



Written Submission for the Government of Canada's Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget

Submitted to the Department of Finance Canada

By Volunteer Canada

September 2026

This submission updates the written brief Volunteer Canada provided to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance in May 2026, with facts current to September 2026.

Recommendations

1. **Recognize the National Volunteer Action Strategy as the national framework for volunteering in Canada, with Employment and Social Development Canada as the accountable department**
2. **Maintain the federal data that measures civic participation, and report it through the Quality of Life Framework**
3. **Invest \$15 million over three years so that average Canadians are ready to help when an emergency hits their community, delivered through the Humanitarian Workforce Program**
4. **Invest \$20 million over three years in national screening infrastructure so that a volunteer record check is portable, affordable and consistent across Canada**

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. Those systems are under strain, and the cost of that strain is showing up in community services and in public budgets.

Between 2018 and 2023, Canada lost approximately 900 million hours of formal and informal volunteering, 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 not enough new volunteers coming in to replace that core as it 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

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. When these organizations close, the volunteering they held together stops. 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. Government has learned to think about delivery in terms of supply chains: the inputs, the capacity and the bottlenecks that decide whether a national commitment can be met. Volunteering is a supply chain of that kind. It supplies the people who staff emergency response, run community programs and hold the front line of services government does not deliver directly, and like any supply chain it has capacity limits and points of failure. Volunteering serves as the civilian layer of emergency response that public safety depends on. It is also how many young Canadians build skills, networks and work experience that 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 has to resource the systems that make it work.

There is also a cost to inaction. The Satellite Account of Non-profit Institutions and Volunteering values volunteer work at \$31.7 billion in 2023, a decline of \$5.2 billion since 2018, and the roughly 900 million hours of formal and informal volunteering lost since 2018 is work communities still need done. That demand does not disappear when volunteers stop showing up. It shifts onto paid staff, provincial programs and federal transfers, in the areas where costs are hardest to contain: health, emergency response, settlement, and support for older adults. A meta-analysis of 40 studies found volunteers had a 22% lower mortality rate than non-volunteers, and assessed volunteering as a public health intervention in its own right.⁷

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.

The research and consultation behind the strategy are now complete. 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. The strategy organizes the work around accessible participation, volunteer infrastructure, and civic engagement and community resilience. 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 findings will be released publicly in the coming months, with the full strategy to follow.

Volunteer Canada is connected to the network this work would run through. More than 1,000 member organizations, over 200 volunteer centres, provincial and territorial peak bodies, and the local organizations that hold volunteers in every part of the country: libraries, legions, service clubs, sports leagues, food banks and hospices. That network already exists and already reaches communities no federal program reaches directly. What it lacks is the funding to work at the scale the country now needs.

The strategy is built to reach communities without a new federal program. Money and support would go to those local organizations through the granting organizations that already exist in their communities and know which of them are real, against a shared national standard for what is funded and how it is measured. Volunteer Canada would supply the standard, the coaching and the measurement. The money would stay local. The federal government has run money through this channel before: the Community Services Recovery Fund put \$400 million into nearly 5,500 organizations from 2023 through national funders granting locally.

Volunteer work is valued at \$31.7 billion a year, and \$5.2 billion of that value has been lost since 2018. This submission asks for \$35 million over three years to stop that decline and rebuild the capacity behind it. Investing in the National Volunteer Action Strategy protects the people-powered systems that make Canada strong, in every community, for every Canadian.

Recommendations in Detail

Recommendation 1

Recognize the National Volunteer Action Strategy as the national framework for volunteering in Canada, with Employment and Social Development Canada as the accountable department

Volunteer Canada and a national network of partners have built the evidence base for a National Volunteer Action Strategy: more than 1,400 Canadians consulted across every province and territory, the most current national participation data, and a full set of recommendations on accessible participation, volunteer infrastructure, civic engagement and community resilience. The Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector called for a national volunteering strategy in 2019, and the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities reinforced it in 2024. We ask the government to recognize the National Volunteer Action Strategy as the national framework for volunteering in Canada and to give it clear policy direction.

Accountability matters more than machinery. We recommend that Employment and Social Development Canada be named the accountable department, with a ministerial lead, and that the departments whose mandates the strategy touches, Public Safety, Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, National Defence and Canadian Heritage, engage through tables that already exist. This recommendation carries no new cost.

Recommendation 2

Maintain the federal data that measures civic participation, and report it through the Quality of Life Framework

Good data is the foundation of good policy, and Canada's is at risk at the moment it is most needed. Statistics Canada's Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating is the most comprehensive national picture of civic participation available. The Satellite Account of Non-profit Institutions and Volunteering produces the only national estimate of the economic value of volunteering, \$31.7 billion in 2023, and tracks the sector's contribution to GDP and employment. The current expenditure review, which asks departments for savings rising to 15% by 2028, puts both at risk. We recommend that funding for the Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating and the Satellite Account, including its Human Resources Module, be maintained, and that Statistics Canada consult the sector before any change.

We further recommend that progress on civic participation be reported to Parliament through expanded indicators in the Quality of Life Framework. Volunteer Canada's existing data partnership runs to March 2029 and will carry the work of translating each survey cycle for governments, funders and communities. That part asks for no new federal money.

Recommendations 3 and 4, and where the \$35 million goes

Recommendations 3 and 4 answer the same problem: getting volunteers on the ground faster. One connects the civilian capacity that sits outside the funded organizations, the other removes the check that stops people before they start. They are separable, and they work best together.

Together the two recommendations come to \$35 million over three years, and most of it leaves Ottawa. Of the \$15 million in Recommendation 3, \$3 million establishes in year one what has to be true for an ordinary Canadian to be ready to help and where each responsibility sits, and \$12 million builds that through volunteer centres and local partners in years two and three. Of the \$20 million in Recommendation 4, \$6 million builds the portable record check in year one, \$8 million funds adoption support so the standard reaches the organizations that need it most, and \$6 million is the capped fund for fee relief for volunteers. That is \$26 million of the \$35 million going to community organizations and to volunteers directly, and \$9 million building the two national systems the rest depends on.

Recommendation 3

Invest \$15 million over three years so that average Canadians are ready to help when an emergency hits their community, delivered through the Humanitarian Workforce Program

When a flood or a wildfire comes, people show up, and most of them are turned away. Neighbours, the local service club, the contractor with a truck, turned away because no one knows who they are, what they can do, or

whether they are safe to place near people in crisis. They were there before the emergency and they will be there long after the response has ended.

Canada has committed to 3.5% of GDP on core defence and a further 1.5% on defence and security-related investment by 2035, and has described that 1.5% as whole-of-society resilience, the civilian capacity that the Department of National Defence cannot build alone. The people turned away at the edge of a flood are that capacity. The government's instrument for it is the Humanitarian Workforce Program at Public Safety Canada, renewed in May 2026 at \$108 million over three years, which funds and deploys the trained response teams of the Canadian Red Cross, St. John Ambulance, the Salvation Army, the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada and Team Rubicon Canada.

Those five recruit, screen and prepare their own volunteers, and are built to move trained teams into a community. Matching a volunteer to a role during an active emergency is a provincial and municipal accountability. Neither of those is the gap. The gap is every other Canadian. Nobody prepares them beforehand, so capacity is brought in while the people who know the roads and which households need checking are not used. Public Safety Canada's own work since 2024 on a pan-Canadian civilian response capacity names this. The problem is not a shortage of people willing to help. It is that their willingness cannot be operationalized where they live.

We recommend \$15 million over three years to close that gap, in addition to the \$108 million renewed in May 2026 and delivered through the Humanitarian Workforce Program, designed with the five funded organizations and with provincial and territorial emergency management bodies. The first year establishes what has to be true for an ordinary Canadian to be ready to help, and where responsibility for each piece already sits. Years two and three build that readiness in communities, through volunteer centres where they exist and local partners where they do not. Volunteer Canada contributes the national screening standard. Nothing here duplicates what the five do for their own volunteers, and nothing here takes on matching. This capacity does not exist today and it will not exist without funding.

Recommendation 4

Invest \$20 million over three years in national screening infrastructure so that a volunteer record check is portable, affordable and consistent across Canada

Screening is the largest single barrier to volunteering the research identifies. Police record checks and the paperwork around them have become slow enough and costly enough that people give up part way through, and the cost falls on the volunteer at a time when 65% of Canadians are focused on meeting basic needs or maintaining financial security.⁸ A check done for one organization is often not accepted by another, so the same person is screened again in every place they try to help. Every organization that involves volunteers depends on this working, including the five Humanitarian Workforce organizations and every emergency management body in the country.

The standard exists and the design work is done. Volunteer Canada's Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement and the screening guidance that sits with it were rebuilt this year and are adopted voluntarily by organizations across Canada. In 2019, with support from the Government of Canada through the National Crime Prevention Strategy, Volunteer Canada commissioned Deloitte to assess the feasibility of a Canadian Screening Centre. Deloitte assessed it as moderately to highly feasible, recommended it operate as a government enterprise in partnership with Volunteer Canada, and recommended a funding model that includes public funding. It has sat unfunded since. What does not exist is the infrastructure: a record check completed once and recognized across organizations and jurisdictions, relief from fees for volunteers, and a digital standard a small organization with no paid staff can apply. Without that, the standard is a document and the barrier stays where it is.

We recommend \$20 million over three years in national screening infrastructure, built with provincial and territorial partners: a volunteer record check completed once and recognized across organizations and jurisdictions, built in the first year; adoption support so the standard reaches the organizations that need it most; and a capped fund for fee relief for volunteers in roles that require a vulnerable sector check. This is the infrastructure Recommendation 3 runs on, and it removes that barrier for every sector at once.

About Volunteer Canada

Volunteer Canada is Canada's national leadership body for volunteering, representing over 1,000 organizational members. For more information on the National Volunteer Action Strategy, visit volunteerstrategy.ca.

Sources

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