

The changing face of volunteerism

One of Canada's leading experts on volunteerism, Linda Graff, asks a thought-provoking question. What would communities look like without volunteers?

Having worked in the nonprofit sector for almost 30 years, Graff knows what the answer is and hopes to help organizations avoid a future without volunteers.

Graff's workshop on April 7, hosted by Volunteer Edmonton, explored how responding to trends, adapting to change and developing attractive roles is crucial to ensuring that people volunteer.

"The point is that volunteers are folks who represent the core resource we rely on," says Graff.

The presence of volunteers in virtually every aspect of community ranging from health, education, arts and culture, to sports and recreation, social services and more, demonstrates how important anticipating and adapting to change are.

Current statistics show that five per cent of Canadians do 67 per cent of the volunteer work. Given that these dedicated volunteers are now in their 70s and 80s, organizations can expect to see them



moving out of volunteering very soon. "In the next three to seven years, we will see a large exodus of the most deeply committed volunteers," Graff explains. "The next generation of volunteers will not want to do the same kind of work or put in the same kind of hours."

Short-term, episodic and fewer volunteer hours are characteristics of volunteers today. The challenge, Graff says, is to engage them with opportunities that are meaningful, relevant, interesting.

"It's time to start thinking about different ways to get people interested in volunteering," says Janice Bell, director of Volunteer Edmonton. "Organizations that don't make the necessary changes are in danger of folding."



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Nonprofit specialist Linda Graff, left, and Janice Bell, director of Volunteer Edmonton, pose together after a full-day workshop on how organizations can recruit and retain volunteers.

This means re-evaluating the kinds of volunteer positions available and creating new positions.

"We put parameters and limits on creativity. We have excuses like *it has always been that way* or *it has been successful in the past*. There are lots of things that keep us in the box and we need to be willing to step outside the lines," Graff says.

Consider introducing virtual volunteering, shorter term opportunities, using social media tools to reach a specific audience, assessing current screening

processes and finding ways to cut down on the time it takes to engage volunteers are all ways organizations can "step outside the box".

Graff hopes participants at the workshop walked away with a better understanding of how to start making changes with their volunteer programs.

"We need to look at what we can do and really take advantage of the wealth of capacity that exists within volunteers. The potential is certainly there for the future," she says.



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