

**I  
Volunteer**

# Rethinking Volunteer Engagement

International Year of Volunteers 2001



Canada

# I Volunteer



# The International Year of Volunteers (IYV), coming as it does at the dawn of the twenty-first century, presents those of us in the voluntary sector with a unique challenge and opportunity. We do so much good and we do it well. We are always striving to do better.

The conjunction of IYV and the beginning of the new millennium is more than a coincidence. It is symbolic of the new thinking and creative approaches that are driving the immense changes in Canadian society. In our sector, there is growing acknowledgement by government and social thinkers of the critical role played by volunteers and voluntary organizations in society. Canadian communities are enriched and enhanced by the contributions that seven-and-a-half million volunteers make every year. Communities are challenged, as never before, to educate and protect their citizens, to provide health care and social services, to safeguard the environment and to invest in language and culture. More than 180,000 charities and not-for-profit organizations address these and other issues that face Canadians every day. Each of these organizations involves volunteers; they participate as board and committee members, as advocates, as fund-raisers and as providers of a myriad of direct services.

needs tending, investment, strategic development, and protection. We can be much smarter in how we engage with volunteers. The relationship of the voluntary sector to society has changed and so has the role of volunteering. A new and smarter ethos of volunteering is emerging—one that demands a more thoughtful matching up of volunteers and designated tasks.

Demographics are shifting as well, and so too are the needs of Canadians. Similarly, the profile of those who step forward to volunteer is changing: they have less time to give and greater skills to offer. While it is true that one in three Canadian adults is a volunteer, it is also true that less than ten per cent of the population does three-quarters of all volunteer work. This hard-core group of “super” volunteers is made up of people who each contribute hundreds of hours of time in a year. They come to the voluntary sector in their middle years, with high levels of education, with significant life experience, and very often from a context of religious faith. Although they are eager to give of their time, they want to know that it is time well spent. They want to do rewarding work, and they want to know that their gifts are being used by the organizations they are helping in a thoughtful and creative way.

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We have spent this year recognizing our volunteers: celebrating them for who they are and for the enormously important role they play both in our organizations and in our society. We have focused attention and energy on the individual. It is now time to take the next step, to think anew about the organizational policies, practices, methods and approaches that support the volunteers who make such a huge contribution to the achievement of our goals. We need to rethink how we engage volunteers, at every step of the way.

It has been said that volunteers are Canada’s greatest natural resource. Like any resource, volunteerism

Volunteers have clear interests and needs. Learning how to direct and harness these interests and needs is critical if an organization is to have an effective partnership with its volunteers.

We need to rethink how we design the work that volunteers do. We also need to rethink how we recruit volunteers, and how we make use of their gifts of time and skill so that our needs—and the needs of our constituents or causes—as well as the needs of volunteers themselves are met. We need to think about how we train and support volunteers, how we recognize them, and how we ensure that their volunteer experiences

are gratifying. We are responsible for ensuring that their volunteer contributions make a real difference.

In recent years, a science has developed around each step of the volunteer management process. When implemented, these proven ways and methodologies result in more effective volunteer engagement. The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement, developed by Volunteer Canada, provides organizations with a philosophical framework for involving volunteers at the governance, leadership and direct service levels. It also includes an organization standards checklist to help agencies evaluate their volunteer programs. Other resources and tools exist which outline best practices, and explain precisely how to go about revamping volunteer engagement. Developed under the auspices of IYV, the Volunteer Connections series proposes new ways to involve youth, older adults, and corporate employees as volunteers, and offers guidance on how to create an environment that is accessible to all volunteers.

Many voluntary organizations have already recognized the value of rethinking volunteer engagement. Changes in policies, practices and methods are managed in different ways, depending on the size and composition of the organization. In many organizations, a professional manager takes on the task of designing and guiding the role of volunteers. In countless other organizations, this job falls to the board, to a staff person with multiple areas of expertise and responsibilities, or to a volunteer. Whoever takes it on, these people all share a single goal and challenge: to effectively mobilize volunteers so as to achieve the missions of their organizations.

Just as tending a beautiful garden depends upon knowing which plants require sun and which do well in shade, the type of nutrients and the amount of water required, so too does the voluntary sector need to know volunteers to nurture volunteerism. There are as many kinds of volunteers as there are species of plants, and a great deal of knowledge now exists to allow us to nourish all strengths, temperaments and aptitudes, and to harvest the best of what they have to offer.

The point is straightforward: voluntary organizations exist to achieve a mission, the possibilities of which are as broad as humanity's needs and aspirations. Volunteers are central to the achievement of that mission, and

effective volunteer engagement is a fundamental lynchpin of the voluntary sector.

The simplicity of this dynamic has created a kind of knowledge revolution in the voluntary sector. It is comparable to the discovery, some years ago, by private enterprise that customer service is not only a desirable characteristic of a successful business, but absolutely critical to it. It is only when voluntary sector organizations incorporate this understanding of the importance of volunteers into every layer and aspect of their organizational culture that we will begin to see a real difference and a measurable effect.

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Change needs to occur at all levels of voluntary organizations. Not only does change need to be seen in genuine discussion among board members, it needs to be taken seriously by managers, who must incorporate it into their organizational and management techniques. Plans need to be developed that include the participation of everyone within the organization, and change needs to be put into action at the service level.

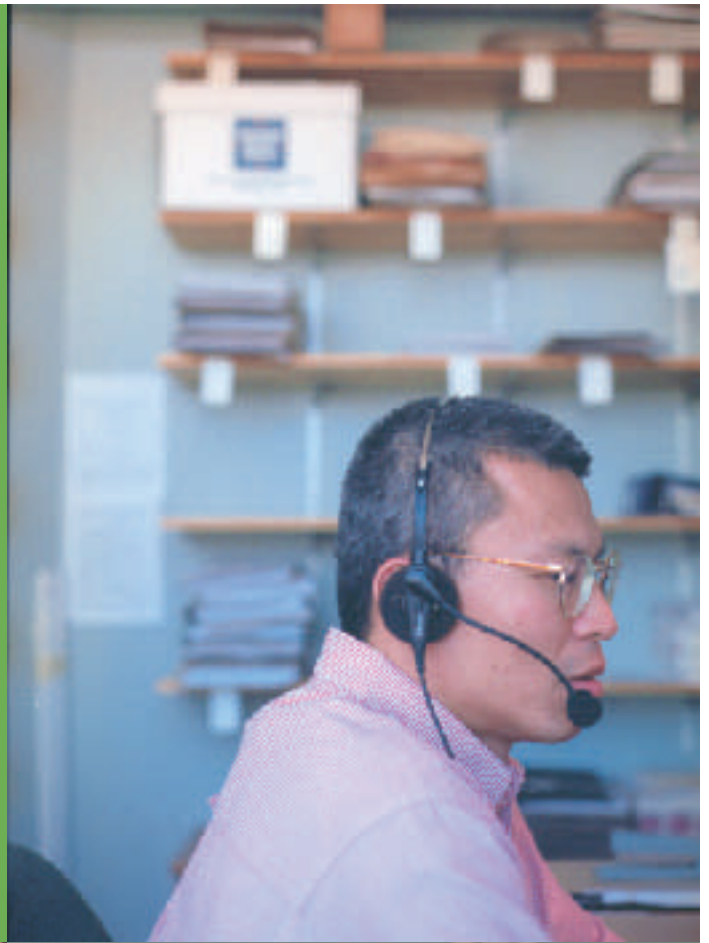
We need to re-evaluate how we assign volunteers to tasks and how we train and support them. We need to re-evaluate how we assess what volunteers do, and be clear about how their performance affects ours as organizations. We need to re-evaluate how we incorporate volunteers into decision-making processes and how we keep them informed of organizational shifts and changes.

This is a time of renewal. We need to approach it with open minds, with humour, and with concerted good will. We must approach it with a fervent respect for shared goals, changing some parts of what we do and maintaining those that work.

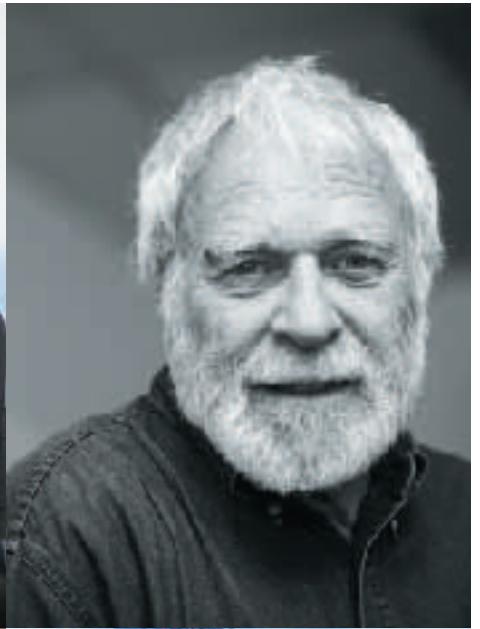
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the achievement of their individual missions. For this reason alone it is important.

But change can do more than that. This is a critically important collective undertaking, for all of us in the voluntary movement. The more innovative and respectful we can be in redesigning and redefining our relationships with volunteers, the more robust a volunteer culture we can build. We can transform the experience of volunteering and build, in the transformation, the strongest volunteer culture—and therefore voluntary sector—Canada has ever known.

Volunteer Canada, your local volunteer centre, a professional association of managers of volunteers, and your own volunteers. Check out the IYV Web site for information on resources, tools and organizations that can help you get started. Share your stories and thoughts with each other and with us.

Get in touch, get started. Good luck!

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This is our most significant challenge: in changing times, we cannot overvalue the importance of a strong volunteer culture. Our volunteers translate our intentions and our values into work that is useful, meaningful, and mutually rewarding. We, in turn, need to revitalise volunteerism, to ensure that it is alive and well and resilient. We need to nurture our garden of volunteers, to respond to their needs so that they, in turn, will respond to ours.

It can be a beautiful reciprocal relationship: if they get the best out of us, we will get the best out of them.

We urge and invite you to begin the work of rethinking volunteer engagement in your organization. Throughout IYV, Volunteer Canada and its government partners have developed resources and tools that discuss and guide organizational thinking about volunteer development. Visit [www.iyvcanada.org](http://www.iyvcanada.org) or call 1-800-670-0401 to get these.

There are other things you can do. Adopt the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement. Contact

### You can begin by:

- listing and measuring what your volunteers accomplish;
- asking your volunteers how they think they could be engaged more effectively;
- asking your volunteer board members how they are involved in the organization's work;
- collecting the stories of your volunteers and publishing these internally; what can you learn from them?



*The following resources help organizations more effectively involve, manage, retain and recognize volunteers. These books, manuals and guides, produced under the auspices of International Year of Volunteers 2001 in Canada, help organizations redefine and revitalize volunteer engagement.*

For further information or to order these resources, please visit the Canadian International Year of Volunteers 2001 Web site at [www.iyvcanada.org](http://www.iyvcanada.org) or call 1-800-670-0401.

## Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement

Due to the size and scope of the voluntary sector in Canada, there exist many different types of volunteer opportunities, and differing levels of organizational support offered to volunteers.

The **Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement** specifies the values, guiding principles and the specific rules or standards that relate to the way organizations involve volunteers. It presents a context and a guide to assist organizations in evaluating how their volunteers are engaged and supported.

The code contains: background information on the voluntary sector in Canada and the rationale for the establishment of a code; the code itself; discussion topics related to the code; and methods of implementing the code.

The **Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement** consists of three important elements:

- 1. Values for Volunteer Involvement:**  
Core statements about the importance and value of volunteer involvement in voluntary organizations and Canadian society.
- 2. Guiding Principles for Volunteer Involvement:**  
Principles detailing the exchange between voluntary organizations and volunteers.
- 3. Organization Standards for Volunteer Involvement:**  
Standards that organizations should consider in developing or reviewing how volunteers are currently involved.

In using the **Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement**, organizations examine their current policies and priorities vis-à-vis volunteers and are encouraged to revisit, adapt or change them. The establishment of a

nationally accepted and standardized articulation of the role and treatment of volunteers in Canada provides a shared baseline among voluntary organizations. The result of adopting the code is a shared vision across the voluntary sector in Canada, a greater investment by organizations in volunteer support, and a more consistent experience for volunteers.

## A Guide to Volunteer Program Management Resources

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of designating an individual to lead volunteer recruitment, oversight and support in organizations. This is equally true in small organizations with no paid staff and limited budgets, as it is for large established organizations. Those who manage volunteers are often without the information they need to do so effectively.

### **A Guide to Volunteer Program Management Resources**

**Resources** lists the top volunteer management resources, books, guides and manuals from Canada and around the world. A brief review accompanies each item. The guide is divided into five sections: the top 20 volunteer program management resources; additional resources; publishers, distributors and other sources for ordering the resources; periodicals that publish articles or resources on volunteer program management; and, electronic resources.

### **A Guide to Volunteer Program Management**

**Resources** describes the “top of mind” resources that help any person – paid professional manager of volunteers or volunteer coordinator – to understand the theory and practice behind good volunteer program management.



## A Matter of Design

The voluntary sector faces many challenges: the effects of changing demographics; the changing expectations of volunteers; concerns around risk management; the emerging trends among younger volunteers; and, a rethinking of governance theory. More and more organizations are being forced to go back to the drawing board as they consider how volunteers help them achieve their missions.

**A Matter of Design**, a discussion paper and practice guide, explores the nature of work and job design concepts. It examines how to create volunteer opportunities that both help the organization fulfil its mandate and are satisfying for volunteers. The manual also explores the relationship between job design and risk management, paid and volunteer positions, as well as labour standards and long-term planning strategies. Sample position descriptions and organizational case studies are also provided.

Effective job design responds to both the needs of volunteers and those of the program or organization. By thinking about job design and adapting learnings from the wealth of human resource and corporate theory available, voluntary organizations will be better equipped to involve volunteers in the 21st century.

## Volunteer Connections

This set of four volunteer program management manuals addresses the challenges facing organizations and groups seeking to involve youth, people with disabilities, and older adults as volunteers. The set also includes a manual on employee/corporate volunteerism that addresses the impact, opportunities, and challenges that employee/corporate volunteerism presents to voluntary organizations.

Each manual includes case studies, program management do's and don'ts, sample policies and practice documents (i.e., job descriptions, volunteer contracts, risk management tools, orientation guides, and evaluation outlines).

### **Volunteer Connections: New strategies for involving youth**

Young people are involved as volunteers at higher rates than nearly any other age group. However, in finding the right job for young volunteers, many agencies report difficulties adjusting to the interests and style of youth as volunteers. This "how to" manual provides hints, sample job descriptions, and general guidelines about working with youth. **New strategies for involving youth** examines the emerging trend of youth volunteers and illustrates how they can bring a fresh and energetic perspective to voluntary organizations and programs. The manual provides strategies and suggestions to develop youth-friendly volunteer opportunities, and covers everything from recruitment to recognition.

### **Volunteer Connections: Creating an accessible and inclusive environment**

Many people with disabilities experience barriers and, as a result, frustration in accessing satisfying volunteer opportunities. Creating an accessible and inclusive environment responds both to the interests of people with disabilities and to the goal of organizations to involve a greater diversity of volunteers. This manual provides an in-depth examination of the issues and barriers related to involving people with disabilities as volunteers. It provides useful information, practical tips and advice on how to create an accessible environment, and a framework to help organizations create an accessible and welcoming workplace for volunteers with disabilities. It also assists organizations in developing partnerships with organizations that serve the disability community.

### **Volunteer Connections: The Benefits and challenges of employee volunteerism**

Many corporations and other large employers have initiated corporate/employee volunteer programs. One of the major challenges faced by groups of employee volunteers can be finding voluntary organizations that are prepared to involve them. Voluntary organizations themselves have identified how difficult it can be to accommodate the needs and interests of employee/corporate volunteer programs within the context of their organization's needs and the overall design of their volunteer

programming. **The Benefits and challenges of employee volunteerism** discusses the emerging trends of corporate/employee volunteerism and explores ways that agencies can truly benefit from these volunteers.

### **Volunteer Connections:**

#### **New strategies for involving older adults**

Although older adults in Canada volunteer at lower rates than any other age group, when they do volunteer, they provide significantly more time on average than volunteers in other age groups. The challenge for many voluntary organizations is to recruit older adult volunteers and to provide volunteer opportunities that do not depend on traditional expectations about the interests and availability of seniors. **New strategies for involving older adults** explores what the statistics and research reveal about the interests of older adults in the context of community work. It also presents new ways of thinking about job design for seniors and case examples of innovative older adult volunteer programs.

## **Global Youth Service Day**

One-off events and high profile celebrations like National Volunteer Week or Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) serve to raise the profile of volunteerism and generate interest in volunteer activities.

This guide encourages organizations to consider creating a GYSD event. The purpose is threefold: to help generate excitement regarding youth volunteers; to publicly identify organizations as a great place for youth to volunteer; and, to explore ways to benefit from youth volunteers. Community organizations and youth will benefit from reading this comprehensive planning guide.

## **Employee Volunteerism Resources**

This set of three resources is dedicated to the corporate sector. Whether the business is a large multi-national corporation or a small, local company, these publications will be a welcome addition to a corporate library. They are written to address the impact, opportunities,

and challenges presented by the growing trend in employee volunteerism, and to provide ideas on how to involve employee volunteers in the community.

### **Engaging Employees in Community**

#### **- Connecting People to Possibilities**

Written in partnership with Volunteer Calgary and IMAGINE, this book examines the benefits of corporate/employee volunteerism. It is a step-by-step primer on how to establish or improve an employee volunteer program.

### **Volunteers at Work – How Canadian Businesses Encourage and Support Volunteerism**

Offering an in-depth look at a cross-section of Canadian employee volunteer initiatives, this book features businesses that have developed unique and resourceful ways of linking employees and community groups. Written in partnership with IMAGINE, these case studies offer guidance and encouragement to businesses on how to support employee volunteerism.

### **Employee Volunteerism in Small Business**

Introducing the idea of employee volunteerism to small businesses, this useful information piece raises awareness and encourages small businesses to create an employee volunteer program.