a global volunteer movement founded in Brussels in 2005, built on the belief that many people doing small things together can make a big difference. In 2025, marking our 20th anniversary, Serve the City Belgium mobilized 3,293 regular and corporate volunteers who contributed over 35,000 volunteering hours across 50 projects in Brussels, Leuven and Wavre, spanning food outreach, education, social connection and practical support for people who are elderly, isolated, experiencing homelessness, refugees and newly arrived migrants, and people with disabilities. Rather than delivering large centralized programs, we connect volunteers directly with people through both one-off service days and ongoing, recurring placements, including Keep In Touch, our weekly programme pairing volunteers with isolated community members, which grew to 256 participants in 2025. Volunteers are matched through our own volunteer engagement platform, ServeNow, which we released as open source in 2025. We believe that consistent, personal relationships, not just services delivered, are what genuinely reduce isolation and build belonging.

Learn more at: www.servethecity.be

Location of the Project:

Serve the City Belgium is based in Belgium. This project is a hybrid role: we'd like the Fellow to spend an initial 2-3 months on-site with our team, so they genuinely experience Serve the City's work first-hand, joining service days, meeting volunteers and beneficiaries, and building the relationships that will inform their research. We see this in-person period as important to the Fellow's own sense of belonging in the work, not just a formality. The

subsequent research, data analysis and writing can then continue remotely. We'd also love for the Fellow's final presentation to take place in person, if the cohort format allows it.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Section 1: Description of the Project

This project will examine the impact of Serve the City Belgium's volunteer model on belonging and social connectedness, for both the people we serve and the volunteers who serve them. Serve the City connects volunteers with people experiencing isolation, including elderly residents, refugees, people experiencing homelessness, and people with disabilities, through recurring volunteer placements and one-off service days, coordinated through our internal platform, ServeNow.

The project builds on a 2021 independent economic impact assessment by Frontier Economics, which found that the wellbeing value generated for our volunteers (an estimated €778,000 across 968 volunteers) actually exceeded the direct monetary value of services delivered to beneficiaries (approx. €242,000), suggesting volunteering's biggest impact may be on the people who volunteer, not only those they serve. That estimate relied on existing UK literature rather than direct measurement. This project will use validated wellbeing and belonging measures collected directly from our own volunteers and beneficiaries, to test whether that effect holds today, why, and whether beneficiaries experience something similar.

We have anecdotal signs of this too, our Keep In Touch programme has grown largely through returning participants, but we have not measured it rigorously. The Fellow will combine validated survey instruments (covering loneliness, social connection, sense of community, and wellbeing) with the engagement data we already collect through ServeNow, to understand not just whether our model builds belonging, but under what conditions: for example, whether more frequent or longer-term contact produces

stronger outcomes than one-off encounters, and whether volunteers and beneficiaries benefit in similar or different ways.

Section 2: Goals of the Project

The project's central goal is to generate credible, rigorous evidence of the belonging and wellbeing impact of Serve the City Belgium's volunteer model, on both beneficiaries and volunteers, to inform our programming and strengthen our ability to communicate our impact to funders, partners, and the public. This falls primarily under research to inform programs, strategy, and community engagement: findings will shape how we design volunteer placements (for example, whether to prioritize longer-term, recurring matches over one-off service days) and how we train and support volunteers.

Specific goals include:

- Establishing a baseline understanding of the belonging and wellbeing outcomes experienced by both the people we serve and our volunteers.
- Identifying which aspects of our model (frequency, duration, type of activity) are most strongly associated with positive outcomes.
- Producing a research report we can share with current and prospective funders, partners, and volunteers to demonstrate the real, human impact of showing up consistently for people.
- Building on and extending our 2021 Frontier Economics economic impact assessment, which first surfaced volunteer wellbeing as a major outcome of our model, by measuring it directly rather than through literature-based estimates, and contributing more broadly to the evidence base on person-to-person volunteering as a tool against social isolation.

Section 3: Guiding Questions

Guiding questions:

- Does participation in Serve the City's volunteer model, as a beneficiary or as a volunteer, measurably improve outcomes related to belonging and social connectedness?
- Does the frequency or duration of volunteer-beneficiary contact affect the strength of these outcomes (a "dosage effect")?
- Are the impacts of participation similar for beneficiaries and for volunteers, or do they differ in kind or degree?

Intended audience:

Serve the City Belgium's staff and volunteer coordinators (to inform program design), our funders and institutional partners (to demonstrate impact), and the broader field of social-isolation researchers and practitioners.

Section 4: Research Methods & Dissemination Approach: The 3 Streams

We propose **three research streams**:

- **Creative**
- **Advocacy**
- **Academic**

The tracks are designed to articulate the possibilities of diverse Fellowship on belonging. The program recognizes that creative methods, advocacy-focused research, and academic research are all Fellowship. All three tracks have the potential to address similar topics. The **key difference is the outputs and methodologies**. The beauty of the tracks is that they all overlap and interweave, only strengthening each other and the Belonging Forum's impact. The streams **instill belonging in process and product**.

Project Stream & Methodological Approach

We propose this project sit within the Academic stream, given our goal of producing rigorous, credible evidence that can stand up to scrutiny from funders and be shared publicly with confidence.

Methodologically, we anticipate a mixed-methods approach:

- Quantitative: pre/post surveys using validated instruments (e.g. the UCLA Loneliness Scale, alongside a broader wellbeing/belonging measure) administered to both beneficiaries and volunteers, ideally benchmarked against a comparison group (e.g. people awaiting a volunteer match) where feasible.
- This would be paired with the engagement data Serve the City already collects through ServeNow (frequency, duration, and type of volunteer-beneficiary contact) to explore whether more sustained engagement corresponds to stronger outcomes. This is good timing: in December 2025 we launched a new impact-tracking capability within ServeNow, built on Salesforce, that lets project leaders record structured service data directly within the platform, so the dataset the Fellow would draw on is more complete and better structured than in previous years.
- Qualitative: a smaller number of semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries and volunteers, to add depth and context to the survey findings and surface stories the numbers alone can't capture.

We recognize that the Creative and Advocacy streams offer valuable ways to instill belonging in the research process itself, and we're open to the Fellow incorporating creative or participatory elements, for instance using interview material or storytelling to shape how findings are shared, even within an Academic frame. We'd welcome the final academic report being accompanied by a more accessible output (a short video, a set of quotes, a visual summary) that we can share more widely with volunteers, beneficiaries, and the public.

Section 5: Key Deliverables

- **Work plan** to serve as a preliminary blueprint for the project, including a budget plan which predicts and plans potential research costs to ensure responsible allocation of bursary funds.
- **1 Opinion Piece** (500 – 1,000 words) related to the project the Fellows are working on, posted to the Belonging Forum's website. Partners are welcome/encouraged to post the article as well.
- **A Final Output** in the Academic stream: a formal research report (20–35 pages), accompanied where possible by a published academic paper and/or a more accessible companion output (see Section 4).
- **A Final Presentation with the Cohort**

APPLICANT INFORMATION

About the Program/What the Program Offers

The Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program empowers young people, recent graduates, and people with lived experience to engage in meaningful research and community action. At the Belonging Forum, our mission is to build connectedness within and between communities through partnerships, research, programming, learning initiatives, and advocacy. At the Belonging Forum, fostering belonging is central to our work. The Belonging Forum approaches the definition of belonging as connection to the 4 Ps: people, place, power, and purpose. This is to say that belonging comes through our relationships with other people as well as through our rootedness in nature, our ability to influence social, political and economic decision-making, and our capacity to find shared meaning and purpose in our lives. The program offers a unique opportunity to apply the lens of belonging to issues that matter, to think intersectionally, and holistically

about the problems of the 21st century – while working alongside experts and community leaders.

This is a paid opportunity from February 8th – October 29th 2027. Fellows will carry out the research part-time on a schedule agreed between the Fellow, the partner, and the Belonging Forum. The Fellow will receive a bursary to support their work.

The Program offers:

- A flexible, part-time research opportunity.
- A bursary to support your research calculated based on cost of living where the Fellow is based and number of hours committed.
- Work with national and international community partners.
- Capacity building, skills development, & mentorship.
- Network and team building opportunities.
- All works produced by the Fellows are published on the Belonging Forum website and promoted on our social media channels.

Equity Statement:

We encourage all equity-seeking groups such as immigrants, Black and Indigenous communities, people of color, women, young and older people, 2SLGBTQ+ community members, and people with disabilities to apply. Please let us know if you need any accommodation throughout the application and interview process and we will be happy to support you.

Key Attributes and Skills in the Applicant:

We're looking for a Fellow with:

- An interest in social research methods (quantitative and/or mixed methods)

- A genuine curiosity about social connectedness, community, or volunteering.
- Strong written English.
- Useful, though not required, background includes:
 - Coursework or experience in sociology, social work, public health, psychology, or a related field.
 - Comfort engaging directly and sensitively with vulnerable populations, including elderly residents, refugees, and people experiencing homelessness or disability.
 - French is a very useful skill for this project: many of the elderly beneficiaries we work with do not speak English, and being able to survey or interview them directly in French will lead to richer, more accurate data.
 - Dutch is a plus given our Belgian context but not essential, as our team can support translation where needed.
- We especially welcome applicants with lived experience of volunteering, migration, or social isolation.

Thank you for your interest in the Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program.
Due to a high volume of applications, only those selected for an interview
will be contacted.