Written Submission for the 2025 Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Invest $1.5 million in 2025 to finalize the development and early implementation of the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS), a core component of national civic infrastructure which will benefit all Canadians, especially its 24 million volunteers.

Recommendation 2: Commit $30 million in 2026 to the creation of a community celebration and innovation fund, to mark the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) and amplify the impact of the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS).

Recommendation 3: Commit $50 million over three years to strengthen Canada's volunteer infrastructure, including core funding for Volunteer Centres and support for volunteer mobilization networks.

BACKGROUND

Canada's economic resilience depends not only on the productivity of its industry, but also on the strength of its social infrastructure. "People power" drives the systems which sustain health, education, care, and community well-being; volunteers are the invisible backbone of these systems. They play an essential role in solving complex problems, providing critical services, and strengthening civic ties. In a time of economic uncertainty, global volatility, and democratic strain, Canada must commit to revitalizing volunteerism.

As the recently released data from the General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (GSS-GVP) shows, Canadians participate at high levels, contributing 4.1 billion volunteer hours in 2023. This national asset is hiding in plain sight, but it is precarious and under-supported. Participation rates are in steep decline. Since 2018, formal volunteer participation has dropped from 41% to 32%, representing approximately 2.6 million fewer Canadians volunteering through organizations. Total formal volunteer hours fell by 28%, representing a loss of 1.2 billion hours of community support that has been especially severe in essential sectors, like hospitals. Informal volunteering has also decreased from 74% to 66%, its lowest level in over a decade.[1]

The steepest drops in participation are among women, young adults aged 25-34, and those with lower education levels. Critically, just 10% of volunteers now contribute 61% of all hours, revealing an overreliance on a shrinking and ageing core.[2] These declines point to a growing strain on our civic infrastructure. Left unaddressed, they threaten Canada's ability to maintain equitable service delivery while also fueling polarization and intensifying the loneliness epidemic.

Volunteer Centres and volunteer-engaging organizations are at the heart of the volunteer ecosystem. They connect individuals to meaningful opportunities, support frontline services such as hospitals, food banks, seniors' centres, arts groups, and newcomer-serving agencies, and ensure volunteering is inclusive nationwide. They also help seniors stay active and connected, reducing isolation and fostering intergenerational ties. But chronic underfunding and fragmented infrastructure continue to weaken the system, leaving many communities without the resources to meet urgent local needs.

Without sustained investment, Canada risks losing the chance to convert local resourcefulness into lasting resilience, strengthening social cohesion, civic participation, and economic inclusion. This is not only a social imperative but a strategic choice: volunteerism contributes an estimated $45-50 billion annually (roughly 2-2.5% of GDP[3]). Investing in infrastructure to support

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[1] Statistics Canada. (2025, June 23). *Canadians' volunteer rates and hours decline, particularly for formal volunteering*. The Daily. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250623/dq250623b-eng.htm

[2] Statistics Canada. (2025, June 23). *Canadians' volunteer rates and hours decline, particularly for formal volunteering*. The Daily. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250623/dq250623b-eng.htm

[3] Estimated economic value extrapolated from the Conference Board of Canada's *The Value of Volunteering in Canada* (2018), which valued 2 billion volunteer hours at $55.9 billion (2017, ~2.6% of GDP). Adjusted to

volunteerism also aligns with best practices in community wealth building, a local-first approach that prioritizes inclusive ownership, local assets, and community-led innovation.[4]

Supported by a strategic and meaningful $450,000 investment in Budget 2024, Volunteer Canada has engaged in deep consultation and research across the country, strengthened cross-sector partnerships; and begun synthesizing recommendations for release in 2026. Early insights mirror those from the GSS-GVP: volunteering is evolving rapidly, and communities are seeking opportunities that reflect shifting priorities, complex schedules, and the need for social connection.

We've laid the groundwork to address declining participation rates and rising social needs. Without renewed and scaled-up investment, momentum will stall, leaving the country without the civic infrastructure needed to meet rising social and economic demands. We urge the Government of Canada to seize the generational opportunity to strengthen one of our greatest assets: our people-powered systems of care, connection, and collective resilience.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Invest $1.5 million in 2025 to finalize the development and early implementation of the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS), a core component of national civic infrastructure which will benefit all Canadians, especially its 24 million volunteers.

Context

In 2019, the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector called for a national volunteer strategy. Since then, declining participation and growing social needs have exposed risks to Canada's social and economic resilience, highlighting the urgent need for a coordinated national response. With 2026 declared the International Year of Volunteers (IYV), a renewed investment will catalyze a Pan-Canadian call to action and demonstrate the Government's commitment to reversing the decline in civic participation and bolstering the country's people-powered infrastructure.

Volunteer Canada and its partners have laid essential groundwork for a National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS), a once-in-a-generation initiative to strengthen and future-proof Canada's volunteer ecosystem so that everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, can participate and benefit. Supported by a $450,000 investment in Budget 2024, Volunteer Canada and partners have already consulted over 1,000 stakeholders, developed a detailed NVAS Roadmap, launched demographic-specific engagement (youth, seniors, newcomers, and intergenerational groups), and piloted innovative models. We were encouraged by the June 2024 HUMA Committee report, which urged ESDC to co-develop the NVAS alongside

reflect 2023 participation data from the GSS-GVP, reporting 4.1 billion volunteer hours, down ~18% from 2018.

[4] Jamal, A., & Hachigian, H. M. (2025, March 21). Canada's economic vulnerabilities show why it must invest in the wealth of local communities. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/canadas-economic-vulnerabilities-show-why-it-must-invest-in-the-wealth-of-local-communities-250221

provinces, territories, and civil society, recognizing its potential to advance priorities in civic commitment, social cohesion, workforce development, and democratic renewal.[5]

Our momentum is strong, but the work is far from complete. With an additional $1.5 million investment, we will finalize tailored strategies, deepen partnerships with equity-deserving groups, produce evidence-based recommendations, and convene and launch a National Summit on Volunteering to galvanize participation during IYV and showcase Canadian leadership.

The investment will also support an expanded National Volunteer Week (NVW) campaign, a high-profile, unifying nationwide celebration to recognize and promote the contributions of over 24 million volunteers across the country. The Government of Canada has long been a lead partner in NVW, but past contribution levels do not match the scale or potential of this moment. A higher funding commitment will allow NVW to expand its reach, garnering significant national and local media attention and spotlighting the value of volunteering as essential civic infrastructure.

The Government of Canada has a precedent for investing in volunteerism during milestone moments, allocating $7.7 million to mark the 2001 IYV and more recently, mobilizing nearly 100,000 volunteers and reaching 25.8 million attendees in 2022-23 with a $31.5 million budget through the Building Communities Through Arts and Heritage Program.

When Canada invests in community participation, the return is significant. As we approach 2026, a milestone year for volunteering, a comparable investment will ensure Canada reclaims its place as a global leader in civic engagement and community resilience.

Recommendation 2: Commit $30 million in 2026 to create a community celebration and innovation fund to mark the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) and amplify the impact of the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS).

Context

In 2026, the NVAS will deliver a suite of tools, recommendations, and insights to modernize and futureproof volunteering in Canada. The IYV fund will be designed to translate this strategy into community-led action. This investment will empower communities across the country to celebrate volunteerism, pilot inclusive engagement models, and strengthen the civic infrastructure necessary for a more resilient, united, and participatory Canada.

Building on Recommendation 1, this fund will ensure that the NVAS is not only launched nationally but rooted in every community across the country. The initiative's objectives are to:

- Uplift thousands of communities with localized celebration events, storytelling, and volunteer recognition
- Promote localized innovation that increases accessibility and inclusion in civic life

[5] House of Commons. (2024). *Promoting and Encouraging Intergenerational Volunteering* (Report No. 25, 44th Parliament, 1st Session). Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA). Retrieved from https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/HUMA/Reports/RP13180385/humarp25/humarp25-e.pdf

- Strengthen regional and sectoral networks for long-term resilience
- Reinforce Canada's international leadership on democratic engagement and social innovation.

Administered by Volunteer Canada in collaboration with local Volunteer Centres, the IYV fund will provide microgrants and supports to celebrate volunteers, pilot inclusive engagement models, and strengthen regional collaboration. This approach will amplify grassroots participation, particularly in rural, remote, and equity-deserving communities, while reinforcing Canada's volunteer infrastructure.

The initiative will culminate in a high-profile National Summit on Volunteering in late 2026 (financed through Recommendation 1), convening leaders from across sectors to showcase NVAS implementation, share innovations, and highlight how volunteerism drives economic opportunity, civic engagement, and social resilience. The Summit will also embed NVAS tools into Canada's broader policy agenda while celebrating the contributions of millions of Canadians.

By embedding this fund in the milestone presented by IYV, the Government of Canada will amplify the impact of its investment in the NVAS, demonstrate leadership on the global stage, and leave a legacy that strengthens civic participation, celebrates volunteers, and builds the systems communities need for a resilient and inclusive future.

Recommendation 3: Commit $50 million over three years to strengthen Canada's volunteer infrastructure, including core funding for Volunteer Centres and support for volunteer mobilization networks.

Context

Canada's volunteer infrastructure is the backbone of civic and community life. At its heart are more than 200 Volunteer Centres that serve as local hubs for recruitment, training, coordination, and sector-wide support. These organizations help a wide range of frontline organizations (including food banks, emergency response groups, hospitals, seniors' centres, immigrant and refugee-serving agencies, community arts groups, and environmental organizations) to recruit, train, and retain the volunteers on which they depend. Volunteer Centres extend the reach of services, mobilize volunteers across sectors, and ensure that participation is accessible and inclusive for youth, newcomers, older adults, veterans, and racialized Canadians.

Yet this critical infrastructure is under strain. Formal volunteer participation has dropped from 41% to 32% since 2018, with total hours falling 28%.[6] Health, amateur sport, and education sectors have been particularly hard hit. Many Volunteer Centres and local organizations are struggling to re-engage volunteers with limited resources, fragile infrastructure, and precarious workforce conditions. In recent years, several Volunteer Centres have closed due to unstable or short-term funding, leaving gaps in community capacity. Without stable and sustained support, these critical actors will remain at the margins, limiting Canada's ability to harness the full potential of its volunteer sector.

[6] Statistics Canada. (2025, June 23). *Canadians' volunteer rates and hours decline, particularly for formal volunteering*. The Daily. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250623/dq250623b-eng.htm

A $50 million federal investment over three years, administered through Volunteer Canada, would revitalize Canada's volunteer infrastructure. It would provide core funding for Volunteer Centres and similar organizations, support national mobilization networks, and create tools, training, and knowledge-sharing platforms. The impacts would be broad and measurable: expanded volunteer opportunities, stronger community resilience, reduced isolation, improved mental health, and workforce pathways for youth, seniors, and newcomers. By anchoring Volunteer Centres and partners as essential civic infrastructure, this investment would reduce public costs, keep benefits rooted in communities, and build a stronger, more inclusive economy.

To complement this investment, we recommend the Government of Canada adopt Imagine Canada's calls to strengthen nonprofit sector resilience, including creating a dedicated federal unit, developing a labour force strategy, and reducing administrative burdens through more efficient federal funding models.[7] These steps are essential to the long-term sustainability of Canada's civic and social infrastructure.

[7] Imagine Canada. (2025). A Policy Platform for Canada's Nonprofits: *Strong Charities. Strong Nonprofits. Stronger Communities.* Retrieved from https://imaginecanada.ca/sites/default/files/policy-platform_strong-charities.pdf