

# Community Dispatch

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## THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND VOLUNTEERS: BUILDING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

December 2001 marks the closure of International Year of Volunteers. There has been much to celebrate. The well being of our communities is a demonstration of the thousands of hours of volunteer time invested in others. December 5<sup>th</sup> is *Resolve To Be Involved Day* and marks the launch of a new public awareness campaign called **I WILL VOLUNTEER 2002**.

The Council launches **I WILL VOLUNTEER 2002** by sharing with the Halton community excerpts from the background document for the recent November, 2001 conference on volunteers and voluntarism, *The Voluntary Sector and Volunteers: Building Our Future Together*.

### What Do We Know About the Sector? – Trends in Research

According to the *2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP)*, fewer Canadians are contributing the majority of volunteer hours in Canada:

- 6.5 million volunteers contributed a total of just over 1 billion hours in 2000, a decrease of 56 million hours since 1997
- In 2000 there were 1 million fewer volunteers than in 1997
- 7% of all Canadians contributed 73% of volunteer hours
- In 2000, 78% of Canadians made charitable gifts with the average gift

increasing; religious organizations receive almost half of all donations

- Volunteers are more likely than non volunteers to make charitable donations, give money directly to others, and participate in community organizations – the more time volunteered the more likely one is give to other kinds of support

Canada has a civic core comprised of 27% of the population who do the majority of donating and volunteering. The distinguishing traits of Canada's small civic core are – 35 years of age or more, religious but less likely to be Catholic, practice informal helping and giving as well as formal volunteering and donating, high level of education, higher status jobs, children between 6 and 17 at home, higher income than average, committed to supporting their community, hold high assessments of their own health and life satisfaction, watch less TV, and live in communities away from large urban centres.

The voluntary sector is dependent on government support for 3 out of every 5 dollars.

The voluntary sector employs one in every 11 Canadians.

In *A Call to Alms: The New Face of Charities in Canada*, Andre Picard writes that \$90.5 billion passes through the voluntary sector each year, a sum equivalent to the GDP of British Columbia.

Over an eight -year period ending in 1998, voluntary sector organizations had their funding slashed 42 percent.

In Ontario, 2 million citizens formally volunteer with an estimated 64,000 voluntary sector organizations.

With respect to corporate giving in Canada, the statistics are grim. Fewer than 5% of Canadian companies report charitable contributions to Revenue Canada.

Most Canadians rate the perceived importance of charities highly, most Canadians (88%) believe charities should be engaged in advocacy – fewer accept the idea of demonstrations but feel that letter writing and face to face meetings **are better**, more than half believe that charities are under-funded, most Canadians feel that charities should engage in business activity to increase revenues, Canadians feel bombarded by requests for donations from charities and oppose the idea of commission based fundraisers, and most Canadians trust charities but believe in a need for more transparency and a non governmental organization to monitor the activities of charities.

The NSGVP Survey asked Canadians about *informal volunteering*; helping people outside their own households. Informal volunteering might be thought of as ‘neighbourliness’ – shovelling the walk of an elderly person who lives across the street, babysitting for a friend’s child, etc. This is a significant part of the voluntary picture in Canada (3 in 10 Canadians are volunteers but 7 in 10 provide help to individuals not living with them).

It is significant that the NSGVP did not track the incidence of ‘*unpaid work*’, which refers to helping or caring for family members. In official Canadian statistics, most unpaid work

is not considered voluntary activity. However, this is an important issue for the voluntary sector because, as our population ages, the need to care for our aging parents or relatives will increase. This will mean that the caregivers (who are, for the most part, women) will have less and less time available to engage in other kinds of voluntary activity.

In 2000, The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy conducted a “*Scan of Research on Public Attitudes Towards the Voluntary Sector*” which concluded that:

- Overall, Canadians view the work and contribution of this sector to society favourably
- Canadians do not want the voluntary sector to be a substitute for services and programs that governments ought to deliver
- Canadians trust voluntary and charitable organizations
- Canadians express concern over how organizations solicit, manage and use donations
- There is a limited amount of research on how the public views the voluntary sector

The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy’s 2001 Symposium called, “Telling Our Story,” included a segment on the role of the media in promoting knowledge about the voluntary sector:

- Nonprofits must demand coverage and connect with local journalists because getting national coverage is difficult; however without coverage the work of the voluntary sector will continue anonymously and without adequate funding
- Nonprofits must be clear about what the message is and ready to talk about their influence on social policy

- The voluntary sector should focus on identifying social trends and documenting them with evidence as well as publicizing the truly inspirational stories

## **The Role of the Voluntary Sector – Providing Services? Engaging Citizens?**

### *Providing Services*

A great paradox exists with respect to the role of the voluntary sector in Canada. While the sector brings to mind the ideas of connectedness, neighbourhoods, and civic engagement the reality is that, increasingly, voluntary organizations are delivering state funded public programs and services under purchase of service agreements with governments.

There is great debate in the literature about what role the voluntary sector *should* play in delivering social welfare goods and services. Proponents, suggest that the pluses of nonprofit service delivery include personalizing and innovating the provision of services, smaller scale operation and the ability to respond to local needs, flexibility to adjust care to needs of clients rather than the structure of government agencies, giving expression to a wide variety of views in our pluralist democracy, and fostering a degree of competition among service providers.

However, detractors warn that government must remain involved because nonprofits cannot generate the resources required to respond to complex human service needs, they will respond to client need based on more limited mandates and the needs of the community may be defined narrowly within the context of these already established mandates. This may lead to uneven and unsystematic delivery of services.

Nonprofit provision may be more discriminating and less universal than direct government assistance. This is in part due to the fact that volunteers are not solely motivated by altruism; they have their own needs for satisfaction. In fact, anthropologists argue that gifts are a primary means of controlling others. Volunteerism works better when there is a personal connection between the giver and the recipient and when volunteers are involved in decision-making.

The voluntary sector is being asked to patch the social safety net, while governments promote the idea that social need can be met if we all ‘dig a little deeper’. Within this context, the voluntary sector is seen as a kind of discount government – unionized jobs replaced coupled with a growth in short term contract work and in private delivery without appropriate standards for service.

Frances Woolley reports a positive relationship between public expenditure as a percentage of GDP and people’s membership in voluntary organizations; and the Luxembourg Income Study and World Values Survey showed that higher income inequality is associated with lower levels of voluntary activity

She suggests that people are more likely to give support to others when the others already have some sources of support and the caregivers are not faced with the possibility of having to take on full responsibility for the other.

Most of the literature advocates for a balance between voluntary sector and government provision of public welfare.

### *Engaging Citizens*

The voluntary sector is struggling for recognition while confronting society’s wish

for collective assistance, social cohesion, and a way to replace bureaucracy. This is a tall order as nonprofits experience funding cuts and a destabilizing move away from core funding to project funding.

In order to meet this demand, nonprofits must tackle the notion that *philanthropy* is no longer a sustainable vision for the role of the voluntary sector in Canadian society. Nonprofits are a vital location for the kinds of activities, captured in the NSGVP, which may be viewed broadly as *civic engagement*. Civic engagement is the way that individuals express their views in our diverse and multicultural nation; it is an important vehicle for participatory democracy. Rather than a dumping ground for society's unwanted, the sector is a springboard to equality and a hotbed of social capital creation.

During the Telling Our Story symposium, Bronwyn Drainie described voluntary organizations as the 'research and development departments of Canadian social and public life'. For example, the seeds of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms were planted by small groups working for change in the women's movement and Native rights movements, among others.

Frances Woolley suggests that voluntary activity is, simultaneously, a sign of social cohesion and disintegration. Without some shared values people would not volunteer at all. On the other hand, in a truly cohesive society volunteer activity may decrease. For example, food banks have become a fixture in many Canadian communities and they attract many committed volunteers. This kind of voluntarism is redundant in a truly cohesive society where the basic needs of all citizens are met.

Frequent mention is made in the literature to advocacy as an important element of civic

engagement. Under current stipulations in the Income Tax Act, registered charities may not commit more than 10% of donated funds to advocacy. Many suggest that this is wrong because it is essential for volunteers to advocate on behalf of those they serve; advocacy is an important part of free speech and democracy.

Furthermore, many call attention to the archaic (100 year old) definition of charity used by Revenue Canada. Under our tax laws, charities fit into a few specific categories: advancement of religion, health, education, poverty relief, culture and other purposes that benefit the community. More recent issues like women's rights, civil rights, multiculturalism, free speech and national unity are excluded.

### **The Value of Volunteers – What are the Costs? What are the Benefits?**

The voluntary sector must remind government that voluntarism is not free and volunteers are not a panacea for social ills. In fact, the biggest enemy of voluntarism may be short-sighted government. Since the cutbacks began volunteer activity has fallen because the infrastructure of voluntary sector organizations is crumbling. These organizations need 'enabling' funds to hire professional staff to recruit, screen, train, supervise, motivate and recognize volunteers.

As nonprofit organizations are squeezed by funding cuts, concerns are raised that volunteers are being asked to perform tasks without adequate training.

Concerns are also being raised about the growing phenomenon of 'involuntary' or mandatory volunteers (from schools, community service hours and workfare/Ontario Works). 'Doing time' in this way may not create loyalty to a cause.

According to the NSGVP, 7% of volunteers in Canada are mandatory.

The voluntary sector must recognize that 'new' volunteers, particularly youth, are less likely to be drawn to the sector by the 'duty' message that attracts Canada's civic core. Many youth view volunteering as a way to improve job prospects. Attracting new volunteers, from outside the civic core, will require a new message of inspiration that touches their passion yet focuses on personal satisfaction and skill building.

The NSGVP (2000) suggests that loss of one million volunteers since 1997 may be in part due to improvements in the economy, which have increased job prospects for many Canadians. Many Canadians feel they no longer have the time to volunteer. This has raised the issue of corporate voluntarism where employers give paid release time to workers to become involved in community causes. The NSGVP reports that in 2000, 27% of employed volunteers were permitted to modify their hours of work in order to volunteer, this is up from 22% in 1997.

### **Regulatory and Resource *Issues* for the Sector**

According to Bronwyn Drainie, the story of downsizing and cutbacks is important to uniting the voluntary sector – it is a common experience among nonprofits who are otherwise diverse.

Many in the literature contend that governments must establish and enforce standards to ensure it is a system, not a jumble of rules and regulations. Governments have a primary role in establishing the parameters of the work to be done by the voluntary sector using legislative and regulatory power.

Voluntary sector needs a role at government policy-making tables. The sector is a larger part of the economy than transportation and agriculture but there is no 'Commission of Charities'.

Some suggest that government could set up an arms length Voluntary Sector Commission or Canadian Charities Commission to supplement the audit role of Revenue Canada and co-ordinate a comprehensive regulatory framework for voluntary sector organizations. There is a need for sanctions for breaches of regulations, beyond losing registered charity status. However, there is a need to balance external and internal regulation practices to not burden small organizations.

Most agree that core funding is essential to the sustainability of the voluntary sector. Government should also fund volunteer coordinators, education (civics) and voluntary high school placements.

Governments must set standards if contracting out government services.

There is a need for the same level of transparency and accountability to the public for voluntary sector organizations that exists with public institutions.

Governments should also consider changing the taxation policy to promote individual and corporate giving. Individuals and corporations can give money, gifts in-kind and time off for volunteering.

A code of ethics for fundraising is required and must be enforced through legislation.

There is an urgent need to explore legislation that would protect volunteers who are injured or cause injury while acting in good faith – need a province wide (or national) liability insurance package, others argue that increased

reliance on insurance is not a solution – need for governments to review and limit personal liability imposed on directors

Many in the literature support the idea of voluntary sector self-regulation as a key aspect of maintaining accountability in the sector. Self-regulation would include eight aspects of governance: the board understands its responsibility, avoids conflicts of interest, undertakes strategic planning to carry out mission, is transparent, develops appropriate structures, maintains fiscal responsibility, ensures effective management, provides oversight of human resources, implements assessment and control systems and plans for the succession and diversity of the board. Only large organizations with budgets of more than \$200,000 should have to provide detailed information about all eight aspects of governance. Government could also provide a shortened tax form for charities with \$100,000 or less.

According to ‘Sustaining a Civil Society: Voluntary Action in Ontario’ (1997), the voluntary sector wants to take hold of its own destiny and develop new and equal partnerships with government and the private sector, be a part of planning process at all

levels and bring a community based perspective to policy formulation.

### **Conclusion – Where Do We Go From Here?**

Clearly, the literature on the voluntary sector raises as many (if not more) questions as it answers. There are serious gaps in our understanding of volunteering and its importance to Canadian society. There is an emerging consensus, however, that the voluntary sector plays a critical role in promoting social cohesion by providing an outlet and location for citizens to care for others, work collectively on social problems, participate in social policy debate and express their values and beliefs. There also appears to be some agreement that voluntarism is not a panacea for social problems or a way to fill in the gaps of reduced government provision for social welfare. In fact, voluntarism may be less about the individual gifts of time in caring for another and more about how we as a society collectively express our values and enact our rites of citizenship.

*This document can be obtained from the Halton Social Planning Council & Volunteer Centre.*

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