

Join the Movement to Create a National Volunteer Action Strategy

IT'S TIME





We stand at a critical juncture where the power of volunteering can help us ease loneliness, address social challenges, and create a stronger, more connected Canada.

CONTENTS

07

Volunteers
Create a Better
Canada

13

A Challenging
Moment for
Volunteerism

21

What Can We
Do? Where Can
We Start?

27

How You
Can Help

33

Our
Vision

39

Get
Involved

43

About Volunteer Canada



**VOLUNTEERS
CREATE A
BETTER
CANADA**

In 1967, Canada launched a national volunteer strategy to coincide with the celebration of the country's centennial.

It was aimed at fostering a spirit of unity, pride, and community involvement and encouraged everyone to contribute their time and skills to local events, community improvement, educational programs, and charitable initiatives.

Together, we celebrated Canada's history and achievements; received powerful statements from Indigenous Peoples affirming truth through art and exhibition; organized and participated in a wide array of cultural events, exhibitions, and artistic performances showcasing Canada's diverse cultures; worked on projects that preserved and highlighted heritage; created parks, built monuments, and upgraded infrastructure; encouraged volunteer involvement in schools; and volunteers helped showcase Canada's attractions and tourism potential.

For decades, volunteering was a real success. If you grew up in Canada, you may not have realized all the different places volunteerism and participation—even your own—were part of your life.

Perhaps your parents volunteered to organize bonspiels and league schedules

at the curling club. Maybe you put on your uniform for Girl Guides or Cub Scouts, where a leader volunteering their time taught you how to make a craft or tie a knot. On Sundays, maybe you sang in the choir. Sometimes you picked up litter at the beach or helped your community through a food bank or home-building project. In First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, you may have seen people giving their time to organize a powwow, potlatch, or other celebrations and healing events.¹



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Volunteering is so pervasive it's invisible. We take for granted all the things that have been pioneered by concerned, active volunteers.

Susan J. Ellis

Author and Volunteer Management Expert

Thanks—in large part—to the lasting legacy of the 1967 national strategy, volunteering was tightly woven into the fabric of everyday community life.

But no matter if we have called Canada home for decades or days, the connection we feel in our communities makes our lives better. And participating in our communities delivers benefits like humanitarian and social services, health benefits, environmental conservation, youth engagement and education, and animal welfare.

But the sector doesn't just deliver services—it makes a huge economic impact.



According to Imagine Canada, charities and nonprofits add about 8.3% or \$192 billion to Canada's GDP.² That's almost as much as the financial services sector (3.6% or \$70 billion, as of September 2023)³ and oil and gas (6.4% or \$139.2 billion as per StatsCan data, 2019)⁴ sectors combined.

And volunteers are in many more places than just our charities and nonprofits. In every community, volunteers step up to help with local events, run sports teams, and support the things they care about like training to be on their local Search and Rescue or volunteer firefighting crew, and informally, like shoveling a neighbour's driveway.

Not only does the sector deliver services we rely on and create economic impact we can't deny, but if we participate as a volunteer, it also makes us feel good. Social connection lowers our anxiety and depression, helps us regulate our emotions, increases self-esteem and empathy, and boosts our immune systems.⁵

In the past, volunteering has been so intertwined with what it means to call Canada home that it's hidden in plain sight. Sometimes, we only notice what volunteers do when they're not there.

Unfortunately, that seems to be what's happening now.

Volunteerism is in trouble.





A CHALLENGING MOMENT FOR VOLUNTEERISM

We're seeing signs that volunteerism in Canada is on the decline.

If you're a kid growing up today, you might be one of the thousands of young people stuck on waiting lists hoping to become a Girl Guide or Cub Scout because there aren't enough volunteer leaders. Kids must wait over two years for a Big Brother or Big Sister mentor. Families today are squeezed. Between raising kids, caring for their aging parents, long hours on the job and the rising cost of living, we need to make it as easy as possible to give time.

At the same time, we're definitely in the middle of a **loneliness epidemic**. Statistics Canada tells us 40 percent of us feel lonely some or all of the time, especially single people and people who live alone.⁶ In the United States, the Surgeon General has declared the loneliness epidemic a public health crisis like tobacco, obesity, and addiction.⁷

But we don't have to be alone. We know from our past that people who volunteer are more connected to their communities and experience a greater sense of belonging and inclusion, which we know has a range of positive benefits, like better health outcomes.

Since the 1967 volunteer strategy, a lot has changed. Canada's cultural makeup now includes more and more newcomers, who greatly contribute to our social and economic prosperity—and who need to be welcomed and supported. Everyone is feeling financial pressure as the cost of living continues to rise. And because the pandemic unlocked the capacity for hybrid or online work, a lot of us now choose to work that way.



We have to think more expansively [about volunteering], and adapt accordingly. And if we can do that, I think more people will step out—because we offer them a different way of conceptualizing and thinking about it.

Barbara Grantham
President and CEO, CARE Canada

The Pandemic

Maybe all of this is why we’re hearing from our members that, after the pandemic, a lot of volunteers didn’t come back. The 2023 Giving Report by Canada Helps (an annual look at the state of the charitable sector in Canada) backs this up. It showed:

55.2% of charities have fewer volunteers than before the pandemic.

41.8% of charities are highly concerned about attracting volunteers.

42% of charities are highly concerned about volunteer burnout.⁸

According to Statistics Canada, in 2022, 67% of volunteer organizations reported that they were running short of volunteers, 51% struggled to retain volunteers, and 42% faced difficulties in securing volunteers committed to long-term roles.⁹

In Ontario, the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) reported a 74% increase in demand for services in 2022. And 1 in 5 organizations with paid staff report that their employees are working more hours to close a volunteer gap, leading to employee burnout.¹⁰

And in British Columbia, a Volunteer Victoria 2021 survey showed the pandemic affected the volunteer habits of seniors: 14.52% stopped all volunteering activities, and 31.12% reduced volunteering activities.¹¹ People are no longer in the habit of showing up in person.

Hybrid Work

Just like workers, many volunteers want to help in a hybrid or virtual way. Like it did in businesses, COVID-19 provided an opportunity to rethink how nonprofits and charities operate. So, meetings stayed on Zoom. Recruiting, managing, and retaining could be done online. And volunteers contributed in ways they could from wherever they were, like creating social media posts, telephoning assurance for older adults, creating graphic design, and completing financial analyses.

These new habits may have a lasting impact as many people now prefer to contribute their time virtually, without leaving their homes.

Strapped Millennials

Whether they want to leave their homes or not, many young people are too pinched and financially stressed to give their time. That’s alarming.

In The 2023 Giving Report, we also learned that due to increased financial pressure since the pandemic, more Canadians are turning to charitable services to meet basic needs like shelter, food, and clothing.

At the same time, Canadians are donating less money to support those charities. In fact, 40.3% of charities have experienced a lasting increase in demand since the pandemic, and 57.3% of charities cannot meet current levels of demand.¹²

Post-pandemic volunteerism challenges

74%

increase in demand for nonprofit services in 2022

67%

of volunteer organizations reported that they were running short on volunteers

51%

of volunteer organizations struggled to retain volunteers

42%

of volunteer organizations struggled in securing long-term volunteer roles

Case Study: A Challenging Moment for Food Security Organizations

We're all familiar with the rising cost of food and transportation, so food security organizations such as Meals on Wheels face a unique pinch. They rely on volunteers to deliver on their mission, and perhaps they had a volunteer manager to help organize, train, and recruit them. With food costs up, the volunteer manager position is let go to pay for the food. In the short term, you have the funding to pay for the food. But in the long term, you're less able to recruit and retain the necessary volunteers to deliver on your mission. It's a vicious cycle.

Connecting Volunteers with Opportunities

Meanwhile there are lots of people who want to help, but don't know how. Newcomers, for example, use volunteer roles as opportunities to connect with their new communities, build networks, practice their new language, gain valuable experience, and contribute their skills.

And while there are signs that volunteers are holding back, we also know people who do come forward are falling through the cracks. Potential volunteers can be left hanging because the host organization has reduced capacity to work with volunteers. For volunteers, it can take months to find a placement that is close to home, is a fit for time, and matches their skills. People may feel their time is not consistent enough or that they don't have enough to offer. Or they are not sure where to look to find opportunities that align with their interests, skills, availability, and location.

We need to better harness the energy and goodwill that is out there.

It's the Tip of the Iceberg

These challenges—and more—are the outlines of a crisis that has come into view. But we don't fully know why volunteers aren't coming in, or staying home, or what will make them come back or join for the first time. We're missing the data, and where we have data, it's patchy and limited.

Canada has changed significantly since the last time we had a national volunteering strategy. It's time we did that again. To keep Canadians engaged and participating in ways that benefit themselves and their communities, we need to know more about the current state of the volunteer sector to restore it.

Volunteer Canada was asked to lead that important work.

In 2019, as part of a broader effort to modernize the charitable sector, a Special Senate Committee on Canada's Charitable Sector recommended that the Canadian government "implement a national volunteer strategy to encourage volunteerism by all Canadians in their communities." The committee made the recommendation in recognition that "the needs of northern, rural and urban communities are unique." It recommended that Volunteer Canada lead this work.



**WHAT
CAN WE DO?
WHERE
DO WE START?**

Canadians—whether they’re in business, government or members of a community—need to come together and get to work to address the volunteerism challenges that affect us all.

01

Step one is to learn. We need to conduct research, collect data, and gather stories to fully understand how volunteering has changed post-pandemic, and if—or how—it has recovered.

Canadians need to know:

- How do people want to step up in their communities?
- What could we do to enable people to participate?
- Could we change how people think of volunteering?



02

Step two is to use this learning to create a new, informed **National Volunteer Action Strategy for Canada** that will take us into the second half of this century.



A National Volunteer Action Strategy will address the volunteer crisis by:

01

Getting everyone on the same page about the problem and inspiring them to act.

02

Creating a network that links volunteer centres, organizations, and communities so people can work together effectively and have a say in that work.

03

Adapting to the changes in volunteering and bringing in new ways to measure it.

04

Boosting the importance of volunteering and starting a movement that makes it a key part of Canadian identity.

A National Volunteer Action Strategy could address democratic and civic erosion, social cohesion, inclusion, and belonging by:

01

Showing volunteering as a way to combat social isolation, add meaning to our lives, and have some fun.

02

Changing how we think about fairness and justice in volunteering and participation so it's more inclusive and breaks down barriers.

03

Making our democracy stronger.

A National Volunteer Action Strategy could address future generations and sustainability by:

01

Setting the stage to direct volunteer efforts toward combating climate change, mitigating climate risk, and better responding to emergencies.

02

Preparing for volunteers to step up during future pandemics or other crises.



HOW YOU CAN HELP BRING BACK VOLUNTEERISM IN CANADA

To help us meet the moment and properly address the crisis in volunteering and participation, Volunteer Canada is launching a \$1M Participation 2030 Campaign. Monies raised will support:

- Government relations, outreach, and policy development
- Coordination and planning to address barriers and build pathways to participation specific to demographics and geographies
- Extensive community consultations across the country
- Landscape review, benchmarking, polling and research
- Communication and outreach
- Project coordination



So, where do you fit in? You have a role to play. We're calling on:

Donors

Your support, whether in the form of your time in partnership or financial resources, will have a profound impact. Your contributions will directly result in happier, healthier, and more resilient and connected communities.

Businesses

Live your corporate values by donating to revitalize volunteerism. Volunteering is important to your employees: it fosters a sense of meaning, and strengthens community ties. When you participate as a business, it increases your brand's visibility, improves your public image, and attracts top talent. Your financial support towards creating a National Volunteer Action Strategy is good for society and beneficial for your business.

Leaders

Your support can make a difference. Building volunteerism in the community showcases your commitment to the well-being of Canadians. Joining our efforts to create a National Volunteer Action Strategy through donation and discussion helps shape a brighter future for people who call Canada home. Together, we have an opportunity to build up and revitalize volunteering so it can bring widespread benefits to people on both sides of the action and directly support public services.

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There is a group of people who are desperately lonely, disconnected, and unincluded. Most people are excluded because of the system, and they feel that they don't have a role. There is an opportunity to address that with volunteerism.

Jehad Aliweiwi
CEO, Laidlaw Foundation





OUR VISION



WE RISE BY LIFTING OTHERS.

With your help, we'll learn what we need to know to create an informed strategy that enables an environment for volunteerism and for the volunteer sector.

When we get it right, participating in our communities would once again become second nature. But the ways we participate may be new and reflective of new technology, the changing needs of volunteers, and roles may be more flexible to accommodate the time people have to offer.

We would enhance the capacity of organizations to deliver on their missions, so that when people need help, it's there for them. There would be tools in place, and infrastructure and backbone supports that enable them to get funding, and all the other things they need to do their work—like support with screening, how-to training materials, and shared resources.

Volunteering would be recognized as a way to upskill, or reskill in a dynamic labour market. We could help people build valuable leadership skills, grow personal and professional networks, and provide enriching life experience by promoting and encouraging participation as volunteers in their communities. We could advocate for supports like course credit, and other incentives in exchange for volunteer hours. And finally, there could be a stronger understanding and recognition for the role of volunteers, and the effort required to properly recruit, train, and retain them.

Imagine if people calling Canada home could create a profile online that included their available time, the skills they have to offer, the themes they're interested in, and when they'd like to get started. Maybe they've already completed screening, or a background check and that information is housed in one place, virtually, for any volunteer manager looking to connect with participants. Volunteer managers, on the other hand, could have access to shared resources like a play book on how best to engage with youth, or older adults to save them time, and help them quickly adopt best practices. How much more connected would we all feel if we could put up our hand somehow and say, **"I've got three hours this weekend—where could I help?"** and quickly get a response? What kind of meaning could that add to our collective experience? Who might we meet? What might we learn, about ourselves, or about our neighbours?

That's why we need a National Volunteer Action Strategy that involves all sectors: charities and nonprofits, governments, businesses, and unions. We need consultations on the state of volunteering, the needs of communities, and participation levels across the country. That understanding would only be complete with a specific focus on older adults, youth, grassroots organizations, ethnocultural, and Indigenous communities.

While a lot has changed, some things never will. Volunteering is an act of good citizenship. And from coast to coast to coast, people—like you—want to help themselves, their families, and their neighbours thrive—while feeling connected and supported.

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GET INVOLVED

Your contribution
makes you part of a new
participation movement
in Canada by helping
us set the stage for a
National Volunteer
Action Strategy.

Get in touch today:

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ABOUT VOLUNTEER CANADA

Since 1977, Volunteer Canada has provided leadership and expertise on volunteerism; promoted and facilitated volunteer engagements; and convened, connected, and collaborated with all sectors, including Volunteer Centres, non-profit organizations, businesses, government, and educational institutions. Today Volunteer Canada supports 1,100 organizational members in delivering on their missions. We have been tapped to create a National Volunteer Action Strategy because of our role as a voice for the movement.

Mission

We advance volunteerism to grow connection, community and belonging.

Vision

The value of one, the power of many.



Endnotes

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