

Engaging Aboriginal Volunteers in Voluntary Groups with Territorial Mandates in the Northwest Territories

**Case Study –
Aboriginal Participation in the Voluntary Sector**

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Native Women’s Association of the Northwest Territories
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ISBN# 1-55401-130-2

Imagine Canada's Knowledge Development Centre is funded through the Community Participation Directorate of the Department of Canadian Heritage as part of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

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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Acknowledgements

Lois Little, Sandy Auchterlonie, and Bob Stephen wish to thank the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories, and the YWCA of Yellowknife for their role in this research project. We also thank the many volunteers who freely gave their time and thoughts to make the research a success. We also want to

thank Stephanie Sibbeston for collecting information from the Deh Cho communities, Aggie Brockman from Volunteer NWT for providing insightful feedback and input into draft reports, and Cate Sills of the NWT Literacy Council for her unwavering support to seeing this project through to its successful conclusion.

Case Study – Engaging Aboriginal Volunteers in Voluntary Groups with Territorial Mandates

1. The Study of Aboriginal Participation in the Northwest Territories' Voluntary Sector

The Northwest Territories Literacy Council, the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories, and the YWCA of Yellowknife conducted research in 2004 to:

1. Gain an understanding of volunteers and volunteerism among persons of Aboriginal ancestry.
2. Increase the participation of Aboriginal volunteers in the nonprofit sector in the Northwest Territories (NWT).

A main focus of the research was to increase the participation of Aboriginal people in leadership and governance positions within the voluntary sector.

The research involved:

- developing a profile of the voluntary sector in the NWT, including Aboriginal participation in it, from a survey of volunteers and voluntary groups;
- personal interviews to discuss Aboriginal volunteerism and good practices that support Aboriginal volunteer participation and that encourage greater accountability to Aboriginal communities;
- interviews with eight Aboriginal role models for a storybook celebrating their volunteerism; and,

- two case studies to examine volunteer experiences and activities that provide lessons about improving Aboriginal volunteer participation.

This case study focuses on five voluntary groups with territorial mandates that are based in Yellowknife, the capital of the NWT. It documents the experiences of these groups in engaging Aboriginal volunteers in general as well as in leadership and governance functions. It also documents good ideas for positively influencing Aboriginal volunteerism, particularly in leadership activities. We hope this case study will be instructive for all voluntary groups with territorial mandates to engage more Aboriginal volunteers in general and more in leadership positions.

This case study is compiled from information shared by people at three separate focus group meetings. The participants consisted of 14 volunteer leaders and executive directors from five voluntary groups with territorial mandates: The *Sport North Federation*, *Volunteer NWT*, *Northwest Territories Recreation and Parks Association (NWTRPA)*, *Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)*, and *Northwest Territories Literacy Council (NWTLC)*. Focus group discussions were supplemented with general information drawn from the Web sites of participating groups.

2. Case Study Setting

The NWT has a colonial history. For much of the 20th century, paternal relationships with the government, the church, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) meant that Aboriginal people had little power over many aspects of their lives. Aboriginal families lost children to residential schools, sometimes for years at a time, suffered from poor health, and were marginalized politically and economically.¹ These circumstances have left lasting scars on Aboriginal people and created tensions in modern-day relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The legacy of powerlessness is manifested today in excessively high rates of alcohol use, incarceration, early school leaving, untimely death, and injury among Aboriginal people. This legacy is also putting Aboriginal cultures at risk, as is evidenced in the declining use of Aboriginal languages.²

With the enactment of the first land claims legislation, Aboriginal rights to land and resources were entrenched in law.³ The legal protection of these rights signalled a shift in relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and institutions. In the last 20 years, three other land claims agreements, and various regional and community self-government agreements, have been enacted. These agreements recognize the rights of various Aboriginal peoples to land and resource ownership, or to be self-governing. Through these agreements, Aboriginal communities are taking back power and reshaping their lives and institutions.

Today, the NWT has a population of 42,000 people who live in 33 communities. Half of the population are Dene, Métis, Inuit, or Inuvialuit, and are collectively referred to as Aboriginal people. Two thirds of the

total population, and about 43% of the Aboriginal population, are concentrated in four communities – Yellowknife, Hay River, Fort Smith, and Inuvik. The remaining 29 communities are home to one third of the population. About 84% of the population in these small communities have Aboriginal ancestry. The distribution of the population is a significant factor in political and socio-economic policy decisions.

Life in all NWT communities is very different today than it was in the past. Forty years ago Aboriginal people began leaving the land to live year-round in new government communities. Twenty years ago, hunting, trapping, and fishing played a significant role in the economy of Aboriginal households. Today, few Aboriginal families are sustained by renewable resource harvesting, although these resources continue to be highly valued for cultural and recreational reasons. In the last decade, Aboriginal people, like other northerners, have become more urbanized and involved in the north's rapidly growing, industrial economy.

¹ For almost two thirds of the 20th century, churches, through an arrangement with the federal government, operated residential schools in several locations in the NWT. Run by priests, nuns, or missionaries, these schools followed a strict Christian code of conduct and forbade Aboriginal children access to their language, culture, and often to relationships with siblings attending the same school. Aboriginal children often spent years in these institutions with no access to family and no exposure to Aboriginal life. While in these institutions, many suffered verbal, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of religious teachers and administrators.

² The GNWT Bureau of Statistics estimates that about 45% of Aboriginal adults in the NWT speak an Aboriginal language.

³ The *Inuvialuit Settlement Act*, also referred to as the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, became federal law in 1984.

At the beginning of the 21st century, virtually every Aboriginal community in the NWT is affected by oil, gas, or mining developments and a burgeoning private sector. The demands of multinational, non-renewable resource companies, together with declining government capacity to respond to citizens' needs, are creating tremendous pressures on all NWT communities. These demands also affect efforts by Aboriginal communities to implement land claim and/or self-government agreements and deal with the residual impacts of colonization.

Aboriginal people have strong ethics of helping out and sharing. Traditional ethics of helping and serving play significant roles in helping Aboriginal communities cope with change and manage modern-day challenges. These ethics connect individuals, families, and communities, and bring a sense of well-being to those who help and those who are helped. Maintaining the vitality and relevance of these traditions is important and challenging for Aboriginal communities. It is also challenging for the voluntary sector to recognize and embrace these traditions, and link them to modern-day notions of volunteering. Aboriginal people do not generally describe these traditional practices as 'volunteering,' and are unlikely to recognize voluntary groups and volunteers as forming a distinct sector in society.

3. The Voluntary Groups Featured in This Case Study

This section offers a brief profile of the five voluntary groups that participated in this case study.

*Sport North Federation*⁴

The *Sport North Federation* was incorporated in 1976 to develop, promote, and make amateur sport accessible to all NWT residents. The *Sport North Federation* has a governance board of 10 volunteers who are elected by, and responsible to, the membership. Two of the current board members have Aboriginal ancestry. The *Sport North Federation's* board follows a committee structure that involves both elected and non-elected volunteers.

Sport North Federation receives core funding through an agreement with the Government of the NWT on lotteries. This funding supports core programs and partnerships. The *Sport North Federation* also seeks project-specific funding. The group maintains offices in Yellowknife and has 13 full-time and two part-time staff.

Sport North Federation has four types of members:

- active members – 27 territorial sport groups;
- affiliate members – specific sport interests;
- associate members – approximately 18,000 individuals and private firms interested in sport across the NWT; and,
- honorary members – people and groups that provide outstanding service to sport and recreation in the NWT.

The *Sport North Federation* is accountable to its members, the Government of the NWT through the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs, its various partners, and funders. It reports to members and partners through newsletters, annual reports at two meetings a year, and various committee meetings. Activity, financial, and project reports form the basis of accountability to government and funders.

The *Sport North Federation's* programs are volunteer-based and endeavour to engage communities and residents throughout the NWT. Sports volunteers are engaged as recreation leaders, coaches, coordinators, mentors, organizers, and facilitators. Volunteers are also engaged in special projects such as 'Get Your Groove On,' a project that targets young women in leadership, and *Volunteer NWT*, a network established through the Canada Volunteer Initiative.

Volunteer NWT

Volunteer NWT was formally established in September 2003. This unincorporated group operates as a volunteer committee or program of The *Sport North Federation*. It is funded for a three-year period. Its mandate is to encourage people to volunteer; develop organizational capacity to manage volunteers particularly in governance, management and administration; and enhance the experience of volunteers and voluntary groups. The 10-member, volunteer committee tries to represent the diversity of the NWT voluntary sector, population, and geographic regions. The committee currently involves four people of Aboriginal ancestry, two francophones, and one other member who represents a minority cultural group. The committee has ex officio members from Heritage Canada, the Government of the NWT's Municipal and Community Affairs, and the *Sport North Federation*. *Volunteer NWT* also has volunteers who represent the group on national bodies.

⁴ www.sportnorth.com (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

Volunteer NWT employs a part-time contracted coordinator based in Yellowknife and receives some administrative support from the *Sport North Federation*. *Volunteer NWT* has many levels and types of accountability. It is accountable directly to Volunteer Canada, the federal funder (Canadian Heritage), and the *Sport North Federation*. In more general terms, *Volunteer NWT* is accountable to volunteers and volunteer groups throughout the NWT. It holds two public meetings each year – one in Yellowknife and one outside of Yellowknife. It reports regularly to Volunteer Canada, Canadian Heritage, and the *Sport North Federation* and frequently issues electronic newsletters to interested individuals throughout the NWT. It also maintains a Web site.⁵

Northwest Territories Recreation and Parks Association (NWTRPA)

The *NWT Recreation and Parks Association* is a nonprofit society that works with NWT communities to promote healthy living through active recreation. It undertakes leadership, advocacy, information, and training activities to support NWT communities, recreation volunteers, and paid recreation professionals. *NWTRPA* employs two staff members who work from its offices in Yellowknife. Volunteers are engaged in community-based programs as well as governance activities.

NWTRPA has a governance board of 10 volunteers, six of whom represent different geographical regions in the NWT. Currently, two board members have Aboriginal ancestry. *NWTRPA* has about 70 members most of whom are community-based recreation coordinators.

NWTRPA receives both core and project-specific funding. It is accountable to the Government of the NWT Department of Municipal and Community Affairs and Health Canada funders, as well as to its membership. *NWTRPA* reports to its stakeholders through regular financial and project reports; an annual report; an annual conference; an annual general meeting; an annual NWT Sport and Recreation Directory; a Web site; and irregular newsletters.⁶

Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)

The *Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)* was established in 1978. It is a cross-disability group. Its mandate is to assist people with disabilities to be self-determining and full participants in society. As one focus group participant noted, “*It helps people with disabilities to be equal citizens.*”

NWTCPD has a policy board of 18 volunteers. More than one third of the current board are persons of Aboriginal ancestry, one third are men, and one third are from six communities outside of Yellowknife. Board members are elected by the membership, and tend to be past clients or relatives/caregivers of a person with a disability.

NWTCPD is sustained through project-specific funding and fundraising activities. Board members and other volunteers play an active role in fundraising activities. Board members may also attend meetings with, or without, the executive director, participate in political forums, and facilitate participation with other voluntary groups in coalitions or partnerships. *NWTCPD* reports to federal and territorial government

⁵ www.volunteernwt.ca/home/index.html (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

⁶ www.nwtrpa.org (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

project funders through regular project and financial reports. For its clients, members, donors, and the general public, it provides information via an annual report, and annual meeting as well as newsletters and its Web site.⁷

Northwest Territories Literacy Council (NWTLC)

The *Northwest Territories Literacy Council* was formed in 1990 to promote and support literacy in the official languages of the NWT. It has a 10-member governance board. Currently two board members have Aboriginal ancestry. Six volunteer board members represent different geographical regions in the NWT. Volunteer board members have a role in policy, lobbying, and funding functions. Regional representatives tend to be involved with other volunteers in literacy programs in their community or region.

NWTLC has about 800 members, many of whom are literacy program deliverers (e.g., daycare centres, schools, and libraries). It has a staff of five and is sustained through project-specific funding from the federal and territorial governments. *NWTLC* reports to its funders through regular project and financial reports. It reports to clients, members, donors, and the general public through an annual report and meeting, special events, a regular newsletter, and a Web site.⁸

⁷ www.nwtability.ca (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

⁸ www.nwt.literacy.ca (Last retrieved June 1, 2005).

4. Common Elements Among Territorial Volunteer Groups

The five territorial voluntary groups that participated in this case study have much in common.

- A volunteer board leads each group. The boards have visionary, policy, directing, and financing functions. Most want to evolve a governance structure that is *“less Yellowknife-oriented and more like the [structures and groups in] regions and communities.”* Currently these groups tend to have, or to be moving toward, governance boards that establish and monitor the long-term direction of the group. This is rather than having ‘hands-on’ administrative boards handling day-to-day work and administration functions.
- Board members and other volunteers of these groups may also be involved in local, territorial, or national committees. Committees are a way to diversify and share leadership, but at least one territorial group worries that *“we may be asking too much of too few people.”*
- Regional representatives are the main way these groups engage Aboriginal people and smaller communities in leadership functions.⁹ *“Regional representatives keep Yellowknife people honest and informed.”*
- Although they are based in Yellowknife, these five voluntary groups connect with other NWT communities through advocacy, training, leadership support, information networks, and special events and projects. However, geographic distances and high travel costs limit the extent to which members and others can participate in these and other activities. These factors of distance and cost also affect the extent to which these groups can establish, or maintain, a physical presence in communities outside of Yellowknife.
- The board, other volunteers, and staff of each group are committed to a particular social purpose. The leaders of these groups believe that their activities respond to the needs of the communities they serve and fulfil the group’s mandate or mission. Although the leaders of these groups believe their focus and work are appropriate and relevant, this view may not be shared by individuals and communities that are not directly involved with them.
- The leaders of each of these voluntary groups believe that they and their staff are representative of the group’s members. But they are less certain that leaders and staff are representative of the broader NWT population or the users of their various programs and services. People of Aboriginal ancestry are not well represented in leadership, governance, and decision-making positions within these groups.
- These groups engage volunteer literacy champions, athletes, recreation leaders, persons with disabilities, and others in community-based projects. Projects developed with and

⁹ Recently, the NWTCPCD altered regional representation to focus on community representation in recognition of the fact that these members have neither the time nor resources to respond to concerns outside their community.

located in communities outside Yellowknife help Aboriginal people to participate in and see themselves in the group. Volunteer-based, community projects and activities, particularly in small communities, are also important “*breeding grounds*” or sources of volunteer leaders.

5. Factors Affecting Aboriginal Volunteer Participation

Voluntary groups with territorial mandates that participated in this case study identify several factors that influence Aboriginal volunteer participation.

A tradition of helping out rather than formal volunteering

Helping out and helping others are traditions that are practiced throughout the NWT today, in formal and informal ways that may or may not be visible to others. Helping may also be called ‘volunteering,’ although this tends not to be the case within Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people who contributed to this case study pointed to the lack of terms for ‘volunteer’ and ‘voluntary group’ in most Aboriginal languages. They explain that a ‘volunteer’ tends to be interpreted in Aboriginal languages as someone who helps out or works for nothing (or no pay) and a ‘voluntary group’ tends to be interpreted as a board doing community work for which they are not paid an honorarium.

Volunteering, helping out, or helping others are not promoted or discussed in many communities. This may be one reason why Aboriginal people and others do not readily make the link between helping and volunteering. Lack of discussion about these concepts may also be a reason why “*volunteering is [seen as] difficult work,*” whereas helping makes people feel good.

A holistic view of society

Until recently, Aboriginal communities have had limited exposure to the private and voluntary sectors. The public sector has been a dominant force in Aboriginal communities for decades. It is visible through public agencies such as education, housing

and health and social service authorities. The public sector is also visible in the many community groups such as youth and elders committees that were created by or receive administrative support from government. Within Aboriginal governments, the influence of the public sector continues through many community program and service agencies as well as through its 'arm's-length' or affiliate relationships with Aboriginal businesses and economic development corporations.

In keeping with traditions that are thousands of years old, northern Aboriginal people continue to favour an integrated or holistic view of society. This worldview is founded on an understanding that all human activities whether social, cultural, economic, or political, are interrelated and inextricably linked to the natural environment. Public, private or voluntary sector groups operating in the NWT tend not to function in an integrated or holistic way, favouring instead to departmentalize specific human activities and elements of the natural environment, often dealing with them in isolation of all others. Conflicting approaches may be a reason that voluntary groups with narrow mandates or very specific interests may be seen as irrelevant or not useful to Aboriginal communities.

Another issue is that voluntary groups, particularly those with territorial mandates, may be seen by local communities as competitors for scarce resources, particularly government funds. The *Sport North Federation* frequently encounters communities that are concerned it may be duplicating programs of the Aboriginal Sport Circle or various regional and community sports groups. These concerns point to the need for more dialogue among territorial and local groups. Such dialogue would reduce the potential for duplication of effort and encourage more

bottom-up, co-operative, and holistic approaches to serving the needs of Aboriginal communities.

[Views on paid and unpaid work](#)

For decades, Aboriginal people have played leadership roles on the many government, business, and voluntary boards that function at all levels of NWT society. Both government and business tend to pay honoraria to board members in recognition of their contribution. These range from \$50 to \$500 per meeting. There is concern that in the growing money economy of the NWT, unpaid or voluntary work may be valued less, viewed negatively, or send the message that *"these poor people have nothing to contribute."* Onerous amounts of *"paperwork and bureaucracy"* and responsibility and liability, combined with limited opportunities to have fun or be part of 'front-line' activities, may also make these voluntary leadership positions less attractive than paid positions.

Over the decades, Aboriginal communities have seen voluntary efforts that respond to community needs (e.g., coaching, mentoring, care giving) become paid government work. Then, due to government cutbacks, these efforts again become unpaid work. This cycle has created confusion about the nature and value of paid and unpaid work, and this leads to difficulties in engaging Aboriginal volunteer leaders.

NWTLC is a territorial group whose leadership frequently discusses issues associated with paid and unpaid work. In these discussions, the Council's leaders consider ways to deal with such issues as honoraria and compensation for lost wages. Frequent discussion about paid and unpaid work among the Council's leaders has likely strengthened the board's commitment to volunteerism because leaders regularly examine their own motivation and

commitment and share their thoughts and resolve with their peers.

Lack of stable and adequate funding

“People are attracted to organizations with money.”

Governments, philanthropic foundations, and other funders or donors are reluctant to enter into core or long-term funding arrangements with voluntary groups. The five groups that participated in this case study are likely typical of others in the voluntary sector in being heavily reliant on project-specific funding. However, such funding limits a group’s capacity to commit to and sustain partnerships and the activities necessary for community development, which by its very nature is a long-term process. This short-term approach to funding can have a negative impact on a group’s credibility and positive public image, two factors that are critical to engaging and retaining Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders, other volunteers, and staff.

A Yellowknife-centric view

“We need to ask ourselves ‘why do we want Aboriginal people involved?’”

The five voluntary groups featured in this case study want to engage Aboriginal people in leadership positions for several reasons, including:

- to ensure fair and equitable representation and access to programs and service by all northerners;
- to ensure appropriate and meaningful programs and services; and,

- to strengthen linkages among community, regional, and territorial perspectives on sport and active living, disability, volunteerism, and literacy issues.

These five groups agreed that they may not be good at asking for help or presenting their mandate to Aboriginal people and others outside Yellowknife. Lack of capacity frustrates efforts to address these issues.

“Yellowknife organizations are not always good at looking outside the community for volunteers.”

Lack of capacity to engage and support volunteer leaders

The authority of leaders can stem from a variety of sources such as their charisma, skills, credibility, networks, or being from “*the biggest family in town.*” Northerners have high expectations and make many demands on their leaders whether in the family, community, business, government, or voluntary realms. Northerners can also be critical of their leaders and their performance. “*The drag-down system is very powerful.*” For these reasons, not everyone has the interest or desire to lead.

“Many Aboriginal people won’t volunteer for any position, let alone a leadership position, if they see a non-Aboriginal person is in charge.”
“It is harder to get First Nations involvement in Yellowknife than in the communities.”

The five voluntary groups featured in this case study have tried to recruit Aboriginal residents of Yellowknife into leadership positions. They have found that many people are reluctant to take on leadership positions, especially if Yellowknife is not their community of origin. This may be because they are reluctant to speak for others elsewhere in the north, or fear potential conflicts should family members need or use the group's services. Wellness or skills issues may be other reasons that Aboriginal people are reluctant to volunteer or take up volunteer leadership positions.

Voluntary groups that engage leaders from outside Yellowknife do not have the resources to have face-to-face meetings more than once or twice a year. Participating in teleconference meetings is difficult at the best of times and can be complicated further by Aboriginal language interpretation, reliance on visual presentation/background materials, and literacy and numeracy issues. Electronic mail, despite variability of service, has improved the flow of information among leaders and other volunteers.

Competition for people with skills

“People with high profile or with lots of skills are in high demand.”

The NWT has one of the strongest economies in the country. The demand for skilled personnel, particularly skilled Aboriginal workers, by land claim and Aboriginal government organizations and high paying non-renewable resource industries exceeds the supply. This can make it difficult for the voluntary sector to fill paid and unpaid leadership positions and secure other volunteers.

Aboriginal in nature

The five voluntary groups featured in this case study are aware that Aboriginal volunteers and leaders tend to be attracted to, and feel welcome in, groups and activities that are visibly “*Aboriginal in nature*” and that target or serve Aboriginal people. Lack of time, money, and access to individuals with knowledge of Aboriginal languages and customs are among the reasons that many voluntary groups are not perceived as ‘Aboriginal in nature.’

Self-government

Self-government agreements in the NWT recognize that some Aboriginal communities will take on more responsibility for social, environmental, and economic programs and services. In the absence of public discussion, territorial voluntary groups are uncertain about the potential impact of these agreements on their mandates and memberships. They are concerned that self-government regimes may not give adequate priority to serving marginalized and disenfranchised members of the community. They also wonder if Aboriginal people will become less or more engaged with voluntary groups as self-government regimes unfold.

Voluntary sector leaders are aware that the sector “*is not on the radar screen of Aboriginal self-governments.*” They also acknowledge that in many Aboriginal communities, First Nations governments are carrying out work that is done by the voluntary sector elsewhere. Voluntary groups worry about how to position critical social issues in a way that will attract the attention of self-government regimes focused on by other priorities. They also worry that resources may become more fragmented and that less inter-community and inter-agency cooperation will occur. This could have resource,

credibility, and program implications for voluntary groups and for the participation of Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leadership in the voluntary sector.

6. Good Ideas for Positively Influencing Aboriginal Volunteering

The five voluntary groups that participated in this case study were eager to engage Aboriginal volunteers, particularly in leadership positions. They are aware of the issues that they must address in order to achieve this goal. They were also aware that there is no 'quick fix' for engaging Aboriginal volunteers and leaders. Encouraging and supporting active and meaningful Aboriginal volunteer participation is a process that requires constant attention and maintenance over an extended period of time. It also requires resources and capacity. With this in mind, they offered seven ideas for positively influencing volunteering among Aboriginal people.

1) Lobby for secure funding

Lack of access to secure and adequate funding is a significant issue for the voluntary sector. Ongoing public discussion that builds awareness of the resource issues facing the voluntary sector can help to solve this persistent problem. The voluntary groups that participated in this case study also stressed the importance of regularly lobbying government and other funders about the risks and limitations associated with project-specific funding. They urged open discussion with Aboriginal communities and their leaders about capacity issues and the constraints they pose. In addition, funders need to be made aware of the benefits that secure and stable funding can have for Aboriginal volunteers and communities. Through regular and honest dialogue, the potential exists to

find solutions to funding issues and to the barriers funding poses to Aboriginal volunteer participation.

2) Build a positive profile and develop relationships

Having a positive profile in Aboriginal communities is the starting point for building relationships and engaging Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders. Well-promoted community-based workshops and meetings are good ways to develop a positive profile. They can provide opportunities for people to learn how voluntary groups can benefit them and their community, and how and why people should volunteer. Workshops, meetings, and other personal contact in Aboriginal communities can also provide opportunities for these communities to provide input into and give some direction to voluntary sector activities. Special invitations to these sessions should be issued to community elders, elected and non-elected community leaders, women, and youth. Successful *NWTCPD* workshops in the Tli Cho Region have followed this pattern.

Community programs such as the *NWTLC*'s family literacy projects are another way to develop a positive profile and a foundation for relationships with Aboriginal communities and volunteers. Community-based family literacy projects for example, engage and support Aboriginal volunteers to develop and own local literacy activities while at the same time nurturing their passion and capacity to respond to local literacy needs. *"Some of our best board members have participated in our [community literacy] programs."*

A third mechanism for building a positive profile and developing relationships with Aboriginal communities and volunteers is to stage special events that involve several communities and engage local

Aboriginal volunteers. This is a tactic used by the *Sport North Federation*, which sponsors such multi-community events as Super Soccer and Arctic Winter Games. The *Sport North Federation* often adds committee work and coaching, mentoring, and other leadership training activities to these events. This encourages Aboriginal volunteer leadership and supports Aboriginal involvement in shaping and directing volunteer activities at the local level.

Other ideas for building a positive profile, developing relationships, and engaging Aboriginal communities and volunteers are to:

- use the same approaches and become engaged with successful groups or events in Aboriginal communities;
- hold as many events as possible, including annual general meetings, outside of Yellowknife each year;
- involve community people as ‘local experts;’ and,
- develop regular fun, invigorating, and culturally-relevant activities that benefit the volunteer and his/her community.

3) Be credible and accountable

Credible and accountable leaders and groups attract people. Credibility and accountability are developed through conscientious and thorough reporting practices and positive profiles, relationships, and messages. Credibility and accountability lead to *“being part of positive gossip.”*

The five voluntary groups featured in this case study all invest significant time and energy in reporting on their activities and finances. Given the limited capacity of most voluntary groups and the lack of standardized reporting formats among various funding

bodies, it is a good idea for groups to standardize their own reporting processes as much as possible so that they can meet all reporting needs in the most efficient way possible. It is also a good idea to join with others to lobby government and other major funders to use standardized reporting mechanisms.

Voluntary groups use a range of media to send out positive messages: public service announcements (PSA), Web sites, newsletters, e-mails, teleconferences, newspaper articles and advertising, posters, event sponsorships, annual meetings, and reports are favoured approaches. Each of these methods can be effective if done regularly. Regular and positive messages empower people by letting them know how to volunteer and what they can get from volunteering.

Aboriginal elders and formal and informal leaders are powerful allies and can be excellent public relations ambassadors for voluntary groups.

“Elders have a very big role to play and it is important to ask them for their help. They can set the tone for everyone else’s involvement.”

Volunteer NWT and the *NWTCDP* have successfully recruited Aboriginal elders to volunteer leadership positions. They have been able to do this mainly because of the credibility and positive relationships of staff members who are either Aboriginal or long-term northerners.

4) Ask and support Aboriginal volunteer leaders

Lack of familiarity with circumstances and resources outside of Yellowknife and lack of capacity are two reasons that Yellowknife-based territorially mandated voluntary groups tend to look inward rather

than outward for volunteers and leaders. It is a good idea to be aware of these tendencies and to make conscious efforts to step outside the usual comfort zone. Engaging new volunteers who represent the diversity of the NWT and the Aboriginal community, and asking existing volunteers to mentor and support new volunteers are ways to do this. Involving new volunteers on committees with experienced volunteers is another way. Additional ways are:

- Provide written job descriptions that emphasize flexibility and shared responsibilities.

“Look for volunteers who are active and leading now and work with them.”

- Hold face-to-face board orientation and professional/volunteer development activities. These allow volunteers to hear the stories and experiences of others, to become oriented to the group, and to build relationships and communications among leaders. Sharing experiences and stories can result in leaders taking personal responsibility for establishing and maintaining relationships with peers within and outside the meetings.
- Be mindful of literacy and numeracy issues, and of the ‘paper burden’ often associated with volunteer leadership. The five groups that participated in this case study have many good ideas about this. The *Sport North Federation* staff and board members work in teams or as ‘buddies.’ *NWTLC*, *NWTRPA* and *Volunteer NWT* reduce the amount and complexity of the ‘paper burden’ by using plain language summaries and visual materials. They also try to involve volunteer leaders in activities that

provide tangible rewards (e.g., awards evenings, special presentations, and training).

- Make sure that volunteers do not incur any financial costs as a result of their volunteer work. The five voluntary groups that participated in this case study always reimburse volunteers for any out-of-pocket expenses associated with their volunteer activities. *NWTLC* also regularly communicates with employers to ensure that volunteer leaders do not lose wages because of their volunteer responsibilities.

5) Question the group’s culture

It is a good idea to regularly question or review the ‘culture’ of the volunteer group including its principles, values, processes, protocols, and organization. Open dialogue can encourage and support diversity both in perspective and participation. As a new volunteer group, *Volunteer NWT* pays particular attention to its group’s culture and to aspects of the group that can encourage and support the diversity of the voluntary sector in the NWT.

6) Hire Aboriginal staff

Hiring Aboriginal staff is a good idea. Most groups that have a territorial mandate are conscious of the value of Aboriginal staff and the credibility that they bring to the group and its work. voluntary groups with Aboriginal staff are more representative of the community, and allow Aboriginal people to see themselves in and feel comfortable with the group.

The majority of the clients of *NWTCPD* have Aboriginal ancestry, as do two of its 12 employees. The involvement of Aboriginal employees and volunteers at *NWTCPD*: *“Brings our office lots of new clients. The people we serve feel comfortable because they are being served in their own language and by someone who they feel understands them.”*

7) Promote, recognize, and celebrate volunteers

“We need to make more of volunteering.”

Promoting the value and benefits of volunteers, and voluntary groups with volunteer programs, shows Aboriginal people and others how and where to volunteer, and what they can get out of it. It is a good idea to celebrate strong Aboriginal traditions of helping out in order to highlight the link between these traditions and volunteering today.

“Volunteering is hard.”

Overcoming negative pressures on those who lead, particularly in the voluntary sector, requires significant and regular effort. Engaging well-respected, political, and community leaders in recognizing, respecting, and valuing Aboriginal volunteer leaders in big and small ways can help overcome these pressures. Recognition, *“keeps you spirited.”*

“When I started my business and was the first to run a business, I was recognized by an elder outside my community and it made me feel good. But no one in my own community ever thanked me. I’ll never forget that.”

Recognize volunteers in a way that makes them comfortable. If volunteers choose to help privately, recognize them in a respectful and discrete way. If volunteers choose to help publicly, recognize them publicly. The *Sport North Federation* recognizes its volunteers in several overt and subtle ways. It offers awards, tokens of participation, and invitations to participate in high profile events such as the Arctic Winter Games. *Volunteer NWT* encourages volunteers by matching them and their skills with the task at hand so they have more opportunities to be successful and truly benefit from volunteering. *NWTLC* celebrates and recognizes personal achievements in newsletters, annual awards, and special dinners.

“It seems that people in small communities just expect people to help all the time just because it is family and people you know, and they shouldn’t expect to be thanked. Everyone needs to be thanked.”

7. Conclusions

The experiences and concerns of the voluntary groups with territorial mandates featured in this case study are likely similar to those of other Yellowknife-based voluntary groups that have territory-wide responsibilities. There is a strong desire among these groups to engage Aboriginal people in leadership positions and to ensure that the work of these groups is relevant, appropriate to, and inclusive of all northerners.

These voluntary groups have several good ideas for encouraging and supporting active and meaningful Aboriginal volunteer participation. They presented ideas that require regular attention by a voluntary group for an extended period of time. They also require resources and the capacity to build and sustain meaningful relationships with Aboriginal

communities that will empower Aboriginal people to volunteer in response to diverse local needs in their community. If voluntary groups in the NWT had more capacity it is likely that they could dedicate the time and resources needed to build these relationships and to engage and support more Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders.

8. Participants

Aggie Brockman, Coordinator, *Volunteer NWT*

Alex Nitsiza, Director, *Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)*

Alfred Moses, Director, *Northwest Territories Recreation and Parks Association (NWTRPA)*

Bill Graham, Chair, *Volunteer NWT*

Carolyn MacKay, Staff, *Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)*

Cecily Hewitt, Executive Director, *Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)*

Charlotte Babicki, Volunteer, *Northwest Territories Literacy Council (NWTLC)*

Doreen Baptiste, Director, *Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities (NWTCPD)*

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Notes

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