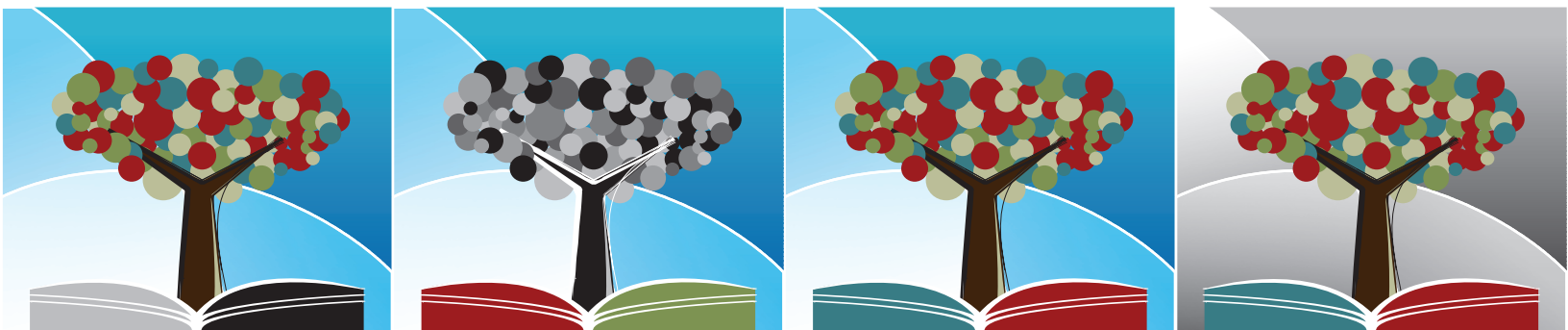


K N O W L E D G E D E V E L O P M E N T C E N T R E



Core Volunteers: Exploring the values, attitudes, and behaviours underlying sustained volunteerism in Canada

Report

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Imagine Canada

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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Core Volunteers: Exploring the values, attitudes, and behaviours underlying sustained volunteerism in Canada

1. Introduction

All volunteers make important contributions to their communities, but some contribute much more than others. This report presents the results of qualitative research that explored the unique characteristics of core volunteers, who are defined here as those who volunteer 188 hours or more per year. The purpose of this research was to provide managers of volunteers with information to assist them in effectively recruiting, retaining, recognizing, and supporting core volunteers.

Our interviews with 26 core volunteers and 24 non-core, or mainstream, volunteers from across the country revealed that core volunteers are distinct in several important ways. For example, they are more likely than mainstream volunteers to be motivated by a strong passion for a cause that is related to their personal or professional interests. While mainstream volunteers said that they didn't volunteer more because they lacked the time or were unwilling to make a long-term commitment, core volunteers reported cutting back on their volunteering due to age or the belief that their organizations needed new ideas. Core volunteers were also more likely than mainstream volunteers to expect volunteering to be mutually beneficial for themselves and the organization(s) they support.

This report begins with an overview of the relevant literature on volunteerism and volunteer values, attitudes, and behaviours. This information provides the reader with a context for understanding the design of the interviews and the significance of the interview results. We then present a brief explanation of our research methodology, a profile of our interviewees, and our major research findings. Recommendations for managers of volunteers are presented in the concluding section.

2. Literature review

In this section, we summarize what previous researchers have found regarding the values, attitudes, and behaviours of volunteers. Several key themes are discussed, including the impact of early life experiences, the personal benefits of volunteering, and importance of having a satisfying volunteer experience. This review is useful for understanding the logic behind our interview questions and the larger body of research to which this project contributes.

Developing volunteer values

A substantial amount of research supports the idea that the values associated with volunteering are developed early on in life. The 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), for example, found that volunteering in adulthood is related to a number of early life experiences such as participating in student government, being active in a religious group, participating in team sports, and having parents who volunteered (Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001; see also Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). The impact of these experiences is far from trivial. Forty-two percent (42%) of those who had been active in student government when they were young volunteered, compared to only 24% of those who had not had this experience (Lasby, 2004). Similarly, 39% of those whose parents volunteered were volunteers themselves, compared to only 20% of those whose parents had not volunteered.

Qualitative research also supports the connection between volunteer values and youth exposure to, or experience with, volunteering. A number of researchers have shown that role models can help to foster volunteering among youth (Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998; Janoski & Wilson, 1995; Mustillo,

Wilson, & Lynch, 2004; Reed & Selbee, 2000; Wilson, 2000). Volunteer values, attitudes, and beliefs can be transmitted by parents and later by leaders of secondary institutions such as school and church (Janoski et al., 1998). Role models can help children develop prosocial attitudes, which include a positive outlook on one's activity and responsibility in the community and acceptance of others' interests and opinions. These attitudes might be expressed in their later volunteerism (Janoski et al., 1998; see also Wilson, 2000).

Janoski et al. (1998) found that youth who volunteer can develop volunteering values and attitudes after they have begun volunteering, rather than before. These youth may be just as likely to continue to practice these volunteering behaviours as adults because they are comfortable with them and their associated values. According to the same authors, youth volunteer behaviour in this case reflects the socioeconomic roles and interests of their parents that were modeled during childhood. This suggestion supports other research that has shown a correlation between volunteerism, educational, and occupational status (Hall et al., 2001; Wilson, 2000).

Making the decision to volunteer

A theme that appears repeatedly in the literature is that the decision to volunteer is complex. Why does someone decide to volunteer? What factors influence this decision? According to the results of the 2000 NSGVP, the decision to volunteer is influenced by a number of factors that vary by age, gender, education, marital and labour force status. Most people say that they volunteer because of belief in or obligation to a cause, a desire for self-enrichment, or a desire to maintain social connections (Hall et al., 2001). Core volunteers are more likely to say that they volunteer

to use their skills and experiences, fulfill religious obligations, and explore their own strengths (Lasby, 2004).

A literature review done by Smith (1994) on the determinants of voluntary association participation and volunteering, which covered literature published from 1972 to 1992, shows that a number of converging factors may influence the decision to volunteer. These include, first of all, the context or environment of the individual in terms of the size of their community and the nature of the voluntary organization in which they are interested. A second factor is social background, including socioeconomic status, gender, and level of education. Third is personality; that is, whether the person possesses traits such as extroversion, assertiveness, or empathy that are generally associated with helping others. A fourth determinant is attitude, which refers to the perceived effectiveness of the organization and the degree to which the volunteer's role is perceived to be effective. It also includes a person's attitude about the rewards of volunteering; the greater the perceived benefits or rewards, the more likely an individual is to remain in the group. A final factor that can influence the decision to volunteer is the immediate situation of the individual. For example, was the person personally asked to join the organization? If so, she or he is more likely to decide to volunteer.

Benefits of volunteering

Our review of the literature suggests that volunteers recognize that they receive a number of personal benefits from volunteering and may well have these benefits in mind when they decide to volunteer (Hall et al., 2001). This is particularly true for youth and unemployed persons, many of whom volunteer to improve their employment prospects (Hall et al.,

2001). The top benefits of volunteering among NSGVP respondents were improving interpersonal skills and developing better communications skills. Core volunteers were more likely than other volunteers to say that they had gained skills because of their volunteer activities (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2004).

A number of researchers have examined the benefits or “function” of volunteering and how this influences the volunteer experience. For example, the Volunteers Function Inventory (VFI) designed by Clary et al. (1992) measures the degree to which personal needs are satisfied and volunteers' goals are reached. The VFI assesses six primary functions of volunteering: (1) the *value* function, the extent to which volunteering allows people to act on and express deeply held values; (2) the *understanding* function, satisfying the desire to understand the people whom one serves as well as oneself, or to learn for the sake of learning; (3) the *career* function, which manifests in the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and/or contacts to enhance job opportunities; (4) the *social* function, by which the individual upholds a normative attitude within his or her social group through volunteering; (5) the *esteem* function, wherein the individual feels better about himself or herself in terms of being needed by others; and (6) the *protective* function, through which persons who feel lonely or guilty volunteer to escape those feelings. The VFI has shown that volunteers are motivated differently across age groups depending on the benefits they might receive. For example, young people may volunteer to expand their social network while older adults may volunteer to maintenance their emotional well-being (Okun & Schultz, 2003).

A key question of interest in the literature on the benefits of volunteering is who benefits more: the volunteer or the beneficiary of the volunteer's activity (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Omoto & Snyder, 1995, 2002; Omoto, Snyder, & Martino, 2000; Warburton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001; Wilson & Musick, 1999; Yeung, 2004)? For instance, Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) argue that volunteers move back and forth between a communal orientation (described as altruistic and natural) and a reflexive orientation (described as self-centered and unpredictable). Volunteers with a communal orientation are driven by a sense of duty to the community and their actions are rooted in strong group-based identities. They typically make long-term commitments and experience the benefits of volunteering when their efforts affect others' lives in a positive way. By contrast, people with more reflexive attitudes typically undertake individual and discontinuous volunteer commitments and are more likely to use volunteering to cope with personal problems or difficult life events. Those with a more dominant communal orientation are said to constitute the core members of voluntary organizations.

Barriers to volunteering more

What prevents people from volunteering more?

According to the results of the 2000 NSGVP, the most common reason that volunteers give for not volunteering more is lack of time (Hall et al., 2001).

The likelihood of citing some barriers varies according to a variety of personal and economic characteristics.

For example, older volunteers are more likely to say that health problems prevent them from volunteering more while volunteers with lower household incomes are more likely to cite cost as a barrier to volunteering more. Core volunteers are much more likely than others to report that they do not volunteer more because they have already made a significant contribution.

Some research suggests that the perceived effectiveness of a volunteer's efforts is important to his or her level of satisfaction, which in turn influences his or her decision about whether to continue volunteering. When volunteers do not see themselves as being effective in helping the organization achieve its goal, they are generally not satisfied with their volunteer experience, which may cause them to stop volunteering. Smith's (1994) review, for example, found that the duration of a volunteer's participation is determined, in part, by whether his or her value within the group or organization is affirmed.

Other researchers have suggested that volunteer retention is related to the extent to which volunteers perceive their role as important to the success of the organization's mission and whether they see themselves as meeting the expectations of others (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). Volunteers who develop a specific role identity within an organization, and who receive recognition for their volunteer efforts, are more likely to experience increased self-esteem associated with their volunteer activities and may, therefore, continue to volunteer. Self-esteem, a sense of worth, and volunteer longevity have also been connected to the establishment of a strong social network through volunteering (Omoto & Snyder 2002; Warburton et al., 2001; Wilson 2000; Wilson & Musick 1999).

3. Methodology

Based on what we learned from our review of the literature, we developed a semi-structured interview to find out more about the values, attitudes, and behaviours of core and mainstream volunteers. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask respondents open-ended questions on a chosen topic. Respondents can answer with as much or as little detail as they choose. This interview style also allows respondents to elaborate on issues that are of most concern or interest to them, and to use detailed examples and personal stories to convey their thoughts and feelings.

Interviews were conducted with 50 volunteers from across Canada. Twenty-six interviewees were core volunteers and 24 were mainstream volunteers. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative Local Network Coordinators and a professional research firm. Forty-six interviews were carried out in English; four were conducted in French.

All interviews were conducted by telephone from February to May 2005. Interviews with core volunteers lasted from 30 to 88 minutes; on average, they lasted 54 minutes. Interviews with mainstream volunteers lasted from 18 to 75 minutes and averaged 39 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were entered into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software and coded for themes. The first author carried out additional interpretive analysis.

4. Profile of interviewees

Our interviewees were a very diverse group. Even within the core and mainstream categories there was a broad range of age, volunteer history, and experience. In this section, we describe the socio-demographic characteristics and volunteer experiences of our interviewees. Then, based on these findings, we describe three general types of core volunteers and three types of mainstream volunteers.

Socio-demographic characteristics

We interviewed at least one core and one mainstream volunteer living in each province and territory. Thirty-one (31) interviewees were female and 19 were male. The core volunteer group was slightly older, on average, than the mainstream group. Core volunteers ranged in age from 19 to 74 and had an average age of 49. Mainstream volunteers ranged in age from 23 to 67; their average age was 46.

The majority of interviewees were married or living in a common-law relationship and most were employed. The core volunteers were more likely than the mainstream volunteers to be out of the labour force. Most of those who were not in the labour force were retired.

More than half of the core volunteers interviewed had completed at least one university degree; several had earned more than one. The mainstream volunteers' group had fewer university graduates.

Neither core nor mainstream volunteers were more likely, as a group, to report a strong religious affiliation. About one third of core volunteers reported attending religious services regularly. These core

volunteers were, as a group, more likely to volunteer for four or more organizations. Two of them were volunteering regularly for their religious institutions and had been doing so for over a decade. About one third of mainstream volunteers also reported attending religious services regularly. Five were, at the time, volunteering in some capacity for their religious organizations.

Hours volunteered

Core volunteers volunteered more hours than mainstream volunteers. Core volunteers estimated that they volunteered from 208 to 2600 hours per year. The median number of hours was 910, meaning that half the core volunteers volunteered more than 910 hours per year and half volunteered less. Six core volunteers, five of whom were either retired or self-described full-time volunteers, estimated contributing more than 1400 hours annually. Mainstream volunteers estimated that they contributed between 24 and 182 hours per year, with a median of 84 hours.

Number and types of organizations served

Core volunteers tended to serve more organizations than mainstream volunteers. At the time of the interview, core volunteers reported serving between one and 11 different organizations, with a median of 3.5 organizations. Mainstream volunteers reported serving between one and three organizations, with the exception of one mainstream volunteer who had volunteered for annual fundraising events with eight different organizations over the previous year. The median number of organizations served by mainstream volunteers was one.

Participants served a wide variety of organizations. Some were national in scope (e.g., Girl Guides

of Canada, United Way of Canada); some were provincial (e.g., sports and health care organizations); many were local (e.g., hospitals, cultural associations, soup kitchens, schools). The majority of participants volunteered with social service organizations, followed by sports and recreation, and arts and culture organizations.¹

Current volunteer positions

The volunteers we interviewed served their organizations in many different capacities. Several core volunteers were founders of the organizations they served. Many were chairs of boards or executive committees and almost all served in at least one position for which they had an official title (e.g., president, co-chair, coordinator). Core volunteers holding a position on a board were likely to have held other board positions in the past, in the same or other organizations.

Most mainstream volunteers served their organizations by delivering services directly to people. For example, some volunteered in hospitals or rehabilitation centres visiting patients or accompanying residents on outings. Others helped at schools, taught children about empathy, tutored math and reading, or coached sports teams.

¹ In categorizing the type of organization, we followed the 2000 NSGVP, which uses the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations developed by the Johns Hopkins University Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project. See Hall et al. (2001), Appendix A.

Past volunteering

All but three participants reported having had previous volunteer experience before taking on their current role(s). Two of those without any prior experience were core volunteers and one was a mainstream volunteer.

Based on the number of hours they had volunteered per year in the past, three of the mainstream volunteers that we interviewed were former core volunteers. One had purposely cut back his volunteer hours within the last year or so; one had temporarily relocated for employment and was beginning relatively new volunteer activities; and one had taken on new volunteer roles that required less time.²

In asking participants about their volunteer histories, the extent to which some core volunteers have had volunteering “careers” (i.e., a history of volunteering that mirrored development in a professional area) became evident. On several occasions, these volunteers had to refer to their curriculum vitae to remember all of their previous volunteer commitments. Some volunteers who did not have their CVs within reach felt that they could not possibly remember everywhere they had volunteered.

Types of core volunteers

As a group, the core volunteers tended to be slightly older and to have more volunteer involvement for longer periods of time. However, two core volunteers (one who was 19 years old and one who was 65 years old) were in their first volunteer positions. Based on the information we collected from our interviews, we can identify three sub-groups of core volunteers.

- *New core volunteers:* Thirteen interviewees fell into this category. These individuals were in their first regular volunteer positions (i.e., positions that involved contributing time daily or weekly). New core volunteers were most likely to be serving two or three organizations for 188 to 1000 hours per year. Their age ranged from 19 to 65, but they tended to be younger. They were mainly employed full-time; one was retired.
- *Classic core volunteers:* The seven interviewees in this category were volunteering for several organizations and had a history of volunteering for a particular cause. Their volunteer positions were often related to their professions. Classic core volunteers were most likely to be serving four to eight organizations for 1000 to 1400 hours per year. Most were employed full-time; one was retired.
- *Full-time core volunteers:* There were six interviewees in this group. They were not in the labour force and were devoting full-time hours to volunteering. Full-time core volunteers were most likely to be serving three to seven organizations for more than 1400 hours per year. These volunteers typically had a lengthy history of volunteer activity.

Types of mainstream volunteers

The mainstream volunteers we interviewed were more diverse than the core group. Most members of the mainstream group had been involved with one or two organizations for ten years or less, but they had few other shared features. Nevertheless, there appear to be three sub-groups of mainstream volunteers.

² The movement between these two groups might be an interesting area for further study. How many mainstream volunteers become core volunteers and vice versa? When does this occur and why?

-
- *Low-mainstream volunteers:* Three interviewees fit this category. These individuals were volunteering once a month or less for one organization, or doing episodic volunteering for one or more organizations, for no more than 38 hours per year. They were between the ages of 44 and 62.
 - *Middle-mainstream volunteers:* There were 17 interviewees in this group. They were volunteering more than once a month for more than 38 hours but generally less than 100 hours per year. Typically they were young adults in their first or second regular volunteer role. Middle-mainstream volunteers were most likely to have been volunteering for their current organization for between two and five years.
 - *High-mainstream volunteers:* The 10 interviewees in this category were volunteering 100 to 187 hours per year. About half were involved with one organization and half were involved with two or three. Most of the volunteers in this group were 35 years of age or older and had been involved with their current organization for three years or more.

5. Findings

The results of our interviews indicate that core and mainstream volunteers share many values and attitudes. They also report similar motivations for, and benefits from, volunteering. The two groups are, however, distinct in a number of ways. For example, core volunteers are more likely to exhibit a strong passion for a cause and to volunteer in areas closely related to their personal interests or professional expertise. They are also more likely to expect volunteering to be a mutually beneficial exchange between the volunteer and the organization. Below we present our major findings on the values and attitudes of core and mainstream volunteers.

Role modeling and early life experience

To understand how values and attitudes that are conducive to volunteering are formed, we asked participants about their early life experiences relating to volunteering and participating in organizations. We also asked if they had any significant role models during their youth. Our findings reveal that both core and mainstream volunteers are likely to have volunteered and participated in activities during their youth and to have had someone important in their lives who volunteered.

More than half the people we interviewed (13 core and 15 mainstream volunteers) had some personal experience volunteering in their youth. This included volunteer coaching, visiting elderly persons in a home, and reading with adults in a literacy program.

All but six interviewees (two core and four mainstream volunteers) participated in activities such as youth groups, student government, and organized sports. Sports and youth groups connected with a place of worship were the most common activities. Many

interviewees were also active as guides or cadets and a few were involved with student government in high school. About half of all interviewees were active in a religious organization in their youth.

Some volunteers directly connected their youth experiences to their current attitudes on volunteering.

“I think I got my start back in high school. And once it gets in your system, once you become that kind of a person and I’ll put that in quotes, ‘that kind of a person’ – a person who volunteers, a person who pays attention to what’s going on in the community and wants to help where he can – once you become that kind of a person you don’t stop doing it, I don’t think.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Nova Scotia

More than half the core volunteers identified someone who acted as a role model for their volunteering.

Mothers were the people most often identified, followed by both parents, and a teacher or coach.

More than half the mainstream volunteers also identified a role model; mothers were named most frequently, followed by fathers. In addition, more than half of each group had parents who volunteered in their community. Many interviewees fondly recalled how their mothers modeled volunteer behaviour and conveyed volunteering values when they were children.

“I think I was in grade five, and of course then we had Red Cross groups in the classroom. I can almost visualize the day when I came home and said, “I’m the treasurer of the group,” and she said, “Oh, well, I am too!” and we had something in

common. That’s probably what we’ve had in common all our lives.”

– Core volunteer, Nova Scotia

“I was thinking about what made me volunteer and I would say growing up, my family placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of volunteering and giving back to communities. My mom does a lot of formal volunteering and informal volunteering, like bringing food to elderly neighbours. So I’ve seen that as an example and I think that is a large reason why I like to volunteer.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Yukon

In addition to having had role models in their youth, several volunteers – both core and mainstream – expressed the importance of *being* a role model for their own children.

“Last year, my daughter started a drive for the Food Bank. I didn’t even know she was doing it until she was almost done because she just started it on her own and she had friends involved and finally one day her teacher called me to say, ‘Do you know what your daughter’s doing?’ So I can see that in them already. Having a role model is probably very important.”

– Core volunteer, New Brunswick

“I’ve got three children and I hope that they learn something from the example that me and my wife give, in terms of volunteering our time. It’s not done with the expectation that we’re going to receive anything in return in terms of monetary compensation and so

on. You hope that message is shared with your kids and you hope by the example that you set that they learn to give their time to others as well.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Nunavut

Both core and mainstream volunteers expressed great appreciation for, and fond memories of, their early life experiences volunteering and participating in activities and organizations. The value of helping others and the ability to act as a positive role model were strongly conveyed sentiments. These findings confirm what previous researchers have suggested about the importance of childhood experiences to adult volunteering.

Motivations

We asked interviewees why they decided to volunteer and why they continue volunteering. Among both groups, giving back to the community, helping others, and making connections in the community were primary motivators. Mainstream volunteers were more likely than core volunteers to report being motivated by a desire to gain employment experience and improve job opportunities. Core volunteers, on the other hand, were more likely to be motivated by a deep passion for the cause. These distinctions may be critical for nonprofit and voluntary organizations to consider when planning recruitment messages and strategies.

Perhaps more importantly, however, our interviews showed that the motivations of volunteers are complex and change over time. The volunteers that we interviewed reported being motivated by different reasons to volunteer for different types of organizations at different moments in their lives. This was especially true for core volunteers, whose

histories of volunteering were, in some cases, quite extensive. These volunteers were aware that their motivations had changed over time and with circumstances.

“My involvement in volunteering came about through self-interest, and it just developed from there. Since that time I’ve been involved at various levels in various organizations, and with varying motivations. I don’t know if there’s any such thing as pure altruism or pure selfishness. But there’s certainly a continuum that I found myself on. I think we all tread on various parts of it.”

– Core volunteer, Newfoundland

The role of religion

Both the 1997 and 2000 NSGVP found that volunteering is more prevalent among Canadians who are religious (Hall et al., 2001). Therefore, we asked interviewees who had a religious affiliation if they believed that there was a connection between their religiosity and their decision to volunteer. Some volunteers felt there was a direct and natural connection.

“Oh, certainly, yes. And lots of things that I would hear in sermon now or in scripture fit in with the values of what I’m doing. It’s like the doors have been opened for me to go in that direction in a divine way. I could be counselling full-time and making a \$1,000 a week, but I don’t feel like I would be happy doing that and I don’t feel like that would serve the best purpose. That’s a value that comes from church.”

– Core volunteer, Northwest Territories

“Our family is Christian, so looking after your brother, and being your brother’s keeper is a pretty important value in that faith. And certainly in my house, we take it to heart. I would have to say a great deal of the religious values come through in looking after your neighbour in need. And in fact I’m saying it that way, because that is the philosophy of the soup kitchen: neighbours serving neighbours in need.”

– Core volunteer, Ontario

Other volunteers, however, felt that there was no connection between their religiosity and their decision to volunteer.

“I don’t think so. Honestly, I think my main motivation is to help kids. I think maybe some of my morals and things like that have come from the church, but not necessarily why I want to help them, because I think the church scares a lot of these teenagers away during their hard times.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Alberta

“There is no direct link. I did not say this because I am a Catholic. I am generous with my time when I am available. It is not a question of religion because the people with whom I volunteer do not necessarily do it for religious reason either. It’s because of the generosity of these people.”

– Core Volunteer, Québec

There was no discernable pattern across the two groups of volunteers in either their level of religiosity or their views regarding the role of religion in volunteering.

Giving back to the community

Many core and mainstream volunteers said that the wish to give something back to the community motivated them to volunteer.

“I think there’s always the sense of giving back, and I think that’s always been with me, that there’s something that I need to give back. As I’ve gotten older I think that’s even stronger, my responsibility to the community.”

– Mainstream volunteer, British Columbia

“My family and I have really benefited from this community in so many ways and had so many opportunities, and I’ve wanted to give back.”

– Core volunteer, Yukon

Helping others

Most interviewees reported that they volunteered because they enjoyed helping others. In fact, most volunteers we spoke to exhibited what might be called a “helping disposition.”

“I’ve always been an outgoing type of person, and I’ve always enjoyed doing things for people. The main reason I started doing volunteer work was to help out because I’ve always been like that. I’ve always enjoyed helping people.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Manitoba

“I definitely do enjoy helping, and I enjoy knowing that whatever effort I’ve made has made a difference.”

– Core volunteer, Manitoba

Connection to the community

Volunteers living in new, small, or rural communities felt that volunteering was a way to get connected with others. When moving to a new city or town, volunteering gave individuals the opportunity to meet others with common interests, expand their social networks, and learn first-hand about important community issues. Volunteering can quickly help people become familiar with their surroundings.

“I could have chosen to stay home and do nothing but, especially when you’re living in a small isolated community, volunteering is a way to become part of that community and contribute.”

– Core volunteer, Northwest Territories

“I actually didn’t start volunteering until I moved to the Yukon. I used to live in Saskatchewan and when I was there I always thought about volunteering but I never actually did it. When I moved to the Yukon, I thought that volunteering would be a really good way to meet people.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Yukon

Gaining experience & improving employment opportunities

As a group, the mainstream volunteers that we interviewed were much more likely than the core volunteers to say that gaining experience for future employment or improving career opportunities was their main reason for volunteering.

“I am personally trying to get into physiotherapy, and I’ve gone to conferences that were put on by people who had gotten into the program and they mentioned that

volunteering is a really good way to do that. So I thought, ‘Well, maybe if I get into this it’ll be a good thing.’”

– Mainstream volunteer, Saskatchewan

“I was looking for a volunteer commitment when I came back to Prince Edward Island, and part of the reason I chose [the organization] was I’m looking to become a teacher. So I was looking for some experience to get into an education program. I just saw it on a bulletin board, and I just thought it was really a good thing.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Prince Edward Island

Professional connection to the organization

The activities of core volunteers were often closely connected to their careers. This professional interest may help to explain why many core volunteers make significant commitments for an extended period of time.

“I didn’t used to volunteer a lot, when I was in university. Then I started working, and I got involved with a nonprofit literacy organization as one of my first jobs and we did a lot of extracurricular work there. We planned festivals, we did a lot of outreach, we did promotion, and mostly that was done outside of our working hours. We did it because we were interested in doing it. So probably the seed was planted there.”

– Core volunteer, New Brunswick

“I used to work with government back in the early ’80s, and I was also involved with the offshore. In both cases, I had some reason

to make contact with [the organization], and with the executive director or CEO, and I found a ready response and a very helpful response team. So when I retired from government, and I was approached by [the organization] to be involved, I felt I should return a favour.”

– Core volunteer, Newfoundland

Personal connection to the organization

Many core volunteers reported having a personal connection to the organization(s) they served. These volunteers were motivated to volunteer and keep volunteering because either they themselves or their children benefited directly from the organization’s activities.

“I’ve been involved with the schools since my kids started. I’ve always tried to make time to go in and volunteer. I was doing contract work for that reason, so that I could be involved.”

– Core volunteer, Northwest Territories

“I joined the club in ’79 and I wasn’t in the club a month before one of my friends came to me and said, “You know, you better come out help us groom some trails.” I guess that’s when I started. In the next couple of years, I sort of branched into a few things and then, after five years, I didn’t like the way the club was being run so I ran for President.”

– Core volunteer, Ontario

Passion for the cause

Most of the core volunteers we interviewed expressed a profound passion for both volunteering and the specific causes to which they gave their time. Several core volunteers also said that it was very important to them to “make a difference.” When asked what they thought differentiated them from volunteers who contributed less time, most core volunteers cited their passion for the cause and belief that they could make a difference.

“I think it requires real passion for what you’re volunteering for. If you don’t have that, you’re not going to put a lot of hours into it.”

– Core volunteer, Northwest Territories

“Passion. I think some people are just very passionately interested in certain causes or issues, and that leads them to take action. I think also optimism. I do think that if you’re going to volunteer you have to feel that you’re going to be able to make a difference, and so I think that that kind of optimism or that feeling that the system does work if you participate in it is what makes some people get involved.”

– Core volunteer, British Columbia

Interestingly, the only mainstream volunteer to express a similar passion for her cause was a former core volunteer.

“Well, first of all I think that the person has to have a real passion for what they’re volunteering for, and I have a real passion for the symphony.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Alberta

Benefits

There were a number of similarities in the perceptions of core and mainstream volunteers regarding the benefits of volunteering. Interviewees in both groups said that they benefited personally from volunteering by gaining a sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment, learning new skills, and meeting new people. Both groups also recognized the benefits to others of their volunteer contributions. Interestingly, the core volunteers that we interviewed were more likely than the mainstream volunteers to describe volunteering as a mutually beneficial exchange.

Benefits to the volunteer

When asked about the benefits of volunteering, several interviewees in both groups said that the sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment they received from volunteering was an important benefit.

“The biggest benefit is that it gives me personal satisfaction and it’s very fulfilling. To see kids get interested and listen to what you have to say, that for me is a big thing.”
– Mainstream volunteer, Alberta

“I do feel a sense of fulfillment when I give my time and try to make things better. Some of those kids at the school have nobody that takes the time to read with them or is even interested in how their day was. That’s number one.”
– Core volunteer, Saskatchewan

Other benefits of volunteering reported by both core and mainstream volunteers included developing new skills, meeting new people, increased self-esteem, and meeting one’s needs in a general sense. Networking was also mentioned as a benefit by some interviewees.

“There are so many skills to be had from volunteering. You would think that just going and putting up decorations is nothing, it’s just a menial task. But to get in there and to talk to the people and to find out what the event’s all about, all those different types of things give you so many different outlets for developing skills.”

– Mainstream volunteer, British Columbia

“You meet really, really diverse and interesting people. About the only thing you have in common is the fact that you’re volunteering for this organization. Some of them, if you weren’t volunteering with them, you’d probably have nothing else in common. Others you meet and you hit it off with them and you finish up doing a lot of other things with them. I think that’s a benefit.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Newfoundland

“This gives me a sense of value and that’s where I’m able to hang my hat and feel good about what I have done and who I am.”

– Core volunteer, New Brunswick

Benefits to others

Many core and mainstream volunteers also discussed the benefits experienced by others, mainly the beneficiaries of the organizations they volunteered with. This exemplifies the general helping disposition of many of the volunteers we interviewed.

“The benefit is the accomplishment of doing a service for people in the best way I can.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Nova Scotia

“I think that I’m one of those people who tends to put myself last. My volunteer work comes first, and then fitting in my own personal things, like exercise, comes lower down. I always think that if I don’t get involved this thing may not happen. I know how hard it is to get people. I think once you’re into that volunteer role you just know, and so you just make sure that you always help out in whatever way you can.”

– Core volunteer, Yukon

Benefits to the volunteer and others

Unique to the core volunteers that we interviewed was the importance of a mutually beneficial exchange in the volunteer experience. Core volunteers were more likely to seek out volunteer opportunities where a win-win situation was possible.

“I see volunteerism as trying to serve my neighbour. And you end up being served by your neighbour when you do this sort of thing. I believe if everybody could find a way to look at volunteerism like that, they would take it seriously, and understand how all-encompassing it can be for your life, level of satisfaction, level of self-esteem.”

Volunteerism serves to enhance all those good feelings.”

– Core volunteer, Ontario

“The greatest advantage of volunteering is the personal satisfaction derived from it. You want to be useful. You want to help. I think it is an important factor. You will receive back what you give, multiplied ten or a hundred times.”

– Core Volunteer, Québec

Three mainstream volunteers, all of whom were previous core volunteers, also expressed the need for “give-and-take” in volunteering.

“I think it’s about creating a win-win situation. I give something to the organization, but then they give something back. It’s give-and-take. And maybe it’s not something very concrete; it can be something intangible, like having that accomplishment, or making friends, or getting connected.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Alberta

The simultaneous giving and getting that volunteering should involve was the most important lesson learned by a core volunteer who, at the time of the interview, was in his first volunteer position.

“I think that one thing that I learned that has been the greatest benefit was that when you volunteer, you go to these places to help people, and you think, oh, you’re going to help them and you’re going to put in as much as you can. But the exchange goes both ways. You’re not just teaching them. You’re learning something from them as well.”

– Core volunteer, British Columbia

Satisfaction

Volunteers who are satisfied with their volunteer experiences are more likely to continue to volunteer. Most of the volunteers we interviewed were satisfied with their volunteer activities. However, as a group, core volunteers reported a higher level of satisfaction than mainstream volunteers. Mainstream volunteers were also more likely to report *dissatisfaction* with their current volunteer experiences.

Core volunteers

An overwhelming majority of core volunteers reported being satisfied with their current volunteer commitments. Many said they were “very” or “extremely” satisfied, and stated that they would not be volunteering if they were not.

“I’ve always been satisfied. I’ve never been dissatisfied with it, because there’s always so much to learn – if you’re willing to learn. I love to learn about these new things, so I’m looking for something to learn about all the time. I haven’t ever had a bad experience in volunteering, not once. But I do attribute some of that to the fact that I bring all my own initiative with me.”

– Core volunteer, Ontario

Some core volunteers, particularly those who had just begun to volunteer for more than 188 hours per year, were so satisfied that they hoped to contribute more time in the future.

“Actually, our long-term goal is to volunteer our way through Third World countries. We would do whatever they needed us to do. I love working with children, so if there was an orphanage or a school to spend time in,

or if it was literally digging wells or helping to build homes, anything they needed us to do we would do. We sponsor a child in India, so I think India would be our first stop.”

– Core volunteer, Manitoba

“If I had more time and knew that I was going to be rooted in the Island, then I would like to be a Big Sister for the Big Brothers / Sisters organization. I know they always say that you don’t need a lot of time to do that but at the same time I’d have to make sure that I’m going to be here.”

– Core volunteer, Prince Edward Island

Mainstream volunteers

Most mainstream volunteers told us that they were satisfied with their current volunteering and that there was nothing they wanted to change about it. Some mainstream volunteers, however, were not satisfied. The most common reasons for dissatisfaction were a lack of training or recognition for volunteers, and the belief that their efforts were not having any impact.

“I think the organization is rather stagnant, and I don’t think that they’re open to change, modification, or movement in one direction or the other, so I don’t know whether an impact can be made.”

– Mainstream volunteer, Newfoundland

“I think that they could do a much better job of communicating with the volunteers and giving them that pat on the back that goes just so far in helping them want to come back again. There’s a lot of instruction that we could be given because each week

there's different volunteers who come, and they walk in and they don't have a clue what they're doing."

– Mainstream volunteer, British Columbia

Appreciation and recognition

In an effort to inform volunteer retention strategies, we asked interviewees whether they felt appreciated by their organizations, if they received any recognition or feedback on their contributions, and how important they felt displays of appreciation or recognition were to the volunteer experience and to volunteer motivation. Our results indicate that there are mixed views on the importance of formal recognition within both core and mainstream volunteer groups. Informal recognition, however, is very important to core volunteers.

Core volunteers

Most core volunteers reported that they received recognition from their organizations, but there was no consensus on its importance. Only one interviewee felt strongly that she was not appreciated enough, describing volunteering as “fairly thankless.” Some participants felt that receiving recognition was critical to a volunteer’s sense of making a contribution, while others felt that it played little role in their motivation for continuing to volunteer.

“It's very important to your self-esteem, in that you feel like you're making a difference. If nobody gave you any feedback, you'd feel like, 'What are you doing there?' You're not sure if you're doing the right thing, or if you're appreciated. I guess that's part of why you volunteer. You want to feel appreciated.”

– Core volunteer, Nunavut

“It's not really important for me. I think for some other people it might be, but it doesn't bother me. It's nice to have it and it's nice to know that you're being recognized, but I think if you're looking for recognition from your peers and from your friends you're in it for the wrong thing.”

– Core volunteer, Northwest Territories

Some core volunteers recounted stories of informal recognition that they received from the beneficiaries of their efforts. For example, one core volunteer explained that local residents often approach him and express their appreciation for all of his efforts to improve the quality of life in their community. These moments, interviewees noted, are just as rewarding, if not more rewarding, than formal recognition from the organization.

“I had an email about a month ago from somebody whose mom had just died, and he was thanking me for several things I had done. I sent him an email back telling him how much it meant to me that when he's in a moment of most pain, he was still willing to think of the people who had volunteered. So those personal thank-yous from the families are important, but I think they just happen naturally.”

– Core volunteer, Prince Edward Island

“We get it from our participants. It's from the parents and the kids, and in different little ways. The coordinator and I, a couple of years ago, went to the elementary schools and sang a couple of songs to all the classes. Two weeks later, a little five-year-old stops and gives the rock sign with the

guitar, and he starts playing air guitar. It's those types of things. They're just a riot!"

– Core volunteer, New Brunswick

Mainstream volunteers

Although some mainstream volunteers reported a lack of recognition from their organizations, most said that they received some kind of acknowledgment. This acknowledgement was appreciated but, like most core volunteers, most mainstream volunteers said that recognition had little impact on their feelings of satisfaction or their desire to continue volunteering.

"It feels great when somebody says thank you. I don't think that if I didn't get that I wouldn't volunteer, but it's a nice thing when you get that feedback because you feel, like, okay, well, somebody's glad that I'm here and acknowledging that I'm helping out."

– Mainstream volunteer, Yukon

"I do it for my own reasons. I don't have to receive all sorts of recognition for it. It's satisfying just doing it."

– Mainstream volunteer, Northwest Territories

Another mainstream volunteer explained that receiving recognition is not what determines the quality or effectiveness of volunteering. Rather, the experience must have some intrinsic reward for the volunteer above all else.

"If you're volunteering and you're in it for what you're going to get out of it, you're in it for the wrong reasons. If you're disappointed because somebody doesn't come up to you and say, 'My god, you did a wonderful job. You're the best and greatest

person in the world,' if that's what you expect to get out of it then you're going to be sadly disappointed because most of the time that's not going to happen."

– Mainstream volunteer, Nunavut

Barriers to volunteering more

Core and mainstream volunteers may have many of the same motivations for volunteering, but they report very different barriers to volunteering more. Mainstream volunteers were more likely to say that they did not have any more time to contribute, or that they were not able to make the kind of structured commitment organizations required. By comparison, core volunteers who were cutting back on their volunteer commitments at the time of the interview were doing so primarily because they felt that their organizations needed to be refreshed.

Mainstream volunteers

Among the mainstream volunteers that we interviewed, lack of time and unwillingness to make a year-round commitment were the top barriers to volunteering more. Some volunteers expressed a desire to contribute more, but said they were unable to find the time on a regular basis or at all.

"I always wanted to volunteer in the hospital, but time just didn't allow me to do that. Volunteering is so structured. If I could just come and go, I'd come and go. But most organizations want you at a certain time on a certain day and to do that every day – and that's a little bit more difficult for me."

– Mainstream volunteer, New Brunswick

“If we only maintained one home and didn’t have a summer place, or another year-round place, I probably would do more, but I don’t like to be pinned down.”

– Mainstream volunteer, New Brunswick

Core volunteers

A number of core volunteers we interviewed had recently stepped down from volunteer positions or were planning to do so in the near future. One such respondent was a mainstream volunteer at the time of the interview but had, in the past, been a core volunteer and therefore had insight into this issue. These volunteers had extensive histories with their organizations. Their main reasons for deciding to leave were age and the belief that their organizations needed new ideas.

“Well, to be very honest, I think I will be cutting back or looking at cutting back, because I’m 67 this year and not as spry and energy-filled as I was previously.”

– Core volunteer, Yukon

“I’m 54, and I think that I’m willing to give it maybe two more years. I love writing, and I want to write more. So I have to give myself time to write.”

– Core volunteer, Prince Edward Island

“I’m a firm believer that a person can do a job for too long. It isn’t so much that I want to give it up as that I believe it would be good for the organization to have somebody else doing it. But since they seem to be quite happy with the job I’m doing, I continue to say okay and let it go. But sooner or later I’ll have to step down and

say, ‘Listen, somebody step up to the plate here, because you’ve had enough of me.’”

– Mainstream (formerly core) volunteer,
Nova Scotia

One core volunteer who had recently stepped down from several volunteer positions explained that her needs were not being met by the organizations she was volunteering with. She was, however, unique among the core volunteers we interviewed.

“I think I like to see things happen. If I can see that I’m being part of the solution then I feel like I’m reaching a goal for myself. But if we’re not working towards solving a problem or rectifying a situation, I’m not happy with that. I have my own personal goals but you kind of go through this volunteering cycle. If you can’t get your needs met by the organization you’re volunteering for, you step back.”

– Core volunteer, New Brunswick

Challenges faced by core volunteers

Although the vast majority of the core volunteers were very satisfied with their volunteering, they also reported several challenges, some of which could cause them to leave their organizations. Many of challenges reported by core volunteers were related to the capacity of their organizations – for example, finding other skilled volunteers to help out and obtaining funding to support volunteer activities.

“It’s getting much harder to run organizations now because life has become more complicated. There are issues of liability, there’s tighter funding, and it is harder to get good volunteers because

there is a lot of competition out there. People are finding it harder to volunteer because they're being stressed out with work and time restrictions on their jobs. And there's a higher standard required of volunteer organizations now. There's the desire that they be as professional as paid work."

– Core volunteer, Nova Scotia

Some core volunteers experienced frustrations managing their relationships with other organization members and volunteers. Most interviewees seemed to accept this as an inevitable part of volunteering, but some admitted that when these problems escalate, they consider leaving their organizations.

"Setting conflicts is the least pleasant."

– Core Volunteer, Quebec

"I'm quite frustrated with the board. Some board members just see what's on the outside. It's all superficial, and as long as everything's looking good from that aspect they think everything's okay. That's frustrating for me right now. I'm really trying hard, and sometimes I get to the point where it's like, 'Oh, why do I even bother?' and if everybody thinks that way then there won't be a board. Who knows what will happen."

– Core volunteer, Saskatchewan

"I think if people are too narrow-minded and too focused on their own agendas, and they can't look at the whole, at the bigger picture, that's the time when I don't want to be involved. Even though my kids may

be involved in the program, I try to think of the big picture and how is it going to benefit everybody, not just my own particular child."

– Core volunteer, Yukon

Summary

The key findings from our interviews with core and mainstream volunteers are summarized below.

- The majority of core and mainstream volunteers had some early life experience volunteering or participating in youth activities.
- More than half of the core volunteers and half of the mainstream volunteers had a role model who volunteered. Mothers were named most frequently by both groups.
- Being a role model for their own children was important to both core and mainstream volunteers.
- Common motivations for volunteering among core and mainstream volunteers were giving back to the community, helping others, and making connections in the community.
- Mainstream volunteers were unique in being motivated to volunteer by a desire to gain employment experience and improve job opportunities.
- Core volunteers were unique in being motivated by a professional interest in the organizations for which they volunteered, a personal connection to the organization, and a deep passion for the cause supported by the organization.

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- For some core and mainstream volunteers, religion played a role in motivating them to volunteer; for others, it did not.
 - Core and mainstream volunteers recognized the personal benefits of volunteering, namely, feeling fulfilled, gaining a sense of personal satisfaction, learning new skills, and satisfying their own needs.
 - Core and mainstream volunteers recognized the benefits to others of their volunteering.
 - Core volunteers were unique in reporting a desire for a mutually beneficial exchange with the organization.
 - The majority of core volunteers were “very” or “extremely” satisfied with their volunteering while most mainstream volunteers were merely satisfied.
 - As a group, neither core nor mainstream volunteers felt that receiving formal recognition was particularly important to their volunteering.
 - Informal recognition from the organization’s beneficiaries was highly valued, especially by core volunteers.
 - The top barriers to volunteering more among mainstream volunteers were lack of time and being unable or unwilling to make a long term, structured commitment.
 - Core volunteers reported cutting back on their volunteering due to age and the belief that their organizations needed to be refreshed.
 - Challenges reported by core volunteers included finding other volunteers to help out, obtaining funding to support volunteer activities, and managing relationships with other volunteers.

6. Discussion and recommendations

The primary objective of this research was to provide managers of volunteers with information to effectively recruit, retain, recognize, and support core volunteers. Our findings indicate that although core and mainstream volunteers share some characteristics, including motivations and early life experiences, core volunteers are unique in several ways. Core volunteers are motivated by a passion for their cause and often by their professional or personal interest in the organizations they serve. Further, core volunteers expect volunteering to be mutually beneficial. That is, they expect to receive something of equal value in return for their time – an extended network, new knowledge or skills, or a personal achievement.

Core volunteers are, for the most part, very satisfied with their volunteering. They consider leaving their organizations when they feel the time is right to step aside for new volunteers, or when age no longer permits them to contribute with as much energy as in the past. The challenges faced by core volunteers are representative of some of the capacity challenges faced by nonprofit and voluntary organizations – e.g., the need for skilled volunteers, for training, and for funding.

Below, we present some recommendations for improving the recruitment, recognition, retention, and support of core volunteers.³

1. *Finding:* Core volunteers have a unique passion for the causes to which they contribute. Often, the cause is related to the volunteer's profession and/

or his or her family benefit from the organization's services or activities.

Recommendation: Recruitment strategies can target individuals who are already involved in some capacity in the area or cause that the organization supports. For example, a sports organization looking for individuals to coach youth basketball teams might approach players in an adult basketball league who are already passionate about the sport. A health organization looking for volunteers might target local health professionals or families of patients who have an interest in the advancement of a specific area of medical research. A local humane society might post recruitment messages in dog parks where dedicated owners walk and play with their pets, or mention to their clients/customers that they are looking for volunteers. Managers of volunteers might also find a promising pool of potential core volunteers by looking at people and professional organizations in their existing network.

2. *Finding:* Core volunteers expect volunteering to be mutually beneficial. That is, they want it to be a win-win situation for the organization and the volunteer.

Recommendation: Volunteer positions should be designed in ways that benefit both the organization and the volunteer. Recruitment messages should equally emphasize the contribution that the volunteer will make to the success of the organization and the benefits that the volunteer will receive. For example, an arts organization looking for volunteer board members might target young or new professionals working in the arts. The recruitment message might explain that board

³ Additional recommendations based on the findings of the 2000 NSGVP can be found in McClintock (2004). Recommendations specific to recognition and retention are provided by McCurley & Lynch (1996).

members help steer the organization towards achieving its goals while learning first-hand about the issues that affect the arts community and making important contacts that will help them build their professional network. Leadership training might also be provided to core volunteers.

3. *Finding:* Core volunteers are “very” or “extremely” satisfied with their volunteering, but their motivations change over time and they do report challenges.

Recommendation: Managers of volunteers might consider initiating regular “check-ins” with volunteers to assess their level of satisfaction and the extent to which they see themselves as being useful or effective. This may be as informal as a brief conversation every two or three weeks where the volunteer is given the opportunity to discuss his or her likes and dislikes about the current volunteer activity or role. Check-ins might also be more formal meetings during which the manager poses standardized questions about the volunteer’s activities or responsibilities. Managers should preface this meeting by explaining that its purpose is not to evaluate the volunteer, but to ensure that the needs of both the organization and the volunteer are being met. Since volunteers’ motivations can change over time, it is critical that volunteer positions be adjusted accordingly. With up-to-date knowledge of what is motivating the volunteer at a given time, managers should be able to design satisfying positions that benefit both the volunteer and the organization.

4. *Finding:* Formal recognition is important to some, but not all, core volunteers. Informal recognition is especially appreciated.

Recommendation: For many core volunteers, it is the advancement of the organization’s mission or the improved quality of life of its clientele that lets them know that their time is well spent and their contributions are appreciated. It is important, then, that core volunteers are able to see the impact they are having. Organizations can also make sure that the beneficiaries of their services know that the individuals who operate the organization and/or deliver services are volunteers. Promoting the contribution of volunteers within and outside of the organization will remind service-users to give thanks and show their appreciation appropriately. Organizations can also acknowledge the contributions of their volunteers in their annual reports and monthly newsletters. One way to show the impact of volunteers is to determine the economic value of the time they contribute. The Volunteer Value Calculator is a free tool that helps organizations perform these calculations. It is available online at <http://www.kdc-cdc.ca/vvc/>.

5. *Finding:* Core volunteers are most likely to reduce their volunteer commitments or stop volunteering due to age and/or the belief that the organization needs to be refreshed.

Recommendation: Managers of volunteers should be alert for signs that a core volunteer is feeling that it is time to “retire” from the organization. Such volunteers could be offered less onerous tasks and responsibilities. They might also be invited to participate in some sort of advisory group. In this way, the organization would continue to benefit from the skills and experiences of long-term volunteers. At the same time, valued volunteers would be able to reduce their level of involvement in the organization gradually.

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