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

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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.

Full report authors

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Contributors

Volunteer Canada staff including Lily Viggiano, Harar Hall, Leigha McCarroll, and Heather Montgomery contributed both to the development of the main report and the companion guides.

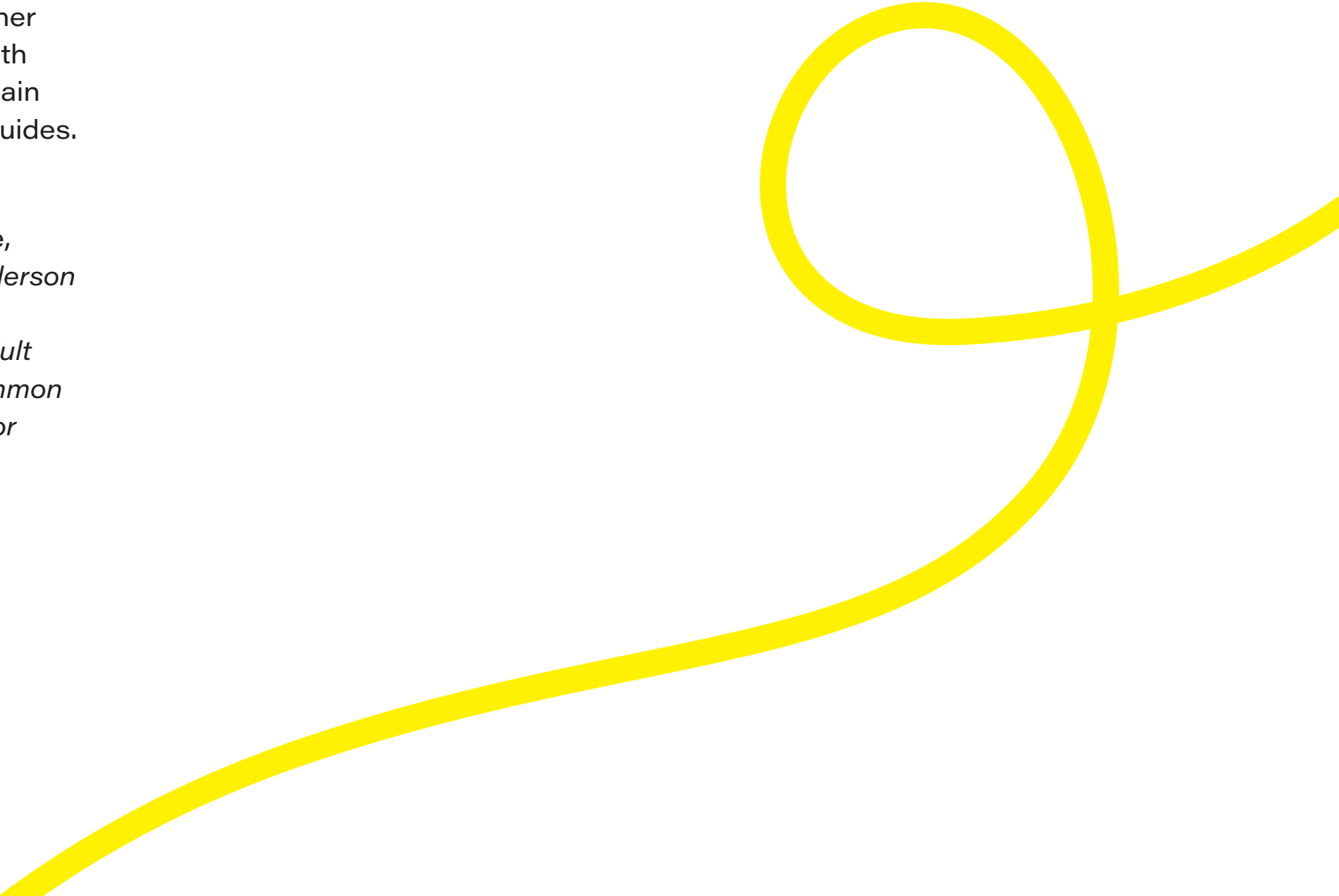
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References

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.



Executive Summary

A quiet transformation is reshaping Canada's volunteer landscape. Many older adults—once the bedrock of community life—are stepping back from formal volunteering at a striking pace. The stakes are enormous.

According to Statistics Canada's 2023 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, adults aged 65 and older still contributed an estimated 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023—roughly **\$12.1 billion in volunteer labour.**

But this contribution has declined even as Canada's older adult population has grown. If older adults had volunteered at the same per-person level as in 2018, Canada's 2025 older adult population would have contributed an estimated 211 million additional hours of formal volunteering—**equivalent to roughly \$7.1 billion more in volunteer labour.**

The steepest decline in formal volunteering participation is among those aged 65–74, a group that historically bridged work and retirement through service.

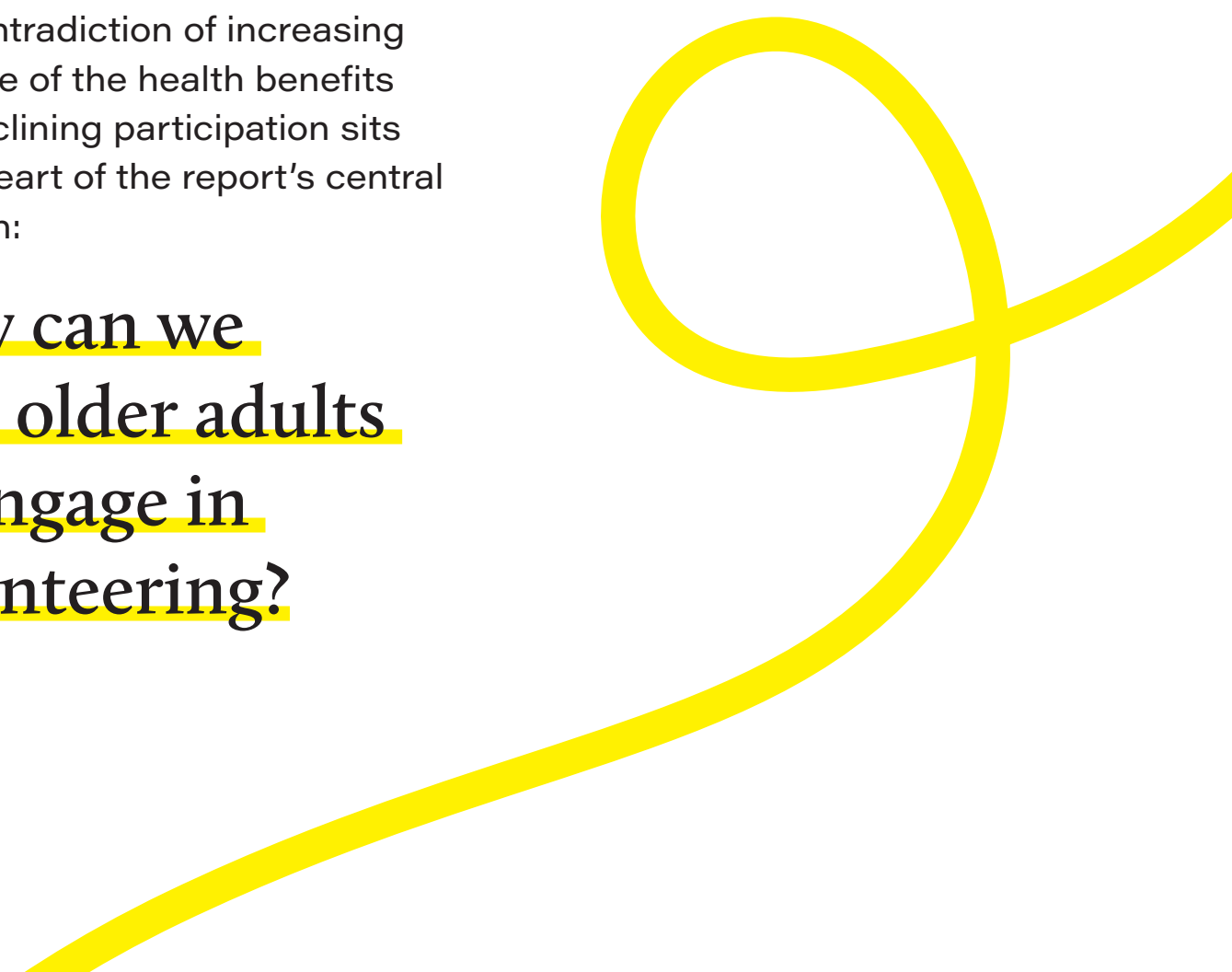
Yet this is not simply a story of decline—it is one of divergence. Who volunteers, and who doesn't, is increasingly shaped by income, education, health, gender, and immigration background. While retirement is often imagined as an open door to civic engagement, for many it has instead become a point of disengagement.

At the same time, the evidence base linking volunteering with healthy aging continues to grow, with studies associating volunteering with better physical health, mental wellbeing, and social connection. Research has shown that volunteering can slow biological aging, reduce inflammation, and lower the risk of disability—all while building the social connections that protect against loneliness. But even as these benefits become clearer, the total hours volunteered by older adults have fallen dramatically.

This contradiction of increasing evidence of the health benefits with declining participation sits at the heart of the report's central question:

How can we help older adults re-engage in volunteering?

The future of volunteering depends on closing gaps—not only increasing participation but redesigning volunteer roles to reflect the realities of modern aging. That means making opportunities more flexible, socially connected, and accessible for those facing mobility, financial, or health barriers. **Volunteering must be seen not as a luxury, but as an essential part of healthy, connected aging.**



The Changing Landscape of Older Adult Volunteering

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. Within this group, the share of racialized older adults is projected to reach 25% by 2032.

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.

A major source of community capacity. Newly available SGVP data suggest adults aged 65+ contributed 361 million hours of formal volunteering in 2023, representing about 30% of all formal volunteer hours in Canada and what we estimate to be about \$12.1 billion in volunteer labour.

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.

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. However, 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.

Retirement not translating to volunteering. 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.

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.



The Path Forward: Three Pillars to Strengthen Older Adults Volunteering

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 several innovative case studies, the report outlines a roadmap anchored in three pillars:

Pillar 1: Elevate and Strengthen the Volunteer Ecosystem

Canada doesn't have a volunteer shortage—it has an infrastructure shortage. To re-engage older adults, organizations need the staff, systems, and coordination capacity to match willing volunteers with meaningful roles. That means restoring volunteer management positions, strengthening volunteer centres and community hubs, and modernizing the tools that connect people to opportunities. Without this ecosystem, even the most motivated volunteers may have nowhere to go.

Pillar 2: Leverage Existing Investments in Health and Social Connection

Huge investments are flowing into older adult health, social prescribing, loneliness reduction, and healthy-aging programs. Volunteering is a missing link—a proven activity that improves health, strengthens social connection, and expands community capacity. Embedding volunteer pathways into these initiatives can unlock participation at scale, turning health investments into engines for engagement.

Pillar 3: Address the Barriers Facing Would-Be Volunteers

Older adults want to contribute, but most aren't being asked. A renewed focus on invitations and opportunity creation—combined with reducing financial, mobility, and digital barriers—is critical. Flexible, accessible pathways must be built for new retirees, older adults with health challenges, and those with limited incomes.

By 2030, a five percentage point increase in volunteering among older adults would mean an estimated **465,000 new older adult volunteers** contributing **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 invitations 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.



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