The Impact of Volunteerism and the Critical Role of Volunteer Engagement Leaders

A Submission to the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector

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Thank you to the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector for the opportunity to share insights into the experience of volunteer engagement leaders and their impact on volunteerism. I appreciate the importance of the Committee’s work and look forward to changes to support the charitable sector that comes through it.

Recommendation
I urge the Special Committee to invest the resources urgently needed to ensure 13.3 million volunteers are able to continue their mission-critical work across Canada. Federal support will help sustain and grow volunteerism, which translates into stronger non-profits, engaged citizens, and thriving communities. Investing in volunteer engagement professional associations, volunteer engagement educational programs, and volunteer centres creates the necessary foundation for volunteerism.

Context
The Administrators of Volunteer Resources of BC (AVRBC) is the professional association supporting 165 volunteer engagement leaders across the province. As president, I equip leaders with training, networking, and resources to lead BC’s non-profits, charities, and social enterprises. These professionals empower their organizations and communities by leading tens of thousands of volunteers who serve their communities and contribute mission-critical resources.

On November 1, 2018, I led AVRBC members in dissolving our 51 year-old association to become a regional committee of Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada. This was a difficult but necessary transition due to capacity and engagement challenges, as volunteer engagement leaders in the sector are critically overextended.
Leading up to the decision to dissolve, I consulted with industry leaders for guidance and perspective. This is what I learned:

- Volunteer centres across Canada are under tremendous pressure, with many having been forced to close. Even those that went through a significant transformation to adapt to the evolving social models and sector are, in many cases, still struggling. I’ve been told that our national guiding bodies, Volunteer Canada and Imagine Canada, are also under pressure.
- Across Canada, volunteer management professional associations are struggling significantly, with many having to reduce services or even dissolve. These nonprofits provide training, networking, and support to equip over 1,000 volunteer engagement leaders across Canada. These leaders direct hundreds of thousands of volunteers in their organizations, ensuring they can provide mission-focused services in every facet of the charitable sector. Similar challenges are being experienced by leaders in the US, UK, and Australia.
- Past senior leaders in the volunteer engagement sector describe these challenges as having escalated over the last decade.

**Impact**

The value of volunteers to Canadians cannot be understated. According to early results from Statistics Canada, in 2017, 13.3 million Canadians volunteered (44% of the population ages 15 and over), each contributing an average of nearly 156 hours. The Value of Volunteering in Canada report “estimates that volunteers added over two billion hours to Canada’s work effort in 2017. This volunteer contribution is valued at $55.9 billion in 2017 – equivalent to 2.6 per cent of GDP. If volunteering were an industry, it would employ nearly as many people as those currently working in education.”\(^1\)

There are over 170,000 charitable and nonprofit organizations in Canada.\(^2\) This includes 85,000 registered charities, 40% of which rely exclusively on volunteers to carry out their missions.\(^3\) If each Canadian nonprofit has even one leader of volunteers, that is 170,000 leaders who engage and empower Canada’s 13.3 million volunteers. The impact of volunteerism, however, cannot be fully appreciated through numbers alone; volunteerism is crucial for building community, for seniors to combat isolation, for youth to enhance skills to enter the workforce, and for new immigrants to gain Canadian work experience and integrate into their communities.

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\(^1\) (2018) Conference Board of Canada, The Value of Volunteering in Canada

\(^2\) Sector Source, What is the Charitable and Nonprofit Sector

\(^3\) McClintock, N. (2004). Imagine Canada, Understanding Canadian Volunteers
The 2016 Imagine Canada Report, Charities, Sustainable Funding, and Smart Growth states, “Unlike a fiscal deficit, a social deficit will not reveal itself in red numbers on a balance sheet. Instead, it will appear as an accumulation of unmet needs, in growing waiting lists for social services, and in increasingly overburdened charities and nonprofits, overworked staff, and volunteers. In short, a social deficit will appear as an inability of charities to meet the social, cultural, and environmental needs of Canadians and as a slow but perceptible erosion of Canadians’ quality of life.”

Volunteerism has always been inherent to the fabric and identity of Canada, but there is a growing sense of urgency and pressure in the charitable sector. Organizations that engage and equip volunteers and volunteer engagement leaders lack the resources to sustain their mandate and address the capacity gap caused by the social deficit:

- volunteer centers support and connect community leaders and prospective volunteers;
- volunteer management professional associations equip leaders to engage volunteers to be a force for change and mission delivery;
- and sector guiding agencies are crucial to leading every charity, non-profit, and social service organization to meet their missions and serve Canadians.

Call to Action
Strengthening volunteerism nationally depends on resources for both volunteers and their leaders – volunteer centres, volunteer management college programs, and professional associations must be supported to resolve the growing crisis of overextended nonprofits and their leaders.

Without a greater investment in nonprofits and skilled volunteer engagement professionals leading a strong volunteer force, Canadian society will be directly impacted. The cost to the government to combat these issues and fill the need would significantly increase and the fabric of Canada would be compromised through:

- Diminished capacity to distribute food to the hungry and support the homeless;
- Fewer mentors and after-school programs for at-risk youth during crucial development years;
- Fewer resources for search and rescue efforts;
- Decreased ability for health charities to fundraise to support the cutting-edge research, education, and advocacy that saves lives daily;

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4 Emmett, B. (2016). Charities, Sustainable Funding, and Smart Growth, Imagine Canada
• Organizations serving new immigrants will struggle to support individuals in their efforts to successfully integrate into their communities;
• Arts, culture, and sports initiatives will be underresourced;
• Decreased seniors’ support necessary for their combating isolation, maintaining independence, and remaining vital members of our community;
• Environmental protection agencies will struggle to educate, advocate, and empower Canadians to be stewards of our communities and country.

Conclusion
Volunteers are the driving force behind the charitable sector and the impact it has on the lives of all Canadians. In the face of a growing social deficit, volunteerism is in critical need of support at a national level. I urge the Special Committee to acknowledge the full measure of impact that volunteers and volunteer engagement leaders have on the core values of Canadian culture, and take steps to strengthen the infrastructure on which the entire sector depends. Further, I ask the Committee to consider the economic implications if the strength of the volunteer sector continues to degrade from lack of funding.

The author
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