



VOLUNTEERING: CRUCIAL FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY GROWTH

Introduction

Volunteering has been a valuable and effective method for Canadians to effect social change for many generations. What began as a way of sharing knowledge and helping each other survive has evolved into an organized method of mobilizing incredible amounts of energy and knowledge for the common good. Volunteers are a vital component of our social structure.

What Does it Mean to Volunteer?

“To volunteer is to choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one's basic obligations.”¹

Volunteer work is often inspired by social injustices and driven by the desire to create change. Volunteers contribute to the growth and sustainability of communities by contributing skilled work in a variety of capacities and fields. Volunteer Canada reports that most Canadians “view volunteering as vital to the societal and economic well-being of the country”.² Its value to personal growth and community life mean that volunteering should be acknowledged as a way of life.

Shifts in Volunteer Work

The way that people volunteer shifts throughout the life cycle.³ Many young adults are busy; however, their schedules are more predictable.⁴ This stability makes engaging in regular volunteer work more accessible. As people begin to have children they tend to have less time to give. Juggling the needs of children, work schedules and often the care of parents is time consuming contributing to the fact that families are the least engaged subset of volunteers.⁵ Besides busy lives, there are also fewer opportunities available for families with young children to volunteer together. As people move into retirement we see that they tend to have more flexible, reliable and consistent schedules again. This group of volunteers are highly skilled and have valuable knowledge to contribute.

Ways of Engaging Volunteers

It is imperative that individuals' interests are taken into account when engaging them in volunteer work. Today's volunteers are highly skilled and have a clear vision of what capacity they want to give their time in. This vision and level of ability represent a shift in how volunteers are engaging with their roles. “Volunteering is personal and stems from individual preferences and motivations.”⁶ Volunteer Centres are an excellent resource for

¹ Susan Ellis and Katharine Campbell Energize

² Volunteer Canada, “Recognizing Volunteering in 2017: Summary Report” p. 9.

³ Volunteer Canada, “Executive Summary: Bridging the Gap”.

⁴ Volunteer Canada, “Building the Bridge for Volunteer Engagement” p. 14.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Volunteer Canada, “Executive Summary: Bridging the Gap”.

matching volunteers with a role that will be engaging and fulfilling, which are attributes that contribute to longevity in a volunteer role.

Benefits of Volunteering

Health & Well-Being

Research indicates that those who volunteer experience more positive physical and mental health outcomes and increased life satisfaction.⁷ For young adults, volunteering can help build confidence, ignite a passion for a certain cause and help them gain an understanding of issues that others in their community may be facing.

When families volunteer, they are given the opportunity to instill the values of giving and working as a team in their children.

For seniors who may be experiencing social isolation or loneliness, volunteering presents an opportunity to form social connections while staying active. Research from the Baycrest Centre has shown that “a moderate amount of volunteering has been shown to be related to less hypertension and fewer hip fractures among seniors who volunteer compared to their matched non-volunteering peers.”⁸

Skills Development

No matter what age group one belongs to, volunteering presents an opportunity to improve or gain new skills. Through various avenues of volunteering such as direct service, contributing administratively or sitting on a board of directors or committee, individuals can build a variety of skills including communication, leadership and teamwork. For

young individuals these may be skills that they have not had the opportunity to develop at school or in the work place. For older individuals, volunteering is a place where they can apply their knowledge and gain new perspectives in how to apply their skills.

Intergenerational Impacts

Along with benefits for individual generations, volunteering can help bridge the gap between age groups. Big Brothers Big Sisters provides great opportunities for older individuals to form relationships with youth who may be at risk providing a positive adult figure in the child’s life and in return receiving companionship and an opportunity to mentor and share knowledge.

A positive adult figure outside of a youth’s family can be an opportunity to ask questions and even explore interests that may not be encouraged or accessible in the home. For older adults, interacting with younger individuals can help them stay connected to current issues in the community they live in and can help “reinforce meaning through being appreciated and recognized as a valuable person.”⁹

The Volunteer Impact on Community

Volunteering has a direct impact on community. Institutions such as hospitals or hospices as well as churches, athletic teams and many social service agencies would not exist without the help of volunteers.

When people volunteer they become more aware of current issues, develop positive relationships with their neighbours and take

⁷ The Conference Board of Canada, “The Value of Volunteering in Canada” p. 10, April 5th, 2018.

⁸ Baycrest Center, “Evidence mounting that older adults who volunteer are happier, healthier.” Accessed on June 22nd, 2018.

⁹ Journal of Gerontological Social Work, “Benefits of Volunteering for Older Adults Mentoring At-Risk Youth”, p. 29

more pride and responsibility for their surroundings. The research shows that when people volunteer more there is less violent crime.¹⁰ Statistics can show that the crime rate is down but what is more important is when people actually feel safe in their communities. This feeling of safety, social cohesion and awareness developed and sustained through volunteering contributes to the community's overall sense of well-being. Attending school, gaining employment and participating in social and family life all become more accessible when we feel safe and engaged in our surroundings.

Conclusion

Volunteering helps to close social gaps between many different groups including politicians and the community, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, people and their community and between generations.

Volunteering gives a voice to the public to ensure their needs are heard. For example,

volunteering for political organizations can also open lines of communication with those in power and shape how issues are addressed.

There are a growing number of volunteer opportunities, like the ones discussed in this report, that allow younger and older individuals to work together. These opportunities help bring generations of people together allowing relationships to form and knowledge to be shared. Both generations have valuable input and closing this gap can help young individuals gain insight into how they want to shape their future while providing older individuals with a sense of purpose.

When people volunteer they have the opportunity to interact with people who have had different experiences. These interactions create a natural way of sharing experiences, knowledge and building relationships. Volunteering is an irreplaceable component of Canada's social fabric.



Produced by Community Development Halton
3350 South Service Road
Burlington, Ontario L7N 3M6
(905) 632-1975, 1-855-395-8807
E-mail: office@cdhalton.ca
Web site: www.cdhalton.ca www.volunteerhalton.ca



United Way
Halton & Hamilton

¹⁰ Huiting Wu, Points of Light Institute, "Social Impact of Volunteerism", August 30th, 2011