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READY, WILLING, AND NEEDED: RENEWING OLDER ADULT VOLUNTEERING IN CANADA

Companion Guide #1
State of Older Adult Volunteering in Canada (2013–2024)

Acknowledgements

This is one of three companion guides to the report **Ready, Willing, and Needed: Renewing Older Adult Volunteering in Canada.** The other companion guides are **Successful Practices And Programs: A Practical Guide to Engaging Older Adult Volunteers and Building Intergenerational Connections** and **Coaching and Mentoring Supports for Organizations.** Everything in this companion guide is derived either from the Ready, Willing, and Needed report itself or from the interviews that were conducted as part of the project.

About the Ready, Willing, and Needed Report

The report examines the decline in older adult volunteering, highlighting the diverse factors shaping this trend and the varying experiences across age groups. As an input into Volunteer Canada's National Volunteer Action Strategy, the report provides data-driven insights and practical recommendations to revitalize engagement and adapt volunteerism to the evolving needs of older adults and their communities.

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Introduction

Older Canadians have always been the backbone of volunteering in this country. They give their time, share their skills, and bring valuable experience to health care, schools, social services, cultural groups, and so much more.

But things have been changing over the past decade. As Canada's older population grows, and as health needs, technology, and society itself evolve, we're seeing shifts in how—and why—older adults volunteer.

This guide takes a closer look at these trends and offers practical ideas for keeping older Canadians engaged, supported, and valued in their volunteer work.



Men's Sheds: A peer-led movement where older men gather regularly to work on projects together, combat isolation, and contribute to their communities

This guide aims to:

01
Present a summary of research on older adult volunteering from 2013 to 2024.

02
Highlight key trends, motivations, and barriers affecting participation.

03
Examine equity and inclusion challenges within volunteer engagement.

04
Offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, organizations, and community.

About Volunteer Canada

Volunteer Canada's mission is to advance volunteerism to grow connection, community and belonging.

Since 1977, our organization has acted as the national voice and leadership body for volunteerism. A registered charity with over 1,000 organizational members, we work with a diversity of corporate, charity, nonprofit, and education partners nationwide to strengthen the quality, quantity, and accessibility of volunteering. We are the sector's backbone organization for volunteerism providing leadership, expertise, standards of practice and resources for the public, private, and charitable sectors.



Why Older Adult Volunteering Matters

Economic Impact

Older adults contributed an estimated 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023—roughly $12.1 billion in volunteer labour. This figure reflects not just hours logged, but the depth of expertise, reliability, and commitment that older adults bring to their volunteer roles. From managing nonprofit boards to coordinating community programs, their work keeps essential services running and allows organizations to stretch limited budgets further. This economic value, while substantial, only begins to capture what older volunteers truly contribute.

$12b

According to Statistics Canada's 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, older adults contributed an estimated 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023—roughly $12.1 billion in volunteer labour.

Social Benefits

Volunteering creates reciprocal benefits that enrich both the giver and receiver. For older adults, staying active in their communities supports better mental health, provides protection against loneliness and isolation, and maintains cognitive vitality. These aren't small gains in a time when social isolation among older adults is recognized as a serious public health concern. Volunteering also creates natural spaces for different generations to connect, share knowledge, and build respect across age groups. These relationships counter ageism and remind us that older adults remain vital, engaged members of society with much to offer and gain.



GoodLinks Intergen Program with St. Francis High School and Confederation Park 55+ Activity Centre, Calgary

Community Resilience

Older adults occupy essential roles that many communities simply couldn't function without. In hospitals and clinics, they provide companionship and navigation support to patients. In schools, they tutor students and share life experience. During emergencies, they staff hotlines, coordinate relief efforts, and offer steady leadership when it's needed most. Their reliability, institutional knowledge, and willingness to show up make them backbone contributors to community resilience.

Recognizing and supporting their continued engagement isn't just good practice, it's necessary for healthy, functioning communities.

A growing and more diverse older population: Canada's population aged 65+ now exceeds 8.1 million and will reach roughly 9.3 million by 2030.

Volunteering allows older adults to stay active in their communities, supports better mental health, provides protection against loneliness and isolation, and helps maintain cognitive vitality.

Demographic Context

Canada's 65+ population has grown by more than 2.3 million over the past decade, reaching 8.1 million in 2025 and projected to reach 9.3 million by 2030.

While older adults are living longer, many are also managing chronic health conditions or caring for loved ones, which can make volunteering harder to fit in. And though more older adults are online than ever before, gaps in digital skills still keep some from accessing virtual volunteer opportunities.



Volunteering Trends (2013–2024)

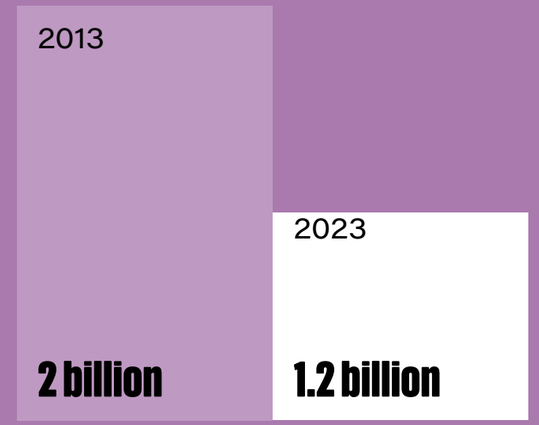
A long-term decline in volunteer participation.

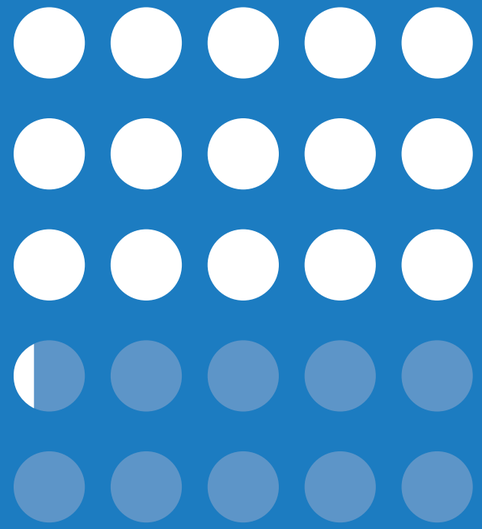
Volunteer rates among those aged 65–74 have dropped from 37% in 2013 to 25% in 2024, while rates among those 75+ have held steady or risen slightly (from 27% to 31%).

Fewer hours volunteered.

Even where participation persists, intensity has dropped sharply—average annual hours have declined by over 40% among those 75+, mirroring declines across all age groups.

Total volunteer hours for all adults fell 40% from 2013 to 2023





Eroding social group participation

In 2024, 61% of older adults reported belonging to no social groups, up 24 points since 2013. Because volunteering is strongly linked to group participation, this collapse in social connection has had profound ripple effects.

What Drives Them

Older adults volunteer because it gives them purpose, keeps them connected, and lets them give back to their communities. They increasingly want flexible, skills-based roles that fit their schedules. Across the board, volunteering delivers real benefits: sharper minds, better emotional health, and less isolation.

What's Getting in the Way

Getting to volunteer opportunities can be tough, especially in rural areas with limited transit. Rising costs and fixed incomes make it harder for some to give their time freely, while many older adults are already stretched thin caring for spouses or grandchildren. Shrinking social networks, from declining church attendance to fewer community group memberships, mean fewer people are being recruited into volunteering.

And sometimes the barrier is simpler: **many older adults just aren't being asked.**



GoodLinks Intergen Program

Who's Being Left Out

Volunteering rates are lower among older adults with less income and education. Racialized and immigrant older adults can face additional hurdles including language barriers, cultural differences, and programs that do not always reflect their communities. To make volunteering truly accessible, organizations need age-friendly spaces, inclusive recruitment, and culturally responsive approaches that welcome everyone.

The Power of Connection

Older adults who belong to clubs, faith groups, or community organizations are far more likely to volunteer. But as isolation and loneliness increase (bringing serious health risks along with them) fewer older adults have these built-in networks that naturally lead to volunteer opportunities. In 2013, just over a third (37%) of older adults did not participate in any social groups, but this number increased to 61% by 2024.

Unequal engagement: Only 13% of older adults in households earning under $30,000 volunteer, compared with 39% in households earning $100,000 or more. Financial strain, health challenges, and limited transportation compound these disparities.

Organizational and Capacity Insights

Volunteer Management Gaps

Many organizations simply don't have the tools or training they need to coordinate volunteers effectively. Without proper systems in place—for recruitment, onboarding, scheduling, and recognition—they struggle to attract and retain the volunteers they depend on. Investing in volunteer management training and accessible coordination tools can help organizations build stronger, more sustainable programs.

Decline in Volunteer-Run Organizations

Smaller nonprofits are facing a sustainability crisis. Funding shortages and leadership turnover make it harder to keep programs running, and many volunteer-run organizations are at risk of closing altogether. Targeted funding support and succession planning resources could help these community anchors survive and thrive.



GoodLinks Intergen Program

Disconnection from opportunities: Only one-third of older adults say they were invited to volunteer in the past year—the lowest of any age group—even though nine in ten responded positively to at least some requests, including almost half that generally said yes to requests, a higher positive response rate than any other age group.

Opportunities for Renewal

Intergenerational Engagement

Pairing older adults with young people creates real opportunities for learning on both sides. Older adults bring years of experience, skills, and know-how, while youth offer new perspectives, energy, and comfort with technology. These partnerships bridge generational gaps and build understanding that benefits everyone. From mentorship programs to community projects, bringing generations together strengthens communities and breaks down stereotypes about age.



Volunteer Waterloo Region Board Games and Mingle

Social Prescribing

Social prescribing is an intentional collaboration between healthcare workers and the community-based sector to provide non-clinical supports and connect people with community resources. Physicians can refer patients to a link worker, who can work with an older adult to co-design a care plan, which can involve volunteering. For older adults dealing with isolation or mental health challenges, volunteering can deliver real results: better cognitive function, stronger social ties, and a sense of purpose. Integrating volunteering into health and wellness strategies helps older Canadians stay healthy while supporting the organizations that need them.

Post-Retirement Pathways

Retirement can open up time and possibilities. However, 39% of adults 65 to 74 who were working volunteered, compared to just 22% of those who are retired, suggesting many disengage at the point of retirement and/or are not finding meaningful opportunities.

Structured programs can help retirees put their professional skills, interests, and available time toward volunteer roles that matter to them. Whether it's joining a board, offering specialized skills, or getting involved in community projects, these pathways let older adults use what they've learned over a lifetime while staying engaged and connected.

Recommendations

The Path Forward

Traditional pipelines into volunteering—workplaces, civic clubs, religious groups—have weakened. But this is also a moment of renewal. Drawing from new national data, interviews with 16 experts and practitioners, and dozens of innovative case studies, the report outlines a roadmap anchored in three pillars:

01 Elevate and Strengthen the Volunteer Ecosystem

Strengthen the capacity of volunteer centres, community hubs, and nonprofits to recruit, retain, and support volunteers. Rebuilding staff and systems for volunteer management is essential to scaling engagement.

02 Leverage Existing Investments in Health and Social Connection

Align volunteering with areas already being funded—such as social prescribing, loneliness reduction, and healthy-aging programs—where volunteering can act as both a "prescription" and a preventative health measure.

03 Address the Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers

Reduce financial, mobility, and digital barriers that limit participation, and design flexible pathways for those at key transitions—especially new retirees, people in poor health, and those with limited incomes.

A modest five percentage points increase in volunteering among older adults by 2030 would mean 465,000 additional volunteers contributing an estimated 37 million hours of service annually. This is the equivalent of adding about 20,000 full time positions to the nonprofit sector. Achieving this requires more than recruitment—it demands rebuilding the systems, relationships, and sense of invitation that connect people to purpose.

If we succeed, Canada can move from decline to renewal—creating a model where older adults, nonprofits, and communities all thrive together.

Role of Volunteer Canada:

- Advocate for policy changes that support volunteer engagement.
- Develop inclusive recruitment campaigns targeting older adults.
- Provide training and resources for organizations to strengthen volunteer management.

References

The Ready, Willing, and Needed report brings together evidence from five major research studies conducted between 2013 and 2024, two by **Statistics Canada**, two by the **Environics Institute**, and one conducted by **Sector3Insights**, complemented by interviews with 16 practitioners and a review of recent studies and best practices for older adult volunteering. Together, these sources provide one of the most comprehensive looks to date at the state of volunteering among older adults in Canada.

The method and complete references are available in the complete Ready, Willing, and Needed report.





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