

Low-Income Volunteers: People to Appreciate and Accommodate

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

Volunteers with low incomes often have special needs, particularly with regard to health and disability. These needs must be accommodated if their volunteer experiences are to be successful. They also appreciate different types of recognition than do volunteers with higher and more stable incomes.

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.¹ This fact sheet highlights findings about the health-related issues of low-income volunteers. It also discusses how organizations can best recognize the contributions of their low-income volunteers.

Health and Low-Income Volunteers

A significant number of the low-income volunteers who were interviewed for this research cited health as a factor that affects their ability to volunteer. Many of these volunteers were receiving disability benefits through the provincial welfare system; others were retired or had been forced to leave the workforce because of their health. These individuals often face significant challenges when they want to volunteer. For example,

- Low-income volunteers in general tend to have difficulty with transportation (i.e. having access to transportation, being able to pay for transportation). Health problems often make these challenges even harder to deal with.

- Health considerations make it difficult for some volunteers to plan their schedules in advance. The effects of an illness or disability can vary from day to day, and can be difficult to predict. Because of this, low-income volunteers with health problems or who live with a disability appreciate organizations that offer flexibility and provide a supportive environment.
- Volunteering is an important source of personal affirmation and satisfaction for low-income volunteers who receive provincial disability benefits. These volunteers report that volunteering provides them with opportunities to feel valued and appreciated, to make important contributions, to work with others and to put their skills and experience to good use.

Appreciating Low-Income Volunteers

Low-income volunteers who volunteered for this research said that the availability of recognition in the form of perks or incentives did not motivate them to start volunteering. Many said that they were not looking for rewards when they decided to volunteer; others said that they did not expect to be compensated for their efforts. But almost all said that they appreciated various forms of recognition when they were offered.

When asked to name desirable forms of recognition, these low-income volunteers indicated a preference for help in meeting their basic needs. Here are some

¹ 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.

of the small things that organizations can offer to show their appreciation for the contributions of low-income volunteers:

- Access to food. This could take the form of meals or snacks during volunteer hours or gift certificates and vouchers for grocery stores or restaurants.
- Assistance with transportation. This could include free public transit tickets for volunteers to use when travelling to and from volunteer sites and reimbursement of gas and parking expenses for volunteers who own their own vehicles. Reimbursement for gas and parking was particularly important in smaller communities where there is less public transit and for volunteers whose health conditions or disabilities prevent them from using public transit.
- Supplemental income in the form of honorariums or stipends. Some volunteers who participated in this research receive payment from voluntary organizations; some who were on disability benefits received payment from the provincial government in return for a certain number of hours volunteered. However, this type of recognition may not be appropriate for low-income volunteers who are receiving regular welfare benefits because in British Columbia any income, including honorariums for volunteering, must be reported to welfare authorities and is deducted from welfare cheques.

- Access to clothing and general household supplies. This could take the form of gift certificates to thrift stores or access to items in an organization's donations room.
- Access to the resources, programs, and services offered by organizations. This could take the form of a free membership in the organization or use of the organization's facilities (e.g. its laundry).

In addition, the low-income volunteers who were interviewed for this research viewed the less tangible benefits of volunteering as perks. These benefits include opportunities for social interaction, the chance to learn and develop new skills, opportunities for personal development, a sense of accomplishment, and the chance to give back to an organization or community. Volunteer positions that are designed to deliver these benefits are rewarding for volunteers and help to ensure that they feel appreciated and valued. Likewise, organizations that ask volunteers why they are volunteering and design volunteer opportunities around the interests and objectives of their volunteers will be well-positioned to create rewarding and long-term relationships with their 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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