Report on a Survey and Workshop Related to the Impact of COVID-19 on Volunteer Engagement Programs in Halton

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March 3, 2021

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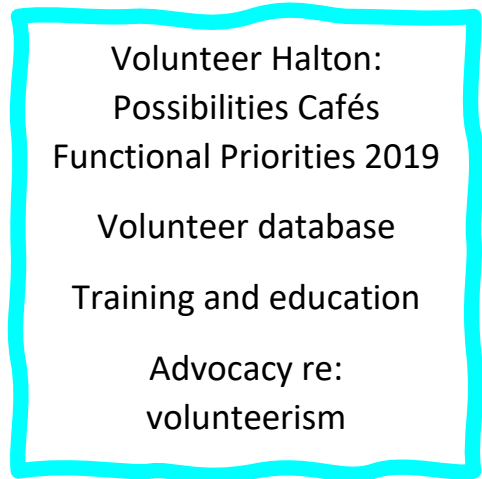
Background

Rosemary Coburn, former Director of Volunteer Halton (VH), was contracted as a consultant by Community Development Halton (CDH) for a 3-month period beginning in December 2020 to, along with other things, assess the viability of the current model of the Volunteer Centre.

Any assessment of viability must necessarily have as a core component an understanding of community needs. In 2019, CDH sponsored a series of Possibilities Cafés which captured the community's perceptions and expectations of the supports they saw as important for CDH and VH (a key program of CDH) to provide. Participants at the Cafés indicated that **both** the social planning function of CDH and the support to the voluntary sector provided by VH were viewed as high priorities for the community. The VH functions that the community saw as priorities were the volunteer data base, training and education and advocacy on behalf of volunteerism.

Within 4-5 months of the Possibilities Cafés, COVID-19 hit and human service organizations everywhere were forced to make rapid changes in the way they deliver service; this necessarily involved changes in the engagement of volunteers across organizations in the voluntary sector.

The Possibilities Cafes had, on the one hand, provided useful insight into what the community saw as priorities for VH pre-COVID, but no work had been done at the local level to ascertain the impact of COVID on the engagement of volunteers, on volunteer programs and on community needs in relation to volunteers going forward. To ensure an effective assessment of the current model of the Volunteer Centre, gaining some insight into what was happening with volunteer programs in Halton due to COVID was important. To facilitate this, Rosemary contracted Jody Orr of The Chrysalis Group to undertake a survey and to facilitate a community conversation on VH and the viability of the current model of service delivery it provides.

> Volunteer Halton:
> Possibilities Cafés
> Functional Priorities 2019
>
> Volunteer database
>
> Training and education
>
> Advocacy re: volunteerism

Jody's review of research conducted nationally over the pandemic indicated recent research had been undertaken in Canada by Imagine Canada, Volunteer B.C. and, Volunteer Canada (in collaboration with others). In fact, Volunteer Canada had undertaken 2 surveys focused specifically on the impact of COVID-19 on volunteer engagement in the nonprofit sector. (the first spanned the time period March to May 2020 and the second the period June to October 2020)

Given the short timeline we had in which to administer and analyze a survey as well as the potential advantage of being able to compare local and national data and trends, after

reviewing their survey instrument, we contacted Volunteer Canada and sought permission to adapt their survey to our local use. We are grateful to Volunteer Canada for their permission to use their survey instrument.

It is worth noting here that the survey was very long and populated primarily with forced-choice questions as opposed to open-ended questions, although there were spots where short comments/descriptions from respondents were included.

With limited time and resources, we knew going into the survey process that we could not develop a strategy for survey distribution that could have yielded in a short turn-around time a representative sample that might be generalized to the whole community. Instead, we adopted a strategy of trying to connect with most agencies that VH knew had a formal volunteer program (with a Manager of Volunteers, for example), some grassroots groups and faith communities, and some individuals. A total of 202 invitations went out, including 155 agencies/organizations and an additional 47 individuals involved in volunteerism with an organizational link. The survey was in the field for a 2-week period with 1 reminder e-mail going out to all those who had been invited initially to participate.

Survey participation was not as robust as we had hoped; we received 54 responses, for an initial response rate of 27% (not considered overly strong although, given the short timeline and deadlines we were working with, an acceptable response). The survey had some significant % of dropouts, however, yielding a completion rate of 60% (most of the dropouts occurred in the last survey section that was focused on descriptive organizational information, reflecting, we believe, the fact that individuals not representative of organizations did not find this section relevant to them. There is also the possibility that people fatigued given the length of the survey.)

The analysis of the survey was confined to descriptive analysis. When reading this report it is important to remember that this analysis gives us insight into the situations experienced by the respondents and that we cannot generalize to the whole community. It does, however, give us insight into the experience of the 54 organizations/ individuals who responded.

Further, given the dropouts, particularly in the final survey section, the reader is advised to look closely at the N (number of usable respondents) for each question; % of responses are calculated against this N and NOT against the total # of respondents.

NOTE: Volunteer Canada undertook 2 surveys in 2020, one covering the period from the beginning of the pandemic to May 2020, and the second covering the period June – October 2020. Comparisons to national data in this report are based on the findings from June

Finally, in reporting the results, we have at some points provided comparisons to the trends and results from the second national survey of voluntary organizations conducted by Volunteer Canada and have indicated in particular where there is alignment with their findings.
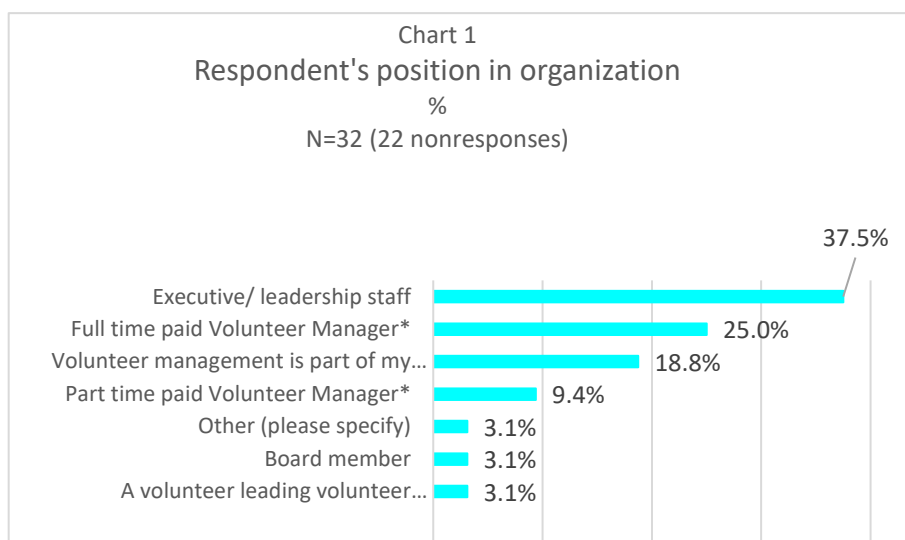
It is important to note that MUSH-sector organizations (Municipalities, Universities, Schools, Hospitals) participated in this research. Typically, research conducted by Community Development Halton or Volunteer Halton on the voluntary sector has not included the MUSH sector which is composed of large institutions which, while technically not-for-profit, tend to be comparatively well-resourced through tax dollars and in comparison, to the rest of the voluntary sector are very large.

WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY

a)   Position in Organization

About 38% of the respondents to this question were in executive leadership positions; more than half (53%) were Managers of Volunteers ranging from full-time to part-time, including people who have that portfolio of responsibilities rolled into other duties.

In terms of their experience of the pandemic's impacts on their position, more than half (N=32) indicated that their workload has increased since the pandemic and 30% said their duties have changed. Although not one of our respondents reported having been laid off, there were 8 respondents who indicated there were currently some layoffs/furloughs. of volunteer engagement staff in their organization and 4 anticipated layoffs/furloughs over the next 6 months.

Chart 1
Respondent's position in organization
%
N=32 (22 nonresponses)

Executive/ leadership staff	37.5%
Full time paid Volunteer Manager*	25.0%
Volunteer management is part of my…	18.8%
Part time paid Volunteer Manager*	9.4%
Other (please specify)	3.1%
Board member	3.1%
A volunteer leading volunteer…	3.1%

There has been some hollowing out of volunteer engagement staff, with about 1/3 of the people who answered this question indicating their duties had changed and a portion of the respondents indicating layoffs/furloughs/etc. of volunteer engagement staff in their organizations. This trend was also seen nationally.

b)   Type of Organization and Population Groups Served

Virtually all sectors were represented in the survey, with 28% of respondents indicating their organization was a social services organization, 18% indicating they were engaged in arts, culture and heritage and 13% engaged in the provision of health services. More than half

indicated they served the entire community, and all but 1 of the 19 specific target groups listed in the survey were served by at least 20% of the respondents (only 10% of the respondents indicated they serve rural/remote communities).

c)   Location and Service Area

Of the 31 respondents who answered these questions, 90% indicated their head offices were in Halton; all provided services in Halton and 45% indicated they provide services outside Halton as well.

d)   Organizational Size
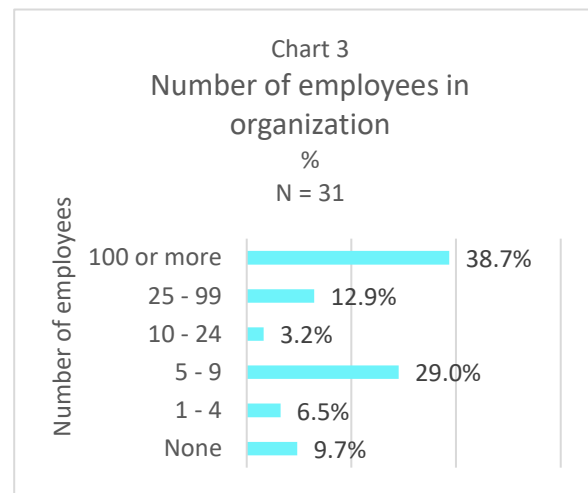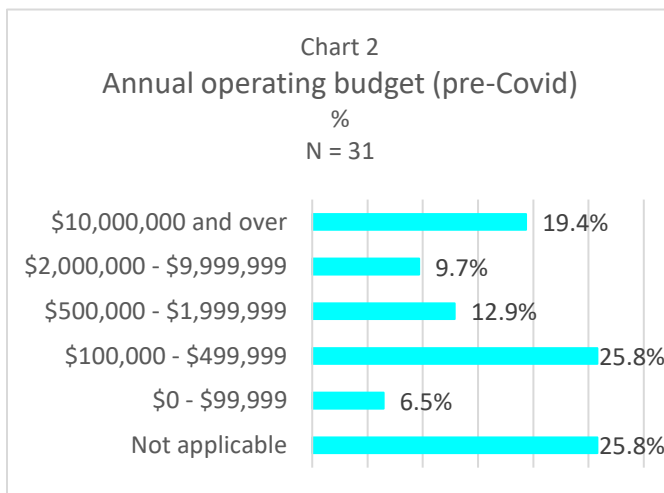
From Chart 2, one can see that 32% of the organizations represented by respondents to the survey had budgets below $500,000; about 20% had large budgets of $10,000,000 or more (this % of organizations with very large budgets reflects the participation of some MUSH-sector organizations in the survey). This is generally mirrored by the number of employees that respondent organizations had (see Chart 3): 38% had 100 or more employees and 38% had 9 or less employees.

e)   Did respondents participate in Possibilities Cafés in 2019

Asking respondents about attendance at the Possibilities Cafés was important because these events had provided an opportunity only 17 months ago for community to comment on what they saw as priorities for both the social planning program of CDH and for VH. 5 (less than 10%) of the respondents had attended one of the Possibilities Cafés in 2019; 49 indicated they had not attended or didn't know whether someone from their organization had attended. Although we cannot know for sure, given that the Possibilities Cafés engaged some 75 people drawn from all over Halton representing a broad cross-section of the voluntary sector, the low number

of people in the survey indicating they had attended could reflect that their organization may have been represented by someone else or that there has been some noticeable staff turnover in the sector. With a different respondent pool and the intervening impact of COVID, an important opportunity arises for community to indicate today whether there is a perceived shift in what it sees as its needs and the priorities that should be considered for VH and its service delivery approach. (A comparison between the 2019 priorities and the priorities identified by respondents to the survey begins on page 16.

Changes in Programs and Services Since Start of Pandemic

a)   Shifts in program delivery and program suspensions

- 88% (N=43) shifted some or all face-to-face program delivery to virtual or remote delivery
- 58%(N=43) suspended all or some face-to-face programs although 26% have begun to restart some of these suspended programs (this compares to 49% of organizations in the national survey

The most frequently identified change in organizational programs and services were shifts of some or all programs/services to virtual/remote delivery (identified by 88% of 43 respondents)

Well more than half of the 43 respondents indicated that all or some face-to-face programs/services had been suspended, and about ¼ indicated they have begun to restart some suspended programs.

who had begun to restart some face-to-face programs, but we suspect much of this can probably be attributed to the different experience of lockdowns across the country as opposed to lockdowns in Halton and Ontario). What is important to draw from this is that in a number of situations some face-to-face will return.

b)   Re-engaging Volunteers

Of the 43 respondents who answered these questions:

- 30% are re-engaging volunteers for virtual/remote roles (this reflects the experience nationally)
- 19% are re-engaging volunteers for in person roles (this is noticeably less than what was reported nationally but it is likely explained in large part by differences in timing of the surveys and the associated stage of the pandemic as well as timing of lockdowns in different areas of the country)
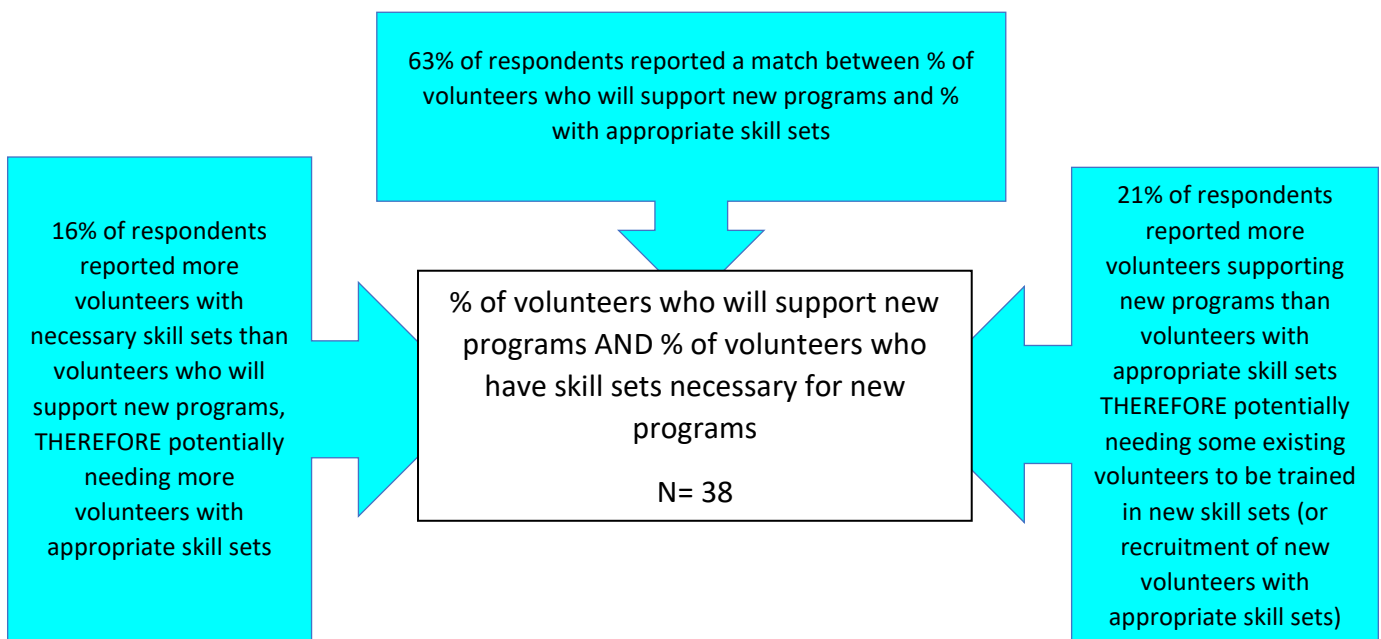
c)   New programs developed

54% created new programs and 26% are in the process of developing new programs (only 14% indicated they had not created new programs)

Well more than half of the 43 respondents to this question indicated they had developed new programs/services and 26% indicated they are currently in the process of developing new programs.

d)   Support for new programs among volunteers and match of skills sets volunteers have with new program needs

With new programs come challenges both in terms of existing volunteers who will support this new programming, i.e., engage in it, as well as in new skill sets the new programming might require. Diagram 1 below indicates the potential match and mismatches between existing volunteer support and existing volunteer skill sets necessary for engaging in new programming.

Figure A

63% of respondents reported a match between % of volunteers who will support new programs and % with appropriate skill sets

16% of respondents reported more volunteers with necessary skill sets than volunteers who will support new programs, THEREFORE potentially needing more volunteers with appropriate skill sets

% of volunteers who will support new programs AND % of volunteers who have skill sets necessary for new programs

N= 38

21% of respondents reported more volunteers supporting new programs than volunteers with appropriate skill sets THEREFORE potentially needing some existing volunteers to be trained in new skill sets (or recruitment of new volunteers with appropriate skill sets)

Challenges Facing Organizations at Present

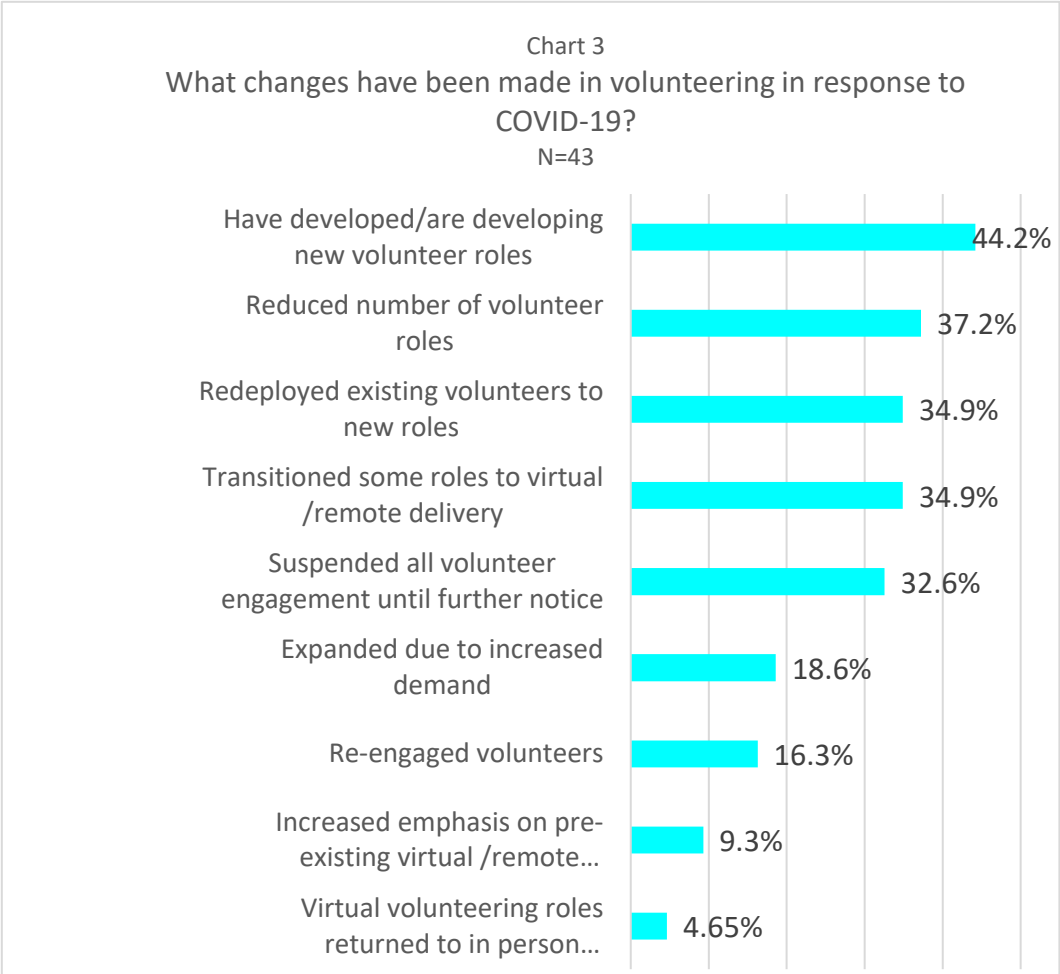a)   Most frequently identified challenges faced by organizations

Respondents were asked how significant certain challenges were for their organizations. The frequency with which these were identified by our respondents as significant or very significant is shown below.

Table A	
To what degree are the following challenges for your organization? N=42	Significant or very significant challenge
Staff providing services with fewer volunteers	43%
Too many volunteer applications for positions available	35%
Not enough staff to support volunteer engagement	32%
Difficulty finding time to plan, recruit and train volunteers while providing services	31%
Difficulty finding time to develop new role descriptions and transition existing volunteer roles to virtual roles	29%
Difficulty providing training and supports for volunteers to work remotely	17%
Difficulty accessing technology for volunteers in virtual roles	17%
Not applicable	14%
Difficulty recruiting volunteers	11%
Difficulty adapting and delivering volunteer orientation and training	8%
Not enough volunteers to deliver programs and services	8%
Difficulty obtaining Police Record Checks/ Vulnerable Sector Checks for volunteers	8%
Difficulty ensuring volunteers have personal protective equipment for in-person roles	6%

The most frequently reported challenges were all related to staff workloads and pressures, e.g., not enough staff to support volunteer engagement or staff having to provide services with fewer volunteers.

Changes to Volunteering

As seen in Chart 3, there has been a wide variety of changes in volunteering

Chart 3
What changes have been made in volunteering in response to COVID-19?
N=43

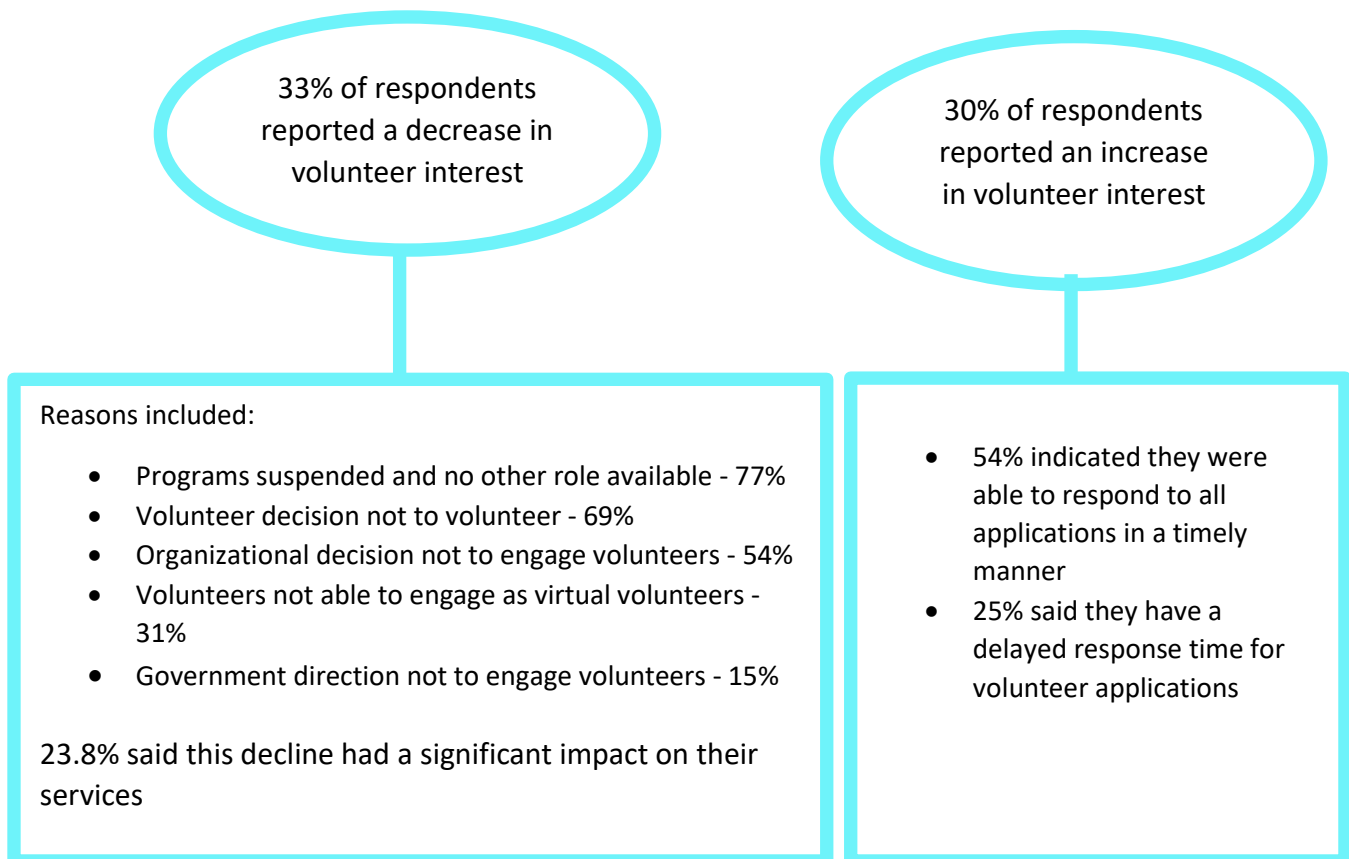|	
Have developed/are developing new volunteer roles	44.2%
Reduced number of volunteer roles	37.2%
Redeployed existing volunteers to new roles	34.9%
Transitioned some roles to virtual /remote delivery	34.9%
Suspended all volunteer engagement until further notice	32.6%
Expanded due to increased demand	18.6%
Re-engaged volunteers	16.3%
Increased emphasis on pre-existing virtual /remote…	9.3%
Virtual volunteering roles returned to in person…	4.65%

reported by survey participants. The most frequent have included:

- New volunteer roles
- Redeploying existing volunteers to new roles
- Transitioning some roles to virtual delivery
- Reducing number of volunteer roles
- Suspension of all volunteer engagement

While there is some variation in %'s, these changes are generally consistent with national data.

On the following page, one can see that about 1/3 of the 43 respondents who responded when they were asked if they had experienced an increase or decrease in volunteers indicated they had seen a decrease in volunteers and about another 1/3 said they had experienced an increase. The reasons for and impact of the decline in volunteers is indicated on the next page as is the reported capacity to respond for those organizations that have experienced an increase.

Increases and Declines in Volunteers

33% of respondents reported a decrease in volunteer interest

30% of respondents reported an increase in volunteer interest

Reasons included:

- Programs suspended and no other role available - 77%
- Volunteer decision not to volunteer - 69%
- Organizational decision not to engage volunteers - 54%
- Volunteers not able to engage as virtual volunteers - 31%
- Government direction not to engage volunteers - 15%

23.8% said this decline had a significant impact on their services

- 54% indicated they were able to respond to all applications in a timely manner
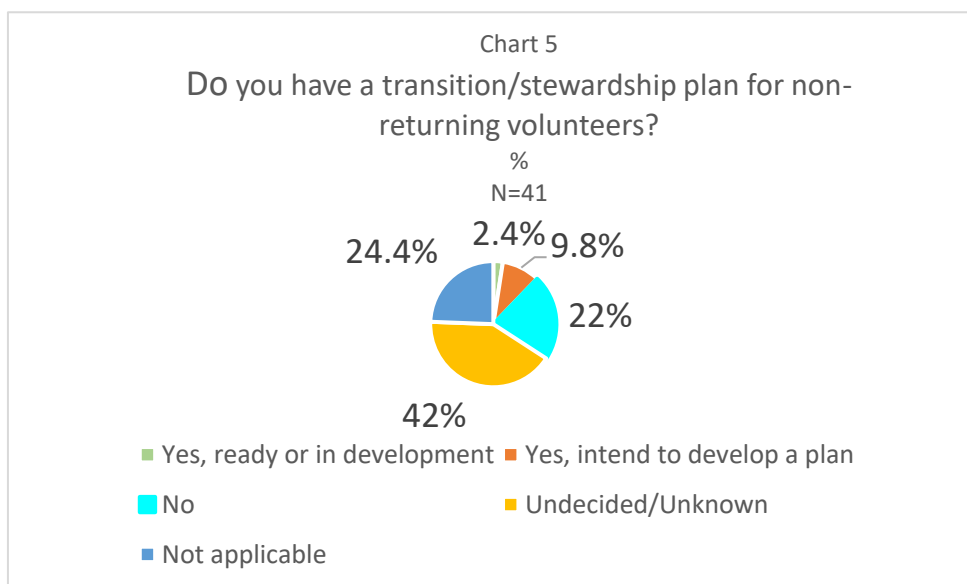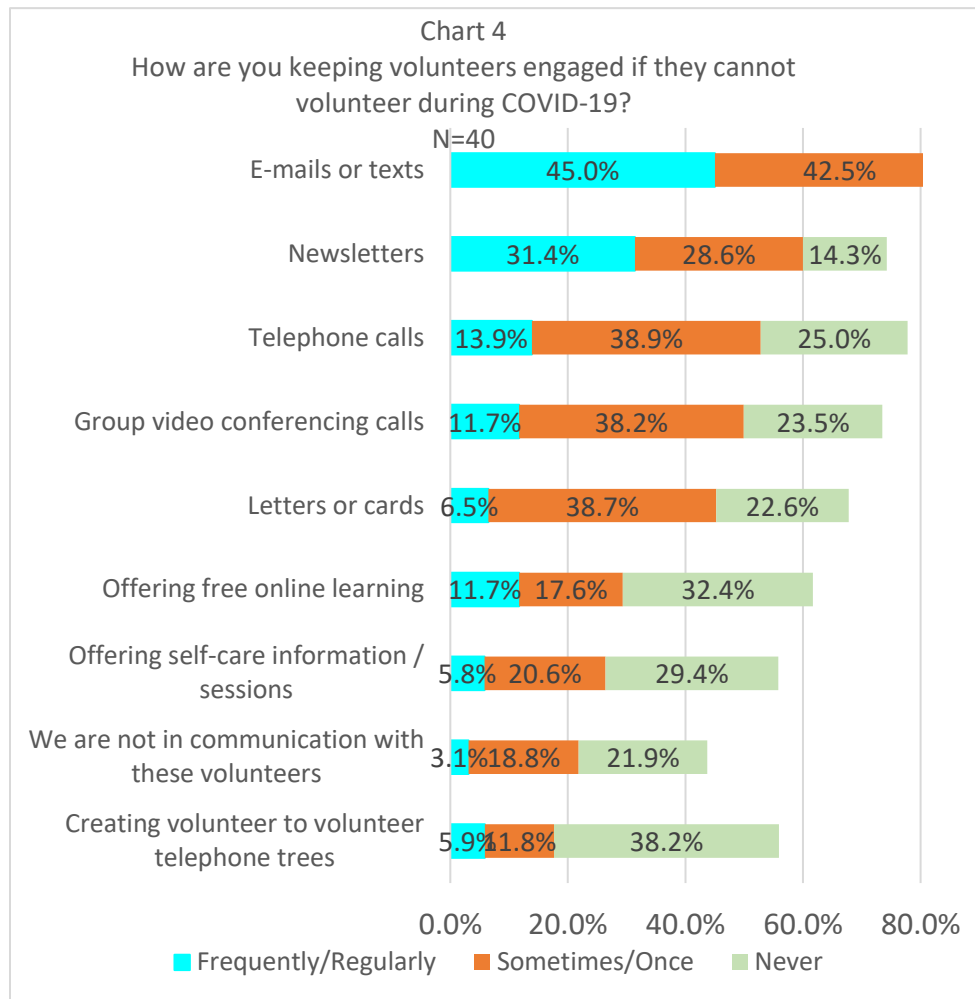- 25% said they have a delayed response time for volunteer applications

Keeping volunteers who cannot volunteer engaged

Chart 4 lists the strategies being used by respondents to keep volunteers who have not been able to volunteer during the pandemic engaged. The most frequent methods are:

- e-mails and texts
- newsletters
- telephone calls
- group videoconferencing
- letters or cards

Chart 4
How are you keeping volunteers engaged if they cannot volunteer during COVID-19?
N=40

Method	Frequently/Regularly	Sometimes/Once	Never
E-mails or texts	45.0%	42.5%	
Newsletters	31.4%	28.6%	14.3%
Telephone calls	13.9%	38.9%	25.0%
Group video conferencing calls	11.7%	38.2%	23.5%
Letters or cards	6.5%	38.7%	22.6%
Offering free online learning	11.7%	17.6%	32.4%
Offering self-care information / sessions	5.8%	20.6%	29.4%
We are not in communication with these volunteers	3.1%	18.8%	21.9%
Creating volunteer to volunteer telephone trees	5.9%	11.8%	38.2%

0.0%   20.0%   40.0%   60.0%   80.0%

■ Frequently/Regularly ■ Sometimes/Once ■ Never

Chart 5
Do you have a transition/stewardship plan for non-returning volunteers?
%
N=41

2.4% 9.8%
24.4%
22%
42%

■ Yes, ready or in development ■ Yes, intend to develop a plan
■ No ■ Undecided/Unknown
■ Not applicable

Non-returning Volunteers

Chart 5 shows that only 11% of the respondents (N=41) have a plan in place or are planning to have a plan in place for transitioning non-returning volunteers.

9

Virtual/Remote Volunteering

"One of the most common adaptations remains the shift to virtual volunteering and program delivery "

Volunteer Canada, Impacts of COVID-19 on Volunteer Engagement, Fall, 2020

In Halton, 54% of our respondents (N=41) said they have or plan to have volunteers working remotely/virtually in the foreseeable future. This is in alignment with the findings of Volunteer Canada (their latest survey had 56% of their respondents indicating this level of virtual/remote program delivery.

Of the 20 respondents who provided information in the survey to questions about virtual volunteering:

- Most – 16 of 20 - indicated that PRIOR to the pandemic, 19% or less of their volunteers performed their work remotely/virtually;
- During the pandemic, 16 of the 20 respondents indicated they had seen an increase in volunteer roles performed remotely/virtually, ranging from an increase of 1% to an increase of 100%;
- In the next 3 months, 10 of the 20 respondents anticipated the % of volunteers performing their roles virtually/remotely would stay elevated.;
- Looking into the foreseeable future, more than ½ of the 20 respondents planning to use volunteers indicated that there would be more volunteers operating in virtual/remote roles than before the pandemic started. 13 (65%) predicted a continued elevated engagement of volunteers carrying out their roles virtually/remotely into the future.

There were a variety of benefits and challenges associated with virtual volunteering reported by respondents. See Table C

Table C
Benefits and Challenges/Disadvantages of Virtual Volunteering
N = 22

Benefits	Challenges/Disadvantages
- Flexibility for volunteers and staff (68%) - Improved technology skills for staff and volunteers (59.1%) - Reduced office or physical space (36%) - Broader access to volunteers (no geographic limitations) (23%) - Operational cost savings (23%) - Brought new volunteers to organization (23%)	- On-line fatigue (55%) - Some programs not suitable for virtual delivery (55%) - Lack of access to/comfort with technology (50%) - Reduced volunteer to volunteer connections (50%) - Time required to adapt all aspects of roles (37%) - Other (each with 1 respondent)) – additional staff support required, challenges getting police/vulnerable sector checks, liability considerations from home environment relating to the program

Support that organizations would find useful

Respondents were asked to rank up to 5 kind of skills-based or   support that their organization would find useful (see Table D on next page). This Table can be interpreted in 2 ways: first, one can look at the number of times an item is mentioned, and; second, one can see the mean score of each item is based on how it was ranked by each respondent.

Table D Skills-based or pro-bono support that would best support organizations over the next 6 months N=35		
Frequency of Mentions	Number of Times Identified	Where does it fit from 1st to 5th place choice
Social media	16	2.5
Marketing and promotion	14	3
Technology (to support internal communications)	13	3.3
Fundraising and grantwriting	11	4.8
Support for applying for government and other emergency programs	11	3.5
Strategic planning	9	3
Website development or support	9	2.6
Operations innovation	9	2.4
Governance	4	3.5
HR management	3	3
Financial management	2	4

The Table lists the items in rank order based on frequency (most frequently to least frequently mentioned). If one were to look at where something was ranked from first to fifth choice, the first 5 items would be:

- Operations innovation (2.4)
- Social media (2.5)
- Website development or support (2.6)
- Marketing and promotion (3)
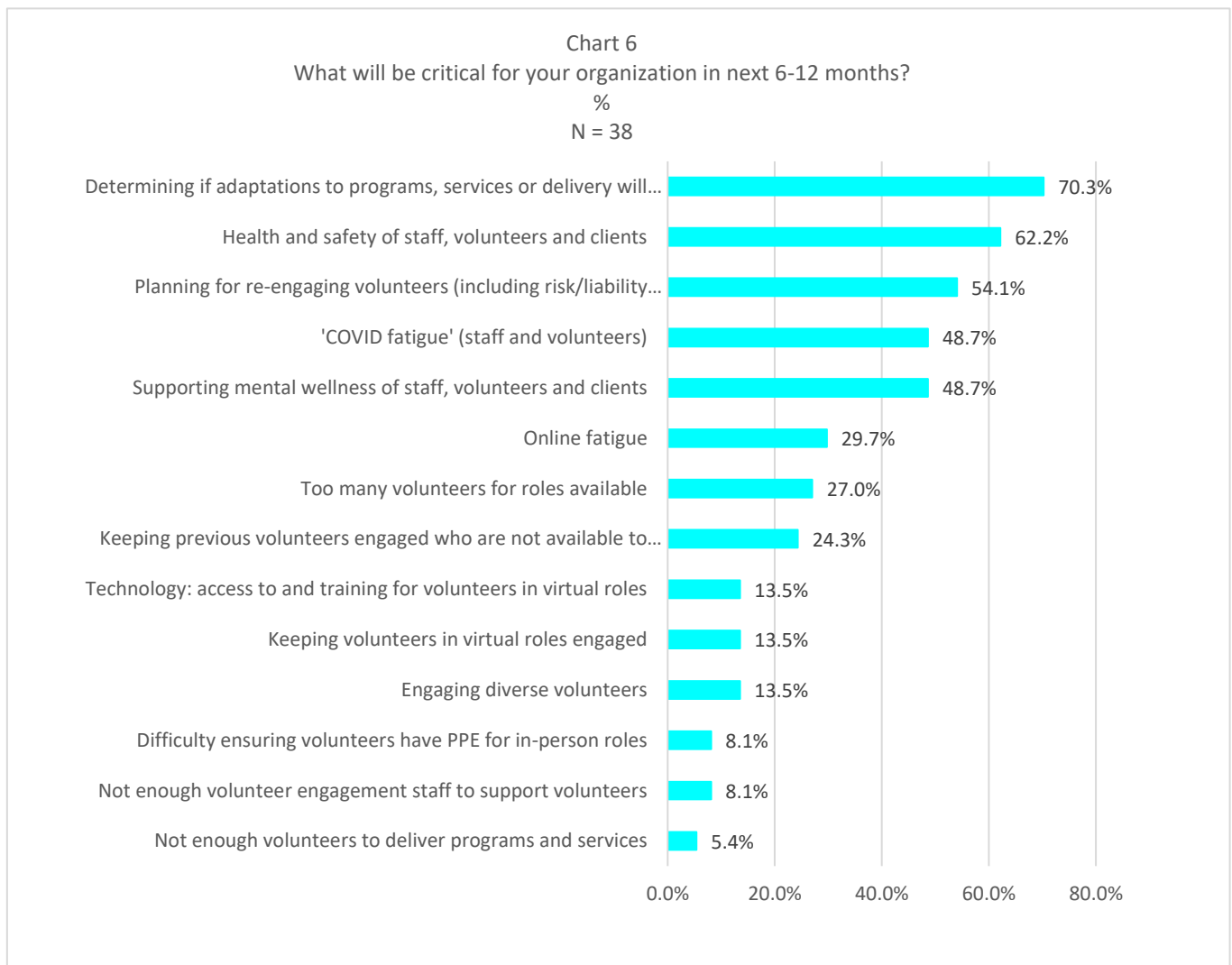- Strategic planning (3)

- HR management (3)

We recommend a combination of both approaches to assessing perceived importance of skills-based or pro bono support that organizations would like to have.

Phase of organizational planning (N=38)

Respondents were asked what stage of planning their organization was at. Responses were:

- Actively planning our next steps   - 29%
- Have a plan in place for next phase of operations and re-engagement of volunteers - 26.3%
- Thinking about next steps - 15.8%
- Not applicable/unsure - 15.8%
- Other - 10.5%

What is critical for your organization going forward?

Chart 6
What will be critical for your organization in next 6-12 months?
%
N = 38

Category	Percentage
Determining if adaptations to programs, services or delivery will…	70.3%
Health and safety of staff, volunteers and clients	62.2%
Planning for re-engaging volunteers (including risk/liability…	54.1%
'COVID fatigue' (staff and volunteers)	48.7%
Supporting mental wellness of staff, volunteers and clients	48.7%
Online fatigue	29.7%
Too many volunteers for roles available	27.0%
Keeping previous volunteers engaged who are not available to…	24.3%
Technology: access to and training for volunteers in virtual roles	13.5%
Keeping volunteers in virtual roles engaged	13.5%
Engaging diverse volunteers	13.5%
Difficulty ensuring volunteers have PPE for in-person roles	8.1%
Not enough volunteer engagement staff to support volunteers	8.1%
Not enough volunteers to deliver programs and services	5.4%

Respondents were asked what they saw as critical for their organization over the next 6 months to a year. The responses are in Chart 6 above.

The 5 most frequently mentioned concerns over next 6 months were:

- Determining if adaptations to programs, services or delivery will be maintained or changed
- Health and safety of staff, volunteers and clients
- Planning for re-engaging volunteers (including risk, liability considerations)
- COVID fatigue (staff and volunteers)
- Supporting mental wellness of staff, volunteers and clients

Each of these 5 top concerns from our local survey were also among the 7 top concerns in the national survey conducted in the autumn of 2020.

Volunteering post-COVID-19

People were asked what they thought volunteering would look like post-COVID-19? (N=36). The most frequently mentioned features were:

- New and/or adapted programs and roles - 66.7%
- Fewer volunteers/same number of volunteers - 41.7%
- Volunteers with different skills needed - 30.6%
- Volunteers with more technology ability needed - 25%
- More volunteers - 19.4%
- Fewer/not enough staff to support volunteers - 13.9%

A number of these features were identified or alluded to at other points in the survey and they align generally with national data.

People were asked at what stage of planning they were with regard to a return to in-person volunteering (see Chart 7). As can be seen from the chart, in some cases, re-engagement of volunteers for in-person services delivery has begun or is in active planning, but in other cases this process is still some time in the future.
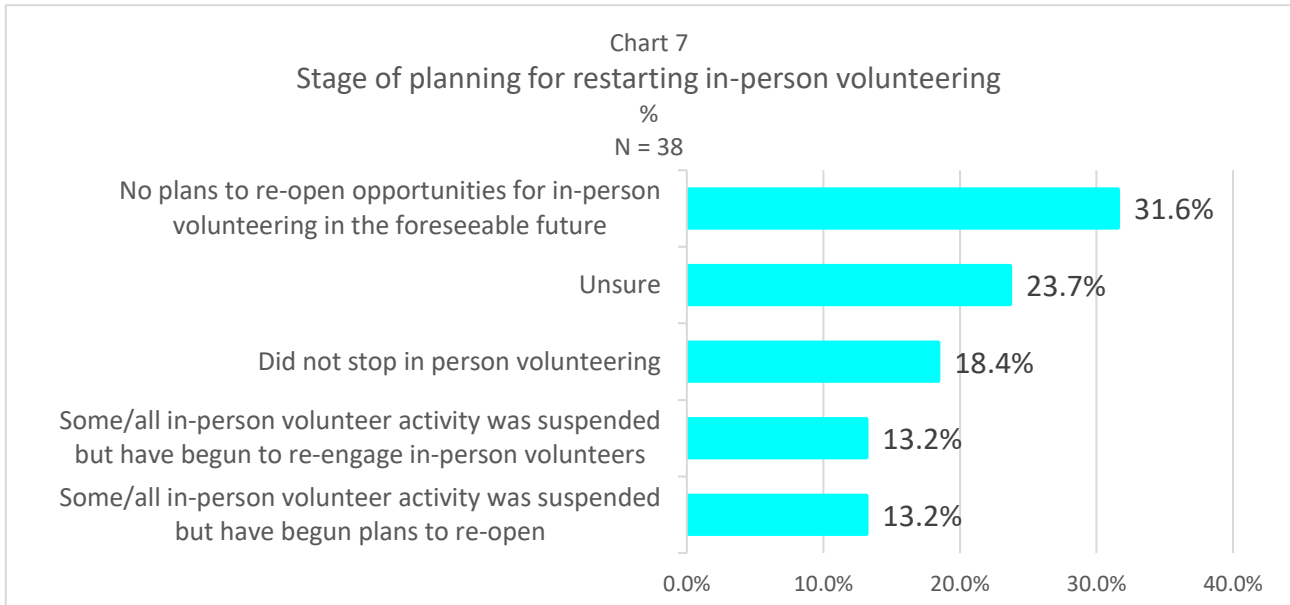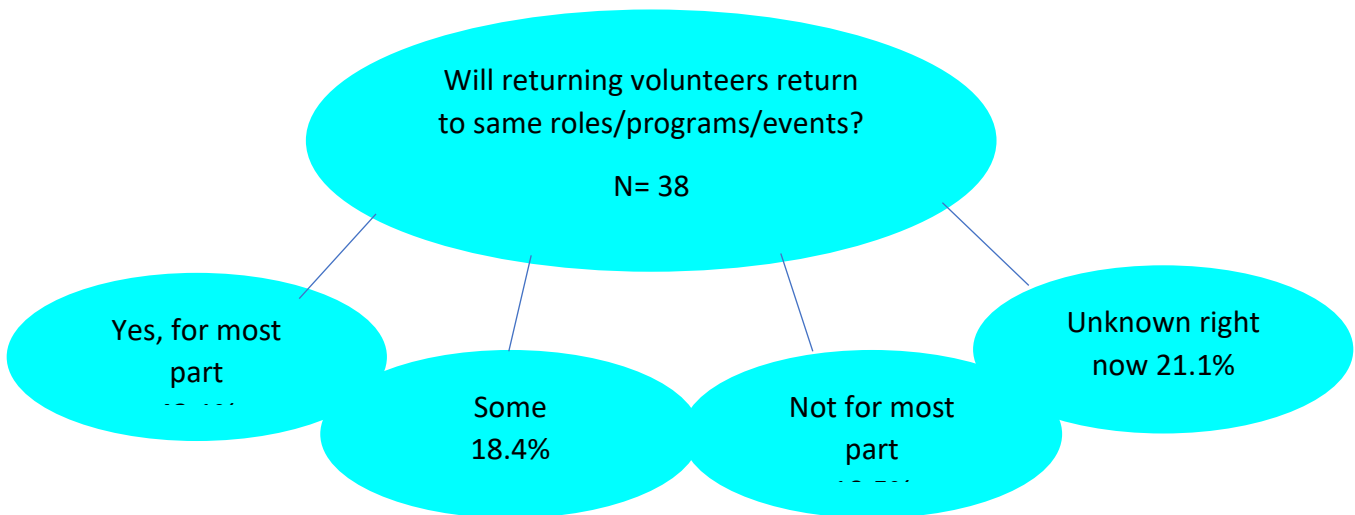
Chart 7
Stage of planning for restarting in-person volunteering
%
N = 38

Category	Percentage
No plans to re-open opportunities for in-person volunteering in the foreseeable future	31.6%
Unsure	23.7%
Did not stop in person volunteering	18.4%
Some/all in-person volunteer activity was suspended but have begun to re-engage in-person volunteers	13.2%
Some/all in-person volunteer activity was suspended but have begun plans to re-open	13.2%

Figure B

To what roles will returning volunteers return?

Will returning volunteers return to same roles/programs/events?

N= 38

Yes, for most part

Some 18.4%

Not for most part

Unknown right now 21.1%

About 40% of returning volunteers are expected to return to previous roles, many of which will be in-person service roles.

Figure C

Will returning volunteers receive training?
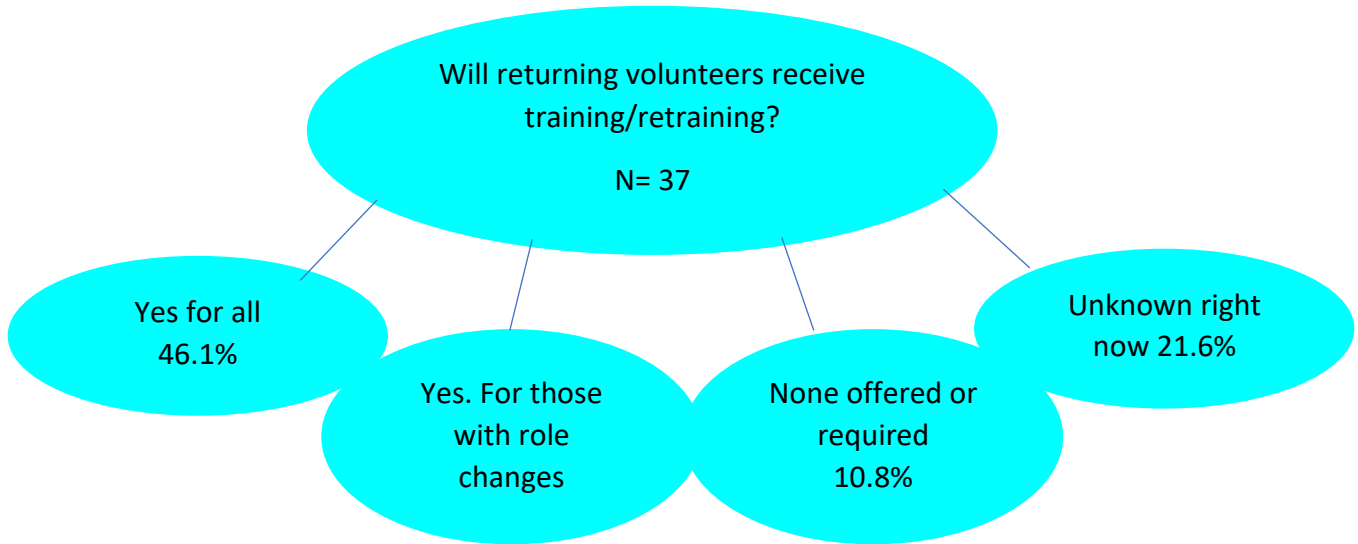
Almost half of the respondents (N=37) indicated that all returning volunteers will receive training/re-training.

Budgetary considerations

When asked whether there was a budget for covering COVID-19 costs related to engaging/re-engaging volunteers, about 33% of the 37 respondents who replied said there was no budget for these costs; another 1/3 indicated that no decision had yet been made about budget or return of volunteers, 19% said there were no additional costs associated with COVID-19, and the remaining 16% indicated that there was a budget for these costs.

Working with grassroots groups if your organization was incorporated

About 30% of nonprofits (N=38) collaborated with grassroots groups over the course of the pandemic and another 30% did not (the remainder were either unsure/didn't know or were not incorporated).

Usefulness of resources used during the pandemic

When asked about usefulness of resources during the pandemic, the 3 that were rated most useful (although on average none were seen as very useful, having mean scores of between 3 and 3.5 on a 5-point scale)) were connecting with other colleagues, government and public health officials, and webinars and on-line learning. The next most useful was Volunteer Halton.

Implications for Volunteer Halton - Priorities

The Possibilities Cafes of 2019 indicated that Volunteer Halton and the social planning function of Community Development Halton were seen as roughly equal in importance/priority to the community. For Volunteer Halton, the maintenance of the volunteer database, training/provision of learning opportunities, and advocacy were seen as critical functions. As with the social planning function, the WAY in which service is delivered by Volunteer Halton was also seen as important, i.e., having a presence in all communities in Halton, having a stronger social media presence, being more representative of the diverse community, etc.

The survey conducted in January had 2 questions related specifically to the role/priorities of Volunteer Halton.

The first of these questions asked respondents the degree to which the priorities identified for Volunteer Halton in 2019 still applied. Given that this was an almost entirely different group of people who responded than people who had attended the Possibilities Cafes in 2019, the outcome was interesting.

The five priorities that relate to HOW service is delivered were ranked as slightly more important than the two functional areas in this most recent survey, although it should be pointed out that *there was very little significant discriminant difference among the 7 priorities that people were asked to rate* (see Table E on following page). Specifically, 4 of the 5 highest priorities identified in this survey were related to HOW business is conducted, NOT about the content of that business, i.e., the functional areas of database maintenance, training/learning opportunities, advocacy):

- Building awareness in the community about volunteerism (mean score of 4.24 out of 5)
- Expanded use of social media (mean score of 4.17 out of 5)
- Outreach into diverse communities (mean score of 4.12 out of 5)
- Advocacy re: volunteerism (mean score of 4.08 out of 5)
- Being active/visible in all communities in Halton (mean score of 4.02 out of 5)

(The volunteer matching/volunteer database had a mean score of 3.96 out of 5, and training and education had a mean score of 3.92 out of 5.)

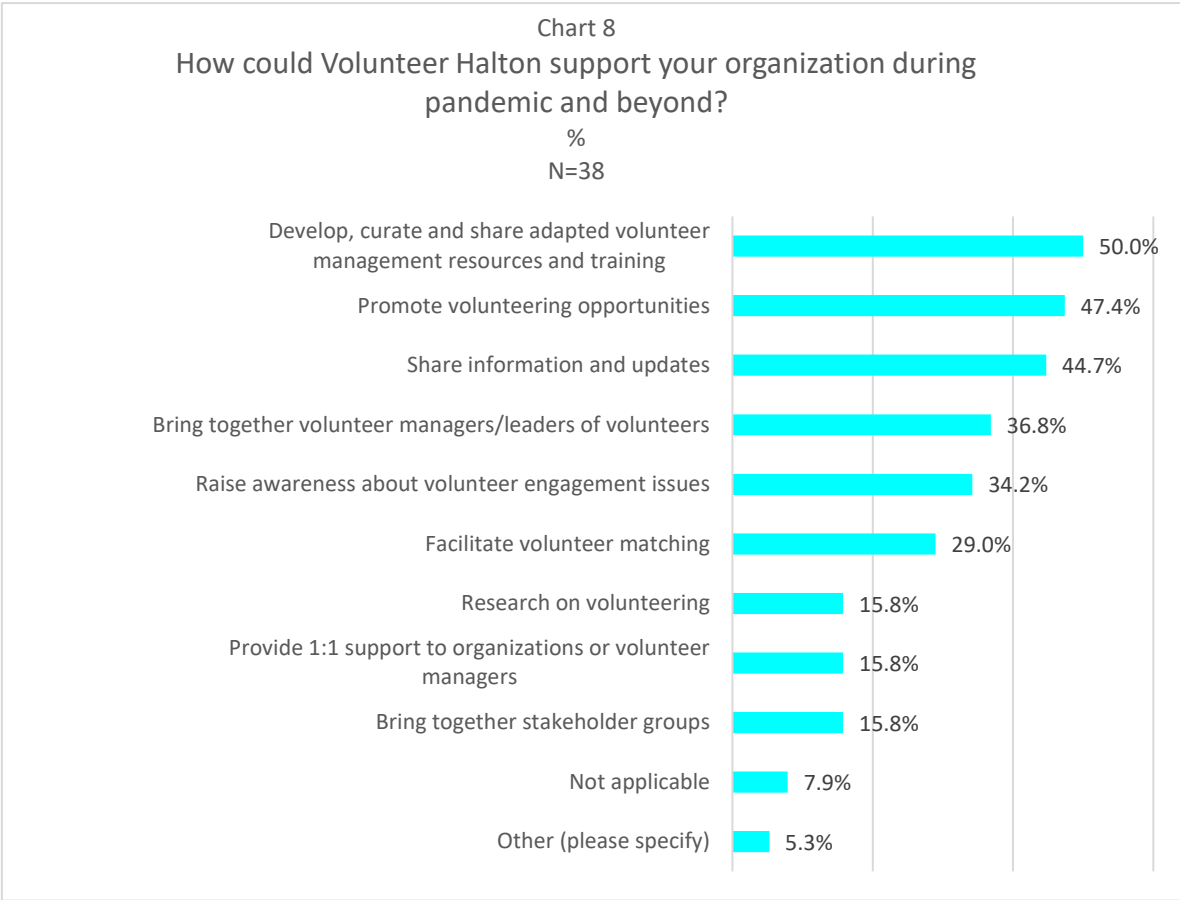| Table E	
2020 Mean Scores of VH Priorities from Possibilities Cafes held in 2019	
Priority from 2019	2020 Mean Score (5 maximum)
Building awareness in the community about volunteerism	4.24
Expanded use of social media	4.17
Outreach into diverse communities	4.12
Advocacy re: volunteerism	4.08
Being active/visible in all communities in Halton	4.02
Volunteer matching/database	3.96
Training and education	3.92

The second question that people were asked about was how Volunteer Halton could support their organization during the pandemic and beyond (see Chart 8 on following page. When people responded to this question, the top 5 responses were:

- Develop, curate and share adapted volunteer management resources and training (50% of N=38)
- Promote volunteering opportunities (47.4% of N=38)
- Share information and updates (44.7% of N=38)
- Bring together volunteer managers/leaders of volunteers (36.8% of N=38)
- Raise awareness about volunteer engagement issues (34.2% of N=38)

What is interesting about these most frequently mentioned supports that Volunteer Halton provides is that they ALL relate to the 3 functional priorities identified in the Possibilities Cafes in 2020, i.e., volunteer database, training and learning opportunities and, advocacy on behalf of volunteerism.

Both the functional priorities as well as priorities for how services are delivered that were identified in the Possibilities Cafes of 2019 for Volunteer Halton identified in 2019 were re-affirmed by this research. In particular, the following were identified as supports the community would like to see:

- Develop, curate and share adapted volunteer management resources and training;
- Promote volunteering opportunities;
- Share information and updates;
- Bring together volunteer managers/leaders of volunteers, and;
- Raise awareness about volunteer engagement issues.

Chart 8

How could Volunteer Halton support your organization during pandemic and beyond?

%

N=38

Category	Percentage
Develop, curate and share adapted volunteer management resources and training	50.0%
Promote volunteering opportunities	47.4%
Share information and updates	44.7%
Bring together volunteer managers/leaders of volunteers	36.8%
Raise awareness about volunteer engagement issues	34.2%
Facilitate volunteer matching	29.0%
Research on volunteering	15.8%
Provide 1:1 support to organizations or volunteer managers	15.8%
Bring together stakeholder groups	15.8%
Not applicable	7.9%
Other (please specify)	5.3%

Observations

The survey In Halton of nonprofit organizations that engage volunteers in service delivery roles has indicated that, for the most part, the same trends and issues which have characterized the impact of COVID-19 on volunteer programs nationally have been repeated locally. Where there may be differences in magnitude of reported impact (for example, higher or lower %'s of an impact locally) can likely be related to differential regional/provincial experience with official lockdowns in response to COVID-19.

Volunteer Canada described the impact of COVID-19 on volunteer engagement using 5 thematic areas, 4 of which were:

- Assess, adapt and innovate
- Engagement, isolation and re-engagement
- Infrastructure and capacity for volunteer engagement
- Support and leadership for the road ahead

We feel it is useful to summarize what we discovered using the same categories:

<u>Assess, adapt and innovate</u>

Like Volunteer Canada, we found that COVID-19 forced organizations to make rapid assessments about what volunteer engagement activities could and could not feasibly be continued. Many services were moved to virtual/remote delivery or discontinued altogether and new programs were developed to be responsive to the needs of people requiring support and service. Our research indicated that the development of new programs and the shift to virtual/remote service delivery did result in a shift in volunteer roles but not all volunteers could be or wanted to be engaged in these new roles.

<u>Engagement, isolation and re-engagement</u>

As just suggested, there were volunteers who, for a variety of reasons, could not continue to be engaged as the pandemic continued. Keeping these volunteers engaged has been a challenge for some organizations: about 25% indicated that engaging volunteers who have not been able to volunteer is important for them over the next 6 – 12 months, and more than 50% said that re-engaging volunteers generally is an important issue going forward.

There is also a range of readiness for re-engagement of volunteers who may not have been active over the pandemic, and a mismatch both ways for some organizations between volunteers who might be interested in engaging in new roles/services and volunteers who have the skill sets necessary for this re-engagement.

It is also important to point out that despite the increase in virtual/remote volunteer engagement and the fact that many organizations will continue to offer this elevated level of virtual/remote programming, there is still an appetite for in-person service provision;

It is also important to note that the impact on volunteer engagement staff was considerable, that staff workloads tended to increase and that roles tended to shift with the emergence of new programming.

<u>Infrastructure and capacity for volunteer engagement</u>

There was evidence of some "hollowing out" of volunteer engagement resources among organizations responding to the survey, with about 1/3 of the people who answered questions about volunteer engagement staffing levels indicating their duties had changed and a portion of the respondents indicating layoffs/furloughs/etc. of volunteer engagement staff in their organizations.

As was noted nationally as well, survey respondents indicated that there was

<u>Support and leadership for the road ahead</u>

Organizations are at various points in relation to their planning for services and volunteer engagement. They do, however, have a sense of the resources they would like to tap, ranging from pro bono/skills-based resources related to funding, marketing and promotion through to

support for Volunteer Halton's role across its 3 major functions: volunteer database and matching; training and learning, and; advocacy on behalf of volunteerism. What is of importance in this regard is not so much what organizations would like to receive by way of support as is how that support might best be provided given the priorities identified during the Possibilities Cafés in 2019 and the supports that respondents suggested Volunteer Halton could provide in Chart 8 of this report. It was during the Cafes that participants challenged both Community Development Halton and Volunteer Halton NOT to change their busines but to do business in a different way.

Report Back to the Community

When the survey was sent out to the community for completion, a commitment was made to report back on what the survey found. It was also important for the community to have a chance to respond to what the survey indicated and, where appropriate, to provide feedback and input to Rosemary to inform her recommendations to Community Development Halton regarding the service delivery model for Volunteer Halton.

To these ends, on February 25th 2021, an invitation was sent out to the community to participate in an on-line presentation of the results of the survey and to engage in a discussion related to issues raised by the survey with a view to informing the assessment that Rosemary might make regarding the service delivery model of Volunteer Halton and any recommendations that might accompany that assessment.

More than 50 people registered for this event and 37 joined the on-line session which was hosted on the ZOOM platform. Following a comprehensive presentation of the findings and opportunity to ask questions, participants were directed to 4 chat rooms, each provided with a question to discuss. The questions were developed jointly by Rosemary and Jody and informed by both the survey results and Rosemary's particular needs for feedback on specific issues that might be addressed in her assessment and recommendations to go to Community Development Halton.

Each discussion group had a "scribe/note-taker" who self-identified at the start of the discussions and who, when the chat rooms were ended and people returned to the main room reported back on the discussions which had taken place. Notes that were taken by these note-takers were then forwarded by e-mail to Jody to ensure accuracy in the notes from each discussion group that have been included in this report. A total of 21 people remained engaged throughout the small group discussions and the report backs, and the 4 questions and associated discussion notes are shared in the pages which follow.

It should be noted here that staff and volunteers from Volunteer Halton did not participate in this event in order to encourage open and honest feedback from event participants.

Discussion Group 1:

How can pro-bono/skills-based supports to voluntary organizations best be identified and delivered in the Halton community?

The survey showed that supports to assist with funding applications, marketing and promotions, using social media, website design, etc., were pro-bono supports respondents would like to see available to them. How could this be done on a community-wide basis?

- *Impact on specific programs:*
  - *Volunteer programs have been suspended in most organizations [and in food programs have] also shifted to food support. Trying to grow programs – more virtual. Grocery delivery program – when protocols lifted – small bubbles of people cooking dinners rather than group dinners. Protocols based on public health guidelines.*
  - *Social media – large identifier – small marketing team. One-way wide range of skills. Get in touch on zoom/highlight staff members to give volunteers more familiarity with skills.*
  - *Volunteer skills not quite as relevant if there is a marketing team.*
  - *If looking for ways to find people to offer pro-bono – somewhere within Volunteer Halton have a skills based link.*
  - *Switching to more virtual skills are being identified. Inundated with volunteers wanting to help.*
  - *Libraries – various opportunities – books delivering to home bound clients. Volunteers helping with book sales / reading buddies – on hold. Teams would have skills*
  - *Liked idea of identifying skills and having links.*
  - *Liability surrounding to a virtual situation – attempting to go more virtual but concerned about the liability.*
  - *Having students online with children – independent from the library. Oakville library delivering virtual – children can participate only if attending with parents or guardians.*
  - *Virtual – group volunteers – breakout – always a facilitator/adult/ always 2 adults. Virtual no minors left alone with the children.*
- *Software for volunteers. – can weed out those with special skills (Better Impact)*
- *Brought up GIGIT – difficult to fill out. What is happening with GIGIT.*
- *Does Volunteer Halton keep a pool of people?*
- *Used government funded program in post-secondary. Way to get and zero in on skills – e.g.: grant writing.*
- *Barriers – older demographic – seniors want to leave their house to be social, virtual doesn't work for them. The profile of the volunteer before won't be the same if more programs stay virtual. Will need new skill sets*

- *Will require greater management*

  (Following the event, an unsolicited e-mail was received by the facilitator noting the challenges of finding pro bono supports and, specifically, finding qualified accountants willing to do pro bono financial work in the sector.)

Discussion Group 2:

How could Volunteer Halton program delivery be more responsive to the perceived need to have visibility/a presence in all Halton communities, be more responsive to diversity, and build awareness of volunteerism.?

There appears to be broad consensus that the what Volunteer Halton does (the supports it provides) is important (database/matching; training and learning opportunities, and; advocacy related to volunteerism). However, there is an appetite for change in how supports are delivered. How could Volunteer Halton deliver programs and support more effectively?

- *Challenges of sifting through many applications to find the particular skill set you need; the notion of a third party (Volunteer Halton?) that mediates between the potential volunteer and agencies looking for volunteers.*
- *It is important to be looking for ways to support volunteers throughout their careers, at different stages and with varying experience, e.g., at some points in their careers, volunteers may be looking for short term opportunities and later looking for something else*
- *It would be great to have people's resumes and profile on file so that all they have done as a volunteer, etc., can be reviewed…in other words, manage and directly support volunteers throughout their careers*
- *Some people are saying that it might be safer just to avoid in-person volunteering altogether*
- *In terms of diversity and inclusivity, it is important to provide support and match opportunities to skills*
- *Perhaps Volunteer Halton could be sub-contracted to manage volunteers if an organization does not have dedicated volunteer resources to support volunteers*
- *It is critically important to have safety plans and training in place in terms of COVID and volunteer readiness; perhaps Volunteer Halton could become a repository for safety information, etc.*

Discussion Group 3:

Re-engagement of volunteers (whether for traditional or new roles) following the pandemic is of concern to many. How could this re-engagement process be best supported across the voluntary sector in our community?

- *To be honest by the time we went around and introduced ourselves and said what re-engagement will look like to each of us we ran out of time to discuss how it could best be supported. Big question for only 20 minutes with 6-7 people who all come from different perspectives/industries and didn't know each other. However, it was a good discussion nonetheless.*
- *If you already have a set of committed, skilled, reliable volunteers it's important to keep in touch not only out of courtesy but also to help mitigate attrition by staying top of mind and engaged – not necessarily waiting to post pandemic.*
- *For those of us that have had to shut down normal operations/programs it was important to stay in contact during the shutdown time (via the means that most volunteers would/could be reached directly and personally) so that volunteers stayed aware/abreast of the current situation as things were changing/evolving and were advised of any updates that pertained to their regular volunteer duties.*
- *For those on the call in roles/industries that had no volunteer opportunities currently available, regular electronic communication was being done through emails and newsletter correspondence to stay in touch with existing volunteers and those that have expressed an interest but can't be brought on at the present time.*
- *A point I personally took away from the topic was that if resources were available to do so, staying connected might take more time but in the long run might be time better spent than waiting to re-engage only to find out your support base has unexpectedly diminished and then having to spend the time necessary to find and train replacements.*

Discussion Group 4:

While not an issue for all organizations, there has been tendency for there to be a hollowing out of volunteer engagement staff and resources in some organizations. What things (if any) could we as a community do to promote retention and expansion of volunteer engagement resources as wise community?

- *We discussed that people volunteer to build connection with their community and contribute.*
- *We identified that "connection" – managing it and maintaining it – has been a big challenge at all levels of organizations and within our professional community.*

- *We identified that there is, in some cases, a lack of appreciation for the importance of the volunteer manager, coordinator, leader and that this role needs more advocacy. In many situations, to increase our capacity to support volunteers and retain volunteer relationships, these roles need more time, more people power and more support.*
- *We would love to see Volunteer Halton work with "us" to advocate for these leadership roles and their importance within organizations and the community.*
- *We would love Volunteer Halton to provide more connection opportunities like today to allow us to connect and share and learn from other local organizations.   An example of this was "How are we planning to appreciate our volunteers this year?" It would be awesome to connect with people doing similar work to discuss new ideas, ways to adapt, etc.*

(The facilitator received an unsolicited e-mail following the event that reinforced the notion of Volunteer Halton convening manager/leaders of volunteers: "The only thing I am missing since coming to work back in Halton and especially the last year would be have a Volunteer Managers group once a month to have the opportunity to connect and discuss issues. I know this was brought up but I feel it is so important. If I can help out in any way in facilitating this please let me know.")

Themes from Discussion Groups

The discussion groups were deliberately given a limited time to discuss the issues, and it was clear that the conversations could have gone on for some time. However, there were several themes that emerged:

Theme 1: More detailed information on skill sets and experience of potential volunteers.

Being able to provide much more detailed profiles of potential/interested volunteers could assist in identifying both potential pro bono supports and lead as well into better matching. Volunteer Halton might wish to investigate the existence or not of software that would provide for secure but more detailed information that will permit this enhanced matching for multiple uses by organizations seeking volunteers and pro bono support.

Theme 2: Management of Volunteer "Careers"

Discussions suggested that matching would be improved as would the volunteer experience if there was a more "managed" approach to volunteers seeking opportunities through the volunteer databas, e.g., a third party advisor to assist in by giving advice and "managing" volunteer careers. Specifically, participants were interested in knowing whether this enhanced "management" was, first, something that was possible, and, second, something that Volunteer Halton could take on. In one group, the suggestion was made that Volunteer Halton could make itself available on a contract basis to "manage" volunteers for organizations that had few or no volunteer management resources.

Theme 3: Convening Managers and Leaders of Volunteers

There was substantial support for Volunteer Halton playing a convening role, e.g., bringing manager of volunteers/leaders of volunteers together on a regular basis for connecting, learning from each other and building community.