

**Written Submission for the 2026 Pre-Budget Consultations in
Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget**

Submitted to: HOUSE OF COMMONS STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

By: VOLUNTEER CANADA

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. Commit to a National Volunteer Action Strategy and dedicate \$10 million towards this initiative in Budget 2026

Recommendation 2. Establish political accountability and cross-departmental coordination for a federal National Volunteer Strategy

Recommendation 3. Modernize federal volunteer data infrastructure to guide strategy development and track progress

Recommendation 4. Provide sustainable core funding for the Volunteer Centres and networks that will implement the National Volunteer Strategy

THE CHALLENGE

Strong communities depend on people showing up for each other. Volunteering is how that happens at scale, through crisis lines, emergency response networks, newcomer settlement organizations, programs for older adults, and thousands of other community services. The systems that make that possible are under strain, and the social and economic impacts are significant.

Between 2018 and 2023, Canada lost approximately 900 million volunteer hours, representing a significant loss to the country's social and economic productivity.¹ Over this period, the formal volunteer rate dropped from 41% to 32%, with the steepest declines among women and Canadians aged 25 to 34 (the life stage where long-term civic habits are typically formed). The top 10% of volunteers consistently contribute 61% of all hours and there are insufficient incoming volunteers to fill in gaps as this core ages.

The organizational consequences are already visible. Given that 58% of Canadian charities have no paid staff,² volunteers are often the primary means of service delivery. Charitable and nonprofit organizations face a trilemma of rising community need, financial instability, and shrinking workforce capacity: 72% report they cannot meet current demand, and only 12% describe themselves as financially stable, down from 21% in 2023.³ Crisis lines, meal delivery programs, emergency response networks, newcomer settlement organizations, older adult centres, and food banks must now absorb the consequences of a participation system under strain.

Canada has also lost many of the organizations that anchor community life. Between 2020 and 2025, more than 2,500 churches and over 1,000 public amenity and community resource charities closed across Canada.⁴ These are the organizations that recruit, coordinate, and sustain volunteering, and where community groups find the meeting space, financial support, and networks they depend on. The consequences of their loss reach into communities, and our connections weaken. Now, more than 1 in 10 Canadians report always or often feeling lonely,⁵ and approximately 60% feel disconnected from their community.⁶

Federal departmental plans across portfolios increasingly invoke a whole-of-society approach to national challenges. This implies a reliance on community organizations and volunteers to help deliver results. Volunteering serves as the civilian layer of emergency response that public safety depends on. It's also how many young Canadians can build skills, networks, and work experience to connect them to the labour market. But volunteer pools are shrinking, coordinators are burning out, and the communities most exposed to crisis are often those where volunteer infrastructure is thinnest. For the whole-of-society approach to hold, the federal government must resource the systems that make it work.

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 CanadaHelps. (2023). *The giving report*. CanadaHelps. <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/the-giving-report/>

³ Charity Insights Canada Project. (2025). *At a tipping point: The trilemma facing Canada's charitable sector*. Carleton University. <https://carleton.ca/cicp-pcpob/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2025/04/Briefing-Document-1-EN-1.pdf>

⁴ Canada Revenue Agency. (2026). *Charities search* [Database]. Government of Canada. https://apps.cra-arc.gc.ca/ebci/hacc/srch/pub/dsplyBscSrch?request_locale=en

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2025, February). *Social isolation and loneliness indicators* (Table 45-10-0048-01). Government of Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=4510004801>

⁶ YMCA of Greater Vancouver. (2024). *Isolation in Canada: YMCA research*. <https://www.gv.ymca.ca/ymca-research-isolation-in-canada>

THE OPPORTUNITY

The scale of the challenge calls for a coordinated national response. Canada needs a federal commitment to the systems that make volunteering possible, one that spans portfolios and gives communities sustained support. Volunteer Canada and a national network of partners across sectors and jurisdictions have taken an important first step. With support from the Government of Canada, we have developed the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS), a plan to strengthen and futureproof the country's volunteer ecosystem so that more Canadians can participate and benefit.

We engaged more than 1,400 Canadians across all provinces and territories, urban and rural contexts, and a broad range of communities including older adults, youth, newcomers, and Indigenous peoples. We drew on a systematic review of existing research and the most current national participation data, including Statistics Canada's Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (SGVP), which confirmed the scale of decline the consultation process had already revealed. Six strategic priorities focused on accessible participation, volunteer infrastructure, civic engagement, and community resilience organize the work. The evidence base points to several prospective interventions, including a National Youth and Older Adult Service Corps. With the steep participation declines among younger Canadians and growing isolation among older ones, a service corps would create structured pathways for both cohorts to contribute, connect across generations, and build skills. The full strategy will be released publicly in 2026.

Investing in the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS) is an opportunity for the Government of Canada to show its commitment to the people-powered systems that make Canada strong, in every community, for every Canadian.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. Commit to a National Volunteer Action Strategy and dedicate \$10 million towards this initiative in Budget 2026

Volunteer Canada and a national network of partners have spent two years building the evidence base for a National Volunteer Action Strategy: consulting more than 1,400 Canadians, synthesizing the most current participation data, and developing a full set of recommendations focused on accessible participation, volunteer infrastructure, civic engagement, and community resilience. With this evidence base slated for publication in 2026, we ask the government to commit to a National Volunteer Action Strategy and establish clear policy direction, cross-departmental accountability, and sustained investment in the systems that make civic participation possible.

The case for such a strategy has been building for several years. In 2019, the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector called on the federal government to develop a national volunteering strategy. In 2024, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) reinforced that recommendation, urging Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to co-develop the NVAS alongside provinces, territories, and civil society. Volunteer Canada and its partners have gathered the evidence and engaged in deep cross-sector consultation. A dedicated federal investment of \$10 million in Budget 2026 would tell Canadians, and the organizations working to serve them, that this government takes civic participation seriously as a national priority.

Recommendation 2. Establish political accountability and cross-departmental coordination for a federal National Volunteer Strategy

Delivering results through a federal National Volunteer Strategy will require dedicated governance structures. The Committee should recommend that ESDC serve as the anchor department for the strategy, with a dedicated secretariat to lead coordination across government. An interministerial table bringing together senior representatives from Public Safety, Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Department of National Defence (DND), and Canadian Heritage would ensure that the whole-of-government connections the strategy requires are built into its governance. A named ministerial champion within the ESDC portfolio, with clear accountability for progress, would give the strategy the cross-departmental authority it needs to produce results.

Recommendation 3. Modernize federal volunteer data infrastructure to guide strategy development and track progress

Good data is the foundation of good policy. Canada has hard-won data infrastructure that supports volunteer-related decision-making, and it must be protected before it can be built on. Statistics Canada's SGVP provides the most comprehensive national picture of civic participation available. The Satellite Account of Non-profit Institutions and Volunteering (SANIV) produces the only national estimate of the economic value of volunteering (\$31.7 billion in 2023) and tracks the sector's broader GDP and employment contributions. Budget 2025's plan to reduce Statistics Canada funding by up to 15% over three years puts these products at risk at exactly the moment they are most needed. The Committee should recommend that funding for the SGVP, SANIV, that the SANIV Human Resources Module be maintained, and that Statistics Canada consult with the sector on any proposed changes.

Beyond maintaining what exists, a federal National Volunteer Strategy needs infrastructure that puts the SGVP to work continuously, not only in the months following each release. The opportunity for federal investment is in the systems that translate and extend each cycle's findings so they remain useful to governments, funders, and communities throughout that period. The Committee should recommend dedicated funding for the Canadian Knowledge Hub for Giving and Volunteering, a national body that translates SGVP and related participation data into policy-relevant analysis; investment in shared data standards across provinces and territories; and support for Volunteer Centres to contribute to a national data network that tracks participation at the community level. Progress on civic participation should be reported to Parliament regularly through expanded civic participation indicators in the Quality of Life Framework.

Recommendation 4. Provide sustainable core funding for the Volunteer Centres and networks that will implement the National Volunteer Strategy

The local delivery layer that will carry a federal National Volunteer Strategy into communities already exists. Canada has more than 200 Volunteer Centres, provincial peak bodies, and volunteer mobilization networks that match people to meaningful opportunities, support frontline organizations across health, housing, newcomer settlement, and emergency response, and keep volunteering accessible across the country. Where they are well-resourced, they show what stable investment can deliver: stronger recruitment pipelines, better volunteer retention, and communities better able to respond to local need. Investing in this network is investing in the local capacity that translates a national strategy to action.

Core funding for this infrastructure has been chronically unstable. Several Volunteer Centres have closed in recent years due to short-term funding arrangements, and 80% of charitable organizations report they require more core funding to sustain operations.⁷ With 65% of Canadians focused on meeting basic needs or maintaining financial security,⁸ the cost and accessibility barriers that prevent many from volunteering reflect broader economic conditions that stable local infrastructure can help address.

The Committee should recommend a federal investment of \$50 million over three years in core funding for Volunteer Centres and mobilization networks, professional development for volunteer management professionals, and modernized technology and data systems. Funds would be phased across the three years, with early investments focused on stabilizing core infrastructure, building toward broader capacity development, training, and technology modernization in subsequent years. The return will show up across portfolios: in emergency response capacity, public health outcomes, employment readiness, and the social cohesion that holds communities together.

Recommendation 5. Establish a dedicated fund for emergency preparedness and civic resilience as an early implementation priority

Canada has committed to investing 3.5% of GDP on core defence spending and an additional 1.5% on critical defence and security-related investments by 2035. That 1.5% commitment explicitly encompasses whole-of-society resilience: the civilian capacity that national security depends on, but that DND cannot build alone. Volunteer networks, community coordinators, and

⁷ Charity Insights Canada Project. (2025). *At a tipping point: The trilemma facing Canada's charitable sector*. Carleton University. <https://carleton.ca/cicp-pcpob/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2025/04/Briefing-Document-1-EN-1.pdf>

⁸ Coletto, D., & Sheppard, E. (2026). *The precarity mindset*. Abacus Data. <https://precaritymindset.com/>

mutual aid organizations are the frontline of emergency response across the country. Building and sustaining that capacity takes years.

The volunteer base that emergency response depends on is thinning. Volunteer Centres across the country maintain skills-based databases of community members with logistics, communications, first aid, and coordination competencies. This civilian infrastructure is a direct complement to the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) capacity in domestic emergency response; investing in it reduces pressure on CAF and strengthens the whole-of-society resilience Canada has committed to building.

The Committee should recommend a dedicated federal fund for volunteer mobilization and emergency preparedness, administered through Volunteer Canada in partnership with provincial emergency management bodies. This fund would invest in recruitment, training, coordination, and screening infrastructure for civilian emergency volunteers.

ABOUT VOLUNTEER CANADA

Volunteer Canada is Canada's national backbone organization for volunteering, representing over 1,100 organizational members. For more information on the National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS), visit volunteerstrategy.ca.