

# Youth Volunteers: What's in it for Your Organization?

Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation

Youth between the ages of 15 and 30 bring enthusiasm, talents, skills, and a fresh perspective to organizations they volunteer with. As part of a research project, we asked more than 350 people involved with more than 40 organizations in Atlantic Canada why nonprofit and voluntary organizations should consider involving youth as volunteers and what they can do to attract more youth, especially in leadership positions. Here is what they said.<sup>1</sup>

## Why should you involve youth volunteers?

Young people bring many positive qualities to any organization that they become involved with. These qualities include:

- energy
- passion
- new ways of looking at old problems
- flexibility
- non-rigid thinking
- a comfort level and skill with technology
- an enthusiasm for community-building.

By involving youth, your organization can:

- Ensure continuity by bringing on new young members who will eventually replace older members.
- Bring new perspective and new methods of problem solving to the table.
- Build a youth following that is committed to your aims and objectives because youth will see that your organization is open and willing to change.
- Build a better community, and society as a

whole, by teaching youth leadership skills through coaching, mentoring, and modelling.

- Become more technologically advanced by tapping into the Internet, e-mail, and Web design skills and abilities that are often well-developed in younger people.
- Make the leadership of your organization more truly reflective of its membership and of society.

## How to attract youth volunteers

There are several steps you can take to connect with youth and invite them to volunteer with your organization.

- Set up information booths at community events, schools, trade shows, universities, and festivals that attract youth. Talk to young people. Collect their names and follow up with them later.
- Prepare easy-to-read, attractive, and informative materials, that give youth basic information about your organization, the volunteer opportunities you offer, and the benefits of volunteering with your organization.
- Hold orientation sessions for youth who indicate an interest in your organization. Present a clear picture of what you are looking for in a volunteer, including the time commitment that you require.
- Develop a youth-inclusion plan that shows that your organization is committed to having youth involvement as part of its mission, vision, and values.
- Invite youth to have ongoing input into your organization's policies, plans, and procedures.

## How to make youth volunteers feel truly welcome

To make youth feel welcome, you should consider the following:

- To work effectively and successfully with youth, adult staff and volunteers must be open and accepting. They have to learn to listen to youth and not prejudge them.

<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet reports on findings of a research project called *Creating a Governance Culture that Nurtures and Values Youth* that was undertaken in 2004 by the Regional Co-operative Development Centre, in partnership with the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation, Rising Tide Co-operative Ltd., and the Atlantic Co-operative Youth Leadership Seminar program. The research was funded through the Canada Volunteerism Initiative's Knowledge Development Centre at Imagine Canada.

- Have faith that youth are capable of making the right decisions, and allow them to make them.
- You can help older volunteers be more welcoming of youth by pointing out that youth involvement will ensure the sustainability of the organization in the future.
- Recognize youth in ways and at times that are best for them. Volunteer appreciation events are often held during the day, when young people are in school. Hold appreciation dinners for youth instead, and also find specific ways to thank them on a regular basis.
- Be sure there is at least two youth involved on your board and/or committees so that their input to planning and management is truly recognized and valued.

### Some cautions and areas for change

Your organization may need to make changes to allow youth to participate fully. For example:

- You may need to amend your by-laws and policies to allow members to vote and hold office at age 18. In some jurisdictions, legislation governing societies, corporations, and co-operatives prevent youth under the age of 21 from serving on boards of directors. You may need to advocate and work to change this legislation.
- You may need to revise your governance structure to incorporate youth seats on the board or institute a youth caucus or committee.
- You may need to establish a mentoring program to support youth volunteers, especially youth leadership volunteers. Mentoring will help youth “fit” into the organization and make a real contribution. This, in turn, will make youth feel that they are valued.
- You may need to be flexible about how much time you can expect from your youth volunteers. Young people lead busy lives. Most are juggling studies, work, family, and relationship commitments. They are paying off student loans and trying to establish careers. Sometimes, because

of exams, family activities, or work commitment, they may need time away from volunteering.

- You should consider reimbursing out-of-pocket expenses. Most youth volunteers are on tight budgets. Costs associated with volunteering (transportation, child-care costs, uniforms, etc.) could pose a barrier to involvement.

### Where to get more information

The following Web sites provide resources that can help organizations successfully recruit and retain youth volunteers. They contain information on how youth have been successful in making and changing public policy as volunteers and how to work with youth volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

Youth Environmental Network – [www.yen-rej.org](http://www.yen-rej.org)

E-Volunteer Online – [www.e-volunteerism.com](http://www.e-volunteerism.com)

Charity Village – [www.charityvillage.com](http://www.charityvillage.com)

Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA) – [www.eya.ca](http://www.eya.ca)

Rural Youth Dialogue 2000 – [www.rural.gc.ca](http://www.rural.gc.ca)

Volunteer Canada – [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca)

Volunteer Ottawa –  
[www.volunteerottawa.ca/English/Education/Workshops/BeyondRecruitment/Main.html](http://www.volunteerottawa.ca/English/Education/Workshops/BeyondRecruitment/Main.html)

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<sup>2</sup> All Web pages last retrieved May 19, 2005.