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The World of Volunteering in 2017 and Beyond: Summary of the Round Table Discussions

The world of volunteering in 2017 and beyond

How do we create a smart and caring nation as we look to the 150th anniversary of Canada's Confederation in 2017? His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, posed this question to the 120 leaders and practitioners from the public, private, and voluntary sector on June 6, 2011. As a springboard for the round table discussions, His Excellency delivered a keynote address and shared inspiring anecdotes about what it means to live in a community, what it means to be a citizen, and how volunteering reflects the values of Canadian society.

Table Discussion #1: What do you want the world of volunteering to look like in 2017 and beyond?

In the weeks leading up to the round table discussion, people were invited to participate in an online dialogue focused on this question. During the first table discussion, participants shared their own views on the subject in small groups. The following seven themes emerged from the online and in-person discussions:

1. Broadening the definition / understanding of volunteering
2. Technology as a tool for volunteer engagement
3. Infrastructure and organizational capacity for volunteer engagement
4. Creating a more welcoming, diverse, and inclusive voluntary sector
5. The role of volunteering in social, health, and community development
6. Public policy to strengthen volunteering
7. Focused volunteer engagement of youth, baby boomers, and new Canadians

Broadening the definition / understanding of volunteering

Although the world of volunteering has evolved dramatically over the past 30 years, the common understanding of the term *volunteering* may be lagging behind. For some, the word *volunteering* is associated with a narrower concept of service and benevolence, while notions of leadership, active citizenship, social action, and community engagement are all part of what volunteering means today. Rather than finding a new word, the focus of conversations was on renewing the meaning of the word. People expressed a hope that by 2017, *volunteering* is regarded as part of our everyday lives, and as the way we participate and shape the communities we want for ourselves and for future generations.

Technology as a tool for volunteer engagement

With fast-moving technological advances changing the way people communicate, seek information, work, develop relationships, and mobilize social movements, many wondered whether organizations have maximized technology's potential for volunteer engagement. Web-based tools and social media were seen as offering greater opportunities to expand the reach, profile, and impact of an organization through accessible, participatory, and collaborative platforms. Technology was also seen to be a vehicle of volunteer engagement with the emergence of virtual volunteering and micro-volunteering. People expressed their aspirations that volunteer-involving organizations are continuously re-tooled to maximize the benefits that technology offers in order to be on par with others sectors in 2017 and beyond.

Infrastructure and organizational capacity

All sectors need well-trained and properly supported leadership, a strong administrative core, as well as research, training, and a culture of innovation in order to thrive and remain viable. Concerns were expressed about the impact

of the economy on the infrastructure and organizational capacity of volunteer-involving organizations. Specific desires that were raised for volunteerism in 2017 and beyond included those aimed at individual organizations as well as those directed to the sector as a whole, from strengthening volunteer resource management practices to raising the profile of voluntary action.

Creating a more welcoming, diverse, and inclusive voluntary sector

Recent studies have indicated that the voluntary sector is not reflective of the diversity of Canadian society. This is true whether we look at those elected to boards of directors, those employed in voluntary organizations, and those engaged as volunteers. This trend was not only thought to be an equity issue but also a means by which organizations can enhance their cultural competencies. The hope for 2017 and beyond echoed at all tables was that the voluntary sector work collectively and intentionally to create more welcoming and inclusive organizations.

The role of volunteering in social, health, and community development

Volunteering has long been regarded by those in the voluntary sector as a vehicle for social development, health promotion, and community development. Yet many are concerned this is not broadly recognized. Governments, academic and community-based researchers have been examining the benefits and long-term outcomes that volunteering offers to volunteers and to the community as a whole. With business models of outcome measurements not telling the whole story, it is hoped that by 2017 and beyond the voluntary sector finds a way to demonstrate the full value and impact of volunteering.

Public policy to strengthen volunteering

With greater public awareness about the value, benefits, and long-term impact of volunteering for volunteers, organizations, communities, and society as a whole, many felt that public policy to support volunteering was intermittent and inconsistent. By 2017, Canada's voluntary sector should boast stronger public policy support.

Focussed volunteer engagement of youth, baby-boomers, and newcomers

Not only do our interests, availability, and inclination to volunteering change at different times in our lives, but our volunteer behaviour may also be influenced by the characteristics of our generation, our family history, and where we grew up. There is particular interest in understanding the unique attributes of millennials, baby-boomers, and new Canadians. Volunteer strategies that take into account generational, cultural, and individual differences were seen to be key success factors for a more robust and dynamic movement toward volunteerism in the year 2017 and beyond.

Table Discussion # 2: How can we lay the foundation for the future of volunteering in Canada during Canada's 150th celebrations?

For the 150th celebrations, it was suggested that Canada organize a national campaign and/or event tied to volunteerism. Celebrations could be implemented by organizations on their own and/or in collaboration with other stakeholders, both locally and nationally. Some suggestions were provided for municipalities across Canada. The following are the highlights of the key recommendations:

1. In 2017, tell 150 success stories of volunteerism in the 150 days leading to the 150th celebrations on July 1.
 - Stories should be reflective, diverse, and told through ages and stages;
 - the history of volunteering in Canada through lens of volunteerism;
 - Inter-generational;
 - all levels of government;
 - Stories connected to year as well as historical markers;

- Stories would be from all parts of Canada;
 - Produce a video? Through social media? Or both?
2. Have daily media coverage in 2017.
 - National PSA and campaigns in each major city;
 - Have 365 days of messages on volunteerism or activities (through social media?);
 - Messaging should be fun and engaging;
 - legacy would be to embed volunteering into Canadian culture;
 - every Canadian can see themselves in the context of volunteering - showing rather than telling;
 - Include success stories – tracking back in history.
 3. Consider a volunteering challenge in each city.
 - Involve volunteer networks and create a sense of belonging;
 - Organize a volunteer competition across Canada – become the first country of volunteerism (not second behind Netherlands).
 - Create an impetus for active citizenship within oneself; hence the need to target our messaging to different demographic groups, i.e. youth, boomers, family, and employer-supported volunteers.
 4. Organize an event in conjunction with the 150th celebrations (e.g. EXPO 67) to celebrate the spirit of volunteering
 - Volunteers as the key to a better community; volunteering is part of culture; what do we have to do to change culture?)
 - Or consider a social media campaign (e.g CISCO Connect Life campaign).
 5. Involve municipalities across Canada:
 - a. To honor one volunteer (or volunteer group) per month. Media coverage is not just for the award winners
 - b. To have a week in 2017 to support volunteering in their own way; to support active citizenship, the diversity together, so that everyone sees themselves and their contributions as part of the bigger picture

Regarding laying the foundation for future volunteerism, a few themes emerged:

- Evolution of volunteerism in Canada
 - Engagement instead of volunteering
 - Involves all walks of life.
 - Focus on different sectors/diversity in our community
 - Informal versus formal volunteering - theme to connect rather than isolate volunteer activity
 - What to do with volunteer time
 - Look at the concept of volunteering - broaden the context/frame of volunteering to include everyone
 - Establish the vision for the foundation
 - Define the role of youth
 - Look at baby boomers

- Identify effective volunteer models (or combination):
 - The Barn Raiser's Council; Barn-Raising across the country
 - De-formalize. Reframing small things to eliminate need to have formal/organization
 - Look at building the base from family – Encourage early engagement. Recognize that family is central
 - Citizenship, new immigrants – how do we introduce them, indentifying with the concept of “volunteering” vs “caring and sharing”; highlight similarities between corp/govt/NFP org.; citizenship privileged – responsibility (keep it simple)
 - Building in the inclusive model of sports
 - Strategic partnerships (i.e. education system) – build on students. Build into education system/embed into curriculum; children go to families for stories about civic engagement; active citizenship is an act of “citizenship”
 - Lobby/encourage all to have a body within government to represent volunteerism (ministry, department)

- Awareness Raising:
 - Improve visibility and benefits of volunteerism Add status to Facebook –where do you volunteer- create a culture; add volunteer message to signature, blocks on power of volunteerism
 - Raise profile of manager of volunteers, build capacity, legacy; scholarships for organization to have volunteer managers; no more volunteer award

- Corporate volunteering:
 - survey says many caring not “volunteering”; social capital, citizenship, community engagement; how do corporations connect with their employees as volunteers
 - Internships – missing this opportunity (corporations and government); thinking about public policy? And formalizing “help” making links

- Introduce and support “cool factor” – technology/influencers/infrastructure

The round table discussions fostered insightful conversation and offered a range of considerations and suggestions for the future of volunteering in Canada. The themes that arose during the dialogue can help ensure that volunteering and civic engagement will be at the forefront of Canada's 150th celebrations in 2017. As planning for the event gets underway, the insights offered at the round table will be used to ensure volunteerism is woven into Canada's 150th celebrations in 2017.