

What Motivates Low-Income Volunteers?

**A Report on Low-Income Volunteers in
Vancouver and Prince George,
British Columbia**

**Prepared by:
Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia
(SPARC)**

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October 2005,
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Introduction

Findings from Canada's National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP) show that the likelihood that an individual will volunteer increases with household income. This is true both across Canada and in British Columbia (NSGVP 2000a, 1997a). Because of this, more is known about volunteers with higher incomes than about volunteers with lower incomes. The NSGVP also suggests that the number of volunteers has declined since 1997. At the same time, personal incomes have fallen and job security has decreased (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003). Charitable and voluntary organizations that need volunteers may have to increasingly reach out to individuals with lower incomes. As such, it would be helpful for them to understand why these individuals volunteer and what they are looking for in a volunteer position.

This research project explores the volunteer motivations and experiences of low-income individuals in two communities in BC: Vancouver and Prince George.¹ For the purposes of this report, low-income individuals are 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.

Methodology

This research was carried out by interviewing low-income volunteers and volunteer coordinators who recruit and are responsible for volunteers, including those with low incomes. Interview questions were based on the findings of a review of available literature on income status as it relates to volunteerism. Although there is limited material on low-income volunteers, the literature review provided some valuable contextual information about issues to explore in the interviews. The work of Clary, Snyder, and Stukas (1996) and of Hall et al. (1998) assisted us in preparing questions dealing with volunteer motivations. Material on volunteering and social exclusion, particularly from the Institute of Volunteer Research (2004), helped in formulating questions about the barriers faced by low-income volunteers. Our interviews with volunteer coordinators were further shaped by, among others, Phillips, Little, and Goodine (2002), whose work explores volunteer recruitment, retention, management, and organizational structure.

All interview participants were recruited by community organizations with which SPARC BC partnered to carry out this project. Our Vancouver partners were the Kiwassa Neighbourhood House and the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. Our Prince

¹ Vancouver is the largest city in British Columbia with a population of approximately 550,000. Prince George is a metropolitan area located near the geographic centre of British Columbia. Its population, according to the 2001 census, was approximately 72,000, with another 10,000 living in surrounding communities. Prince George functions as a major service and commercial hub for the central/northern part of the province.

George partners were the Prince George Native Friendship Centre and the Community Planning Council of Prince George. Partners drew on their own volunteers and staff and on their connections with other local agencies that rely on volunteers to recruit low-income volunteers and volunteer coordinators for this project. More information on the role of our partner organizations is provided below.

Interviews with Low-Income Volunteers

For this study, researchers interviewed 55 low-income volunteers in Vancouver and Prince George. Although recruitment got off to a slow start, a large number of volunteers in each location ultimately expressed interest in participating in the project, so many, in fact, that the research team had to turn away potential interview participants in order to remain within the limits of available human and financial resources.

For the purposes of our research, we defined low-income individuals as 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.² In other words, our sample consisted of people who were poor because they relied on inadequate income support programs or because their earned income was insufficient to lift them out of low-income status. The majority were receiving provincial income assistance (i.e., welfare), either through the regular or disability benefit streams (see Table 1).

Each volunteer was interviewed in person. We took this approach for two reasons. First, the research

team felt that neither a telephone interview nor a written survey would be appropriate for this particular audience given the difficulty of connecting with interviewees (owing to, among other things, inconsistent or lack of fixed address and telephone contact options). Second, face-to-face interviews allow researchers to create a personal connection with participants in a comfortable and open environment. In retrospect, we also believe that the health of interviewees would have made anything other than in-person interviews difficult. Face-to-face interviews allow for a level of personal interaction unattainable through other media. The various nuances attached with question and answer scenarios can be adjusted more readily to the communicative norms of each interviewee, allowing for a more comfortable exchange of information. This is particularly true for those who struggle with mental health issues.

Interviewees were given a \$40 honorarium to cover any costs associated with their participation in this research and to thank them for their time. To uphold standards of confidentiality, participants were only asked to initial, not sign, a form confirming receipt of the honorarium.

Interviews with low-income volunteers were semi-structured; researchers used a series of prepared, open-ended questions. Using prepared questions ensured that similar information was collected from all participants, while the semi-structured format gave researchers some flexibility on the order in which questions were asked and the depth in which each question was explored. This is important when interviewing people whose comfort level with and degree of engagement in the interview process varied considerably. Interviewees were asked to reflect on

² The minimum wage in BC is \$8 per hour. A range from \$8-\$9 was included in order to capture those individuals who earn slightly above minimum wage, but whose income still falls below Statistics Canada's measures of low income using Low Income Cut-Off lines (LICOs).

Table 1: Income Source for Study Participants

Income Source	Number of interviewees		
	Total	Female	Male
Welfare – regular	16	7	9
Welfare – disability	20	10	10
Employment Insurance	2	1	1
Pension	4	3	1
Earned Income from Paid Employment	6	2	4
Partner ³	3	3	0
Unknown/no answer	2	2	0
TOTAL	53 ⁴	28	25

why they volunteered, the factors that affected their ability to volunteer (i.e., supports and barriers), and the forms of volunteer recognition and/or support that they received. They were also asked about their current volunteer position and experiences, what they liked or disliked about volunteering, and what kinds of volunteer opportunities or features they would seek out or avoid in the future.

Interviewees were given a written consent form to initial. This provided a brief summary of the purpose of the project, informed them of their rights in the research process, and assured them that all information would remain confidential and anonymous. Researchers also explained this orally to interviewees. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. Two levels of analysis were completed. First, an Excel template was used to organize the responses to each question so that themes could be identified. Responses were also tabulated to highlight areas of convergence and divergence. Second, a narrative interview summary template was used to identify themes within individual

interviews and to understand how different life circumstances intersected with volunteerism.

For the purposes of this research, only low-income individuals who were volunteering in a formal capacity at a community organization in the social services sector were included. Although informal volunteering is an important way in which Canadians, including low-income individuals, make a contribution, it is more difficult to identify individuals who volunteer informally. For this reason, we did not include them in this project.

Interviews with Volunteer Coordinators

We conducted a total of eight interviews with volunteer coordinators who had some experience with low-income volunteers in Vancouver and Prince George. Volunteer coordinators were asked about recruitment, retention, and whether or not financial insecurity should be considered when designing volunteer positions. These interviews were also semi-structured to permit conversations to evolve according to themes suggested by interviewees.

Approximately half the interviews with volunteer coordinators were tape recorded, while a few more informal exchanges involved note-taking only. A detailed write-up was made for each interview and these were subsequently compiled to serve as the basis of thematic analysis. As noted above, community partner organizations were the primary points of contact for recruiting volunteer coordinators.

Community Partner Organizations

Partner organizations in Vancouver and Prince George helped SPARC carry out this research. They took the lead in recruiting low-income volunteers and volunteer coordinators to participate in interviews and

³ The volunteer's income derives from the wages or benefits of the volunteer's domestic partner.

⁴ The total does not add to 55 because two taped interviews were lost as a result of technical difficulties.

reviewed draft materials. Without the contacts of these partner agencies, it would have been much more difficult to recruit the number of participants we needed for our research. The recruitment of volunteer coordinators was difficult despite the involvement of partners. This was largely because many social service organizations do not have volunteer coordinators on staff, which meant that we had a small pool of potential interviewees and made it difficult to find some who had experience with low-income volunteers. Staff turnover and workload at some community partner agencies also complicated recruitment efforts.

Research Findings

Literature Review

There is a substantial amount of literature on volunteerism and research into related nonprofit or third-sector activities. However, there is little material that focuses on the activities of low-income volunteers, in particular the motivations of these volunteers and organizations' responses to these volunteers.

Volunteerism and engagement with volunteer activities is intimately connected with the notion of security and well-being. Yet the realities of this connection may not be immediately obvious. Financial security and well-being are often seen as precursors to volunteer activity. The implication of this, from a research point of view, is that scholarly study of volunteerism has tended to reflect this bias – to the exclusion of low-income volunteers. The resulting 'gap' that has emerged has left the particular motivations and draws of a not un-substantial portion of volunteers under-researched and under-explored. As an interesting aside, despite the fact that data from Canada's *National Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating* (NSGVP, 1997, 2000) repeatedly shows that individuals with higher incomes are still more likely to volunteer, it is also true that the most substantial declines in volunteerism have occurred amongst those with higher incomes (Independent Sector, 2003). In other words, the proportion of lower-income volunteers is increasing – making the relevance of research into low-income volunteerism even timelier.

Although there is an established connection between volunteering and income, current literature on volunteering, while focusing on volunteers with high degrees of financial security, typically lacks substantive discussion on the role of household

economics. Literature on middle-class or upper class volunteerism treats those volunteers with financial security in a normative fashion and thus manages only a peripheral discussion of the role of income.

Interestingly, an earlier body of literature relating to 'low class' or 'working class' volunteerism dates back to at least the 1950s (e.g., Dotson, 1951; the analysis of some literature of this period by York, 1976). Although this literature is somewhat dated, it nevertheless contains a discussion of socio-economic status that is often missing in more contemporary studies. It is only recently that a small body of work has started to explore some of the issues connected with income security and involvement in volunteer activities.

The Strategic Volunteering Report (Strategic Volunteering Advisory Group & Mori, 2001) on low-income volunteers and volunteer coordinators in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside found that volunteers' primary motivation was a desire to help others. This was linked to feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy that volunteers reported deriving from their volunteer activities. Other key motivators included the hope of obtaining paid employment, building social relationships, gaining access to resources (e.g., a phone or meals), filling spare time, gaining access training and skills, and receiving other benefits. We discovered these same motivators in our research as well.

Among the barriers to volunteering cited by low-income volunteers in the Strategic Volunteering study were time pressures, lack of transportation, and not feeling respected (by organizations). Each of these barriers also emerged in varying degrees in our research. Transportation was a significant issue for many of the low-income volunteers we interviewed, particularly in Prince George, and can be a significant barrier

for low-income volunteers who are disabled or in poor health.

Clary et al (1998) report that career motivations are much more significant among low-income volunteers than among those who enjoy a higher degree of income security. Indeed, volunteering to gain access to job opportunities and to develop job-related skills emerged fairly consistently in our interviews with low-income volunteers. Clary et al speculate that individuals who are more established and financially advantaged may have already satisfied their work-related needs. As a result, career-related or skills development goals are less important to them. The authors also note that a volunteer's motivations have implications for volunteer recruitment and retention: "[I]f volunteers are seeking to satisfy specific needs and goals, then organizations offering the satisfaction of these specific goals should increase the likelihood that a volunteer would continue to serve with the organization" (Clary et al, p. 22).

There is limited literature on why low-income individuals choose to volunteer with one organization versus another. In a brief study of low-income volunteers at American 4-H groups conducted in the early 1980's, Camasso, Heinsohn, and Lewis (1983) note that people "often become volunteers because their own child is in the group" (p.14). This finding accords with our research, which highlights the sense of continuity and connection between volunteers and the organizations with which they volunteer. Many of the individuals we interviewed mentioned a 'historical' connection that linked them with the agency at which they volunteer. This was often one in which the individual was or had been a direct or indirect beneficiary of the organization's services (e.g., a client, service user, or program participant).

Interviews with Low-Income Volunteers

This section of the report presents summary findings from volunteer interviews under four thematic areas.

These are:

1. Why volunteer: motivations for volunteering in general and with particular organizations.

These motivations include:

- to make use of spare time,
- for social interaction,
- for personal development and satisfaction,
- to learn new things or gain job-related skills, and
- to contribute to an organization or community.

2. Barriers and constraints: the life circumstances and lack of supports that limit or prevent volunteering.

These include:

- income-related constraints,
- health-related constraints, and
- time-related constraints.

3. Recognition and supports: understanding the specific ways to reward for low-income volunteers.

This includes:

- the importance attached to recognition and support, and
- desired kinds of recognition.

4. Desirable and undesirable features of volunteer positions. These include a range of factors related to the nature of the work and work environment, as well as the perceived benefits and constraints attached to the position.

1. Why Volunteer?

The low-income volunteers who participated in this research were in general agreement on why they

volunteered. This may be in part because all of the low-income volunteers we interviewed volunteered in the social services sector and may, therefore, have had certain common reference points with respect to the kinds of volunteer activity in which they were interested.

Among the range of reasons that interviewees offered for why they volunteered, two occurred most frequently: to make use of spare time and for social interaction. Three other reasons received roughly equal attention by interviewees: for personal development and satisfaction, to learn new things and gain job-related skills, and to contribute or 'give back' to an organization or community.

a) Making Use of Spare Time

The reason given most frequently for volunteering is that it helps to fill spare time and keeps the volunteer busy. In the words of one volunteer, *"It makes me feel good to be out and doing something."* This motivation intersects with financial insecurity in that the majority of interviewees in this project were either unemployed or not in the work force because of disability, poor health, or other life circumstances. They therefore had spare time that they chose to use to volunteer. In the words of two interviewees receiving disability benefits:

"I'd go crazy at home if I didn't do something because I like being out and around people."

"I was volunteering because I'm on disability and I have to have something to do other than just sit at home and do nothing."

An interviewee who was retired put it this way:

"I chose to volunteer because I had retired when I was 60, and I was bored and lonely."

Well, I'm used to working all my years, and then all of a sudden the stop, so a friend of mine told me, well, why don't you volunteer?... So I came down and I started volunteering, and I just love it. I just love meeting people. You know, people from all walks of life come in here, some sadness, but it's, it's a big pleasure, I just love being here."

Interviewees who were unable to work because of health considerations said that they appreciated the flexibility and support that is often associated with volunteering. One interviewee who was unable to work because of her health said that she *"wouldn't be able to do [paid work] because you have to hurry in some jobs, and you have to be quick... I'm slow and I have to be at something that I can just take my time, at my own pace."*

It should be noted, however, that being unemployed or out of the work force does not automatically translate into having lots of spare time. For example, the new welfare policy adopted in B.C. in 2002 made access to public income support contingent on looking for work or participating in training activities. Not only can this be time-consuming, but it also limits the hours available for volunteering. Moreover, welfare administrators appear to be of two minds about the value of volunteering in helping individuals gain paid employment. Some interviewees reported that welfare administrators acknowledge the role of volunteering in helping to build skills and networks. When volunteering is seen in this way, more 'sanctioned' time can be spent on it. However, other interviewees suggested that welfare administrators see volunteering as something that takes time away from more 'legitimate' job search activities. For these interviewees, volunteering takes second place to the

job search and training requirements that they must fulfill in order to continue receiving welfare benefits.

b) Social Interaction

Having time to volunteer is linked to a second motivation: a desire to interact with people. Interviewees reported that they derived enjoyment from the social interaction associated with volunteering. However, they also pointed to a need to 'fit in', to be recognized and accepted, and to become part of a community into which they are welcomed and in which they feel comfortable.

The desire for social interaction is likely tied in part to the sense of isolation that often accompanies marginal financial status and may be stronger among low-income volunteers, such as our interviewees, for several reasons.

First, most interviewees were not working, which means that for them the workplace was not available as a site of social integration. Volunteering, particularly when it involves activities with other people, fills that void by fostering a sense of community membership.

Second, low-income individuals who rely on provincial income assistance programs must contend with the stigma that is often attached to welfare as one's primary source of income. Welfare is often seen as the last resort for individuals who are too lazy to work and who are willing to depend instead on public 'hand outs'. In addition, welfare incomes in B.C. are far below the Low Income Cut-Off figures that serve as Canada's 'unofficial' poverty lines (Long & Goldberg, 2002).

Third, living in poverty compromises the ability to participate in the community and in recreational activities that help to create feelings of inclusion. Volunteering fosters a sense of community

involvement and social solidarity. For organizations in the social services field – the area on which this research focuses – volunteering may also provide venues for interaction that take into account or are responsive, as least to some degree, to the unique needs and situations of low-income individuals.

Finally, poor health or disability can create additional feelings of social isolation. Interviewees in these circumstances often noted that they valued volunteering as a source of social support that is both accepting of and responsive to their needs and circumstances.

c) Personal Development and Satisfaction

Volunteering is often seen as an activity that delivers feelings of accomplishment and self-worth, as well as a sense of being valued and appreciated. For some of our interviewees, the need to feel capable of making a contribution was specifically linked to withdrawal from the workforce (because of retirement, ill health, or disability) or to the limitations imposed by a medical condition or disability. As one interviewee put it, *“I started off volunteering mostly because I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and I wanted to maintain some kind of usefulness.”* Interviewees who were receiving provincial disability benefits through the welfare system strongly emphasized the importance of the personal development and satisfaction they derived from volunteering.

Interviewees also emphasized the satisfaction that comes from helping others. Several said that helping others “feels good.” The desire to help others not only motivates many people to volunteer, but it also plays a role in helping them to decide where to volunteer. Interviewees often noted an affinity between themselves and the people they helped because they shared similar economic conditions. In fact, a few

interviewees said that although they initially began volunteering because they were required to (e.g., as part of a community service measure), they chose to keep volunteering because they enjoyed the activities and the people involved:

“I got charged with [being a public nuisance], so I had 6 months probation and 3 months I had to do some cornerstones, store clothes, and stuff. That’s how I got started [volunteering] and I just kept going from there, so something bad turned into something good for me and I enjoyed doing it. I was talking to so many different people and you know, I just... I don’t know. It may have been just a need to be helpful to other people.”

Finally, some interviewees reported that they simply enjoyed volunteering. In the words of one interviewee, *“I want to be where I’m happy.”*

d) Learning New Things and Gaining Employment-Related Skills

Many interviewees said that they volunteered to learn new things and for employment-related reasons. This was often expressed as gaining new skills, experiences, contacts, and references that could help volunteers obtain paid employment:

“I hope that when I put down that I volunteered at all these places, [employers] will see that I kept current. Like if I apply at an office job or something they’ll just say, well at least she’s kept current with computers and stuff...I really hope that, you know, eventually I will find a part-time job and then I can use the references

from my, you know, clerical skills [at my volunteer jobs].”

“[The] only reason that I volunteer at some places is because at the moment I don’t have a job, and it keeps me busy, and plus I get lines on some places where I can drop off resumes from other people I volunteer with.”

Learning about new job areas was also mentioned. Many interviewees volunteered to gain job experience, advance career goals, acquire knowledge, and explore employment aspirations. For a handful, it was a way to gain more Canadian job experience. Interviewees for whom learning and employment-related motivations were important indicated that the availability of skills development opportunities, job connections, and references played a role in their decision to volunteer with a particular organization. In later discussions about desirable forms of volunteer activity, interviewees highlighted the possibility of working in an office environment as being particularly valuable for job advancement.

Interviewees who identified employment-related aspirations as a reason for volunteering tended to be employed in low-wage or insecure jobs or to be receiving regular welfare benefits. As noted above, in B.C., welfare recipients who are deemed “employable” (i.e., who are non-disabled adults who do not have young children) have to meet a variety of employment-related obligations in order to qualify for and maintain eligibility for benefits (for example, there has to be clear records kept of efforts made to secure employment, or other job-search and skills-training activities). Although paid employment would likely remain a goal of many welfare recipients regardless of regulatory requirements, the obligations

created by the legislation affect how interviewees structure their time and activities. This may have led some interviewees to cite employment-related goals as important. Interviewees who were receiving disability benefits and who did not have to satisfy the same employment-related requirements were less likely to cite career goals as a reason for volunteering. However, some of these interviewees pointed to learning opportunities as a criterion for selecting volunteer opportunities.

e) Contributing to an Organization or Community

A significant number of interviewees said that they volunteered in order to make a contribution to a particular organization or geographic or social community. Interviewees who mentioned this motivation most frequently expressed it as a desire to “give back” to organizations or communities in return for services or assistance that they or their family and/or friends had received in the past. They also said that they decided where to volunteer based on the type of work an organization does, the clients it serves, or the programming it offers. In effect, the path to volunteerism is often paved by volunteers’ past connections with an organization as a service user, employee, or, in some cases, through mandatory participation in an employment or community service program. In the words of two interviewees:

“They help me out a lot, especially when I’m moving, they’re bringing boxes to me. That’s why I like volunteering for them. They do a lot for me. When I first started, I had nothing. They donated beds to me, clothes, a TV. That’s why I like them. That’s how I started volunteering.”

“One of the reasons I [volunteer] is to help them back, like you know, because they

used to help me out once in a while you know. They gave me work around the office, you know, and cleaning a little bit here and there. So whenever they needed volunteers I was, you know, offered. It's just a way of paying back, you know, for me anyways."

For some interviewees, connections to community agencies are linked to the constraints associated with living on a limited income. For example, some said that volunteering offered an alternative to making financial donations, which they could not afford, and was a way to help others who were struggling. As one interviewee put it: *"When I was growing up we did not have much of this stuff and there were people volunteering to help you out, so I guess it's my way of giving back to society."*

A related issue flagged by some interviewees concerns the role of personal connections to a particular agency. Several interviewees said that they volunteered because they knew a particular person at the organization (e.g., a volunteer, staff person, or service user). A few were referred to a voluntary agency by a personal contact (e.g., a friend, life skills worker, welfare worker, or staff person at another agency). Several others indicated a desire to volunteer in a specific setting; specifically, among Aboriginal individuals and/or at a location that serves the Aboriginal population. For example:

"I would like to do more volunteer stuff with the Native communities around here because then I would get to know who, where I'm from, and whatever. I think for me, it's nice to see Natives helping Natives, you know, even if it's just a volunteer position like that. It makes you feel like you belong somewhere and you fit in."

Interviewees were not specifically asked to identify their ethnic or cultural affiliation, so we cannot say how often this was mentioned by interviewees who self-identified as Aboriginal. However, it did come up often enough to merit mention. Some interviewees also reported a desire to create an Aboriginal presence at organizations that were not specifically designed to serve Aboriginal individuals.

2. Barriers and Constraints

We asked interviewees about factors that affected their ability to volunteer, including barriers to volunteering, circumstances that hindered volunteer activities, and factors that facilitated or supported volunteering. They flagged three issues, all of them barriers or constraints. These are discussed below.

a) Income Constraints

The majority of interviewees cited issues related to living on a limited income as factors that deterred them from volunteering or that complicated volunteer involvement. These fall into two main categories: difficulty covering the direct costs associated with volunteering and the general stress that results from daily struggles to make ends meet.

Costs Associated with Volunteering

Many interviewees cited the costs associated with volunteering as a barrier. As one interviewee noted:

"I know a few [people] that aren't volunteering because...it's going to cost them more to do it than it is, and they can't afford it. I don't think they don't want to do it. It's going to cost them more to get to town and be able to do what they're going to do, and so they say no."

As this quote suggests, transportation costs (i.e., the

cost of getting to and from volunteer positions or any transportation required to carry out volunteer activities) are a particular problem. This was mentioned by a large number of interviewees. The majority of those who mentioned this barrier relied on public transit. The few who owned cars mentioned the costs associated with operating and parking their vehicles.

The availability and cost of transportation also affected interviewees' choice of volunteer activities, the hours they volunteered, and where they volunteered (i.e., whether the location was readily accessible by public transit, whether it was within walking distance of the volunteer's home, etc.). Volunteers with disabilities were particularly affected because they had fewer transportation options and these often cost more than regular public transit. Here is how one interviewee summarized this concern:

“For me, I think maintaining a vehicle in the North Country is quite costly, and I’m having issues with that. Whether that will end up, it could adversely affect my volunteering down the road. If I didn’t have a car, I don’t think I’d be able to volunteer. So I do think transportation is a real issue for me. Now I have MS and I don’t take the public transit system. Medically it’s not really feasible for me...if I’m feeling ill I need to go home now – not 10 minutes from now, not 20 minutes from now. So I have very little flexibility when it comes to that. On good days I have all kinds of flexibility but I can’t foresee that, so transportation is and will be my number one concern...Without that I think I would really have to think twice about what I’m doing.”

Other direct costs flagged by interviewees included extra food expenses (e.g., when volunteer hours span

meal times or when a volunteer is taking medication that must be accompanied by food intake), the cost of childcare, the cost of any necessary supplies, or costs incurred as part of volunteer activities (e.g., taking clients out for coffee in peer support roles). While many interviewees indicated that the organizations at which they volunteered helped with some or all of these costs, they nevertheless identified the possibility of incurring additional expenses as a factor that they considered when deciding if and where to volunteer.

Stress

Living on a low or limited income creates stresses that can affect an individual's ability or inclination to volunteer. One interviewee who was receiving welfare benefits explained it this way:

“You need money to survive and you can’t, you’re not getting money from volunteering or anything – you have to have some sort of income. And EI or the Ministry doesn’t pay enough money, so you have to find extra work. So it’s money, one of the things that slows you down. You’re always concerned about your bills, and you grow accustomed to some thing in your life and you have to cut down on everything. So for me, it’s money.”

A few interviewees said that perks like free food, bus tickets, or additional income (such as honoraria) influenced whether and where they volunteered.⁵ For example, one interviewee noted that the “only reason” he started volunteering at a food bank was because he was going there anyway to get food.

“[When] I first started it was just so I didn’t have to stand in line longer. You know, so I volunteered

⁵ It should be noted that under BC welfare legislation, recipients of regular welfare benefits (i.e., those not receiving disability benefits) must report all earned income, including honoraria, and that this income is deducted dollar-for-dollar from their benefits. Failure to report constitutes fraud.

to help unload, and you go through before everybody else. That's how I started."

In summary, income was mentioned more frequently as a factor that affected interviewees' ability to volunteer and less frequently as a motivation for volunteering. In other words, people with low incomes do not generally volunteer with the expectation of material gain, but such benefits may influence where these individuals volunteer. This should be kept in mind by those who are responsible for recruiting and recognizing volunteers.

b) Health-Related Constraints

Health can affect the ability to volunteer as well as how much and how often one can volunteer. Many of the interviewees in our study pointed to health as a significant constraint on their volunteer activity. For example, one interviewee said, *"I've been sick for a long time, so I haven't had much of a chance to come down..."* Health status also affects the types of volunteer activities one is able to perform and when one can volunteer. One interviewee said, *"Mornings are my time. Again, that centres around my illness rather than any real personal preference. I'm learning to cater to my energy levels with my MS."* Health status can also affect where a person volunteers (e.g., is the location accessible to someone who has a disability; is it easy to get to?). Some interviewees noted that the stress and depression that can accompany poor health also influence whether or not they volunteer.

It is perhaps no surprise that the interviewees who were receiving disability benefits most strongly underscored health considerations as major constraints on volunteering. However, health concerns also arose among interviewees with other income sources. Interestingly, female interviewees were much more

likely than their male counterparts to identify health as a factor that affected their volunteer involvement. It is not entirely clear why this is the case.

c) Time-Related Constraints

The amount of free time a person has can motivate that person to volunteer or limit their ability to do so. People with more free time may choose to fill that time with volunteering. People with less free time are generally less able to volunteer. Work hours, family commitments, and other personal commitments (including health care appointments and counselling) were all given as time-related barriers to volunteering. Some interviewees also mentioned obligations such as mandatory participation in community service programs, alternative measures programs, or parenting courses.

Interviewees who were receiving regular welfare benefits were limited by the requirement that they spend a certain amount of time in job search and training activities as a condition of receiving public income support. As noted earlier, some interviewees reported that some welfare administrators view volunteering as an opportunity to build skills and employment connections while others believe that volunteering limits the time available for employment-related activities.

3. Recognition and Supports

We asked interviewees to describe how their current volunteer activity was recognized and to name any supports or perks they received for volunteering. We also asked them to suggest forms of recognition or support that organizations could offer to their volunteers.

a) The Importance Attached to Recognition and Support

Most interviewees did not consider recognition in the form of perks or incentives to be important, nor was this type of recognition cited to any significant degree as a motivation for volunteering. As one interviewee put it:

“No, they don’t have to give me anything or do anything. I’d much rather be working, but if I’m not working it’s something to fill my day and kill some time. [The volunteer coordinator] gives us a ride home or a couple of dollars for bus fare, but I don’t even ask for that. I’m too proud, too old, too proud.”

Indeed, perks and incentives appeared to be so unimportant that interviewees only talked about them when specifically asked. It was not a subject that interviewees tended to return to throughout the interview process, nor did it emerge as a strong theme in other areas, such as motivations for volunteering. Some interviewees explicitly noted that the decision to volunteer should not be based on expecting something in return. A few went so far as to suggest that, as volunteers, they had little claim to recognition. One interviewee asked, *“If you want something out of it that’s going to benefit you, then why volunteer?”* Another pointed out that volunteers couldn’t expect recognition, particularly if it meant additional costs for the organization:

“I think [recognition] just depends on what kind of organization, like, for example, film festivals. They could offer you a pass or something, which is not costing them anything...Unless the system can give you something like that...you really can’t, if you’re volunteering, you can’t expect it.”

Instead of viewing perks and incentives as something to which volunteers have a claim, interviewees more commonly viewed them as a bonus of their volunteer involvement. In other words, many appreciated this form of recognition but did not feel it should be expected. As one participant noted:

“I don’t think [volunteers are] looking for [incentives]...usually they sign up for volunteering first and they find out later on, that there’s an incentive. When I started volunteering here, I didn’t really expect anything back, but then later on I found out that they were giving Safeway cards and I was like, oh great, so that was a bonus.”

A significant number of interviewees reported that when they began volunteering, they were not aware of the recognition or perks they might receive. For example, one volunteer noted that the organization where she volunteered offers payment to those who volunteered a minimum number of hours over a month: *“I didn’t even know they were even paid until about three months or something, and then they said well you know, you get paid for this.”*

Some interviewees received perks in the form of access to services. This was true, for example, of a group of interviewees who volunteered at local food banks. These individuals started out as food bank clients. In some cases, food bank staff asked if they would like to volunteer. For these interviewees, volunteering and accessing additional food were closely linked (and clearly tied more generally to the broader issue of insufficient income to cover basic needs). As one interviewee noted, *“I’ve volunteered for seven years, for food stamps, and that’s how I’ve been getting extra food.”* Even among this group, however, the desire to keep busy, make a contribution, or gain

skills or employment connections were the main motivations for volunteering. The fact that a volunteer position offers these benefits while delivering a perk like access to additional food makes volunteering particularly worthwhile to low-income volunteers. In the words of one interviewee:

“So, you know, like, volunteering is something to do, but uh, the only reason that I got introduced to that there is because I had to go for food anyways.”

Even if they did not expect recognition, interviewees appreciated it. One interviewee who received payment for her volunteer activity described feeling *“proud and happy”* about this additional income. Volunteers at the food bank who were getting extra food said, *“every little bit helps.”* Other interviewees who were welfare recipients argued that welfare benefits are so low that any help organizations can offer to volunteers is valuable. Because any income received by welfare recipients must be reported and is deducted from welfare payments, non-monetary perks were particularly appreciated. One interviewee said that these types of perks made him feel appreciated:

“I go there for breakfast in the morning, and I have lunch in the afternoon. And I just found out recently that I can use their laundry service...and then I feel that my volunteering work is being recognized and appreciated. So you know, it goes both ways...Whether or not it’s monetary or whatever, you know, that’s beside the point. For me the most recognizable thing is just being recognized and appreciated for the work that you’re doing. For me I feel that’s good enough.”

b) Desired Kinds of Recognition and Support⁶

When we asked interviewees what type of recognition or perks they would like to receive, they frequently mentioned money (e.g., payment for volunteering, or honoraria or stipends) and/or help to ensure that basic needs are met (e.g., transportation, including rides home or free bus tickets and help covering transportation and parking costs; food, including meals during volunteer hours; coupons or vouchers for grocery stores; and gift certificates). A small number of female interviewees identified childcare as a valuable perk that might facilitate volunteering.

The types of recognition that interviewees mentioned they would like to receive tended to be the types that they reported they were receiving in their current volunteer positions. Most interviewees reported that they received meals, snacks, or other food during volunteer shifts or in the form of coupons or vouchers. Transportation assistance was provided to many interviewees, which is significant given the importance of transportation as a factor that affects volunteering. This perk was typically offered in the form of bus tickets or rides home. Some also received direct payment such as stipends or honoraria either from individual agencies or through the provincial welfare system to eligible recipients of disability benefits.⁷ Finally, some interviewees received help in accessing basic goods and services (e.g., gift certificates at thrift stores, access to clothes, and access to items in agency donations rooms).

Although most interviewees reported receiving one or more of these perks, their provision was frequently

⁶ Overall, interviewees offered relatively few suggestions about kinds of recognition that organizations could offer or that they would like to receive. For some, this may be because they were uncomfortable with expressing expectations of payment or rewards for volunteering.

⁷ The B.C. government provides stipends to eligible welfare recipients who receive disability benefits and who volunteer a minimum number of hours each month. This program was formerly available to all welfare recipients.

informal and uneven. These perks were sometimes available, but volunteers could not always count on them. For example, many interviewees indicated that they received some help with transportation, but that this could take the form of occasional rides home or bus tickets when they were available.

When we asked interviewees what recognition they would like to receive aside from recognition in the form of income and basic supports, most said that they were not looking for recognition or that they expected nothing in exchange for volunteering. Some also indicated that they did not receive any form of recognition. (It should be noted that many interviewees did not regard informal expressions of appreciation, e.g., saying “thank you,” as a form of recognition.) As one interviewee put it:

“I haven’t really received anything, other than sort of my hours that I do. I’ve never really cared to look into it though either. I don’t know, that hasn’t really been, I’m not, like, a tangible, materialistic kind of person. If someone says ‘thanks a lot’, that’s more than enough for me.”

Although many interviewees reported participating in formal commemorative or celebratory events, receiving written acknowledgement (newspaper articles, plaques, certificates), or having their names posted at voluntary organizations, almost none pointed to these types of activities as forms of recognition that they were looking for.

Overall, interviewees’ perceptions of the kinds of perks they were receiving or would like to receive were tied to their reasons for volunteering. The way volunteering fills time, provides a forum for social interaction, fosters feelings of personal satisfaction,

creates opportunities for skills development, and allows individuals to feel like they are making a contribution were all cited as forms of recognition or as perks of volunteering. As one interviewee noted, *“both my jobs make me feel good, you know, like that’s the biggest perk. It makes me feel good to be out and doing something.”* Another said:

“I’m on social assistance right now, I’m on welfare. But there’s a big motivation for me to be there – it’s an employment agency, geared to Aboriginal employment. There’s Aboriginal employment counsellors there so I get access to their resources. They have a computer lab on-site. I’m helping people at the same time, which is what I want to do. I’m gaining experience, and getting references helping people for working in that sector.”

Some interviewees said that recognition should be linked to the circumstances of the particular volunteer. For individuals living on limited incomes, it is often small things that are most appreciated – free memberships, coupons, access to services, and free parking at the agency. One interviewee said that organizations should offer:

“...things that would help you. Say you’re on welfare – you don’t get a heck of a lot. You know, little things – gift certificates, vouchers, gift cards. I think there’s something in, in the law that they’re not supposed to give monetary things, but then, like gift certificates and stuff like that.”

Several interviewees specifically mentioned that the difficult financial position that many voluntary organizations are in – particularly those in the

social services sector – affects the capacity of these organizations to offer support and recognition. Funding is limited, and there are often few resources available to devote to perks for volunteers. However, some interviewees said that recognition does not have to be expensive and that there are many small ways in which an organization can make a difference in the lives of low-income volunteers:

“So, if it’s, say, an illness that prevents them, maybe mental illness, maybe it’s just transportation, maybe they can only get to town once a month. And so those things all need to be looked at. That doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t do something for that person – and it might be a McDonald’s coupon, it might be something very small at, say, during the Christmas season that they acknowledge the person. Something. There has to be some way.”

One additional point pertaining to the use of honoraria needs to be mentioned here – specifically with regard to the circumstances of volunteers who are receiving welfare. The new provincial welfare legislation in British Columbia prevents recipients in the regular welfare benefit stream from earning any additional income without having it deducted dollar for dollar from their welfare cheques.⁸ In effect recipients have no capacity to increase their monthly income unless they are successful in finding stable, full-time paid work and leaving the welfare system. This complicates circumstances around volunteer positions that offer honorariums or modest payment in recognition of work performed. Additional income earned through volunteering must technically

be reported and deducted from benefits (or recipients risk accusations of fraud). This is the case even though welfare incomes remain far below poverty levels for all recipients. The use of honorariums thus presents potential issues for low-income volunteers. These considerations need to be clearly understood by both volunteers who may be subject to these restrictions, as well as volunteer organizations in order to ensure that neither is placed in a compromising situation with respect to the provision of rewards for volunteer work.

4. Desirable and Undesirable Volunteer Features

We asked interviewees what they liked about their current volunteer positions, what features they would look for in their next volunteer position, and the importance of particular types or features of volunteer positions. In response, interviewees indicated that they wanted positions that

- require the performance of specific tasks (e.g., office work was mentioned by several interviewees, as were cooking and childcare activities),
- involve working in specific environments (e.g., outdoors), or
- are tied to particular activities or events (e.g., 2010 Paralympics).

In some cases, the desire for a certain type of volunteer position was linked to the hope of building job skills and gaining experience. This was particularly true for volunteer positions in an office environment, where the opportunity to gain administrative skills (e.g., filing, reception, word-processing, and general computer literacy) was considered valuable for resumé-building and job searches. Overall, however, volunteer positions that specifically relate to career

⁸ The situation with benefits recipients in either of the disability streams is different. Though benefits here are often insufficient to cover cost of living, recipients are able to supplement their income with outside income sources via limited involvement in the labour force and/or volunteer honoraria.

aspirations or that could lead to employment were reported less frequently in response to questions about desirable features than they were in response to questions about the reasons for volunteering. Given that there was often overlap in how interviewees answered these questions, the distinction here seems to highlight something of a distinction between the qualities of the desired position versus its utility in relation to other goals, such as employment.

Volunteer positions that promote the development of new skills and that provide opportunities to learn new things were also viewed as desirable. Particularly if they are in an area that is interesting or are in support of a cause that the volunteer believes in. (Although a small number of interviewees indicated a desire to volunteer in areas in which they already had experience).

Finally, interviewees viewed as desirable positions that would allow them to volunteer with other people or help others. This is in line with the importance of social interaction as a reason for volunteering and the feeling of satisfaction interviewees said that they got from helping people. Among the groups of people that interviewees said they wanted to help were children (referred to more often by female interviewees), the elderly, women and Aboriginals.

When we asked about undesirable features of volunteer positions, many interviewees offered no response or indicated that they could not think of any undesirable features. This is perhaps not surprising given that the majority of interviewees expressed satisfaction with their current volunteer positions and had few, if any, negative comments to offer on their experiences to date.

The interviewees who did identify potentially undesirable features focused on two in particular: the type of position and the volunteer environment. With regard to type of position, interviewees said they would not volunteer in areas in which they were not interested and that they would avoid volunteer activities that conflicted with their health needs (e.g., that were too physically or emotionally demanding). This was particularly important for interviewees who were receiving disability benefits. With regard to the volunteer environment, a number of interviewees said that interactions with agency staff or the atmosphere at the agency were important considerations. For example, interviewees expressed concerns about working with unpleasant people or in organizations where there were poor relations between staff and volunteers (e.g., staff being condescending to volunteers or taking volunteers for granted). A few interviewees mentioned the importance of avoiding unsafe environments (e.g., environments where there may be racist or sexist behaviour or where clients may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol).

Interviews with Volunteer Coordinators

We interviewed eight staff members in community organizations who were responsible for working with volunteers. These interviewees worked in a number of capacities and had a variety of titles. However, all were involved to varying degrees with coordinating volunteers. Three interviewees identified volunteer coordination as an explicit part of their job; one noted that it had been *“a primary role for 17 years.”* Another interviewee indicated that volunteer coordination had not originally been an explicit part of her job, but had become a key component and was now included in the position title. Volunteer coordination represented a significant aspect of the work of the remaining interviewees, although this was not reflected in their job titles. In one organization,

coordinating volunteers was itself a volunteer undertaking.

The differences in how organizations allocate time and resources to volunteer coordination appears to depend on the human and financial capacity of organizations. Where there is sufficient human and financial capacity and/or substantial reliance on volunteers, organizations tend to have a volunteer coordinator on staff. One interviewee noted that specific funding should be allocated to volunteer coordination because it is very difficult “to really do” effective volunteer coordination “off the side of [one’s] desk”. The challenges inherent in volunteer coordination, especially on a limited budget, can be exacerbated when working with low-income volunteers because, in the view of some interviewees, “it is very time consuming to work with [these] volunteers.” They often have fewer skills and lower levels of education than other volunteers and so need additional training and support.

We asked volunteer coordinators whether they felt that financial (in)security had an impact on a volunteer’s perceptions or their volunteer experiences. Their answers fell into two categories: answers relating to volunteer motivations and the nature of the volunteer experience and answers relating to the role that income security plays in influencing how volunteers view different types of recognition.

Volunteer Motivations and Volunteer Experiences

Volunteer coordinators uniformly felt that, for many of the same reasons mentioned by volunteers themselves, income can have an effect on the decision to volunteer. One interviewee noted that during the recruitment process, her organization asks volunteers about their interests and needs in an attempt to understand their motivation for

volunteering. She said that low-income volunteers “see volunteering as a stepping stone to employment, as well as wanting to give back, being interested in the cause, etc.” Other interviewees agreed that opportunities to develop skills and gain employment-related experience are important motivating factors for low-income volunteers.

One interviewee reported:

“...consistently [hearing] from people who are living in or near to poverty...that they feel relieved to have an avenue to give back...it is amazing when you have someone who has been going through onerous hardship who the minute they get a job comes in with a pot of soup because they want to say thank you for what they’ve been given.”

The same person mentioned the importance of volunteering as a way for people to deal with stress. “People come to channel all their anxiety into an activity for a few hours, a day, or a series of days. They express gratitude that they have an avenue to do something...while they’re processing what they are going through...[Volunteering allows them] to have the space and time to figure out a solution.”

One interviewee noted that it is important to acknowledge the cultural dimension of volunteerism. The term volunteerism may not be understood in the same fashion in all ethno-cultural communities or may imply different (or foreign) concepts of exchange between an organization and the individuals it serves. This is particularly true in many First Nations communities because “in most Aboriginal languages there is no word for volunteerism, but there is a spirit of giving and sharing that is understood in every community and every traditional lifestyle.”

One volunteer coordinator said that in her experience, *“a lot of low income individuals don’t seek volunteer opportunities on their own.”* In her view, this is likely because these individuals may be more focused on living day-to-day and lack the time or resources that non-low-income people may enjoy. However, a number of volunteer coordinators mentioned that clients and program participants constituted a significant portion of the volunteer base at their respective organizations, highlighting the importance of a pre-existing connection between an organization and its low-income volunteers.

Several volunteer coordinators reported that retention is a particular challenge with low-income volunteers and that there is a greater likelihood of turnover among this group. As one interviewee noted, *“Because volunteering is a form of training and a source of a reference letter, the likelihood that [the volunteer] will leave because they find paid employment is higher.”* This is a challenge for organizations that have allocated significant time and resources to recruiting and screening volunteers. However, the same interviewee went on to say that low-income volunteers tend to demonstrate a particularly high degree of enthusiasm: *“They also tend to be really gung-ho...are willing to do lots and are dedicated to their work.”* One interviewee disagreed with the idea that retention is related to income status, arguing instead that, *“when people choose to stay [in a volunteer position] it is more a matter of their making a connection with the program than anything else.”*

Volunteer Recognition and Support

We asked volunteer coordinators whether financial insecurity affected what low-income volunteers saw as appropriate or desirable forms of volunteer

recognition and support. Volunteer coordinators began by saying that recognition or support is not particularly relevant to people’s decisions to volunteer. However, one coordinator reported that *“practical things”* – groceries, gift certificates, snacks, and transportation support (bus tickets or parking tokens) – were important to low-income volunteers. This view was echoed by other interviewees who noted that low-income volunteers particularly appreciated groceries, food from community gardens, clothing, and opportunities to access programs or resources (e.g., computers or training) that would be otherwise unavailable or that they would have to pay for.

In contrast to what low-income volunteers reported, volunteer coordinators tended to understand recognition not primarily as gifts or honoraria, but as regular validation and acknowledgement of volunteers’ contributions. One interviewee explained that her volunteers *“like to be praised”* and that it is important to express gratitude *“through daily shows of appreciation.”*

Some interviewees suggested that recognition is quite *“individual to the volunteer,”* which can make it difficult for an organization to anticipate how a volunteer will react. For example, one interviewee said that one of her volunteers *“was terrified of being the centre of attention”* at a proposed thank-you luncheon and was happier with a mug from a local gift store as a token of appreciation. On the other hand, another interviewee reported that the volunteer thank-you lunch at her organization was very important for her volunteers. These examples suggest that organizations should talk to their volunteers about what type of recognition they enjoy and appreciate.

Acknowledging Financial Insecurity

We asked volunteer coordinators if they take a

potential volunteer's financial status into consideration when designing volunteer positions. Interviewees said that it was often difficult to know if a prospective volunteer was experiencing financial difficulty. Sometimes it may be apparent or may come up during the initial contact between the organization and the prospective volunteer. But interviewees generally agreed that matters of income security are difficult to broach. They ask about skills and interests during the initial volunteer screening or contact but do not ask about income-related issues. One interviewee said that she felt it was *"too invasive to ask this on a screening interview.... I wouldn't want to do it this way."* Instead, this information is usually discovered through more indirect means, often over time. As another interviewee said, *"You get more information just talking to volunteers about themselves and their lives than you do from providing explicit attention to an issue in a screening process."* Still another interviewee noted that she learned about her volunteers' circumstances through casual conversations and asides:

"...it's pretty informal...People come in and sit down and we chat. I find that's the best way of communicating. Like in the [community] garden, when we weed or dig potatoes together or something. That kind of environment generally induces some kind of conversation."

This type of active listening helps to build relationships between organizations and their volunteers. The same interviewee said that listening to volunteers seems to yield positive results: *"The feedback I got from volunteers is that they like being here because they are comfortable, they don't feel judged and they are being heard."* Another volunteer coordinator affirmed this approach suggesting, *"It's*

important to make sure that you meet people's needs once they are here". Part of her agency's intake process is to ask volunteers about their plans and expectations, employment aspirations, and skills development needs.

One interviewee noted that many financially insecure volunteers have low skill levels or learning disabilities. One volunteer coordinator said that some of her volunteers are *"learning things such as how to answer the phone."* Differences in skills levels have to be taken into account when designing volunteer positions to ensure that appropriate supports are put in place to allow for genuine learning. In the words of one interviewee, *"My vision of an ideal volunteer program would be one that provided a broad range in which a person could develop skills."* However, the same interviewee also pointed out that achieving this goal can be difficult. Organizations may have to invest in additional time and training to ensure that low-income volunteers learn new skills and are mentored. Moreover, in many organizations, some skills, such as office skills, are often the purview of staff. Issues of privacy and confidentiality make certain types of work inappropriate for volunteers. Finally:

"There is the tendency when [organizations] get busy that volunteers get delegated to mundane and menial work. I try not to let that happen, but it can...and I think that it is a big challenge for any volunteer organization...the pitfall about the notion of volunteer work is that it ends up being the dry, boring, yucky stuff that none of the paid staff wants to do...and it really shouldn't be."

Because volunteering provides people with important skills, interviewees acknowledged that they should

determine “*where the [volunteer] wants to go, and what [skills] they want to develop.*” To sustain interest and nurture volunteers, organizations should consider how they might give volunteers more responsibility or ‘promote’ them as they acquire new skills. This would allow volunteers “*to gain confidence and self-esteem, which are key,*” particularly for those with limited work experience and those who have been out of the workforce for a period of time.

Like volunteers themselves, the volunteer coordinators whom we interviewed generally agreed that volunteering can provide low-income individuals with valuable opportunities to develop self-confidence and self-esteem. Providing adequate and appropriate opportunities for learning and skills development are important in this regard. Self-confidence is also fostered in work environments in which volunteers do not feel on the edge, stigmatized, or overly scrutinized and where personal safety is assured. As one interviewee put it, volunteers need “*an opportunity to build skills in a non-threatening environment.*”

Volunteer coordinators also recognized that low-income volunteers need a component of direct personal support. This includes allowing volunteers to give feedback on their experiences and to receive validation of those experiences. Some interviewees reported that this happened in part simply by providing opportunities for dialogue between volunteers and the volunteer coordinator. One interviewee said that the low-income volunteers at her organization “*like to chat – perhaps because they don’t have anywhere else to go*” to do so.

Analysis

The findings from individual interviews with low-income volunteers and volunteer coordinators we presented explored how particular questions elicited different types of responses, and examined the degree to which similar responses appeared across interviews. In this section, we consider the broader lessons about volunteer motivations from the interview data as a whole.

National Data on Volunteer Motivations: Looking to the NSGVP

The National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP) asks respondents about their motives for volunteering. According to NSGVP finding, the motivation cited most frequently is a belief in the cause supported by the agency with which one volunteers (reported by 95% of respondents). Eighty-one percent of volunteers said that they volunteered to make use of their skills and expertise, 69% because they were personally affected by the cause of the organization at which they volunteer, and 57% to explore their strengths and abilities. Only 30% of volunteers said that they volunteered because their friends did and only 23% volunteered to improve job opportunities (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000a).

The pattern of responses was slightly different among the low-income volunteers interviewed for this project. First, belief in a cause was explicitly mentioned less frequently. Instead, interviewees expressed a desire to get involved in volunteer activities that they were interested in. By this they were usually talking about the activity itself, not the organization’s mission or values. However, it could be argued that the tendency of the low-income interviewees in this study to volunteer with organizations with which they had a

pre-existing connection (e.g., as clients, service users, or program participants) implies a belief in the larger cause of the organization, even where that sense of ‘cause’ is approached in very immediate, everyday terms.

This interpretation challenges us to understand ‘a cause’ in more immediate and experiential terms, rather than as an engagement with broader philosophical values, guiding principles or mission statements. Here, the everyday, front-line, components of the ‘cause’ of an organization to which interviewees point as important guiding factors include things like area of work, population served, staff interaction, and work environment. Thus the notion of being personally affected by the cause of an organization may be of greater relevance to lower income volunteers than a more abstract belief in a cause broadly conceived. In our interviews, a personal connection with the work of an agency was often referenced in decisions about the allocation of volunteer time, but it also seemed to form an ongoing component of the volunteer experience. The help that many volunteers report receiving around ensuring basic needs are met is a personal impact so fundamental that it risks being overlooked by individuals whose daily living requirements are assured.

Second, in contrast with NSGVP findings, the desire to make use of knowledge and expertise did not emerge as a strong motivating factor among the low-income volunteers in this study. Only a few mentioned this as a reason to volunteer. Instead, interviewees were much more likely to say that they volunteered to learn new things, to acquire new skills, or to gain experience.

For some interviewees, a desire to enhance knowledge and abilities was linked explicitly to career aspirations or to the goal of moving into paid employment. The notion that employment-related aspirations may be a stronger motivator among low-

income volunteers than among volunteers as a whole is consistent with the findings from other studies (Clary et al, 1998; Strategic Volunteering Advisory Group & Mori, 2001). However, it is also important to read interviewees’ comments about employment goals in the context of welfare program requirements: recipients of regular welfare benefits in B.C. must sign an employment plan that stipulates the job search and training activities in which they will engage. As mentioned earlier, although paid employment would likely remain a goal of many welfare recipients regardless of regulatory requirements, the obligations created by the legislation affect how interviewees structure their time and activities. It should also be noted that acquiring new skills, expertise, and knowledge were also raised as valuable features of volunteer work independently of how they might contribute to paid employment or career aspirations. For some interviewees, learning opportunities were simply linked to a desire for variety or to meet new challenges.

Literature from the UK – particularly *Off the Streets and Into Work* (OSW, 2004) and material from the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR, 2004) – suggests that lower income, socially excluded individuals tend to feel that they do not have any skills, expertise and related confidence to offer (OSW, p.3; IVR, p.30). However, this view was not articulated by interviewees in this study. Interviewees who had strong past connections to the paid workforce – including those receiving employment insurance or pensions, involved in career transitions, or forced to leave work due to health considerations – tended to believe strongly in their capacity to make a contribution in a volunteer role. Those without a past connection to the workforce did not explicitly identify concerns about a lack of skills, expertise or

confidence, nor was it implied in discussions of what interviewees liked or did not like about their current volunteer positions or the factors that facilitate or make it difficult for them to volunteer. Where interviewees did point to limitations on what they could undertake or offer as volunteers, these limitations tended to relate to expectations about volunteer roles and particular features of the job, versus larger concerns about skills or confidence, or even their value as volunteers in a given organization. While this contrast to the OSW and IVR studies is of note, it is important to not overstate its value at this stage. It would, for example, be helpful to undertake additional research with groups of low-income individuals who do not currently volunteer. Determining the reasons for their decisions might yield different insights in this regard.

Finally, as with NSGVP findings, volunteering with an organization because one's friends did was not a strong motivator for interviewees in this study. However, a general desire for social interaction and to work with or help others was a significant motivator. The importance of being around people was further highlighted in interviewees' comments around the type of assignments they preferred and the importance they placed on work environment and respectful, equal treatment. Similarly, some interviewees indicated that they began to volunteer at a particular location because of personal connections (e.g., their friends were volunteering at the organization or using its services, they had been referred to the organization, etc.).

Thus, the desire to volunteer involves social elements that may or may not be connected with prior friendships or personal connections. The key message here is not that particular personal contacts motivate the decision to volunteer, but rather that a

desire to find a place to be with people or to become a part of a welcoming and respectful community are attractive features of volunteer work for lower income individuals.

The Unique Experiences of Low-Income Volunteers

In addition to the NSGVP findings on volunteer motivation, interviewees who participated in this study raised a number of issues that relate specifically to volunteers with limited incomes.

First, living on a low income can place constraints on volunteering. Low-income volunteers are particularly sensitive to any costs associated with volunteering (e.g., transportation and parking costs, meal costs, childcare costs, etc.). Because many low-income people rely on public transit, they are also more sensitive to the location of any volunteer activity in relation to transit.

Second, health is often a factor for many low-income volunteers. A significant number of interviewees relied on provincial disability benefits or were unable to work because of poor health. Health can also limit the tasks one can perform, the hours one is available, and the locations to which one can travel.

Third, many low-income volunteers must contend with regulatory constraints imposed by the welfare system. For example, a significant number of interviewees who were receiving welfare mentioned that welfare administrators were lukewarm to the idea of volunteering because it would detract from welfare recipients' obligation to look for work or participate in training activities. Interviewees also questioned the practice of deducting any volunteer-related earnings dollar-for-dollar basis from welfare cheques.

Fourth, financial circumstances are also indirectly

implicated in why low-income individuals volunteer. Most interviewees were on some form of public assistance and were not in the workforce. As such, most had spare time and many said that they volunteered to fill that time. Many interviewees also said that they volunteered as a way of giving back to organizations that had helped them, their family, or their community.

Fifth, although the importance of deriving personal satisfaction and appreciation from volunteer experiences is certainly not unique to low-income volunteers, many interviewees attached particular importance to this benefit. This may be because they were not in the workforce and therefore did not experience the type of satisfaction and feelings of self-worth that are often associated with paid employment. Retired interviewees indicated that volunteering presented an opportunity to continue to make use of skills, despite being ‘a bit slower’ in the execution of tasks. Interviewees with disabilities said that volunteering helped combat the isolation that often accompanies disability and the challenge of living on disability benefits, and allowed them to feel useful and make a contribution.

Finally, although some literature on low-income volunteers points to motivations stemming from feelings of inferiority (Clary et al, 1998), these were not articulated by the low-income volunteers who participated in this project. In fact, interviewees suggested that there were many places where they could make a difference to organizations and to individuals; they just needed opportunities to do so. Moreover, the emphasis that interviewees placed on appreciating and recognizing volunteers and ensuring equal and respectful treatment of volunteers suggests that feelings of inferiority were not central to their volunteer experiences.

Suggested Actions

Based on information from interviews with low-income volunteers and volunteer coordinators who work with low-income volunteers, we offer the following recommendations on volunteer recruitment and volunteer retention and recognition. These will be of interest to organizations that involve or seek to involve low-income volunteers.

Recruitment

1. Look to low-income clients, service users, and program participants as a source of volunteers. These individuals are often familiar with the organization and its services and have an understanding of the work environment, structure, and personnel. As well, staff may be familiar with the circumstances of these prospective volunteers and so will be able to tailor volunteer positions to them without a lot of extra work.
2. Ask clients, service users, and program participants if they are interested in volunteering. Being asked to volunteer is affirmation that one has valuable skills and experience to contribute.
3. If you recruit clients, service users, or program participants as volunteers, make sure that they understand that access to the organization’s services is *not* contingent on volunteering. This is particularly important for low-income volunteers who may rely on the organization or basic supports.
4. Ask all prospective volunteers why they want to volunteer, what they are looking for, and, perhaps most importantly, what they can bring to the organization. Low-income volunteers attach a great deal of importance to feeling that they can make a contribution and to the resulting feelings of satisfaction and self-worth.

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5. Do not ask about financial status during volunteer screening. This is a personal and sensitive subject and can lead to discomfort on the part of prospective volunteers. Do, however, provide opportunities for feedback from and dialogue with volunteers. This will help you learn more about their personal circumstances.
 6. As much as possible, make time to talk to prospective volunteers about what they hope to gain from volunteering. Structuring volunteer positions so that volunteers to realize some of their goals is one way to express appreciation and recognize contributions.
 7. Be as flexible as possible with schedules. 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.

Retention and Recognition

1. Try to become familiar with the personal circumstances and needs of low-income volunteers and the ways in which these affect their ability to volunteer. This will help you choose appropriate forms of support and recognition that volunteers will value – often with few direct costs to the organization.
2. Acknowledge and reward the efforts of your 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.
3. Remember that volunteer recognition and support does not have to consist of structured rewards or tangible goods. The features of a volunteer position (e.g., learning opportunities, social interaction, and employment connections) are often viewed as ‘perks’.
4. Remember that some forms of volunteer recognition may be problematic for some low-income volunteers. For example, monetary rewards such as honoraria given to volunteers who are receiving welfare benefits must be reported and will be deducted dollar-for-dollar from their welfare cheques.
5. Consider how your organization can help low-income volunteers with transportation. This is a key area of pressure and can often have a significant impact on volunteering.
6. Consider how your organization can help low-income volunteers with basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, household supplies). Low-income volunteers appreciate whatever help they can get with these items.
7. Ensure that volunteers clearly understand the nature and boundaries of the volunteer relationship, and the fact that volunteering does not affect access to general organizational resources and services.

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Annotated Bibliography

Bezold, C. (1989). Reaching low-income audiences with low-income volunteers. *Journal of Extension*, 27(2). Last retrieved October 25, 2005 from [Journal of Extension website: http://www.joe.org/joe/1989summer/ent.html#a3](http://www.joe.org/joe/1989summer/ent.html#a3)

This brief review of low-income volunteers working at a food preservation program in Stevens County, Washington, discusses recruitment procedures used by the Family Living Advisory Board and details the 30-hour training program provided to volunteers. The author suggests that non-traditional aspects of the training program – a mixture of hands-on work and theoretical materials, presented at a pace that facilitated the learning experience, and with an emphasis on team building among volunteers – strengthened the impact of the program. Additional notes in the article confirm the importance of paying volunteers' transportation expenses, particularly in rural communities, as volunteers are "sometimes put in the position of having to choose between whether to volunteer or buy food."

Camasso, A., Heinsohn, A., & Lewis, R. B. (1983, March/April). Myths about low-income volunteers. *Journal of Extension*, p.13-17. Retrieved October 2004 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1983march/83-2-a2.pdf>

This brief report details a study of low-income volunteers at various 4-H groups in the United States. Of particular interest, it notes that low-income volunteers "often become volunteers because their own child is in the group" (p. 14), which suggests the importance of familial connections as a motivation to volunteer.

Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD). (2003). *Personal security index*. Ottawa: Retrieved May 2004 from <http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2003/psi/>

Prepared annually, the Personal Security Index measures yearly changes in the security of Canadians in three key areas: economic security, health security, and physical safety. Accordingly, the "PSI focuses on the basics of living: whether Canadians have enough money to get by and have resources they can count on in times of need; whether they live in good health and have access to necessary health services; and whether they are safe from crime and accidents" (p. 1). The index uses a variety of methods to outline statistical changes in these areas and changing attitudes and perceptions amongst Canadians.

Clary, E.G., Snyder, M., & Stukas, A.A. (1996). Volunteers' motivations: Findings from a national Survey. *Nonprofit Sector Research Fund Working Paper Series*, 25(4), 485-505.

The information presented in this article is taken from the Independent Sector's 1992 National Survey of Giving and Volunteering in the United States. It employs a functional theory to examine the motivations of volunteers and suggests that people volunteer to fulfill one of six functions: a values function, an understanding function, an enhancement function, a career function, a social function, and a protective function. This article reports that volunteering to fulfill a career function (to gain work-related experiences) or a protective function (to cope with inner anxieties and conflicts, such as feeling of inferiority) are more important for those at lower income levels. The authors note that career-related motivations are much important to lower-income volunteers than to those with a higher degree of income-related security. They suggest that "if volunteers are seeking to satisfy specific needs and goals, then

organizations offering the satisfaction of these specific goals should increase the likelihood that a volunteer would continue to serve” with the organization.

Dorsch, K., Riemer, H., Sluth, V., Paskevich, D., & Chelladurai, P. (2002). *What determines a volunteer’s effort?* Toronto: Last retrieved June 2004 from <http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/pdf/SR/Dorsch-SR2-English-Web.pdf>

This report finds that role acceptance is key to getting high levels of effort from volunteers. Achieving role acceptance means ensuring that volunteers have clearly identified roles and that they (i) understand these roles, (ii) feel a sense of confidence in their ability to fulfill their roles, (iii) are satisfied with the extent to which they perceive themselves to be helping their community, and (iv) are satisfied with the organization’s overall performance.

Dorsch, K., Riemer, H., Sluth, V., Paskevich, D., & Chelladurai, P. (2002). *What affects a volunteer’s commitment?* Toronto: Last retrieved June 2004 from <http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/pdf/SR/Dorsch-SR1-English-Web.pdf>

Applying social cognitive theory to volunteering behaviour, this study finds that getting a high level of commitment from volunteers is linked to ensuring that they are satisfied with organizational performance and that they identify with the organization. To accomplish this, organizations must have clear policies and procedures, create safe and supportive environments, ensure that volunteers accept their responsibilities, and give volunteers ways to satisfy their need to help the community and others.

Dotson, F. (1951). *Patterns of voluntary association among urban working-class families. American Sociological Review, 16, 687-693.*

Dotson’s work is a good example of an earlier body of literature relating to ‘lower-class’ or ‘working class’ volunteerism. Research here dates back at least the 1950s. A good summary of the literature of this period can be found in York, 1976 (*see below*).

Hall, M., Knighton, T., Reed, P., Bussiere, P., McRae, D., & Bowen, P. (1998). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating.* Ottawa, ON: Ministry of Industry. Last retrieved October 25, 2005 from Giving and Volunteering Website: <http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca/pdf/n-r1/ca.pdf>

This report presents key findings from Canada’s 1997 *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating* (NSGVP). It presents NSGVP data on volunteers in Canada, as well as on the motivations of volunteers, the barriers volunteers encounter, and the benefits derived from volunteering. The experience of low-income individuals who volunteer is not specifically addressed, but the correlation between earnings, education, and volunteering is noted.

Independent Sector. (2003). *Giving in Tough Times: The Impact of Personal Economic Concerns on Giving and Volunteering.* Washington, D.C: Independent Sector

This report is based on the Independent Sector’s National Survey of Giving and Volunteering in the United States. The survey finds that individuals who feel economically insecure – regardless of their economic status – are less likely to volunteer or donate. A profile of households with economic concerns is

included. Individuals facing economic insecurity are less likely to be homeowners, less likely to have attended or graduated from college, less likely to belong to a religious group, less likely to have been asked to volunteer or give, less likely to be donors or volunteers, and more likely to support the need for charitable organizations.

Institute of Volunteering Research. (2004). *Volunteering for all? Exploring the link between volunteering and social exclusion*. London, UK: Last retrieved, October 7, 2004, from www.ivr.org.uk/socialexclusion/fullreport.pdf

The focus of this study is the volunteer experiences of three underrepresented and potentially socially excluded groups in the United Kingdom: disabled individuals, black and minority ethnic groups, and ex-offenders. The goal of the research was to identify barriers to volunteering, how these barriers were challenged, and how people benefited when challenges were successful. The research included both volunteers and non-volunteers from the above three groups. Volunteers tended to point more to psychological barriers to volunteering (e.g., the public image of volunteering, perceptions of time and fear of over-commitment, lack of confidence, the attitudes of other people, and fear of losing welfare benefits), while organizations focused on practical barriers (e.g., difficulty finding out about volunteer opportunities, overly formal recruitment procedures, poor follow-up of new recruits, the physical inaccessibility of volunteer environments, and inability to meet the costs of volunteering).

Long, A. & Goldberg, M. (2003). *Falling further behind*. Vancouver. Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC).

This report looks at issues of income security in British Columbia and compares employment and assistance rates to various measures of the cost of living (including shelter and supports such as food, health care, transportation, clothing and other costs). It estimates the minimum monthly living costs for five hypothetical households. Its primary finding is that “it is even harder for income assistance recipients to make ends meet in 2002 than just one year ago as a result of cuts to welfare benefit rates imposed by the provincial government.” It references the effects of changes to income assistance in the province and makes recommendations aimed at alleviating the income assistance shortfall.

Off the Streets and into Work. (2004). *Off the streets and into work (OSW) volunteering guide: A resource for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless*. London: Last retrieved October 7, 2004, from www.osw.org.uk/pdf/OSW_Volunteering_Guide.pdf

This guide, produced by a nonprofit group in London, England, discusses the benefits that the homeless or those at risk of becoming homeless can derive from volunteering. It notes three specific reasons why many homeless individuals do not volunteer: (i) they feel they have nothing to offer because they lack of work experience or qualifications; (ii) many organizations have rules that state that individuals who have accessed services must wait two years before they can volunteer with the organization, and (iii) many homeless individuals find it stressful to take a volunteer position that involves work linked to their own experiences. The guide details the various benefits associated with

volunteering and notes that 'good' organizations should offer their volunteers a number of items – including reimbursement of travel expenses, a sense of a clear role and expectations, sufficient training, support, insurance coverage and a safe environment.

Phillips, S., Little, B. R., & Goodine, L. (2002). *Recruiting, retaining, and rewarding volunteers: What volunteers have to say.* Toronto: Last retrieved October 25, 2005 from http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/files/iyv/phillips_sr1_english_web.pdf

This report, based on interviews with 111 volunteers in social service organizations and community associations, identifies themes in how volunteers view recruitment, retention, and recognition. It reports that organizational infrastructure is important for effective volunteer management, particularly having staff available to answer questions and provide information. Organizations also need to 'tell the story' about why volunteers are needed, why the cause is worthwhile, and so on. Volunteers identified three factors that contributed to their ongoing involvement: appreciation and respect, meaningful and varied experiences, and good communication. Finally, the report draws some conclusions about what government could do to support volunteerism.

Smith, D.H. (1994). *Determinants of voluntary association participation and volunteering: A literature review.* *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 23, 243-63.

A useful reference list for articles and reports related to volunteerism.

National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP). This survey is summarized by: Hall, M., Mc Keown, L., & Roberts, K. (2001). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating.* Toronto ON: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (now Imagine Canada). Last retrieved October 25, 2005 from Website: <http://www.nonprofitscan.ca>

Data from this survey provides a profile of Canadian volunteers, including personal characteristics of volunteers, motivations for volunteering, and barriers to volunteering. Findings on volunteer motivations demonstrate that most volunteers cite a belief in the cause of an organization as a central reason for volunteering. Other important sources of motivation include a desire to use skills and experience, being personally affected by the cause of an organization, and a desire to explore one's own strengths and abilities. Less frequently cited volunteer motivations include the fact that friends volunteer, fulfilling religious obligations or beliefs, and improving job opportunities. Key barriers raised are a lack of time, an unwillingness to make year round commitments, having already donated money (instead of time), not being personally asked to volunteer, and not knowing how to get involved.

Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP). (1997, 2000). Fact Sheets. Retrieved June 2004 from <http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca>.

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-----1997a. *Motivations for Giving and Volunteering*.

-----1997b. *Who are Canada's Volunteers?*

-----1997c. *Who are British Columbia's Volunteers?*

This series of fact sheets produced as a part of the 1997 and 2000 NSGVPs details aspects of volunteerism in Canada and British Columbia – including demographic details around age and gender of volunteers, education levels, labour force statistics and personal and economic characteristics. Of particular relevance to the present study is the Motivations and Barriers fact sheet that discusses access to job opportunities, skills and related experience, as well as the implications of health related barriers to volunteering.

The Strategic Volunteering Advisory Group, & Mori, I.J.. (2001). *The strategic volunteering report*. Vancouver: Skills Connection and InVOLve BC. Retrieved January 22, 2004 from <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/skillsco/svreport.htm>

This report is from a small participatory action research project with volunteers and volunteer coordinators in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia. The goals of the research were “to create better volunteer experiences, to begin fashioning an overall vision for volunteer organizations in the area, to investigate the ‘volunteer

to work’ phenomenon, and to assess the motivations for low-income individuals to volunteer.” The research found that there were a variety of motivations for volunteering. The most common motive was the rewarding experience of helping others. Many volunteers appeared to equate feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy with helping. Other motivations were the hope of obtaining paid work, forming and keeping relationships, filling free time, accessing training, being appreciated, and receiving benefits.

Vineyard, S. (2001). *Recognizing volunteers and paid staff*. Darien: Heritage Arts Publishing.

This book discusses changing volunteer demographics and the need for organizations to respond to the different communities of volunteers. It reviews useful recruitment strategies and incentives and outlines items to consider in “low-income areas,” such as providing food vouchers and coupons and transportation.

York, A. (1976). Voluntary associations in a ‘difficult’ housing estate. *Community Development Journal*, 11(2) 126-133.

This study of ‘difficult’ housing estates in England builds on earlier studies of the role of volunteerism in building neighbourhood ties and community capacity. It is particularly good article for its summary of older literature(1940s– 950s) on ‘blue-collar’ or working class volunteerism.

This and other Knowledge Development Centre publications are also available online at www.kdc-cdc.ca, or as a special collection of the Imagine Canada — John Hodgson Library at www.nonprofitscan.ca.



www.kdc-cdc.ca