

## **Slowly Becoming an Endangered Species – The Volunteer**

By: Colin Gage

*Here's the real problem. We potentially have a huge threat to community life on our door step. It would appear no one knows, and no one is talking about it.- Linda Graff*

Volunteering and other forms of community involvement and caring reflect the civility among Canadians that both enriches and defines who we are as people. Yet experience and demographic trends tell us that we will no longer be able to rely on this important resource. What will happen to our most vulnerable if we fail to address this crisis? What will happen if caring behaviors decline?

To give you a sense of the enormity of the issue, in 2003, Canadians contributed 2 billion hours of volunteer time, or the equivalent of 1 million full time jobs. This is an extraordinary contribution until you realize that 67% of all volunteering is done by 5% of Canadian adults. Historically, people start to move away from volunteering at about age 55 and the drop in participation rate increases sharply as people reach their mid to late 60's. If baby boomers, who have been volunteering over the last three decades, follow these patterns, the loss of volunteers in this country will be great, and so will the consequences. Many volunteer and non-profit organizations – in social housing, the arts, health and faith charities, youth and child services, will lose their leaders and sustainers.

Evidence of the decline in volunteerism is already evident. A recent study of Non-profit and Voluntary Organizations conducted by Statistics Canada identified that the majority of the participants are having problems fulfilling their missions and achieving their organization's objectives due, in part, to problems recruiting volunteers. Others said they had difficulties being able to plan for the future, or finding suitable people to sit on their boards.

Organizations in small and rural communities, where populations are disproportionately older, report they are unable to find enough volunteers to keep operating and are now scaling back services or contemplating closing their doors entirely.

Is the issue just one of demographics? It appears that Canadians are connecting less with others, reaching out less often to help others. When they do volunteer, they often engage in the creation of amenities and services that tend to benefit themselves, rather than others. Are these signs of a more generalized decline in caring which will lead to an erosion of civility in our communities?

Volunteers are doing real work, not just the “extras”.

Without volunteers:

- isolated seniors go hungry, and the lack of support services forces seniors from their homes into institutional care prematurely
- food banks would be forced to close
- the lack of youth programs and supports will leave young people with few options, but the street
- in rural areas, houses burn down due to the lack of volunteer firefighters.
- politicians can't organize election campaigns and grassroots democracy disappears
- community-based organizations such as non-profit housing no longer reflect their broad-based communities

Non-profit and voluntary organizations are an integral part of society, serving as vehicles which engage the efforts of millions of Canadians to address the needs in their communities. A small number of quite good volunteers are holding the system together. There is no plan for after they are gone. Where will society's most vulnerable turn for help if volunteering and civic participation falter? What will our future look like when there is a significant deficit in people willing to contribute?

Good governance of non-profit housing depends on strong and active volunteers who reflect the diversity of their community. Non-profit housing corporations are having trouble recruiting new Board members (particularly younger members) and, coupled with legislative and funding challenges which have reduced the decision-making roles of these volunteer Boards, some non-profit housing corporations are now contemplating turning the keys to their developments back to the Service Managers. Many of the existing volunteers have

been involved since the building's inception but they are now tired and worn out – with no visible signs of skilled and energetic replacements on the horizon.

Volunteers – they've always been there for us so they'll always be there, right?

Wrong. We, as a sector, have to develop a strategy to advertise the need; awareness is the lynchpin. Beyond awareness, we have to develop the solutions, but I submit no one solution will fix this looming problem.

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