The Role of Volunteerism at the YMCA
Submission to the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector

April 2019
Who We Are

The YMCA is a powerful association of people joined together by a shared passion to foster a sense of belonging for all. In an age of complex social challenges, the YMCA is steadfastly dedicated to building healthy communities by inviting and encouraging Canadians to join in to give back, and to gain the connections, skills and confidence they need to thrive.

Across Canada, the YMCA is at the heart of communities, serving evolving needs and providing vital programs, services and connections to over 2.26 million people through 45 Member Associations. Together, we’re unwavering in our dedication to achieving meaningful outcomes that matter to the communities we serve.

YMCA Canada is pleased to contribute to the Special Senate Committee on the Charitable Sector’s study on the impact of federal and provincial laws and policies governing charities, non-profit organizations, foundations, and other similar groups; and on the impact of the voluntary sector in Canada. The following written brief reflects our experience, expertise and work, and demonstrates the impact of our volunteers on communities across Canada. Should there be any questions or follow up required, please do not hesitate to contact us directly.

Volunteerism at the YMCA

The YMCA is a charity with deep community roots, and a strong commitment to volunteer engagement. In 1884, the YMCA movement was founded by a volunteer, Sir George William, to serve the needs of young workers drawn to London during the Industrial Revolution.

Today, thousands of Canadians across the country, from all walks of life, share a YMCA volunteer story, including YMCA Canada’s President and CEO, Peter Dinsdale, who first joined the YMCA in 2014 as a volunteer on the National Board of Directors.

In 2017 alone, over 21,000 exceptional volunteers contributed over 1.1 million hours of their time teaching fitness classes, fundraising, serving on Boards of Directors, running special events, supporting newcomers, mentoring young people and more. YMCA volunteers give back to their community; find a place to belong; gain valuable experience; meet new people with shared interest; enhance leadership skills; and share knowledge and experiences with others.

Across Canada, YMCAs offer new and rewarding volunteer opportunities, inviting people to apply. Once they have been through our screening processes, volunteers receive orientation to the YMCA and to their role, participate in our child safety and protection training, and receive the training and support they need to be successful.
Demonstrating impact:

“I have been a volunteer at the YMCA for as long as I can remember. I have had the opportunity to volunteer in several different capacities - some highlights include volunteering at day camps, member services, fund development, teaching fitness classes, and serving on the national Board of Directors. More than what I’ve done during my time at the Y, I am grateful for the skills I’ve learned, the people I’ve met, and the person I’ve become.

Volunteering at the Y has helped me build interpersonal skills, creative thinking, and confidence. With the Y as a safe and supportive environment, I’ve challenged myself, learned resilience and perseverance, and the personal growth that comes from pushing the limits of my comfort zone. The Y taught me from a very young age that my actions make a difference and that I can have a positive impact in my community - regardless of age, ability, or experience. Because of the Y, I know what it is to be a part of a community, and feel like I belong.”

- Ruhee Ismail-Teja, Chair of the Public Policy and Advocacy Committee, and Member of the National Board of Directors, YMCA Canada

Special focus on youth

The YMCA provides opportunities for young people to build relationships, and engage with community and civil society. We create meaningful volunteer experiences for young people that foster a sense of belonging and civic engagement, and provide youth with the opportunity to gain new skills, experiences and connections. In 2017, youth volunteers made up 15% of the YMCA annual volunteer network (more than 3,200 youth volunteers).

We believe that volunteering is an exceptional learning opportunity for young people that can aid in their transition to the workforce. For example, at the YMCA of Greater Toronto, 21 per cent of staff began as volunteers. Other examples of volunteerism involving young people at the YMCA include:

Youth Representatives on Boards and Committees

The YMCA offers meaningful opportunities for young people in governance, offering and supporting youth positions on some Board of Directors and Committees across our federation. Experience gained from inclusion in governance structures can help young people learn about organizational operations and governance, while making meaningful connections with industry professionals and leaders in their community.

YMCA Canada provides an opportunity for volunteers and staffs to participate in the recently convened CEO Youth Advisory Committee. Comprised of eight members, age 19 to 29, the Committee is accountable to the Present and CEO of YMCA Canada. Members provide input and advice on emerging issues, priorities and strategies of the YMCA in Canada. They are also responsible for sharing learning and insights with other volunteers and staff at their local YMCA Member Association.
Additionally, many YMCA Member Associations across Canada create opportunities for young people to serve on their local Board of Directors and Committees. For example, the YMCA of Greater Toronto has a Youth Advisory Committee to the Board of Directors, composed of youth age 18 to 25. Up to three young adults also sit on the Board of Directors itself, with several serving on Board Committees. The YMCA of Southwestern Ontario also offers youth positions on the Board of Directors, and the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford as an active Youth Advisory Committee.

**Demonstrating impact:**

“I’ve been honoured to dedicate my time and service as a volunteer for the YMCA for the last 6 years. At age 18, I was nominated to the YMCA of Western Ontario’s Board of Directors. A member of the Board, I was given the opportunity to integrate youth perspectives into our community and decision making at the YMCA of Western Ontario and YMCA Canada. Today, I hold a national position as a young leader to the YMCA Canada’s CEO Youth Advisory Committee, and a member of YMCA Canada’s Health Fitness Aquatics Committee.

*Being a YMCA volunteer for all these years has allowed me to develop a huge passion for youth advocacy and empowerment. These tremendous experiences have enabled me to have the skillsets and passions to drive change and make my community, Canada, and the world a better place. By volunteering with the YMCA, I have also been able to work with the most incredible individuals and mentors who have given me both the skillsets and experiences to confidently look into my future, along with giving me the greatest gift of all: having someone believe in me.*

- Jessica Golyattov, Member of CEO Youth Advisory Committee and Health Fitness Aquatics Committee, YMCA Canada

**YMCA PlusOne Mentoring program**
The YMCA PlusOne Mentoring program is a community-based mentoring program designed to engage youth who are experiencing challenges in their social and academic development, in a meaningful relationship with an adult mentor. The objective of this program is to leverage the mentoring relationship to support youth expand their positive peer network, increase self-esteem and build autonomy. Chase, a 12-year-old, a former PlusOne program participant at the YMCA of Greater Moncton now volunteers at the local child care centre, helping the next generation to develop a love of reading.

**YMCA Community Action Network**
The YMCA Community Action Network (YCAN) program is one of Canada’s national youth service initiatives, part of the Canada Service Corps initiative of the Government of Canada. Led by the YMCA of Greater Toronto in partnership with nine other YMCA Member Associations, youth between 15 and 30 years of age work together to plan, develop, and carry out meaningful service projects in their community.

Since its launch in January 2018, the program has supported and engaged over 350 youth in more than 35 community projects across Canada, with a strong focus on engaging youth who are traditionally underrepresented in community programs.
Demonstrating impact:
“Originally, my family is from South Sudan, but I was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. At age 17, I joined the YMCA Community Action Network (YCAN) to not only find safe space but to have voice on issues important to me and my community. For our service project, we found that newcomer, refugee and immigrant youth don’t have a program to go to after high school. Some need a safe space, others need a mentor and most need employment guidance. The Growing Leaders of Winnipeg provides help to all those needs. One of the greatest impacts was offering students’ who felt out of place in university a mentor to help them in their classes and careers they wanted to pursue.

YCAN gives youth like me the opportunity to soar and be heard about the real issues we face. It also gives us chance to have a positive impact on our community. YCAN helped me come out of my comfort zone and build communication skills, team building skills and how to incorporate my ideas with others. YCAN also helped me grow into a strong independent young female.”
- Aweng, YMCA Community Action Network program participant

YMCA Fellowship of Honour
TheYMCA Fellowship of Honour is the highest honour and most valued award in the YMCA in Canada. Volunteers are at the heart of the YMCA and the YMCA Fellowship of Honour is a way to celebrate their commitment and achievements. The YMCA Fellowship of Honour recognizes the outstanding YMCA volunteers and staff who have given tremendous leadership while strengthening and expanding capacity of the YMCA in Canada. Each nomination is judged on its own merits, based on the impact made on the YMCA Association and community.

Since 1981, 123 exceptional and distinguished individuals from across Canada have been appointed to the YMCA Fellowship of Honour for their contribution to the YMCA and community at the local, national and/or international level. Their stories show how these leaders have passed on a legacy of caring from one generation to the next, have inspired civic responsibility in others, and strengthened communities across the country.

The induction of YMCA leaders takes place every 3-4 years, under the vice-regal patronage of Her Excellency the Governor General of Canada. Individuals are honoured in one of two categories: A Companion Award recognizing outstanding national and international leadership and an Officer Award acknowledging local or regional leadership contribution.

Contact information
For more information on any of the initiatives above, please contact:

Peter Dinsdale
President & Chief Executive Officer
YMCA Canada
601-1867 Yonge Street
Toronto, Ontario M4S 1Y5
T: 416-967-9622 E: Peter.Dinsdale@ymca.ca