

# Understanding Low-Income Volunteers

by the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC)



An individual's income can affect the ways in which they are able to volunteer. A person who lacks a predictable, stable, and adequate source of income must often worry about basic necessities (e.g. access to safe and healthy housing, access to adequate nutritious food, ensuring that dependent children or elderly parents are properly cared for). This can affect the capacity to participate as a full member of the community by taking part in civic and social activities such as volunteering.

In the fall of 2004, the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC) interviewed 55 low-income individuals who were volunteering at social service agencies in Vancouver and Prince George, British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet highlights some of the special characteristics of low-income volunteers. It also discusses how organizations can involve some of their low-income clients, service users, and program participants as volunteers.

## Characteristics of Low-Income Volunteers

Interviews with low-income volunteers revealed the following:

- Low-income volunteers cannot easily afford to incur costs that may be associated with volunteering (e.g. paying for transportation to and from volunteer assignments, for childcare, for equipment, etc.). Transportation costs (e.g. cost of public transit, parking costs, etc.) were frequently mentioned as a barrier that affected decisions about where and when to volunteer.
- Many low-income volunteers have health problems or live with a temporary or permanent disability. This exacerbates concerns about transportation and its associated costs. Public transit is not always accessible to people with disabilities. Health concerns also raise issues about the accessibility and supports present in the volunteer working environment.
- People on low incomes often suffer from feelings of isolation or social exclusion. Low-income volunteers often view volunteering as an opportunity to make a contribution to an organization and/or to the community, to engage in personal development, engage in rewarding social interaction, and to feel a sense of accomplishment.
- Many low-income volunteers are motivated by a desire to learn new things and develop new skills. This is sometimes linked to employment goals and the hope of securing paid work. But many low-income volunteers simply want to have variety in their lives or enjoy new challenges.
- Low-income volunteers often have difficulty covering the cost of basic goods and services and making ends meet. As a result, many low-income volunteers report that the types of support and recognition that they most value are help in meeting basic needs and direct payment in the form of honoraria and stipends.

<sup>1</sup> Low-income individuals are defined those who are unemployed or not in the workforce and who receive income from federal and/or provincial income support programs (e.g. welfare benefits, disability benefits, Employment Insurance benefits, Canada Pension Plan benefits, etc.) as well as individuals who are employed and earn between eight and nine dollars an hour.

## Involving Low-Income Clients as Volunteers

Many of the low-income volunteers who were interviewed for this research reported that they volunteered with organizations with which they, their family, friends or community already had a relationship, often as a current or past client, service user, or program participant. Some of these volunteers were motivated by a desire to “give back” to organizations that had helped them. Others were motivated by empathy and a desire to help those who needed the same type of assistance that they themselves had received. This suggests that current and past clients, service users, and program participants are a valuable source of potential volunteers.

Here are some things to keep in mind when recruiting low-income clients, service users, and program participants as volunteers:

1. Asking low-income clients, service users, or program participants to volunteer with your organization affirms the value of their skills and experience. This is particularly important to low-income volunteers who are interested in personal development, social interaction, and feeling like a valued contributor.
2. Low-income clients, service users, and participants who become volunteers are already somewhat familiar with the organization. This makes it easier to match a volunteer position to the interests, needs, and expectations of these volunteers.
3. Even if the organization is familiar with the its volunteer recruits, it is still important to ask these individuals what they want to do and what they would like to gain from their volunteer experience (e.g. opportunities to develop new skills or to make use of existing skills and experiences).
4. When asking clients, service users, or program participants if they would like to volunteer make it clear that if they choose not to, this will not affect their access to the programs or services on which they rely.
5. Be sure to acknowledge and reward the efforts of your low-income volunteers. This does not require large gestures. Low-income volunteers tend to prefer small, useful forms of recognition to large formal events. If you do not know what they would most appreciate, ask.
6. Be prepared to be flexible when scheduling volunteer assignments. Be particularly aware of the challenges associated with illness or disability. Recognize that access to public transit and the regulatory requirements of some income support programs may affect the schedules of low-income volunteers.

See our report, *What Motivates Low-Income Volunteers? A Report on Low-Income Volunteers in Vancouver and Prince George, British Columbia, (SPARC BC)*.

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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.

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