

Community Dispatch

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CHAIRMAN'S ROUNDTABLE ON THE NONPROFIT AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR: FINDINGS FROM THE VOLUNTEER DIALOGUES – PART 2

This Community Dispatch recognizes Volunteer Week 2006 by sharing insights about volunteering flowing from the volunteer dialogues conducted by the Chairman's Roundtable on the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector. The Roundtable was described fully in the previous Community Dispatch Vol. 10, No.4. This, the second, shares a summary of the Roundtable's Community Dialogues on volunteers and volunteering. The comments of volunteers as to why they participate and what barriers limit that participation are essential to building the capacity and vitality of the sector.

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The Volunteer Dialogues

As a key step in the Roundtable's consultation process, the Roundtable hosted a number of Community Dialogues exploring volunteerism in Halton. The Dialogues took place from November 18th to December 1st, 2005, with eleven focus groups held on mornings, evenings and weekends. A minimum of two sessions were held in each of Halton's local municipalities. In total, the Roundtable heard from ninety volunteers who shared with us their thoughts, ideas and experiences on volunteerism in Halton.

The intent of the sessions was to identify local issues facing volunteers and their participation in agencies, throughout Halton particularly:

- volunteer motivation;
- what volunteers look for in an organization;
- marketing strategies; and
- issues and opportunities experienced by volunteers and their agencies.

Why Consult Volunteers?

The value of consulting this stakeholder group cannot be understated, given what we know about the overall contribution of volunteers. Some key highlights include:

- volunteers in Canada are estimated to contribute between 1 and 2 billion hours of time each year;
- It would take between 600,000 to over a million full-time jobs to replace the work of volunteers; and
- in economic terms, Statistics Canada estimates that volunteers provide the in-kind equivalent of \$14 billion dollars of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to the economy.

Based on these statistics, it is evident that volunteer contribution in the nonprofit sector is significant, and, therefore essential to informing the Roundtable's processes.

Who Participated?

(based on an 80% response rate, N =72)

Participants represented a wide cross section of agencies and sectors, with greatest participation from health and social services (38%), followed by the faith sector (9%) and education/research (9%).

With respect to gender and age, the sample was over-representative of females (68%) and those over the age of 50 (65%). The age of our volunteers was seen to be reflective of their involvement, as nearly 70% of participants had volunteered for 10 years or more. However, their significant experience was not only indicative of

the duration of their volunteerism, but also in their level of activity, as 77% were involved with two or more agencies, while 67% gave more than ten hours per month. These findings suggest that we spoke to a core group of volunteers who could draw on a wide range of experiences over many years.

When looking at the roles and activities performed by these volunteers, it was found that the greatest number were involved in delivering frontline services (31%), followed by sitting as a board member (27%). Participants were least likely to fundraise (16%) and provide administrative services (13%).

What The Roundtable Heard

Over the course of the sessions, participants identified a number of key themes to inform the work and forthcoming recommendations of the Roundtable.

Imbalance between Resources and Needs

“We’ve created an environment where the need for volunteers is critical, but there’s increased vulnerability for volunteers”

- session participant

Respondents demonstrated concern over an imbalance between the demand for service placed on agencies and the volunteer and financial resources available to meet this demand. In particular, volunteers felt that time constraints represented a significant barrier to volunteering, sighting a number of related issues, including the burden of commuting. We also heard that concerns over liability may be restricting the type(s) of activities volunteers are willing to become involved in. Transportation issues were seen as a potentially limiting factor for some individuals.

Financially, participants appeared to be keenly aware of the funding challenges experienced by nonprofit agencies. Financial sustainability coupled by long applications for funding were key issues. Also identified as key issues was the sustainability of funds and the difficulties posed

by the application process. Concerns over funding were seen to be exacerbated by what participants characterized as a lack of affordable and accessible space. These findings resonate with the work of Katherine Scott in her report *‘Funding Matters: The Impact of Canada’s New Funding Regime on Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Organizations,’* which notes “while funding isn’t the only thing that matters... it matters a lot.”

Potential Solutions

“It’s not about competition, but about cooperation”

- session participant

Addressing potential solutions to the challenges faced by nonprofit organizations, participants felt that agencies could benefit from greater cooperation, including the sharing of infrastructure, resources and knowledge. This sentiment reflects the emergence of several key initiatives across the country. The collaborative initiatives build on the strength of the voluntary sector to tackle challenges and seize opportunities. The need to raise awareness around the sector and its issues also became apparent, particularly as it relates to the visibility of volunteer opportunities. Awareness has also emerged as a key focus of the Roundtable, which has been discussing strategies to convey the importance and impact of the sector to the broader public.

What Volunteers Want

“Give me something meaningful to do”

- session participant

In addition to examining the barriers, challenges and opportunities faced by volunteers and their agencies, participants identified a number of characteristics that they look for in an organization in which they would volunteer. These characteristics were:

- effective internal processes
- valuing and recognizing the contributions of volunteers
- providing clear expectations
- facilitating a meaningful volunteer experience

Combined, these qualities speak to the value of volunteer infrastructure in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Volunteer Motivation

“Without volunteers, the world would stop.”
- session participant

Although participants expressed that they look for certain characteristics in agencies, a sense of social responsibility was stated as the most significant factor for becoming engaged as a volunteer. This included giving back to the community or supporting a cause that had personally affected them, as well as the recognition that volunteers fill gaps in meeting the service needs of the community. Participants expressed the importance of role modelling the volunteer experience to children as key to continued volunteerism later in life, which is consistent with findings from the most recent National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (2000).

However, a number of participants indicated that they were drawn to the volunteer experience by its many rewards, including personal gratification and self-fulfilment; networking and social aspects; as well as an opportunity to grow personally.

Marketing Strategies

“Someone asked me – (to volunteer) – being asked is helpful”

- session participant

In reaching out to potential volunteers, participants indicated that agencies need to reach out directly and in person to potential volunteers. However, they cautioned against asking just anyone, as it was felt that organizations should take a targeted approach to volunteer recruitment. This falls hand-in-hand with a desire for clear and upfront expectations, ensuring that potential volunteers can target the experience they are looking for. Further suggestions for outreach centred around creating greater youth involvement, as well as taking a broad based approach to the use of multimedia.

Conclusion

Volunteerism is the life blood of many community agencies and the community itself. However, many agencies find themselves with limited resources and infrastructure required to recruit and fully manage their volunteer compliments. As the Roundtable moves forward, the voices of Halton’s volunteers will figure prominently in their considerations and eventual recommendations.



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