

Meeting the Need: Assessing Volunteer Service Delivery in Sault Ste. Marie

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1 Background

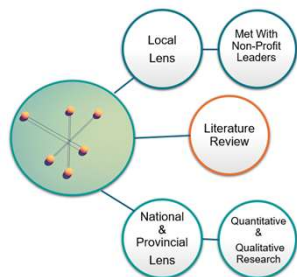
- Local community service organizations who are volunteer-reliant have identified that they struggle to attract and retain the volunteers who are vital to the success of their ongoing program delivery.
- The focus of this capstone project is to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by these organizations and the impacts on both the organization and the well-being of our community.
- The project examines barriers in attracting and retaining volunteers who are key to continuous service delivery.
- An exploration of strategies and solutions as well as future considerations and recommendations for improving volunteerism.

? Which strategies can be implemented to create a robust and resilient volunteer network to support the well-being of our community?

2 Methods

Local Lens

Collaboration, primarily with the local Canadian Red Cross, fostered connections with local leaders from four non-profit organizations over a three-month period. In addition to participating in meetings where the local volunteer landscape and its challenges were discussed, site visits were made to each organization.



Literature Review

The literature review consisted of three main sources: peer-reviewed journal articles, government and national statistical reports, grey literature and sector-specific publications. A deliberate focus was given to Canadian statistics with a broader scope including both Canadian and American publications between 2011 and 2025. This allowed for comparison of pre-versus post-pandemic volunteerism trends. Themes such as volunteer motivation, retention, barriers, community health impacts, and effects of COVID-19.

National and Provincial Lens- Quantitative & Qualitative

Data focusing on volunteer participation by demographics (age, gender, generational groupings), along with data such as number of hours spent volunteering and in which types of organizations, were compiled from Statistics Canada² and Volunteer Canada⁶ websites. A review of Volunteer Canada's national strategy document, "A Roadmap to Meet the Moment"⁶ was also completed.

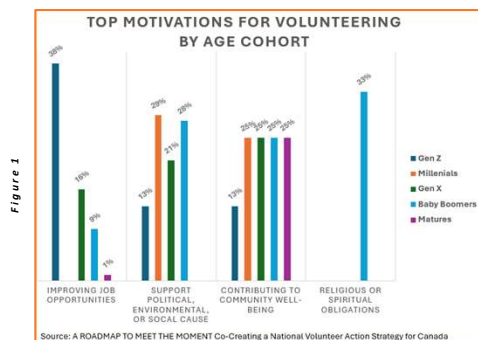
3 Results

Local Volunteerism Landscape

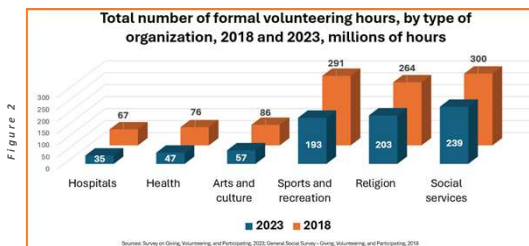
From an internal perspective, local non-profit organization (NPO) service delivery leaders (SDLs) spoke about the inability to transition short-term volunteer engagements, such as the mandated 40-hour requirement for high school students, into long-term commitments. The resources involved in the onboarding process often exceed the hours being contributed. Aligning a volunteer's skillset and availability with service recipient (SRs) needs and the NPOs existing programs is challenging. SDLs touted negative effects of low volunteerism participation on both physical and mental health of SRs. There is an identified need to break silos between various NPOs to better meet the needs of both volunteers and SRs.³

The Broader Volunteerism Landscape

Motivation to volunteer is largely driven by factors that are personally meaningful such as enhancing a skillset or networking rather than the primary reason of helping or contributing to society.¹ This is especially evident in the Gen Z demographic where 38% reported their primary reason for volunteering was to improve their job opportunities. In comparison, 16% of Gen X, 9% of Baby Boomers, and only 1% of Matures cited this as the driving factor. Overall, only around 25% of all volunteers voiced that contributing to community well-being was their primary motivator.⁶ See Figure 1.



Where are they volunteering? Data from Statistics Canada² and Volunteer Canada⁶ shows where volunteers are choosing to dedicate their time and the difference in commitment levels pre- and post-pandemic. Volunteer Canada's roadmap indicates that COVID-19 had an impact by magnifying issues in volunteerism that were pre-existing and were compounded by the fact that those who made up the majority of Canada's volunteer pool were also those who were most vulnerable to the virus's effects.⁶ See Figure 2.



Barriers to participation in volunteerism include lack of a centralized system for vulnerable sector checks (VSCs), socioeconomic factors (especially in youth and newcomer populations), and inequitable organizational practices such as requiring volunteers to pay for VSCs or delaying reimbursement for incurred mileage expenses.⁶

Retention often comes down to continued satisfaction with the same personally meaningful factors that first served as a motivator rather than altruistic reasons alone. Other critical factors are organizational clarity for role expectations, engaging volunteers in organizational initiatives, and personal satisfaction with their duties.¹

Health and Social Impacts of low volunteerism can be seen as a decline in physical health due to reduced physical activity and increased sedentary lifestyles of the SRs. Seniors may struggle more with mobility and activities of daily living (ADLs).⁴ Mental, emotional, and cognitive health may suffer due to inaccessible programming, lack of social interaction, increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. Volunteers are social bridges between SRs, especially seniors, and health & social systems.⁴ Strain is placed not only on the SRs family and personal support network, but it also can cause burnout among volunteers who are trying to bridge the gap in care. With decreased physical and mental health, there is more potential for SRs to require hospital services due to falls or lack of preventative care measures.⁴

4 Discussion

Volunteer recruitment and retention is resource-intensive for NPOs who struggle to align volunteer needs with those of the SRs and the NPO itself. Siloed structures symbolize barriers that can be solved by creating a larger, shared infrastructure. Pandemic impact can be seen in the nation-wide drastic decrease of volunteer hours across various organizations when comparing 2018 to 2023 data.

Personal needs serve as the primary driver and benefit of participating in volunteerism, not altruism. Low volunteerism results in decreased physical, mental, and cognitive health, as well as negative social impacts for service recipients; especially seniors.

Gaber et. al.'s research ties internal motivations to continued volunteer participation and engagement, rather than altruistic factors.¹ Moore et. al. demonstrated the potential for positive health outcomes among SRs who have access to volunteer services and NPO programs.⁴ Statistics Canada and Volunteer Canada link volunteer participation to factors like generational cohorts, impacts of COVID-19, and the organizations where volunteers choose to serve.^{2,5}

Volunteer Canada's roadmap provides a framework that will guide a nation-wide movement to boost volunteerism which echoes the needs identified by local SDLs.^{6,3} Understanding how to balance needs of volunteers, service recipients, and non-profit organizations will give perspective required for meaningful change to our local volunteer landscape. Breaking silos will allow for cost savings, sharing of resources, increase resiliency, and collaborative efforts. All of this leads to positive impact on the service recipient.

5 Conclusion

Removing organizational barriers while creating shared infrastructure will allow NPOs to build opportunities for volunteer attraction based on personal growth motivators. Exploring ways to align wants and needs for all stakeholders will craft mutually beneficial relationships, boosting volunteer satisfaction and retention. Success from these changes will be seen in the improved health and well-being of service recipients in our community.

6 References

- [1] Gaber et al. (2022). Understanding volunteer retention in a complex, community-centered intervention: A mixed methods study in Ontario, Canada. *Health & Social Care in the Community*.
- [2] Hahmann & Statistics Canada (2021). Volunteering counts: Formal and informal contributions of Canadians in 2018.
- [3] Local Service Delivery Leaders (2025). Personal communications.
- [4] Moore et al. (2021). Volunteer Impact on Health-Related Outcomes for Seniors: A Systematic Review And Meta-Analysis
- [5] Volunteer Canada (2025). New Results from Statistics Canada's Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating
- [6] Volunteer Canada (n.d.). A ROADMAP TO MEET THE MOMENT Co-Creating a National Volunteer Action Strategy for Canada.