

# Retention of Aboriginal Volunteers at Sporting Events

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## Background

Volunteer retention is the desired outcome of building loyalty or commitment to an event or organization (Connors, 1995). Aboriginal individuals face several challenges to ongoing participation as volunteers, including racism, costs associated with volunteering (e.g., transportation, childcare), and community wellness issues (e.g., crime, substance abuse) (Daitch, Short, Bertolini, & MacPherson, 2005; Little, Auchterlonie, & Stephen, 2005; Riemer, Dorsch, Hoeber, & Bell, 2003). It is reasonable to expect that these challenges would compromise retention if unaddressed. However, it is also known that Aboriginal people volunteer to express their commitment to family and community (Daitch et al. 2005; Little et al., 2005), which suggests they would show a high retention rate.

Given this paradoxical context, the purpose of this study was to identify effective strategies for retaining Aboriginal volunteers based on lessons learned from two sporting events: the 2006 Saskatchewan First Nation Winter Games and the 2005 Canada Summer Games. Both of these events involved a significant number of Aboriginal volunteers (500 and 350, respectively).

## Data collection

We conducted roundtable sessions with Aboriginal volunteers from both the Winter (45) and Summer (32) Games. In these sessions, we explored the reasons behind their commitment to volunteering for the event. We also conducted interviews with two managers of volunteers associated with the events.

## Findings

Retention was not an issue at either event. According to the volunteer manager for the Winter Games, *“out of the whole week, I maybe had about four people [who] didn’t show up.”* Interviewees attributed the high retention rate to community pride and commitment, and to organizers meeting volunteer needs.

### *Commitment to community*

When asked if they ever considered quitting or not showing up, most volunteers said no. This could be because Aboriginal cultures highly value helping out and caring for others (Little et al., 2005). It could also be related to family involvement. Many individuals volunteered with family members, which allowed them to share transportation and increased their comfort with the environment.

Volunteers also wanted to ensure that the event was successful because it would reflect positively on their community. For example, some Summer Games volunteers remained committed because it was the first time Aboriginals had been officially welcomed into the event: *“We’re proud to be invited and be part of a major sporting event in Regina.”*

### *Meeting volunteers’ needs*

The host committee for the Winter Games provided transportation, meals, and accommodations for volunteers. This addressed many of the challenges to Aboriginal involvement. As one volunteer said, *“you have to make sure that you had a place for them to sleep, and to make sure they’re fed, and [had] washroom facilities, and everything.”*

The formal structure of many mainstream events often discourages Aboriginal involvement (Little et al., 2005). However, our interviewees spoke about volunteering in a relaxed and informal environment. Volunteers selected or were assigned to events or sports (e.g., hockey, volleyball), rather than formal positions (e.g., server, or ticker taker). Others took on multiple tasks and “*did whatever needed to be done.*” One individual spoke about this preference for informality:

*“We don’t say OK, here’s your job description, do that and only that. I think the nice thing is, whenever someone needs help, you go help. That’s the nice thing about the First Nations Games...the flexibility of just being there and being able to help whether that’s your job or not.”*

Several individuals expressed concerns about feeling like a minority at the Summer Games. Organizers addressed this issue by involving elders, incorporating Aboriginal traditions and symbols, and providing Aboriginal awareness training for volunteers. This helped to minimize turnover.

## **Suggestions for Retaining Aboriginal Volunteers**

Based on our research, we offer the following suggestions for retaining Aboriginal volunteers.

**1. Encourage family volunteering.** Volunteering with family is a common practice among Aboriginal people. Provide opportunities for family members to volunteer together at an event (e.g., serving meals, taking tickets). Also, encourage Aboriginal volunteers to involve other family members.

- 2. Communicate the importance of volunteering.** Community pride is a significant factor in retaining Aboriginal volunteers. Consider targeted recruitment messages that highlight the impact of volunteering on communities. Communicate these messages during volunteer management activities, including orientation, training, and recognition.
- 3. Provide unstructured volunteer opportunities.** Aboriginal individuals have expressed a desire for unstructured volunteer opportunities. Consider allowing individuals to select events or venues where they will volunteer and allowing them to take on a variety of tasks.
- 4. Create a comfortable, inclusive environment.** Aboriginals want to feel welcome and comfortable at mainstream events. Consider providing Aboriginal awareness training to all volunteers, inviting elders to provide support, or incorporating Aboriginal traditions and symbols (e.g., opening prayer, medicine wheel) in events.

## **References**

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