

LEARNING FROM THE FIELD

Insights & Recommendations for
Volunteer Centres in Alberta



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Land Affirmation	16	Common Challenges and Emerging Needs
2	Executive Summary	18	Common Successes
3	Introduction	21	Recommendations
4	Study Approach and Methodology	22	Advocacy Priorities
6	Understanding Volunteer Centres	23	Development And Opportunity Areas for Volunteer Alberta
11	Contextualizing Volunteer Centres	24	References

As Volunteer Alberta continues our ongoing (un)learning journey, we see the increasing importance of reflecting on our ties to each other and the land. Our main office is situated on Treaty 6 Territory, in an area that holds many Indigenous names but is referred to by the Nehiyaw people as amiskwaciwâskahikan (ᐱᓄᑦᕿᕐᕈᕐᕋᐅᐸᐅᐃᐅᐅ) and colonially as Edmonton. Our staff, board, and work extend into Treaty 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10 Territories, and we affirm the importance of honouring these historic agreements as well as all future treaties. The land we call Alberta is the ancestral territory and present-day home of many Indigenous peoples, including the Nehiyaw, Dene, Iyârhe Nakoda, Anishinaabe, Niitsitapi, Inuit, and Métis. They have cared for and advocated for the lands, waters, and animals for many generations despite historical and ongoing harmful actions against their communities. We are grateful for their stewardship of this land, and as act of reconciliation and good will, it is our intention to ensure that our organization, along with the entire social impact/non-profit/voluntary sector, can become good partners in supporting the land and communities.

Inspired by Indigenous knowledge systems, we seek to become good organizational ancestors. In doing so we are committed to meaningful reflection and critiquing of our ways of knowing, being, and doing. To help communities thrive and illuminate good ways forward for the sector, we must recognize how colonial systems influence how Albertans perceive and participate in volunteerism and civic engagement. This includes considering the historical and ongoing barriers that exclude Indigenous people from meaningful engagement in our communities. In the spirit of reconciliation, we all have a responsibility to consider how our organizations can contribute to decolonized, inclusive, and equitable volunteer programming and take action to do no more harm. Volunteer Alberta is committed to meeting our responsibilities.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Alberta, volunteer centres link people to opportunities, support organizations with the tools and coordination they need, and help communities cultivate cultures of civic participation and belonging. They build trust, relationships, and shared systems that allow volunteerism to thrive. In this report, this collective work is referred to as volunteerism infrastructure—a form of social infrastructure that underpins civic participation, community connection, and collective wellbeing, making it possible for these conditions to grow and endure over time.

This research set out to answer a question: what does it mean to be a volunteer centre in Alberta today, and what roles can and should these organizations play as the province's volunteerism landscape continues to evolve? To explore this, Volunteer Alberta led a mixed-methods, community-based study between 2023 and 2025, drawing on an exploratory survey, a review of relevant literature, seventeen semi-structured interviews with nonprofit, municipal, and Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) staff, and learning circles with the Alberta Volunteer Centre Network.

The findings affirm that volunteer centres are trusted community connectors that bridge people to resources, services, and places of belonging. They also equip nonprofits, municipalities, and community groups with training, shared tools, and relationship-building support. The research reflects the reality that volunteerism is built and sustained collectively, through relationships, coordination, and intentional investment. Volunteer centres are central to this work and play a central role in helping civic engagement take root and flourish across Alberta's diverse communities.

INTRODUCTION

This research set out to better understand and articulate the purpose of volunteer centres, including the core values that shape their work and the roles they play in strengthening volunteerism and civic participation in their local communities. Spanning over two years of research and deep learning, the core objectives of this initiative were:

- To gather clear insights into the purpose and function of volunteer centres in a broad sense, and to better understand how they operate in the Albertan context.
- To explore how these organizations have adapted to recent social shifts and to surface their aspirations and priorities for the years ahead.
- To identify any opportunities for advocacy, inter-organizational support, or innovations that might leverage and strengthen the vital roles that Volunteer Centres serve in their communities.

Research Questions

- What does it mean to be a Volunteer Centre in Alberta today?
- What specific roles do different organizations play in their communities? How are they structured, and resourced? Who do they serve? Are there common challenges that need solving?
- What role can and should Volunteer Centres play in Alberta's evolving volunteerism landscape?
- How are these roles adapting in response to changes or patterns in current volunteering trends, social and political issues, and the needs of communities?
- Are there organizations, agencies, or groups that do not formally identify as Volunteer Centres, but function as community hubs and offer services Volunteer Centres typically provide?

Key Insights and Findings

- Recent years placed significant strain on communities across Alberta, as the COVID-19 pandemic and other intersecting crises increased demand for essential services while contributing to declines in formal volunteer participation and community engagement.
- While conditions have begun to improve, volunteer centres, nonprofit organizations and other service providers have recovered in different ways, adapting their work to reflect local needs, capacities, and available resources.
- As part of this recovery, various communities, local governments, and organizations in Alberta have returned to the "fundamentals" of community-building and have looked to refresh their approaches to engaging volunteers, which make up the backbone of local community events and the provision of essential social services.
- This work goes beyond promoting volunteering or filling roles; it also involves fostering a local culture of civic engagement, social connection, and shared responsibility.
- For many volunteer centres, recent years have emphasized strengthening community connections and cultivating the social infrastructure needed for local volunteerism to continue and thrive.

STUDY APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods approach. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for a broad scan of key trends, and deeper, contextual insights into the experiences of volunteer centres and similar organizations, or agencies, in different communities.

The study drew on four complementary research activities, designed to support an iterative and relational inquiry process:



1. An exploratory survey that identified trends in the everyday operations of volunteer centres, key challenges, successes, and funding sources.
2. A review of relevant literature that contextualized and conceptually defined volunteer centres, including their purpose, core functions, and the discourses that shape their work.
3. Semi-structured interviews with individuals who have varied experiences and expertise from the nonprofit sector, local municipalities, and Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) programs in Alberta.
4. Periodic learning circles and group discussions with the Alberta Volunteer Centre Network, which played a key role in shaping the questions and overall direction of this research.

Together, these activities allowed early findings to inform later stages of the research, deepening insight over time. This report will largely focus on discussing key findings from the qualitative interviews, but relevant discourses, analysis, data, and contextual information will be included as necessary.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who have direct experience working in or alongside volunteer centres and volunteer-engaging organizations. Participants reflected a range of organizational roles, governance models, and community contexts, including community size (by population).

8 interviews with representatives from nonprofit organizations

6 interviews with representatives from municipalities and FCSS programs

3 interviews with former executive directors of nonprofit organizations

Communities & Geographic Representation

2	Northern Alberta
1	Edmonton-based organization
3	Edmonton-area communities of varying sizes
2	Central Alberta
2	Calgary-area communities
2	Southern Alberta

Data Analysis

Interview data was analyzed using an inductive thematic approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' experiences rather than being imposed in advance. The analysis prioritized participants' descriptions of how volunteer centres operate, adapt, and respond within their community contexts.

Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to support data immersion and initial pattern identification. Open coding was conducted to capture key ideas, challenges, successes, and contextual factors described by participants. Codes were then grouped into broader categories, which were iteratively refined into thematic groupings. Throughout this process, themes were reviewed to ensure alignment with the research questions and consistency across cases. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme and preserve participants' voices within the findings.

Limitations

Findings from this study should be understood as a robust but partial snapshot of Alberta's volunteer centre landscape.

- Of the 22 known volunteer centres identified in Volunteer Alberta's directory, perspectives were gathered from 11 centres.
- The term "volunteer centre" did not resonate with all participants. Some organizations perform similar functions but do not identify with this language.
- The study does not capture all organizations, community groups, or informal networks that support volunteerism, community connection, or civic participation, many of which play important roles outside formal volunteer centre structures.

UNDERSTANDING VOLUNTEER CENTRES

Before turning to the study's key findings, this section establishes a shared understanding of the purpose and functions of volunteer centres. Drawing on existing definitions and sector discourse, it situates volunteer centres as part of the social infrastructure that supports local volunteering and volunteerism. It also begins to reflect how interview participants described and experienced this work in practice.

Volunteer centres are often known for their role in volunteer matching, but their contributions extend far beyond connecting individuals to opportunities. Cara Eaton (Volunteer Toronto) notes that Canada is home to just over 200 volunteer centres, each embedded within its own community context and mandated to support participation in ways that reflect local needs. Collectively, these organizations hold “wisdom on how to reduce social isolation, increase civic engagement, settle newcomers, improve health outcomes for seniors, and kick-start young people’s careers” (Eaton, 2025). At the same time, Eaton cautions against the assumption that volunteering is self-organizing or that it “just happens.” Sustaining volunteerism requires intentional coordination, ethical recruitment practices, and ongoing investment in relationships and systems.

Key Concept: Volunteering and Volunteerism Infrastructure

Within the volunteering literature, infrastructure is commonly used to describe the systems and supports that promote, sustain, and develop volunteer engagement. This includes volunteer placement and support, organizational capacity-building, information-sharing, and broader community conditions that encourage participation (Van den Bos, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, volunteerism infrastructure is understood in simplified terms as the strategies, systems, structures, processes, and relationships that help volunteering work and endure over time. This framing shifts attention away from individual acts of volunteering toward the conditions that make participation possible and sustainable.

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At the same time, interview participants expressed mixed reactions to the language of infrastructure. For some, the term felt rigid, overly technical, or too closely associated with top-down approaches that did not fully capture grassroots organizing, informal care, or community-led mobilization. As one interviewee remarked:

"I love the idea of social infrastructure, right? Because that makes sense. But then people don't always understand that it's not just places, that it's actually putting things in place for people to do the work of the community. Like these people are doing the work of the community."

Volunteer Centres as Community Connectors

Across interviews, one concept consistently resonated more strongly than others: community connectors. Participants repeatedly used this language to describe how volunteer centres function within their communities. One interviewee reflected:

"I associate so much of volunteer centres with community. So naturally I'm more drawn to the community work because that's also my particular role—it's very much community-based. But community connector to me appeals...I feel like that's something most people would understand, and I think that is very much what volunteer centres are doing as well."

Volunteer centres and organizations that support local volunteering were frequently described as intermediaries that connect people to community resources, networks, services, and third spaces where participation and belonging are cultivated. In many communities, valuable resources and capacities already exist. What is often needed are trusted connectors who can mobilize those resources, bridge relationships, and help people navigate pathways into community life. As one respondent remarked:

"Our big thing is being a connector...and if our community partners are seeing a gap in certain initiatives or services, sometimes they're like, hey, we're kind of stuck on this...what can the city do? And so then it's almost like we become this kind of middle person, but almost that advocate to council or to those departments and say, hey, this is what we're seeing. It's affecting...our community."

What Volunteer Centres in Alberta Do

Volunteer centres play a vital role in strengthening communities across Alberta by connecting volunteers with meaningful opportunities and supporting the organizations that rely on them. Their work encompasses six core areas: matching volunteers to opportunities; building the capacity of local organizations; delivering community programming; celebrating volunteerism; educating the public about volunteerism; and advocating for the volunteer sector. Together, these functions ensure volunteerism remains accessible, sustainable, and valued throughout the province.

MATCHING

1) Provide volunteer referrals and opportunity-matching systems or volunteering databases through platforms like Volunteer Connector or Better Impact, and offer referral services or directed 1:1 support where possible.

CAPACITY BUILDING

2) Technical support with policies and building organizational capacities by providing education, training, and coaching on capacity issues related to onboarding, screening, governance, recruitment tactics, etc.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING

3) Implement targeted community programming to support and engage volunteers from diverse identity groups (e.g., newcomers, youth, seniors, etc.) and volunteers with various ability needs.

CELEBRATION

4) Celebrate volunteerism and the contribution of volunteers through volunteer recognition events, National Volunteer Week events, social media campaigns, and various community events.

EDUCATION

5) Encourage people to volunteer by providing information about volunteerism and local opportunities through newsletters, volunteer fairs, community round tables, and other community events.

ADVOCACY

6) Leadership and advocacy on issues relating to volunteerism by joining or convening advocacy discussions, facilitating partnerships with funders, governments, local community groups, schools, and other nonprofits to mobilize collective action.

Distinguishing Between Nonprofits and Municipality-Led Volunteer Centres

This research focuses on two primary types of organizations that support local volunteering: nonprofit organizations and municipality-led agencies operating through a Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) program (see page 10 for background information). While these entities often share similar goals related to volunteering and community wellbeing, they operate within different structures, funding environments, and sets of priorities and constraints. The table below outlines key differences between the two.

Overview of Key Differences Between Nonprofit and Municipal-Led Volunteer Centres

	Municipality-Led Agencies (FCSS)	Nonprofits
Strategic Alignment	Programming and core operational activities are shaped by City Council and municipal priorities, municipal community wellbeing frameworks, and provincial FCSS requirements.	Programming and core operational activities are shaped by organizational mission. Priorities often includes broader sector advocacy.
Capacity Structure	Capacity for volunteer-related work depends on municipal department, approved scope, staffing, and how responsibilities are distributed across teams.	Capacity shaped by funding and resources available.
Focus of Work	Focus on volunteerism work is within community development. While this varied by community, several municipal representatives identified supporting local volunteering as their primary role. This focus often provided more capacity and resources dedicated specifically for volunteer engagement initiatives.	In addition to volunteerism and community needs, several nonprofits shared that they are engaged in advocacy efforts for broader sector issues impacting nonprofits including funding and workforce development.

Continued...

	Municipality-Led Agencies (FCSS)	Nonprofits
Sector Dynamics	Operates within a more centralized coordination, with less direct competition for funding.	Operates within a more competitive funding landscape, with some risk of duplicated services. Some nonprofits cited limited opportunities for collaboration and the rise of fee-for-service consulting projects.
Funding Environment	Funding is tied to municipal budgets, Council approval, and FCSS guidelines. Participants cited that municipal funding structures provided some predictable financial stability, but funding remains influenced by local priorities and budget cycles.	Funding relies on a combination of grants, contracts, fundraising, and donations. Several nonprofit respondents cited this reliance on project-specific revenue as a recurring challenge, and particularly for smaller organizations, who face greater limits on their ability to plan for long-term sustainability.

Background: Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)

Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) is a province-wide program supporting locally determined initiatives that strengthen individual, family, and community well-being throughout Alberta. Through preventive, community-based initiatives, FCSS builds a community's capacity to navigate challenges and respond effectively in the event of crises.

Municipalities allocate FCSS funds toward primary prevention (addressing root causes and strengthening community-wide protective factors) and secondary prevention (supporting individuals or groups at risk before issues escalate). The program operates as a provincially legislated 80/20 funding partnership between the Government of Alberta and participating municipalities or Métis Settlements.

Because municipalities determine local priorities within provincial guidelines, the way a FCSS program is implemented can significantly shape how communities support volunteerism, social connection, and civic engagement.

CONTEXTUALIZING VOLUNTEER CENTRES

Across interviews, participants emphasized that there is no single approach to supporting volunteerism that works everywhere, and every volunteer centre will function just a bit differently from others depending on their community context. Ultimately, what volunteer centres can accomplish will depend greatly on the interplay between local needs, organizational capacities, available resources, levels of community mobilization, and the local effects of demographic or other broader social trends.

As one participant explained:

“The needs of the community, the size of the community, the amount of dollars they get, the organizations that already exist [affect what municipalities are able to do]. If there's an organization that exists that is doing a food bank, well, why would you do it yourself?”

The table below summarizes the key themes and subthemes identified through participant interviews. These themes highlight the contextual factors that influence how volunteer centres operate and reflect participants' understandings of the conditions shaping volunteer centres' roles, capacities, successes, and limitations across different community contexts.

Table: Factors that shape the capacities, accomplishments, and limitations of volunteer centres.

Themes & Subthemes	Examples of Supporting Quotes
Theme 1: Every community has unique needs and approaches to fostering community wellbeing	
Understanding the local and unique needs of communities impacts the strategies, actions, and overall operations of volunteer centres	“So identifying the needs, and again, mine was based on the assumption that every person, every organization and every city, has needs and I think you have to see that in the strategy was based on everybody has a need and everybody has something to give and so by connecting people to those that need certain things and those that can give, we're actually fulfilling both like both people or both entities, right?” [006]
The size of communities impacts service demands, resource distribution, organizational capacities and inter-organizational collaborations	“Why the structure is a bit different [for some organizations]: It's just due to size. So you'll probably find [smaller] municipalities... do a lot of their own stuff. They don't grant out often to other organizations because they're so small. They can literally run a volunteer centre, a senior centre, the food bank...within the FCSS. They just do it all. They run all the youth programming. They do everything in-house... They provide the programming, the services or what have you that is needed in the community because they don't have other organizations that do that work as they get bigger.” [008]

Themes & Subthemes	Examples of Supporting Quotes
Service shortages and volunteer deficits requires organizations to adapt their processes, services, and initiatives	"And now, of course, we have a bit more of a volunteer crunch. And so issues and concerns and questions around volunteering and volunteerism have been creeping up in the city. So we're just trying to figure out what the needs are and what we have capacity to do." [008]
The specific service demands and crises volunteer centres address are often unique to their local community context	"As of right now, unfortunately, even like our Youth shelter I believe is gonna be shut down because they lost funding. And... they used to have volunteers come in and do the basic life skills to do more of that mentorship. Well, that program is no longer going to exist. Staff are being let go, and so then it's like how do we pivot to still provide services with hopefully leaning on volunteers? So that's again another conversation that's been around the table, for some of those services needing volunteers." [009]
As part of overall community wellbeing and social recovery, communities and municipalities may update or implement community wellbeing plans and strategies	"We have four key focus areas within our strategy for volunteerism: increasing community participation by connecting people to diverse and inclusive volunteer opportunities; fostering leadership development within our community; supporting organizations like non-profits that utilize volunteers, building their capacity so that they can support volunteers better, and then the 4th focus area is enhancing awareness, so increasing the benefits of volunteering, and raising the profile of volunteerism and civic engagement." [007]
Strategies directly influence the resources, structures, and overall direction organizations can take to implement initiatives supporting local volunteerism	"We did community engagement conversations as well, so it was really neat that volunteerism did come up, right? And so this is as well the first document post COVID for us. So then a lot of the first initial conversation, I think it really started with that mentality of like not only how do we get our volunteers back, it was a lot of things like it's the how do we reconnect with folks again, how do we provide the services again that we weren't necessarily providing?" [009] "Our community social needs document is now called the community social road map. And so taking all of those things together to say, OK, well, what did the community say about this? How do we need to move forward? So we're just really starting that process because we just are digging into the new, road map and, and sort of how we're going to activate all of that." [008]

Themes & Subthemes	Examples of Supporting Quotes
Theme 2: Broader trends and social shifts shape local needs that volunteer centres respond to	
The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a major contextual factor influencing volunteer centres in recent years. Participants described how the pandemic strained organizational capacity while increasing demand for services. Recovery is uneven across communities, reflecting differences in local circumstances and resources. While some organizations have rebuilt capacity relatively quickly, others are still working to stabilize operations and adapt to changing conditions	"As we all know, volunteerism was hit hard by the pandemic in many ways. There was all this really great stuff happening, that we talked about with connecting people doing other things, but lots of the stuff that the organization was doing couldn't carry on. And so, there was a slump, and when everybody else started pulling themselves out of their slump, this organization didn't... [but] I think the organization is in a way healthier spot now." [002] "I think everything was fine...and then COVID happens and then the all the agencies ended up with additional volunteer issues after COVID that they aren't necessarily able to resolve on their own and don't have the capacity to resolve on their own." [008] "I don't necessarily agree that there's a huge volunteer shortage...we've recovered well. The issue is getting organizations to think differently...So I don't necessarily agree that we have this huge volunteer shortage. I got the people I talked to so committed, so dedicated, so passionate. They're not in it for anything other than to give back to their communities." [007] "So my overall sense is that [volunteering] is making a comeback. I feel like it did really slow down obviously before COVID a little bit because people are getting caught up in their lives, right? They're so caught up in what they're doing and then it definitely was a lot of the seniors doing all the volunteering. But what I have seen gradually more and more is people are coming out people, the volunteer need is bigger and better or more than ever." [006]
Local demographic trends shape evolving community needs, prompting volunteer centres to adapt their services and initiatives in response	"Now the biggest challenge is the influx of newcomers because they utilize a lot of the nonprofit services and those organizations weren't prepared for it. Also finding them employment in a community where there isn't necessarily a lot of employment options. Tying that need to develop skills for Canadian job market to skill development in volunteerism" [001] "So we receive a lot of post-secondary requests to learn more information. And also in the past few years a lot more instructors, both college and university are looking at as part of their school programs, asking their students to do volunteer opportunities." [003]

Themes & Subthemes	Examples of Supporting Quotes
Broader shifts in volunteer participation and community engagement require local organizations to adapt, with volunteer centres often providing guidance and support through this transition	"Volunteers want something different. The volunteers that were volunteering and no longer volunteering. So it's not just like we have this base of volunteers, we just call them, they come out, they do their thing. It's having to start from scratch and under a new set of rules." [008] "It was changing way before the pandemic. And I'm not sure I have the answer of why the change, but I think some of it was that service groups were diminishing, specifically in our rural community...And I think, you know, we're so over-scheduled and that as a society that sometimes we're just busy being busy, and so if there isn't an ask, people won't just put their hand up. Because they're busy being busy." [005]
The rise of digital volunteering requires organizations to develop new infrastructure and approaches to effectively support virtual volunteer opportunities	"Virtual volunteering, helps with building capacities that communities might not be able to provide...For foreign professionals, this could be something really valuable; like with something such as translation, warm-calling who are fluent in other languages and have a strong understanding of the culture." [010] "There's been a lot of cost-saving [with virtual], but you do miss a lot from in-person volunteering, like the relationship-building, because online it's so transactional. You can't sit in the hallway and walk together, so, the relationships aren't built the same way. Volunteerism is relationship-building by-and-large. Even when you're not interacting with people you're still building relationships with the land, with animals, and abstract concepts like art. And you lose that alignment." [003] "And I think technology has been fabulous for volunteer organizations that are regional or provincial or national or international because you can connect with folks on a regular basis without huge travel costs and time commitment. But I also see that there has been some human connection that possibly was the passion of some of those groups that is no longer there." [002]
Theme 3: Intersectoral supports and collaborations (government supports, funding, sponsorships, etc.) directly affect organizational capacities	
In several communities, the implementation of the FCSS program influences how volunteering and volunteerism are supported, as it establishes key partnerships between local governments and community organizations	"And so that's the beauty that I see, where FCSS has that connection right now where [volunteerism] fits with the municipality's priorities, and because it fits with municipal priorities we're able to merge both of them and now provide a whole, almost year-long series of [volunteerism-related] initiatives." [009] "FCSS is all related to prevention, so primary and secondary prevention... And within FCSS, volunteerism is a pretty big pillar and is something that can be funded because it helps build community connectedness. It, can help people with things like social isolation and what have you, and kind of prevents some of those issues as a root cause just purely from actually volunteering." [008]

Themes & Subthemes	Examples of Supporting Quotes
The availability of corporate sponsorships can provide volunteer centres with further capacity to support local events and promotional activities	"We've been so fortunate for a lot of our events like Servus...they've been a great sponsor for us to reduce some things." "Canadian Tire actually does gives us \$10,000 worth of sponsorships. So they give us, we have [community event] lawn chairs so that you can sit and watch all the entertainment and stuff, but they also give us all sorts of items for a silent auction again to bring people in and then all proceeds go to a designated nonprofit. So everything is just directed at promotion, getting people out to learn and then just celebrating nonprofits and trying to connect the public with the organizations and they all love it."
Theme 4: Unique capacities and motivations influence the services, programs, and initiatives organizations implement	
Organizations assess and adapt their programs to secure funding and support	"For the past two years, it's really been about figuring out the successes of the work, how to build on those, what are the challenges in our community and how do we address those? How do we demonstrate to our mayor and council that continuing to fund us makes sense for this community?" [002]
Lived experience will inform how individuals approach relationship-building and community work	"I listen for context, I listen to build relationships, that's just who I am, but then I worked at the hospital and learning that I had to work with nurses and build connections to make sure that people would work with me in a certain way. So how I would reach out and talk to them and build team with not actually being on site. Then as my kids grew up, our family became a volunteer family for a nonprofit raising money for Stars Air Ambulance and actually understanding the impact of what people can do really opened my eyes." [006]

Overall, these themes highlight the contextual factors that shape the work of volunteer centres. Each community has distinct needs and realities, and volunteer centres often adapt their roles accordingly. The next sections explore the common threads that emerge across these diverse contexts, including shared challenges, recurring successes, and the opportunities that illustrate the vital roles volunteer centres play in nourishing the wellbeing of their communities.

COMMON CHALLENGES AND EMERGING NEEDS

While volunteer centres operate in diverse community contexts, interview participants identified several challenges that cut across geography, organizational structure, and mandate. These challenges are not isolated issues but interconnected pressures shaped by funding environments, changing volunteer expectations, staffing realities, and broader social trends. Together, they highlight both persistent vulnerabilities within the volunteer ecosystem and emerging needs that are likely to shape the future of volunteer centres..

Resource Constraints and Underfunding

Across interviews, resource instability surfaced as one of the most consistent and consequential challenges, especially for nonprofit respondents. Dependence on multiple project-specific revenue sources such as grants, contracts, fundraising, and donations meant that some organizations, particularly smaller ones, were limited in their ability to plan for long-term sustainability. Participants described how funding cuts, short-term grants, and restrictive funding guidelines constrained organizations' ability to invest in operational or administrative capacities.

In some cases, volunteer centres had reduced services or closed altogether due to funding instability, creating significant gaps in local volunteer coordination and support.

"Certainly some of our social profits have seen some big funding hits—they are answering that need for organizations that lost funding, struggling with their programming. A lot of the funding loss happened this year (2025) and it was big and all at once." [001]

"It's not easy to find core operating dollars for a volunteer centre if your municipal government isn't the one supporting you. We've looked around and can get corporate sponsorship for an event or a thing they're doing but not to pay staff and keep the lights on. There isn't really anything else around that would be a big enough source of funding to keep us open if the municipality decides we're not a priority." [002]

Shifting Trends in Volunteerism and Organizational Response

Recent shifts in volunteering and volunteerism trends (e.g., higher interest in short-term flexible roles, demographic changes) have required volunteer-engaging organizations to revisit their processes, policies, and engagement practices. In response, many volunteer centres have shifted or expanded supports such as learning workshops, coaching, consultation services to help organizations strengthen their volunteer management practices and adapt to changing patterns of volunteer engagement. At the same time, many volunteer-engaging organizations reduced or eliminated dedicated volunteer management roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing reliance on volunteer centres for support and expertise.

“Another problem is volunteers not showing up to shifts—having no problem getting people to sign up, but struggling to get people to show up. Going to focus on how they can impart the importance of showing up, don’t think the impact of those shifts and making sure they attend is there—people impulsively signing up, excited in the moment, not realizing they have committed to something. Maybe it’s a language barrier. Doing some training on volunteer manager side to do phone calls a couple days ahead of shifts, or setting up a texting service to alert people about upcoming shifts. But with less volunteer managers, it’s hard to coordinate the tasking of these things. It’s not something FCSS wants to take on—some of the onus should be on the organization itself.” [001]

“As you know, a lot of organizations that had volunteer managers got rid of those volunteer managers during COVID and now they don’t have the funding to bring them back.” [008]

Capacity Gaps

Beyond funding constraints, many interviewees described broader capacity limitations that affect their ability to fulfill their mandates. Limited staffing, competing organizational priorities, and overlapping responsibilities often require volunteer centres to make difficult decisions about what they can reasonably sustain. These gaps can restrict innovation, reduce service offerings, and limit the depth of support available to community partners.

“If I could, I probably could focus on just volunteerism. And this is just one part—it’s a very small part. So there’s so much out there of resources that I think would provide such a wealth to anyone in a role like this. It can be a full time position for sure...Even focusing on just the volunteer piece. That’s like one part of my role in this community well-being plan. I’m like this could be a full time job, having the connections and being a connector with other cities and meeting others that do specifically this role.” [009]

Adapting to Change

Participants also reflected on the difficulty of adapting long-standing systems and practices to meet evolving community needs. In some cases, existing policies, procedures, and practices can unintentionally create barriers for volunteers. Institutional habits, policy requirements, and administrative processes can sometimes slow needed change. Navigating this tension between stability and adaptability remains an ongoing challenge for volunteer centres supporting other volunteer-engaging organizations.

“How will you grow if you don’t want to bring in new people, and folks with different perspectives... The people you’re serving are not represented here.” [010]

“Then I talked to other organizations and they’re still caught up in like thinking they need to, you know, the risk management piece...So like, it doesn’t make sense out here to say no to every volunteer under the age of 16. You know, yes, we get it from a risk and liability perspective. That’s still a bit of a barrier...But is there a way you can work around that? Like, can they come in with an adult? And you know, like, so having that flexibility. So get back to the basics, look at the situation that’s in front of you. Is this truly a risk?” [010]

Recognition and Public Awareness

Several participants identified continued recognition of the importance of volunteerism and civic engagement as a priority. Beyond celebrating individual volunteers, participants emphasized the need for sustained public education that highlights the systems, relationships, and labour required to make volunteering possible. They highlighted the importance of building greater public awareness of the value and impact of volunteerism within communities.

"It's hard to make people understand the depth of volunteering. When you use the word volunteer, they don't actually understand what a volunteer is, right? So it's really just making people understand the depth of volunteerism and what would communities look like if we didn't have it." [006]

COMMON SUCCESSES

Despite the challenges identified, participants also described meaningful areas of shared success. Across diverse contexts, volunteer centres demonstrated strong relational capacity, adaptability, and responsiveness to local needs. These successes were most evident where organizations acted as connectors and capacity-builders strengthening local volunteer ecosystems while responding to local priorities and resource realities.

Communicating the Value of Volunteering and Volunteerism

Interview participants consistently highlighted efforts to communicate the importance of volunteering not only as an individual act of service, but also as a driver of social connection, belonging, and community resilience. Through storytelling, recognition initiatives, public campaigns, and partnerships, volunteer centres have worked to elevate the visibility of volunteer contributions and reinforce the broader social value of civic participation.

"Well, thanks to Volunteer Alberta's amazing support for National Volunteer Week—the community volunteer recognition—my favourite week of the year is National Volunteer Week. So, I think that's such an important role for volunteer centres to be able to externally recognize in the community volunteers and the importance of volunteerism as well." [002]

"Every 3 months we have a group activity related to volunteerism (ex. Group gift wrapping, painting pottery bowls for a festival, etc.)...We also have a Monthly newsletter for volunteers to share impact stories and showcase upcoming opportunities and training." [001]

"We have all sorts of fun activities and lots of other fun face painting and family activities and seniors activities. So the idea is that everybody comes, all the nonprofits that have a table bring all of their volunteers are up to 20. So we're also thanking them, the boards and their teams. And then we bring the public in and the nonprofits in so that we can all celebrate. So it's just a way of making everybody understand... and it's about volunteering and thanking volunteers." [006]

Community Connections and Collaboration

Many organizations described their work as fundamentally relational, acting as connectors, convenors, and stewards of community relationships. Beyond facilitating referrals or sharing resources, volunteer centres play an ongoing role in maintaining trust and fostering collaboration among funders, partners, and community stakeholders. This connective function was especially vital in smaller or resource-constrained communities, where coordination and relationship-building are essential to sustaining volunteer engagement. Participants also emphasized that volunteering creates spaces for human connection and helps meet a basic need for belonging.

"We play the key role in maintaining relationships with stakeholders like funders." [002]

"I'm really excited about this Volunteer Leadership program that we're developing because I think it's got so many tie-ins to our community social development department it's kind of going at this community wellbeing perspective from different angles. So you know we have neighborhood connectors, we're recruiting and trying to get neighbours to take care of neighbours. And then I have this Volunteer Leadership program that's going to come in. Maybe some of those connectors will take some of that and then be able to take those skills back to their neighborhood." [007]

"People do want to gather as a family. People do want to connect. People actually do need to connect, right? So volunteering and creating these environments is what people need now in this world of isolation and on your computer all the time, right? People need to be. Yes, they do want to volunteer on their computer, 'cause that's something too. But human connection, whether it's online or whatever, connecting to something or someone is a basic need, a human basic need." [006]

Capacity-Building and Support

Capacity-building emerged as a core and highly valued function across contexts. This work included training workshops, educational supports, and guidance related to volunteer recruitment, onboarding, retention, and engagement.

While direct volunteer management support within individual organizations was less common due to capacity constraints, participants emphasized that even modest interventions—such as sharing tools, offering advice, or facilitating peer learning—can strengthen organizational capacity and have a meaningful, lasting impact.

"For capacity building, I think a lot of that is the workshops and training are really trying to offer information that is of use nonprofits and helpful, especially organizational training. I've noticed this past year there's been more volunteer coordinators starting who are brand new the sector." [003]

"So, once we educated them on how they can do it and gave them tools, then they started to build and I can definitely tell you that my boards that we're working with the strong workshops on how to engage, and then the policies and giving them templates has really helped them build from the community." [006]

Programming, Membership, and Advocacy

Many volunteer centres developed programming, and member benefits (where applicable) tailored to specific community needs, including volunteer recognition initiatives, leadership development, newcomer engagement, and youth-focused programming. These efforts were shaped by local priorities and delivered in ways that reflected community context and capacity.

Advocacy was also identified as an important, though often under-resourced, role. This included raising awareness of the value of volunteering, contributing to local planning and policy conversations, and advocating for sustained investment in volunteerism and community wellbeing.

“So our membership program is always expanding. But I would say the combination of the promotion, social media promotion, the column, and the business connections as well, they're all tied into some of the membership programs and benefits that members are looking for.” [002]

RECOMMENDATIONS

As Albertan communities continue to renew their commitments to community wellbeing and civic participation, supporting volunteer centres and investing in the social conditions that enable volunteer participation will be essential to sustaining healthy communities across the province.

Volunteerism is cultivated through relationships, coordination, trust, and intention. This requires sustained investment, cross-sector collaboration, and a broader understanding of how volunteering contributes to social connectedness and community resilience.

Reinforcing volunteer infrastructure requires shared responsibility across governments, funders, volunteer centres, and volunteer-engaging organizations. The following recommendations are actions that volunteer centres and volunteer-engaging organizations can take on their own to strengthen volunteerism and community wellbeing.

FOR VOLUNTEER CENTRES

- Continue communicating the social, civic, and wellbeing impacts of volunteerism, shifting narratives from “volunteer labour” to community connection, care, and collective wellbeing.
- Strengthen capacity-building supports for volunteer-engaging organizations, including:
 - Volunteer engagement and management practices
 - Fund development, sustainability, and advocacy
 - Collaboration, relationship-building, and community consultation
- Develop volunteer-focused resources that emphasize community connection, and meaningful participation, flexibility, and inclusion, particularly for volunteers with limited time, mobility, or access to traditional pathways.
- Collect and share learnings and evidence to support advocacy at local, regional, and provincial levels.
- Share resources, practices, and tools with other volunteer centres as fitting to adapt to their own local contexts.
- Value and acknowledge informal and emerging forms of engagement, and explore ways to welcome and recognize contributions without forcing them into rigid or institutionalized structures.

FOR VOLUNTEER-ENGAGING ORGANIZATIONS

- Recognize that sustaining volunteerism infrastructure requires a collective, community-wide effort, and engaging collaboratively with volunteer centres, municipalities, and peer organizations.
- Support equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion through intentional outreach, inclusive role design, accessible systems, and inclusive practices.
- Offer a range of volunteer opportunities that vary in structure, time commitment, and participation style, reflecting changing volunteer expectations and capacities.
- Review and streamline systems and processes to reduce barriers to participation, including onboarding requirements, screening protocols, and administrative procedures.
- Invest in volunteer management capacity, recognizing that effective volunteer engagement requires skills, time, and resources.

ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

Advocacy priorities are issues that volunteer centres, volunteer-engaging organizations, and the broader sector can champion collectively, particularly with governments and funders. The following advocacy priorities reflect common themes identified across interviews and highlight areas where greater recognition, investment, and collective action are needed.

1. Recognize volunteer infrastructure as essential community infrastructure

Volunteer centres play a critical role in supporting volunteer engagement, organizational capacity, social connectedness, and community wellbeing. Just as communities invest physical and social infrastructure such as transportation, healthcare, recreation, and education systems, investment in volunteer infrastructure is needed to support healthy, connected, and resilient communities. Volunteer infrastructure should be recognized as a public good rather than solely as a project-based expense.

2. Advocate for stable and sustainable funding models

Short-term and project-based funding limits long-term planning, organizational stability, and the ability to respond to emerging community needs. Sustained operational funding is needed to support the ongoing work of volunteer centres.

3. Promote greater public understanding of the value of volunteerism

Volunteerism contributes to social connection, civic participation, belonging, resilience, and community wellbeing. Public awareness efforts should communicate both the value of volunteer contributions and the infrastructure required to support them.

DEVELOPMENT AND OPPORTUNITY AREAS FOR VOLUNTEER ALBERTA

This research points to a number of areas where further development, learning, and coordination could strengthen the volunteer infrastructure of Volunteer Centres and the communities they serve across Alberta. The opportunity areas outlined below are offered as emerging insights and directions for further exploration. They highlight potential pathways for strengthening volunteer infrastructure over time, informed by evolving community needs and practice-based learning.

A Consolidated Volunteer Engagement Workbook

A comprehensive, practical resource that brings together evidence-informed methodologies, tools, and practical guidance for volunteer recruitment, retention, and meaningful volunteer engagement. This workbook could include:

- Evidence-informed approaches to volunteer engagement and management
- Practical templates for onboarding, screening, and role design
- Tools for engaging diverse volunteers and reducing participation barriers
- Strategies for supporting volunteer wellbeing, fostering belonging, and creating positive volunteer experiences

Further Data and Research on the Impact of Volunteering and Civic Engagement

Build on existing research that helps organizations understand, and communicate, the impact of volunteering and civic engagement to community wellbeing. This work can strengthen sector capacity to make the case for encouraging local volunteerism, secure funding, and mobilize public support. Areas of value can include:

- Annual or periodic snapshots: What does volunteering look like year-to-year in Alberta?
- Community-level impact: What is the value of volunteering for neighbourhoods, community wellbeing, and civic participation?
- Narrative-ready insights for members, funders, municipalities, and sector partners
- Mixed-method data sources, including quantitative indicators, qualitative stories, informal volunteerism metrics, and place-based community data
- Opt-in data infrastructure that enables network partners to access real-time or seasonal volunteerism trends

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