

**ENGAGING
YOUTH
EFFECTIVELY:**

A CASE STUDY FOR
VOLUNTEER CENTRES





Background

In 2010, Volunteer Canada and Manulife Financial released the **Bridging the Gap** research report, highlighting the results of a pan-Canadian research study that provided insights into the changing culture of volunteerism. The research identified gaps between what volunteers look for in volunteer opportunities, and what organizations currently offer, and also explored specific barriers and opportunities for effectively engaging volunteers in four vital demographic groups: youth, families, baby boomers, and employer-supported volunteers.

The partners are now focused on addressing the common barriers to involvement. To better engage young Canadians, a youth involvement model was developed and pilot tested by the Volunteer Action Centre of Kitchener-Waterloo. The goal was to create a framework for youth engagement that could be adapted to suit specific needs of communities across the country. The pilot project focused on building relationships with youth engagement collaborators and youth in Kitchener-Waterloo. The planning stages of the pilot began in December 2010, and the final phase will come to a close in spring 2012.





Need / Opportunity

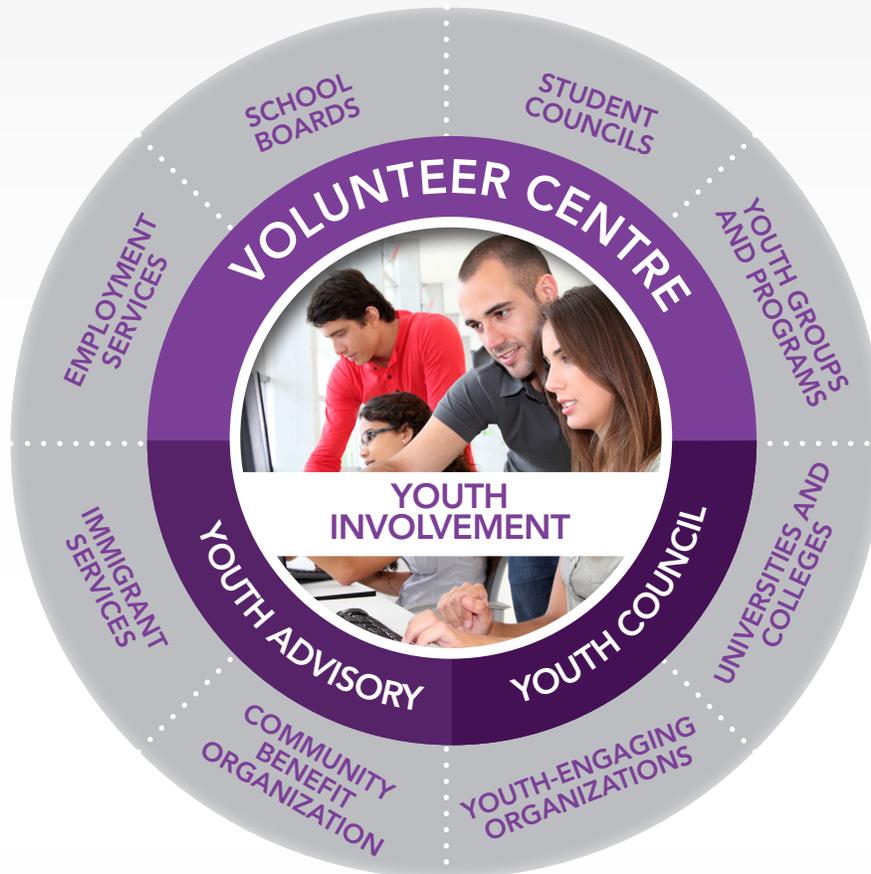
Canada's voluntary sector stands at a critical crossroad. Our '*uber volunteers*' – the **7 per cent** of volunteers who contribute **78 per cent** of volunteer hours – are aging, and the next generation is not necessarily following in their footsteps. It is critical that we fill these volunteering gaps in order to maintain healthy, resilient communities across Canada.

In Kitchener-Waterloo, as in most communities across Canada, several stakeholder groups focus on supporting, educating, and empowering youth. With a wide range of key players, there is a clear need for collaboration and knowledge sharing among all stakeholders, to maximize their collective impact. Volunteer centres serve as community engagement facilitators, integrating multiple agendas; encouraging collaboration; sharing knowledge and resources; and educating the community on youth engagement issues.

When planning began for the pilot project, it became clear that community feedback would be critical for developing a successful youth involvement framework. In particular, local youth and adults who live and work with young people could provide invaluable perspectives and advice. In order to tap into the ideas of these groups, two consulting committees were formed. The first group was a youth council, made up entirely of young people from the community, who brainstormed ideas for stronger youth involvement, and proposed new youth-involving community projects and programs. The second group formed a youth advisory committee, and was comprised of teachers, parents, school board representatives, and both staff and volunteers from local voluntary organizations and the volunteer centre.



Audiences / Collaborators



■ SCHOOL BOARDS

School boards and teachers are a vital connection in the development of a youth involvement initiative. Together, volunteer centres and educators can learn to provide each other with pertinent information and resources to enhance community participation among youth.

■ STUDENT COUNCILS, YOUTH GROUPS AND PROGRAMS

These are youth-serving groups that already engage youth and encourage their involvement. Representation of these groups on a youth advisory committee can provide important insight into effective strategies for engaging youth.

■ UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

Involving university and college students on the youth advisory committee and youth council can offer a unique perspective, and university-aged students can serve as mentors to high school students involved in the youth council.

■ YOUTH-ENGAGING ORGANIZATIONS

Some community organizations are highly successful at involving and retaining youth volunteers. These organizations have programs and procedures targeted specifically toward youth involvement.

■ OTHER COMMUNITY-BENEFIT ORGANIZATIONS

These community organizations may have limited or no previous experience engaging youth, but are open to trying. They demonstrate the greatest potential for immediate growth of youth involvement.

■ IMMIGRANT AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

These organizations often use volunteering as a tool for integration, skill development and networking (both personal and professional).



Goals and Objectives

Through the pilot project, the partners aimed to:

- Build relationships between the volunteer centre and local youth-focused groups and facilitate dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders working on youth engagement strategies.
- Provide youth with tools and resources that empower them to find positive, interesting, and relevant volunteer opportunities.
- Build the capacity of local volunteer-involving organizations to develop and promote youth-friendly volunteer opportunities.
- Inspire students to embrace a lifelong commitment to community involvement.
- Empower youth to be involved at the decision-making and governance levels within their communities.





Implementation

Based on the experience of the Kitchener-Waterloo Volunteer Action Centre, the following five steps aim to assist other volunteer centres in involving youth in community through volunteering:

1. INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

Assess your capacity to take on this kind of project before engaging in new initiatives. Existing resources like websites and databases, a list of external links or print materials might be a good start. Funding is essential to creating and sustaining new programs targeting youth involvement. Ensure your volunteer centre has the internal capacity to undertake a youth community engagement program.

2. RESOURCE AND PARTNERSHIP IDENTIFICATION

Seek out useful resources through member organizations. Speak to local politicians, school boards, foundations, service clubs and corporations that have a focus on youth. Discuss potential avenues for partnership and collaboration in the area of youth engagement.

Examples of connections created through the Kitchener-Waterloo pilot:

Manulife Financial – funding the pilot project

Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration – Change the World Youth Challenge

Libro Financial – Community Builder Grants supporting youth leadership

Alliance for Children and Youth – a network of youth-serving organizations

Waterloo Regional District School Board

Waterloo Catholic District School Board

3. DEVELOP A PLAN FOR CONNECTING

Involve a small working group of partners to discuss strategies that will work best for your community. Leveraging the expertise of practitioners in your community will give your plan its best chance for

success. The Volunteer Action Centre engaged the guidance heads from both the Catholic and public school boards and a staff member from Pathways to Education and Alliance for Children and Youth. Remember to include time in your plan for building strategic relationships.

Once you have developed an action plan, a communication plan is essential for promoting your youth involvement initiative. The communication plan should include social media outreach to youth, through channels such as Facebook. In Kitchener Waterloo, school board representatives have been vital in sharing information via weekly updates that are also disseminated to a growing audience of youth and adult allies.

4. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING

Take time to develop relationships that will move your youth involvement agenda forward. Design activities intended to develop and test these relationships. Invest the time and expertise of staff and youth volunteers in identifying existing local youth serving organizations, alliances, industries and resources. This will help build awareness of your mission and strengthen community ties as you grow.

A Youth Advisory Committee can attract a variety of adult allies who work closely with local youth. Representation from school boards, teachers, youth-serving and youth-engaging organizations, young professionals, parents, guidance counselors, recreation / leadership programs and volunteer centre staff or volunteers can create a vibrant network for discussions.

5. ENCOURAGE YOUTH TO TAKE LEADERSHIP

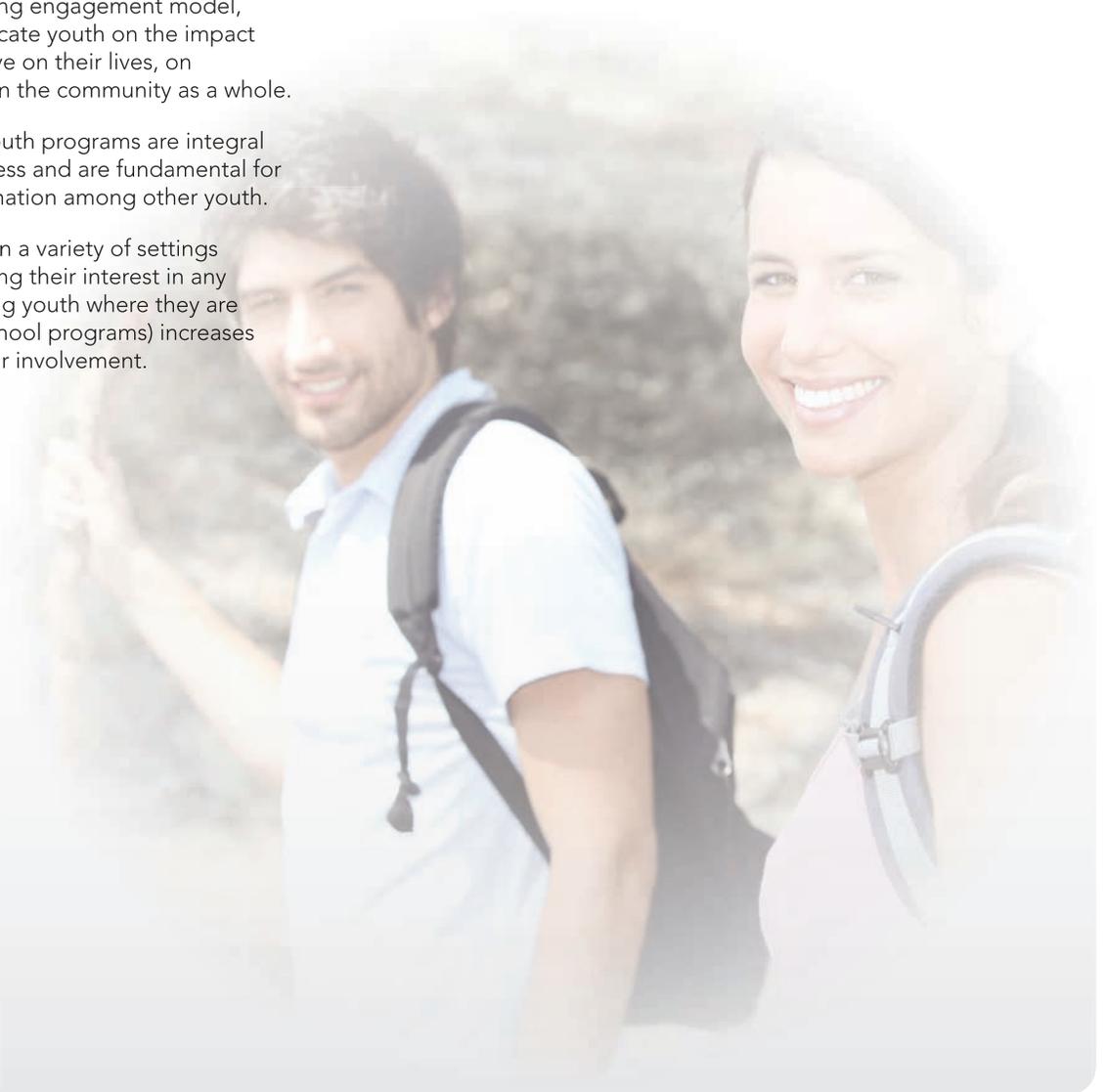
A Youth Council connects youth from across the community to work together to develop ideas, tools, and to explore existing successful experiences. A youth-driven committee can inspire new projects and create ideas for stronger, more effective engagement. A committee of youth is an invaluable tool for connecting and spreading your message to other youth outside the volunteer centre's current networks.



Key Learnings

The pilot project undertaken by the Volunteer Action Centre of Kitchener-Waterloo provided some valuable insights and lessons for future implementation in communities across the country. Key learnings from the pilot include:

- Strong relationships within the community are fundamental to the success of this model. Though it takes time to build the trust and open communication necessary, forging solid relationships between the volunteer centre and community stakeholder groups is a critical step in the effective integration of a youth involvement model.
- Including youth in planning and strategy sessions is integral to receiving their support and ensuring plans reflect the needs and interests of young citizens.
- To create a compelling engagement model, it's important to educate youth on the impact volunteering can have on their lives, on organizations, and on the community as a whole.
- Youth groups and youth programs are integral to the advisory process and are fundamental for disseminating information among other youth.
- Approaching youth in a variety of settings is important to gaining their interest in any organization. Meeting youth where they are (i.e. schools, after-school programs) increases the likelihood of their involvement.





Project Outcomes

The pilot project raised awareness in the Kitchener-Waterloo region, specifically among youth, of the wide range of youth-serving programs in the community. Through the youth involvement pilot, all participating stakeholder groups noted increased collaboration and better sharing of resources, information, and opportunities among participants.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED THROUGH THE PILOT PROJECT:

YOUTH COUNCIL:

- 30 local youth became involved in the council
- Students represented eight local schools and two school boards, including the only French high school in the region
- Six meetings were held, and youth council members contributed 150 hours of their time to the initiative

ADULT ALLIES:

- The pilot project engaged a total of 80 adult allies, including:
 - 50 mentors (parents, teachers, speakers, student teachers, young professionals)
 - 30 youth-serving organizations / programs

COLLABORATION AND SHARING WITH SCHOOLS:

SCHOOL CONTACTS:

- 100 school contacts receive the Action Centre's weekly communication.
- These include: representatives from two school boards, high school principals, guidance councilors, vice principals in charge of student activities, teachers, representatives from alternative at-risk youth programs, and English as a Second Language educators.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PILOT PROJECT, PLEASE CONTACT:

Dianne Boston Nyp, Voluntary Action Centre of Kitchener-Waterloo,
dianne@volunteerkw.ca

Paula Speevak-Sladowski,
Volunteer Canada,
pspeevak-sladowski@volunteer.ca

