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

Companion Guide #2

Successful Practices And Programs: A Practical Guide to Engaging Older Adult Volunteers and Building Intergenerational Connections

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 **State of Older Adult Volunteering in Canada (2013–2024)** 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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Funder

This project is generously supported by The Waltons Trust, Samuel Family Foundation, and The McConnell Foundation.

With thanks to our interviewees:

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Citation

When referencing this guide, please cite as: *Ayer and Anderson (2026). Ready, Willing, and Needed: Renewing Older Adult Volunteering in Canada. Common Good Strategies. Prepared for Volunteer Canada.*

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Introduction

Older adults have long been the backbone of volunteering in Canada. Yet participation has declined sharply among those aged 65-74—from 37% in 2013 to 25% in 2024—even as evidence of volunteering benefits for health and well-being grows stronger.

But this isn't just a story of decline. It's a story of opportunity: **older adults are the most likely to say yes to volunteer requests, but they are also the least likely to be asked.**

Across Canada, innovative programs are successfully engaging older adults, combating isolation, and building bridges between generations. **This guide highlights these bright spots,** replicable models and strategies that are working, and offers practical insights for organizations seeking to revitalize older adult engagement.

What's in this guide?

This companion guide is part of the Ready, Willing and Needed series, which examines the state of older adult volunteerism in Canada. While the main report provides comprehensive data and analysis, this guide focuses on what's working and how you can apply it.

This guide contains:

01
Evidence-based strategies for engaging older adults

02
Practical frameworks you can adapt

03
Honest assessments of challenges and how to overcome them

04
Real examples from successful programs across Canada

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.



The Context: Understanding the Challenge

The Ready, Willing, and Needed report, which includes data sets, informational interviews with researchers and practitioners, and reference to the growing evidence base for volunteerism and intergenerational connection, lays out some hard truths and bright spots.

The Hard Truths

Loneliness is epidemic. Over one-third of older adults reported feeling lonely during the pandemic, and many continue to experience reduced social interaction.

Social networks are shrinking. In 2024, 61% of older adults reported belonging to no social groups, up 24 percentage points since 2013. This collapse in social connection has profound ripple effects on volunteering.

Volunteer hours are falling. From 2013 to 2022, average hours volunteered declined by 44% among those 75 and older and 27% among those 65-74.

Volunteer rates rise sharply with income. Only 13% of older adults in households earning under $30,000 volunteer, compared with 39% in households earning $100,000 or more.

Traditional pathways are weakening. The share of older adults not attending religious services rose from 38% in 2013 to 66% in 2022. Service clubs and civic organizations are closing at alarming rates.

Only 13% of older adults in households earning under $30,000 volunteer.

Average volunteer hours declined 44% from 2013 to 2022 among those aged 75+.

Bright Spots

Despite these challenges, the data reveals powerful opportunities:

Interest remains high. When asked to volunteer, 89% of older adults responded positively to at least some requests, including 48% that generally said yes to requests, a higher positive response rate than any other age group. The issue isn't motivation—it's opportunity and outreach.

The oldest adults are staying engaged. Those 75+ have maintained stable or slightly increased volunteer rates (from 27% in 2013 to 31% in 2024), though they are volunteering less hours.

The evidence linking volunteering with healthy aging continues to grow. Volunteering can slow biological aging, reduce inflammation, lower disability risk, and enhance mental wellbeing while building social connections that protect against loneliness.

Innovative Programs are thriving. From Men's Sheds to GrandPals to intergenerational board game nights, creative approaches are successfully engaging older adults across diverse communities.

A modest increase would have major impact. A five percentage points rise involunteering among older adults by 2030 would mean 465,000 additional volunteers contributing an estimated 37 million hours annually. This translates to the equivalent of about 20,000 FTE positions.

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Why Intergenerational Programs Matter

The Power Across Generations

Intergenerational volunteering— intentionally bringing younger and older generations of people together through shared purpose—offers unique benefits:

Combats ageism. Direct contact between generations breaks down stereotypes and builds mutual respect. As one older adult said: "I guess their problems are similar to ours, perhaps at a different level."

Reduces loneliness for all ages. Both older adults and youth report feeling less isolated after participating in intergenerational programs.

Strengthens communities. When generations work together, they create stronger, more resilient communities with deeper social capital.

Transfers wisdom and skills. Older adults share life experience and expertise while gaining fresh perspectives and energy from younger participants.

Research identifies four key conditions for successful intergenerational programs:

01
Equal status among participants

Programs where one group is treated as subordinates can reinforce stereotypes rather than reduce them.

02
Shared goals and mutual benefits

Both young and old must see clear value in participating.

03
Cooperative activities

Only when generations do things together do attitudes change.

04
Strong institutional support

Organizations must visibly support and sustain these initiatives.

Source: Report on Policy Options Related to the Topic of Ageism Targeting Older Canadians

Key Takeaways

Start with social connection
As one interviewee noted, creating conditions for intergenerational engagement naturally leads to intergenerational volunteering. When students in an intergenerational classroom at the University of Toronto got to know some older adults, several began volunteering at the retirement home organically.

Make it mutually beneficial.
Avoid unidirectional programs where one group is passive. Youth participants should contribute meaningfully, and older adults should gain new perspectives—not just give advice.

Build in flexibility. Accommodate different schedules, energy levels, and commitments across age groups.



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

Practical Frameworks: Applying What Works

Intergenerational volunteerism is one pathway to success. Based on key findings from the Ready, Willing, and Needed report, we summarized other practical approaches on how to better relate to, recruit, retain, and recognize older adult volunteers.



GrandPals: an intergenerational initiative connecting school children with older adults for shared learning, storytelling, and friendship

Framework 1: Creating Meaningful Volunteer Roles

Volunteers want to contribute in ways that matter. They need to feel their skills are valued, their work has purpose, and they're part of something larger than themselves. When these elements are missing, even the most dedicated volunteers walk away.

What volunteers are looking for:

Opportunities to apply their skills and expertise	Connection to the mission and to each other
A sense that their contributions have real value	Flexibility in scheduling and commitment levels



GrandPals initiative

Strategies that work

Cohort onboarding creates community. Rather than bringing volunteers in one by one, onboard them in groups of 10-12. This approach, used successfully by GrandPals and other programs, creates shared experience, peer support, and a sense of ownership from day one. Volunteers who start together, stay together.

Build social connection into the experience. Even when volunteers work individually, regular social events help them feel part of a community. The Nova Scotia Health Authority found that many volunteers were hoping to meet people in their community. A few social gatherings made volunteers feel more connected and committed.

Use team-based approaches when possible.
For roles such as volunteer driving that can feel isolating, consider sending volunteers out in pairs or creating check-in systems so they feel connected to others doing similar work.

Let people start small and grow. Allow volunteers to begin with modest commitments and expand as they build confidence. Many older adults are willing to give significant time, but may be put off by demanding commitments upfront.

Volunteers who start together, stay together.

"Previous generations would come in and volunteer Monday to Friday on a regular schedule. But boomers have not done that. They have an interest in leadership and advisory roles, in drop-in projects, but not the day-to-day operations."

—Interview participant

Framework 2: Flexibility is essential

The evidence is clear: today's older adult volunteers need flexibility. Previous generations committed to rigid and regular schedules. Current older adults want leadership roles, project-based work, and the ability to step away for travel or family commitments without guilt.

What flexibility looks like in practice:

Offer seasonal and episodic opportunities. Recognize that availability shifts throughout the year. Some volunteers may be highly active in winter but travel extensively in summer. Programs like GoodLinks allow weekly participation with built-in flexibility for absences—volunteers can miss sessions without feeling they've let anyone down.

Minimize onboarding barriers. Extensive training requirements and lengthy applications can deter potential volunteers. Create low barrier entry points that let people get started quickly, with additional training available as they deepen their commitment.

Choose negotiation over rigidity. Rather than requiring volunteers to fit predetermined roles, invite informal conversations about their interests, skills, and availability. Then work together to find mutually beneficial opportunities.

The evidence is clear: Today's older adult volunteers need flexibility.

Why this Matters

When asked why they were volunteering less, older adults cited burnout, time constraints, and feeling disconnected from opportunities—not lack of interest. Flexibility addresses these barriers directly, making volunteering more accessible to those who want to contribute but need adaptable options.

48%

of older adults generally say yes to requests

But only

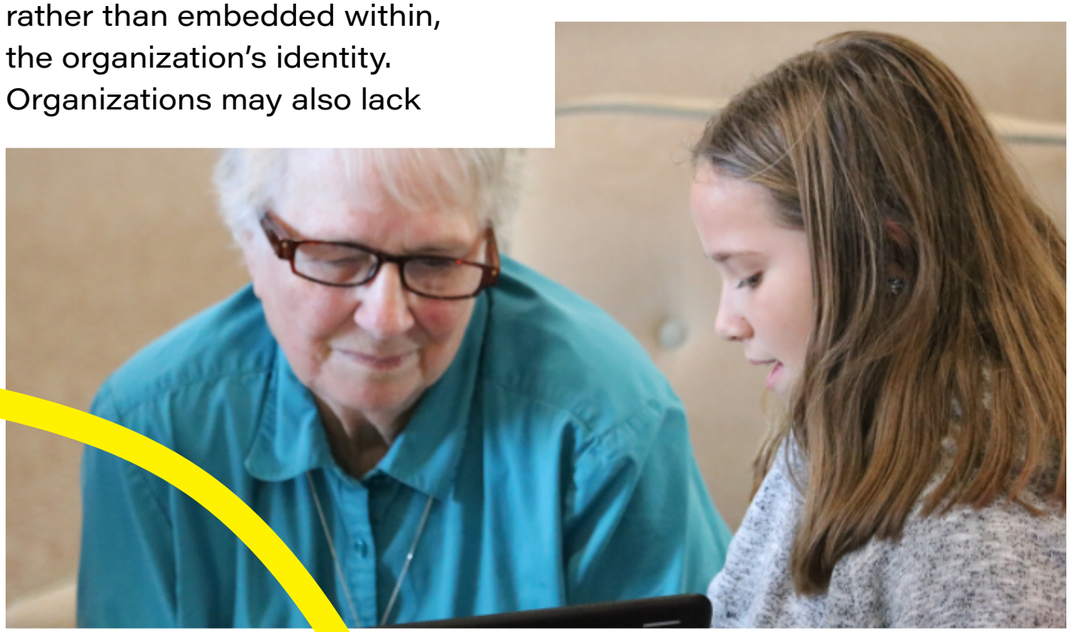
32%

have been asked in the past year

Framework 3: Recognition and appreciation

Here's an uncomfortable truth: one bad volunteer experience can turn someone off volunteering entirely. Recognition isn't a nice-to-have; it's essential for retention.

Across the sector, organizations often encounter recurring challenges in volunteer engagement. Volunteers may be unintentionally excluded from holiday events or organizational celebrations. At times, they can be positioned as adjacent to, rather than embedded within, the organization's identity. Organizations may also lack consistent processes for understanding what forms of recognition volunteers find most meaningful. In some instances, interpersonal or cultural dynamics may arise that leave volunteers feeling less welcome or appreciated than intended.



GrandPals initiative

How to get recognition right

Start by asking. Different volunteers value different forms of appreciation. Some prefer public acknowledgment at events. Others appreciate quiet thank-yous or the option to donate honorariums for tax receipts. Don't assume; ask directly what would be meaningful.

Include volunteers in organizational life. Invite them to staff celebrations, annual meetings, and planning sessions where appropriate. When volunteers feel like outsiders, they act like outsiders—which often means leaving.

Make appreciation specific and timely. "Thank you for your 200 hours this year" means more than "Thanks for volunteering." Acknowledge specific contributions: "The older adults you visited this month told us your conversations were highlights of their week."

The Bottom Line

Volunteers give their time freely. Organizations can ensure they feel valued for that gift. Recognition done well builds loyalty, creates positive word-of-mouth, and transforms one-time volunteers into long-term champions.

Quick Recognition Wins

Send personalized thank-you notes after major projects

Highlight volunteer stories in newsletters and social media

Create a small "volunteer appreciation" budget for coffee, meals, or transit costs

Celebrate milestones (100 hours, 1 year, 5 years)

Ask for feedback regularly and act on it

Supporting Frameworks: Quick Reference

While the three frameworks above address the most critical factors for success, two additional areas deserve attention:

Accessibility and Inclusion

Ensure physical spaces are accessible (ramps, seating, restrooms). Recruit multilingual volunteers to serve diverse communities. Train staff on cultural competence. Offer both digital and in-person options so technology isn't a barrier.

Reducing Financial Barriers

Remember: only 13% of older adults earning under $30,000 in household income volunteer, compared with 39% earning $100,000+. Even "free" volunteering has costs—transportation, parking, police checks, equipment. Reimburse expenses when possible. Cover police check fees. Provide meals during shifts. Small investments remove major barriers.

Remember:

The older adults who could benefit most from volunteering's social and health benefits often face the greatest barriers to participating.

Design programs that are truly accessible, not just to the healthiest and wealthiest, but to those who need connection most.

Next Steps

Ready to apply these frameworks? Start by auditing your current volunteer program against these principles. Where are you strong? Where could you improve? Then choose one framework to focus on first—often, flexibility and recognition offer the quickest wins.

The full report includes a list of practical tools for people designing, managing, or evaluating older adult volunteer programs.



Case Studies

Men's Sheds: Community Grassroots Building

What is it?

A peer-led movement where older men gather regularly to work on projects together, combat isolation, and contribute to their communities.

Why it works

Responds to reality that older men have lower participation in typical older adult programs (fitness classes, social activities)

Structured around interests of participants themselves, not organizational mandates

Vibrancy comes from peer-to-peer connections, not top-down programming

170+

sheds across Canada, growing from 35 in 2020, with a goal of 1,000 by 2032.

3,000+ hours

Some sheds have tracked 3,000-4,000 volunteer hours annually.

Community Impact

Sheds partner with organizations on repairs, maintenance, bat boxes for ecology groups, garden beds for seniors' homes, benches for hospitals, and more.

Scaling Insights

Monthly virtual meetings allow sheds to share resources and learn from each other

National organization provides toolboxes on governance, development, diversity

Micro-grants help local sheds mark events and raise awareness

Platform being built to help sheds track volunteer hours

Key Lessons

Decline of traditional organizations creates space for innovative grassroots models

Peer-led approaches foster ownership and sustainability

National support helps local initiatives scale without losing autonomy



> “The thought of being able to give back and give a positive impact makes us feel good inside.”
>
> — Men’s Shed Volunteer

Volunteer Waterloo Region: Board Games and Mingle

What is it?

Weekly intergenerational board game nights bringing together older adults and youth (typically about seven older adults and 25 youth, 70% newcomers).

The Challenge

Youth participants asking for more older adult involvement—recruitment remains key barrier.

Evolution

Originally a summer program, now year-round due to popularity. Creating youth and older adult leadership teams to run program collaboratively.

Scaling

Evaluation being used to adapt program for rural context in nearby Wellesley Township.

100%

of participants engaged across generations

88%

made meaningful connections

76%

reported no social isolation after participating (vs. 36% before)

Key Lessons

Social activities create foundation for future volunteering together

Leadership opportunities engage participants more deeply

Evaluation of small projects provides insights for expansion





Volunteer Waterloo Region Board Games and Mingle

Recommendations: Three Strategic Priorities for Organizations

Priority 1: Rebuild Volunteer Infrastructure

What this means

Restore volunteer management positions

Train staff to work effectively with volunteers

Create systems for recruitment, onboarding, recognition, retention

Build internal capacity before focusing on recruitment numbers

Example from the field

Nova Scotia Health focused on training staff and improving program quality before expanding volunteer recruitment—prioritizing retention and long-term success over short-term numbers.

Priority 2: Leverage Health and Social Connection Investments

What this means

Position volunteering as preventative health strategy

Partner with social prescribing initiatives

Connect with health networks and wellness programs

Frame volunteering as evidencebased health intervention

Why this Matters

Volunteering reduces loneliness, increases purpose, supports mental and physical health—making it cost-effective investment aligned with health sector priorities.



Men's Sheds community

Priority 3: Address Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers

The following groups may need targeted support to participate:

01

Low-income older adults: Face financial barriers (transportation, fees, equipment)

02

Those with poor health/limited mobility: Need accessible, flexible roles

03

Those experiencing burnout: Need low-pressure, restorative engagement options

04

New retirees: Often disengage as they leave workforce—need structured pathways



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.

"Now that we understand the powerful benefits of volunteering, how can we help older adults re-engage in it?"

The answer lies in the bright spots showcased in this guide— and in the collective commitment of organizations across Canada to rebuild, innovate, and create pathways for meaningful engagement.

The work begins with invitation. The transformation begins with connection.



GrandPals initiative

Notes

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