

THE VOLUNTEERING LENS OF COVID-19: FALL 2020 SURVEY

Impacts of COVID-19 on volunteer engagement

Joint report from Volunteer Canada, Volunteer Management

Professionals of Canada and spinktank

December 2020



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a profound impact on our health, the economy, and our social wellbeing, while illuminating the vulnerabilities and inequities in communities. This has placed enormous stress on the non-profit sector, as basic operations have been disrupted, resources have decreased, and the need for services has spiked. Volunteer Canada, in collaboration with Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada (VMPC) and spinktank, sought to better understand how volunteer engagement has been affected by the continuing pandemic, to better equip us to provide support and leadership.

Insights were gathered from 408 non-profit organizations and 279 volunteers, through a survey conducted in October 2020. Other studies conducted, since April 2020¹ provided context for this report. This report provides highlights from the survey in five sections:

1

Assess, adapt
and innovate

2

Engagement,
isolation and
re-engagement

3

Infrastructure
and capacity
for volunteer
engagement

4

Support and
leadership for
the road ahead

5

Questions
for
consideration

Context

On March 15, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 Pandemic.² In Canada, public health officials directed people to shelter in place and only essential services were permitted to stay open. Over time, each province, territory and municipality provided direction, based on their unique circumstances. The common standards included physical distancing, wearing masks and limiting contact with those outside of one's household. Older adults and other vulnerable populations were advised to be extra vigilant with these measures. Non-profit organizations determined which programs, services and activities to suspend, cancel, postpone or adapt. Volunteer engagement fluctuated depending on the decisions of the organizations and the vulnerabilities of their volunteers. The first wave of the pandemic was at its peak in May 2020 and the second wave began in October 2020.

Assess, Adapt and Innovate

ASSESS

Early in the pandemic, organizations had to assess their operations to balance the need for keeping staff, volunteers and clients safe while continuing to provide essential services to vulnerable populations. Almost all organizations were impacted in some way: suspending, postponing or cancelling some programs, services or activities; cancelling or reducing in-person volunteer involvement; transitioning some volunteer roles to virtual delivery; modifying in-person roles to lower touch/increasing health and safety practices; or increasing or expanding programs³.

Challenges facing organizations today

- Staff providing services with fewer volunteers
- Difficulty finding time to develop new role descriptions and transition existing volunteer roles to virtual roles
- Too many volunteer applications for positions available
- Not enough staff to support volunteer engagement
- Difficulty finding time to plan, recruit and train volunteers while providing services
- Difficulty accessing technology for volunteers in virtual roles
- Difficulty providing training and supports for volunteers to work remotely
- Not enough volunteers to deliver programs and services
- Difficulty adapting and delivering volunteer orientation and training
- Difficulty obtaining Police Record Checks/ Vulnerable Sector Checks for volunteers
- Difficulty recruiting volunteers

ADAPT

During the period of June – October 2020, 49% of organizations had restarted some suspended programs, 48% had developed new programs or services, 43% had begun to re-engage volunteers for in-person roles, and 38% for virtual volunteering roles. Almost half of organizations had or were developing new volunteer roles, and 31% had redeployed existing volunteers to new roles. While 28% reported a reduced number of volunteer roles, 12% of organizations expanded due to increased demand for their programs and services.

One of the most common adaptations remains the shift to virtual volunteering and program delivery, a trend consistent with findings in Volunteer Canada's earlier survey⁴: 56% of organizations indicated they

now offer some virtual volunteering roles. Those with virtual volunteering roles prior to COVID-19 noted an increase from 9% to about half of current roles. Almost half (48%) of those volunteer roles will continue to be virtual for the foreseeable future (either new or adapted).

This shift to virtual formats is not accessible to all organizations: 30% of respondents indicated they are not able to offer or adapt to virtual roles or delivery of programs and services. Volunteers in these organizations reported enhanced health and safety measures in place for their roles, lower touch options and additional orientation and/or training.

INNOVATE More than 40% of organizations indicated they had or would be developing new programs and services to meet community needs, sometimes engaging volunteers with different skills and more technological ability.

The adaptation to virtual has also presented opportunities for innovation. Though many organizations transitioned existing volunteer roles to virtual formats, in other cases they developed new virtual volunteering roles. However, for roles adapted to virtual, organizations anticipate almost 50% will not remain in that format: they will revert to in-person formats when possible. This differs for new virtual volunteering roles, where organizations see 50% of the roles remaining virtual, and 30% moving to in-person formats. The pandemic may be pushing organizations to virtual formats where possible, but the pull of in-person volunteering remains.

Isolation, Engagement and Re-engagement

ISOLATION Organizations continue to be challenged with keeping volunteers engaged during COVID-19: those who have stepped away from volunteering, those in virtual or remote roles, volunteers in new or adapted roles, and new volunteers. Communication with those volunteers - developing and supporting connections to the organization and between volunteers - especially those in virtual volunteering roles and those unable to volunteer, becomes more important as concerns grow related to social isolation, mental health and wellness and COVID fatigue.

Critical to organizations in the next 6-12 months

49% keeping previous volunteers engaged

38% supporting mental health and wellness of staff, volunteers and clients

23% keeping volunteers in virtual volunteering or remote roles engaged

ENGAGEMENT Volunteers who remained active during COVID-19 indicated they were able to volunteer during COVID-19 because of flexibility in their schedule, having more time to volunteer, having access to and comfort using technology. For both active volunteers and those who returned to active volunteering during this time, more than 60% kept the same role. More than 40% in both groups indicated they are in adapted or new roles with the same organization.

FACTORS AFFECTING ABILITY TO VOLUNTEER	ACTIVE VOLUNTEERS	INACTIVE VOLUNTEERS
I am comfortable using technology to volunteer	57%	24%
I have more flexibility in my schedule	56%	19%
I have access to technology	50%	27%
I have more time available to volunteer now	42%	24%
I am over the age of 65	26%	41%
I have 'online fatigue' (too much time online)	21%	21%
I am living with someone over age 65	14%	25%
My health concerns	9%	25%
I am living with someone with health concerns	8%	17%
I have less time to volunteer now	8%	9%

Many organizations (41%) continued to experience a moderate or significant decrease in volunteer interest and availability during this time. Organizations attributed this to volunteers' decision not to volunteer because of age, individual health concerns, safety concerns or other; volunteers not able to engage through virtual volunteering; program, service or event suspended or postponed and no other role available for volunteer; organizational decision not to engage volunteers during this time; or government direction not to engage volunteers during this time. 28% of organizations also reported a reduction in volunteer roles. This decline in volunteers has impacted organizations' ability to deliver programs and services from a great impact (10%) to moderate (21%) to not at all (12%).

It is key that organizations communicate regularly with their volunteers. They continue to be in touch by email, through newsletters, group video conferencing calls, telephone calls, offering free online learning, offering self-care information/sessions and creating volunteer to volunteer telephone trees. Volunteers want to stay connected to their organization even if they are not able to volunteer at this time. They are interested in updates on how the organization and staff are faring, COVID-19 information, training, safety, how

they could help from home, re-opening and re-engagement plans, connection opportunities with fellow volunteers, other volunteer opportunities... or a friendly hello.

"Just keep in touch...let us know they know who we are, and that we are valued."

INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

With many non-profits reporting a decrease in volunteering and fewer roles available, some volunteers contributed to their communities in different ways, with 17% of active volunteers helping out in their neighbourhood or with a grassroots group. Those connections extended to organizations as well, with almost half (46%) indicating they had collaborated with neighbourhood or grassroots groups in their community in some way.

"(Collaborating led to)...new contacts, program opportunities and volunteers"

RE-ENGAGEMENT

Many volunteers are waiting to volunteer again. Consistent with Volunteer Canada's Spring 2020 survey, more than 80% of previous volunteers intend to return if health and safety practices are in place. However, while 52% of organizations said planning to re-engage volunteers was an important issue over the coming months, 63% indicated they do not have, or are unsure if they have, a transition plan for volunteers, and less than 30% have or intend to develop a stewardship plan for volunteers who do not return to their organization. More than 40% of organizations indicated they had or would be developing new programs and services and would need volunteers with different skills and more technological ability. They felt that only 46% of their existing volunteer base would be interested in supporting any new programs, and 45% would be a fit for those new programs.

“Challenges bringing back our existing and trained volunteers to do different or adapted roles...not providing them with the opportunities they want. (We are)...offering lower contact roles but many decline. Getting management to consider reestablishment of volunteers in higher risk areas where impact of volunteers is positive and significant.”

Critical issues for organizations in the next 6-12 months

- 69% Health and safety of staff, volunteers and clients
- 59% Determining if program, service or delivery adaptations would be maintained or changed
- 59% 'COVID fatigue' (staff and volunteers)
- 52% Planning to re-engage volunteers
- 49% Keeping previous volunteers engaged
- 42% Planning for a next wave of the pandemic
- 38% Supporting mental health and wellness of staff, volunteers and clients

Capacity and Infrastructure

Volunteering, both informal and formal, flourishes when supports are in place to keep people safe and benefit most from people's time and talents. Those supports not only include volunteer management practices, but also the skills and knowledge of an experienced leader of volunteers.

A concerning trend in the data was the decline in dedicated volunteer engagement staff, either through reassigned duties, being laid off/furloughed or being let go. For many organizations with a large portion of their volunteer base unable to continue in their pre-pandemic roles, decisions were made to eliminate or re-allocate volunteer engagement staff.

37% of volunteer engagement staff indicated their duties had been changed to non-volunteer engagement tasks. A recurring theme heard from respondents was a concern that even if they

returned to their volunteer engagement duties, it may be in addition to the other duties they've taken on while volunteer involvement was suspended;

“My role has changed significantly. I worry about what expectations will be like post COVID-19. Will I be expected to continue my current duties as well as the volunteer and student coordinator role?”

A bright spot was the consistently high rate of volunteer engagement staff being involved in decision-making. Between March-June, 77% indicated they were involved in decision-making discussions at their organization with 19% not involved. That level held steady from June-October with 79% confirming they were involved and 18% not being part of those conversations.

Support and leadership for the road ahead

Organizations are examining their current strategies, structures and operations to determine what they need and how volunteers can best contribute to advancing their mission. This includes modifying volunteer roles, understanding new skill sets will be required, possibly fewer volunteer roles available due to continued social distancing restrictions, and reduced capacity to deliver their services.

Nonprofit organizations value the role of Volunteer Canada, volunteer centres and VMPC in supporting them during the pandemic for sharing information and resources, raising awareness about volunteer engagement issues and bringing together stakeholder groups.

“Uncertainty...(is a challenge) - planning in an environment where the ground is constantly shifting is a difficult prospect, thankfully we are all experiencing similar challenges in that sense so staying connected helps.”

	Volunteer Canada	Volunteer Centres	VMPC
Share information and updates	70%	59%	55%
Develop, curate and share adapted volunteer management resources and training	70%	47%	54%
Raise awareness about volunteer engagement	66%	49%	42%
Bring together stakeholder groups (non-profit organizations, volunteer centres, businesses, government departments, educational institutions)	55%	39%	34%
Bring together volunteer managers/leaders of volunteers	45%	52%	52%
Research on volunteering	61%	26%	35%
Provide 1:1 support to organizations or volunteer managers	33%	40%	33%
Promote volunteering opportunities	28%	54%	17%

Questions for consideration

COVID-19 has and will continue to have significant impacts on volunteerism and volunteer engagement. This report has highlighted a number of important findings - confirming trends from earlier surveys⁵ and helping us better understand the ongoing shifts and changing landscape we are all experiencing in the nonprofit and charitable sector.

Looking ahead, organizations anticipate changes to volunteering post-COVID

73% New and/or adapted programs and roles

45% Volunteers with more technology ability needed

44% Fewer volunteers

41% Volunteers with different skills needed

18% Same number of volunteers

18% More volunteers

17% Not enough volunteer engagement staff to support volunteers

This report also surfaced questions whose answers, individually and collectively, will help shape the sector and volunteerism in the immediate future. What the research has demonstrated over time is that while we are all living through the pandemic together, different organizations and volunteers are experiencing it differently. While there are no clear answers and the pandemic continues to evolve, it is clear that the nonprofit sector and volunteerism will continue to be integral to productive, resilient communities.

- ? How will organizations manage and plan for the uncertainty of evolving cycles of restrictions and reopening as the pandemic continues?
- ? How will organizations keep volunteers engaged and connected, both those who are not able to volunteer and those in virtual volunteering roles?
- ? What impact will 'COVID fatigue' and isolation have on staff and volunteers as the pandemic continues into 2021?
- ? Will organizations be able to recruit new volunteers or volunteers with different skills required for new and adapted roles?
- ? Will organizations who reduce volunteerism or who have not kept volunteers engaged see reduced support in other areas (time and money) in years to come?

REFERENCES

1. Volunteer Canada (July 2020) The Volunteering Lens of COVID-19
Ontario Nonprofit Network (August 2020) Risk, resilience and rebuilding communities: The state of the Ontario nonprofit sector three months into the COVID-19 crisis
Ontario Nonprofit Network (April 2020) Ontario Nonprofits and the Impact of COVID-19: A flash survey report
Imagine Canada (May 2020) Charities & the COVID-19 Pandemic
Statistics Canada (June 2020) Volunteering in Canada: Challenges and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic
2. The World Health Organization declared the novel corona virus, COVID-19, a pandemic on March 15, 2020.
3. Volunteer Canada (July 2020) The Volunteering Lens of COVID-19
4. Volunteer Canada (July 2020) The Volunteering Lens of COVID-19
5. Research on the impact of COVID-19 on nonprofit sector and volunteer engagement

Support and Resources



www.volunteer.ca



www.vmpc.ca



www.spinktank.ca