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

Companion Guide #3
Coaching and Mentoring Supports for Organizations

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 **Successful Practices And Programs: A Practical Guide to Engaging Older Adult Volunteers and Building Intergenerational Connections.** 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 adults have long been core contributors to Canada's volunteer landscape, yet organizations are seeing shifting engagement patterns, declining intensity of participation, and growing disparities based on income, health, social connection, and access. At the same time, research shows that volunteering plays a powerful role in healthy aging—strengthening social networks, improving wellbeing, and fostering a sense of purpose.

This guide is designed for practitioners who work directly with volunteers: volunteer managers, coordinators, program leads, and community-based organizations seeking to build accessible, meaningful, and intergenerational volunteer pathways for older adults.

Drawing from the insights in **Ready, Willing and Needed: Renewing Older Adult Volunteering in Canada**, as well as current innovations across the sector, this guide provides practical tools, approaches, and models that organizations can implement immediately—even with limited staff capacity.

This guide aims to:

Raise awareness of successful coaching, mentoring, and peer-support models that support older adult volunteers.

Highlight practical tools, templates, and professional development resources that improve volunteer engagement.

Identify capacity-building strategies that can increase organizational readiness—especially for intergenerational programs.

Situate Volunteer Canada's role within existing national infrastructure and its potential to contribute to sector-wide systems change.

Support practitioners in addressing current gaps and building more inclusive, engaging pathways for older adult volunteers.

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.



Coaching Practices

Coaching approaches help volunteers feel supported, confident, and clear about their roles. They are especially beneficial for older adults navigating transitions (e.g., retirement, mobility shifts, reduced social networks) and for volunteers stepping into peer-support or intergenerational roles.

Key Practices

1. Supportive check-ins

Short, scheduled check-ins (monthly or bi-monthly) help volunteers surface challenges early, stay connected to staff, and prevent burnout—one of the strongest barriers reported by older adults. In 2023, over a third (38%) of older adults who were volunteering less than before the pandemic said they were "just more burned out nowadays and do not have as much energy to volunteer."

2. Role clarity and goal-setting

Volunteers thrive when expectations are clear. Simple tools—role summaries, "what success looks like" statements, and first-30-day guides—help build confidence.

3. Strengths-based placement

Older adults bring leadership, lived experience, technical skills, and deep community knowledge. Matching volunteers based on strengths increases satisfaction and retention, and this can be accomplished by asking a series of questions in onboarding interviews and by taking the time to listen to their life story.

4. Flexible engagement coaching

Given increases in travel, caregiving responsibilities, and fluctuating energy levels, coaching should emphasize flexibility—seasonal roles, episodic projects, and collaborative scheduling.

5. Wellness-oriented coaching

Volunteering is linked to improved mental and physical health. Coaches can encourage volunteers to set boundaries, take breaks, and recognize volunteering as a partnership—not an obligation. This is particularly important as a recent systematic review in The Gerontologist noted the potential harm of volunteering for volunteers who feel overwhelmed, including a decrease in self-fulfillment.

Peer Mentoring Models and Volunteer-Led Navigation

Peer mentorship encourages connection and builds community—both critical given declines in social networks among older adults. Older adults excel in roles that draw on lived experience and relational strengths.

Promising Approaches

Peer-to-Peer Volunteer Mentors
Experienced volunteers support newer volunteers with guidance, encouragement, and troubleshooting.

Intergenerational Peer Mentoring
Bringing youth and older adults together supports skill-sharing, builds belonging, and improves volunteer satisfaction. Older adults often appreciate opportunities to contribute life experience while youth offer digital or cultural navigation support.

Affinity or Identity-Based Mentors
Language, cultural background, or lived-experience matching can improve comfort and reduce barriers for racialized, newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ older adults. For example multilingual friendly visiting programs.

Volunteer navigators who help peers access services. This is especially promising within emerging social prescribing networks.

Community connectors in apartment buildings or seniors' residences.

Cohort-Based Onboarding

Cohort-based onboarding supports social connection—a major predictor of whether an older adult will volunteer.

Benefits

- Creates immediate peer networks
- Normalizes learning together
- Reduces isolation and builds belonging
- Strengthens commitment beyond an individual role

Cohort Components

- Welcome session with staff and peer hosts
- Short training modules grouped by role type
- Shared reflection or discussion
- Clear pathways to continued involvement

Professional Development

Professional development is an essential foundation for strong volunteer engagement systems, and this list of opportunities can serve as a starting point.

University of Waterloo Volunteer Management for the Not-for-Profit Sector Course

This self-guided 12-module course addresses key components of volunteer management practices with the goal of equipping practitioners with the skills and competencies required to understand the management of diverse groups of volunteers.

Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada/ Conestoga College Certificate Program

The three-course online certificate program is the longest-running program in Canada (since 1984) and provides students with the knowledge, resources, and tools to be effective, creative and inspiring volunteer managers. It is delivered online and can be completed within a year.

GoodLinks Intergenerational Training

The training workshops are designed for anyone who wants to build authentic intergenerational experiences, especially nonprofits, care facilities, community centres and faith communities.

Professional Association of Volunteer Leaders Ontario (PAVRO) - Mentorship Program

This program offers an opportunity for PAVRO members to connect to work on a specific topic or project.

Online learning for volunteer management practitioners

Volunteer Toronto

Foundational volunteer management training, workshops, and toolkits

VMPC (Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada)

National standards, conferences, and communities of practice

Volunteer Canada Learning Hub

Learn more at volunteer.ca

Certification Programs

CVRM

Certified Volunteer Resource Manager (VMPC)

AVRM

Advanced Volunteer Resource Management, available through some provincial centres

Toolkits and resources for creating intergenerational programs

City of Edmonton Intergenerational Programming Toolkit

A toolkit to assist organizations to plan and implement intergenerational programs.

World Health Organization - Planning and implementing interventions for intergenerational contact

A step-by-step guide for people who want to use intergenerational programming to combat ageism and to promote understanding and mutual respect among generations.

WHO Age-Friendly Cities Framework

The WHO Age-friendly Cities framework proposes eight interconnected domains that can help to identify and address barriers to the well-being and participation of older people.

Griffith University Intergenerational Learning Program Operational Guidelines and Toolkit

Guidelines for the development, implementation and evaluation of intergenerational programs.

New Brunswick Department of Social Development - A toolkit for Planning Intergenerational Events

Practical information to support educators, care providers, community groups and agencies in coordinating successful intergenerational initiatives.



Capacity Building

Volunteer Management Roles & Funding

The Ready, Willing and Needed findings show that volunteer manager roles were among the first cut during the pandemic and some have not returned. Yet they are essential infrastructure.

Organizations should:

- Include volunteer engagement roles in core budgets
- Use grants to pilot or rebuild volunteer coordinator positions
- Share volunteer management functions across collaborating orgs when capacity is low

Internal Staff Training

Staff across the organization—not just volunteer managers—need shared training on:

- Working with older adult volunteers
- Intergenerational relationship-building
- Cultural humility and language inclusion
- Trauma-informed and age-friendly practices
- Reducing out-of-pocket costs and transportation barriers

Data Tracking & Evaluation Tools

- Volunteer hour tracking (even approximate)
- Structured feedback and exit surveys
- Demographic questions that reflect diversity in aging
- Short reflection forms for intergenerational programs
- Light evaluation tied to outcomes such as belonging, purpose, and confidence



Current Gaps & Recommendations to Move the Field Forward

Drawing from The Ready, Willing, and Needed findings, practitioners should be prepared to address:

Key Gaps

1. Declining social connections among older adults

In 2024, 61% of older adults reported belonging to no social groups, up 24 points since 2013.

2. Lack of invitations to volunteer

Older adults are the least likely to be asked but the most likely to say yes.

3. Transportation and out-of-pocket barriers

4. Burnout potential

Volunteers who feel overwhelmed are more likely to experience a decrease in self-fulfillment.

5. Uneven engagement across income and health status

6. Limited staff capacity for volunteer engagement

7. Lack of culturally inclusive and language-accessible programs

Recommendations

Embed social connection in all volunteer practices, including cohorts, mentorship, and intergenerational opportunities.

Ask more often and more intentionally—especially to reach isolated or previously engaged older adults.

Design flexible, low-commitment roles that respect energy levels and competing priorities.

Reimburse transportation wherever possible or build partnerships with community ride programs.

Invest in staff training, even if brief and modular.

Use intergenerational models to increase belonging, skill-sharing, and mutual support.

Engage volunteers in program design, ensuring roles reflect what older adults value.

Strengthen partnerships with health and social prescribing networks to reach isolated older adults.

Role of the Sector

The volunteer-engagement sector (volunteer managers, older-adult programming leads, and intergenerational practitioners) plays a vital, hands-on role in building connected and caring communities.

These professionals create welcoming pathways for people of all ages to contribute their skills, strengthen belonging, and support one another. They design meaningful roles, nurture safe and inclusive environments, and champion the talents of older adults and youth alike.

By bridging generations, fostering relationships, and adapting to evolving community needs, the sector drives innovation, resilience, and social connection. Their day-to-day leadership is what turns national strategies into real impact on the ground—one volunteer, one relationship, and one community at a time.

Role of Volunteer Canada

Volunteer Canada strengthens the national volunteer infrastructure by uplifting the people and systems that make community engagement thrive.

We bolster volunteer management capacity, support local and regional centres, and convene national networks that spark shared learning and leadership. Through the National Volunteer Action Strategy, we develop tools, training, and evaluation frameworks that help organizations excel.

We also champion the strengths and contributions of older adults, advocate for robust national investment in volunteer management and data infrastructure, and promote policies that enhance health, aging, and social connection. This includes addressing barriers (like transportation and digital exclusion) so every person can participate fully in their community.

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.

Notes



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