



Social justice volunteers: Motivation and engagement

What do we mean by social justice volunteers?

Many voluntary sector organizations in Canada work to address social justice issues relating to health, gender, ethnicity, environment, poverty, disabilities, reproductive rights, and criminal justice. Many of these organizations approach these issues by providing direct services to members of disadvantaged groups and by engaging in community outreach, education, and advocacy activities. All of them rely to some extent on the involvement of volunteers. What do these volunteers do? How involved are they in formulating and debating policy issues and engaging in research and community outreach? How much direct service do they deliver? A study for the International Year of Volunteers investigated these questions.¹

Why do they volunteer?

The most important reason to volunteer cited by volunteers in this study was a commitment to serving the less fortunate (44% of volunteers) (see Figure 1). A commitment to broad social change was the second most important reason given for volunteering (20%). The third most important reason was encouragement from friends, staff, and relatives (18%).

What do they do?

Volunteers in community agencies that address social justice issues undertake a variety of tasks (see Figure 2). Seventy-one percent of the volunteers in this study were involved in providing direct service to clients (e.g., mentoring, teaching, role-modelling, counselling, providing emotional support, or physical assistance). Nine percent helped with office tasks such as typing, filing, making catalogues, photocopying, fundraising, translation, organizing receptions and workshops, and answering the telephone. Fourteen percent were involved in education and outreach while 9% were involved in advocacy. These volunteers were engaged

in research, disseminating knowledge, and lobbying on such social justice issues as environmental protection, anti-racism, child abuse, and violence against women. Eighteen percent of volunteers served on boards of directors. Some of these individuals were also involved in research, education, and advocacy activities as part of their board activities.

Benefits of volunteering

Volunteers gained many benefits from their involvement. Ninety percent of the volunteers participating in our study said that the major benefit of volunteering was the personal satisfaction they derived from helping other people or improving society. Thirty-three percent said that volunteering contributed to their self-improvement by expanding their knowledge and enhancing their personal skills.²

Volunteer retention

Seventy-five percent of the volunteers in this study said that the agencies they were involved with motivated them to continue volunteering. The three most important methods used by agencies to motivate volunteers were: recognizing volunteer contributions (51% of volunteers), organizing social activities (20%), and providing a social environment conducive to volunteering (13%).

What volunteers say

For some volunteers interested in social change it is important to engage in discussions focusing on community and public policies, as well as disadvantaged individuals. One volunteer said:

The major reason [for continuing to volunteer] is my opportunity to be able to come back to meetings and see that some of the things that we've discussed have been acted upon and that, therefore, we've made a difference, whether it's a

small difference or a large difference. And that really is payment enough as a volunteer to be able to say, "I've given some input. I've made a difference here in this organization." And as long as that continues on then my interest is still there with that organization. I know that I'm a valuable part of the organization.

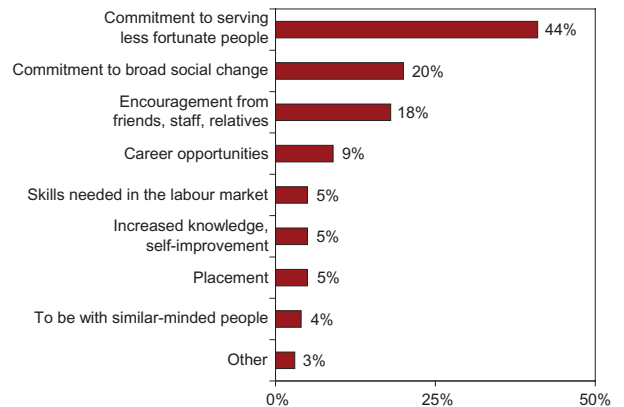
Another volunteer highlighted their role making a difference in the community:

A part of it [motivation for volunteering] goes back to the self esteem and looking back at the good you've contributed and feeling better about yourself ... and saying "I've done something that's mattered." ... The reward is this feeling like I've made the difference in my community not just to myself and the kids but [to] our community.

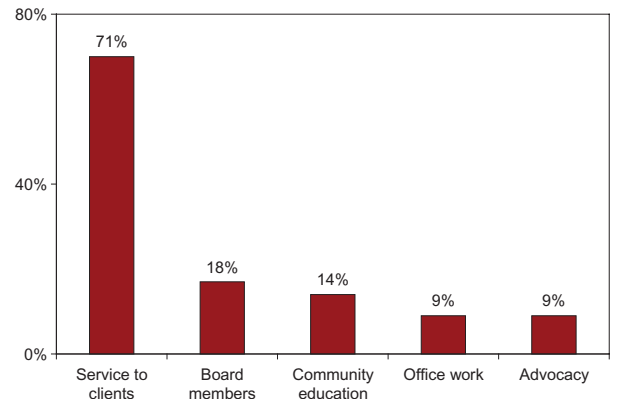
Conclusion

Community agencies involved in social justice issues in Windsor seem successful at attracting volunteers whose major commitment to volunteerism derives from their wish to help disadvantaged people. These volunteers gain valuable skills, knowledge, and experience from volunteering, and appreciate the recognition they receive from the community agencies. Yet, most community agencies are interested in redressing social injustice not only by providing services to marginalized groups, but also by engaging in research, community outreach, and advocacy. Comparatively few volunteers assist in these tasks. Perhaps community agencies should explore why this is the case.

Reasons for Volunteering



Type of Volunteer Activities



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For more information on the International Year of Volunteers, visit www.nonprofitscan.ca.

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¹ Eighty volunteers in 23 community agencies in Windsor, Ontario were interviewed for this study. Fifty-four percent of these volunteers were women, 52% were over age 40, 78% had post-secondary education, 56% were employed full-time, and 80% were born in Canada.

² Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer to this question.



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