

Did the Pandemic Kill Volunteering?

By Evelyne Asselin

MOST NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS in Calgary would tell you that the pandemic has transformed how people offer their time to help their community. According to a 2022 Statistics Canada survey, 65% of Canadian non-profit organizations reported not having enough volunteers, and nearly 36% had issues retaining them. Meanwhile, the need for volunteers is increasing.

The situation in Inglewood is no different; some organizations are still struggling, while others have had to adapt.

"We almost never fill all of the volunteer shifts for any given event or activity," confirms Talia Potter, Events and volunteer manager for the Inglewood Community Association (ICA), "Generally, we are running anywhere from one to five short."

Potter has overseen the ICA volunteer program for over three years and has worked closely with volunteers through many different organizations in the city for the last 20 years. "People have moved away over time from volunteering for altruistic reasons, and it's much more transactional now," she remarks. "As COVID took away our habits of getting involved, people just haven't returned to volunteering in the same capacity."

At the Alexandra Centre Society (ACS), another Inglewood non-profit that relies on volunteers, they agree that more attention needs to be given to their volunteer program. "It's not harder [to find volunteers], you just have to explain the opportunities more and look for the volunteers—they don't approach us," says ACS Executive Director Debbie Short. "The time commitment is different; a lot more older people are offering, versus the younger crowd."

Although not all organizations in Inglewood struggle to fill volunteer positions, many have had to make changes to survive.

"We do have a waitlist for some roles, such as the Museum Attendant program, but we

are always in need of event and gardening volunteers," explains Tereasa Maillie, Public Programs and Partnerships Coordinator at The Confluence. Over 80 volunteers participated in their program last year.

we met during recruitment, there was this very interesting shift towards skilled volunteering as opposed to just volunteering for a certain organization that you have affinity with, but more so looking for something

that will maybe help your resume, your development, or something that you really feel passionate about doing," Alvarez says.

The team also noticed that some people are seeking shorter engagements, more spontaneous roles versus consistent ones. Others are passionate about helping their community but don't consider themselves volunteers, meaning they might not be accounted for in the statistics.

"So what we did in the research was actually just displacing that word entirely, and replacing it with something like 'showing up for your community' or 'helping

each other,'" explains Alvarez. "That doesn't mean that people aren't helping at all. We've heard a lot of mutual aid examples, —just lending a room, going on grocery runs for people who can't go out by themselves—those little things. But again, they're not framing it as volunteering because it's not within the confines of the formality of going through an organization per se."

The professionalization of volunteering is fairly recent, with volunteer service programs appearing around the mid-1800s. Helping one another as humans, however, dates back 150,000 to 200,000 years, explained social anthropologist Ivy Staker of Dalhousie University during an interview with Volunteer Alberta.

Struggling organizations may gain by changing their approach to volunteers in this evolving world.

"Technology is everything now," explains Erin Navarro, Senior Coordinator of Learning and Resources for Volunteer Alberta. "Every volunteer can go search for any cause they're interested in and have 10, 20, 30 orga-



Claire O'Brien shows volunteers how to adjust shifting gears on a bicycle.

"We lost all of our volunteers and had to rebuild the entire program, but it is very robust now, with so many committed volunteers," Maillie explains. "We now have a diverse group of volunteers from all backgrounds who are looking for flexible shifts—not necessarily the same time every week. People also don't want to be saddled with minimum hours; they want more control over when and how they engage with The Confluence."

Volunteering or Giving a Hand?

The worrying statistics from 2022 prompted the non-profit Volunteer Alberta and its partners to dig deeper into their meaning through ethnographic research. Are people really unwilling to offer their time anymore? Although the (Re)Engaged research project is far from completion, some answers are emerging, according to Andres Alvarez, Research and Knowledge Mobilization Specialist for Volunteer Alberta.

"In short conversations with people that

nizations right there. So there's a competition. It matters how you talk about your volunteer roles. It's really important for volunteers to understand and for you to communicate how it makes an impact. If that connection isn't there, they can easily move on to the next organization."

"It's not about destroying or rebuilding," says Alvarez, "it's about flipping the narrative or coming up with different positions updated to the times we live in—positions that offer certain flexibility because of the time constraints and levels of stress that younger people are going through right now."

Success Stories in the Hood

Some organizations in Inglewood are already applying these principles, either by default or by design. Some even have waitlists.

Organizations that offer skilled volunteering opportunities seem to have an advantage. Programs like fixing donated bikes at Two Wheel View, gaining work experience as a young person or immigrant at a gallery like Esker Foundation, or helping kids read at the Little Red Reading House, are thriving.

"A lot of people who are looking to get into a profession working with kids—like early childhood educators or those working in human service fields—are looking for that experience," explains Parisa Radmanesh, coordinator at the Little Red Reading House, who says 30 to 35 people contact her for volunteer opportunities.

"We connect our volunteers with community partners and opportunities for career growth," adds Noor Sayadi, Public Engagement and Volunteer Coordinator at Esker Foundation.

"The best way to give to not for profits is to volunteer your time, that is the most precious gift you can give. Our volunteers shape who we are and if they have ideas for programs we run with it!"

**Debbie Short, Executive Director
at the Alexandra Centre Society**

"This also means providing access to the Esker team's knowledge and expertise to support our volunteers in their personal and career goals, and offering unique and rewarding volunteer opportunities. I try to constantly develop and flesh out roles for volunteers based on our support needs and on the volunteers' skills and interests, within programs and in collaboration with other departments at Esker."

YW Calgary Volunteer Coordinator Rhonda Risebrough agrees that her role is to adapt to the volunteers' needs.

"If people don't see a position that suits them at the moment, they're always welcome to email me," she says. "We can have a dis-

cussion about their interests, skills, and time commitments, and find something that works for them."

After the pandemic, the YW also created virtual volunteer opportunities to better suit an active population who might not have the time to travel to their facility.

Two Wheel View Community Engagement Coordinator Claire O'Brien says they've also gone above and beyond to ensure volunteers feel part of a community.

"Every time a volunteer comes in, we start with an opening circle. Every time, no matter what. We go around the room, say our names, introduce ourselves, and do what we call a 'weather check.' So, it's this intentional connection. Things like this help people get to know each other and also help people feel like they're really seen here, and that we want to get to know them."

Like many other successful organizations, there's no minimum number of hours required once someone signs up to volunteer.

So, if you've been hesitant to sign up and give your time, know that most organizations are very flexible in this post-pandemic world. Even if the word "volunteer" itself seems heavy to bear, at the end of the day, it's just helping out.

"Volunteering, in a lot of ways, hasn't changed at all," concludes Erin Navarro of Volunteer Alberta. "Before we ever talked about it as volunteering, it was about relationship and community and collaboration."

Volunteer Opportunities in Inglewood

Looking to volunteer in Inglewood? Check out the following organizations

- Your Inglewood Community Association! - Many roles available
- The Confluence - In need of events and gardening volunteers
- Two-Wheel View - New roles available
- The Alexandra Centre Society
- Esker Foundation - Waitlist, accepts new volunteers occasionally
- Little Red Reading House - Waitlist but looking for local volunteers
- YW Calgary
- Calgary Folk Music Festival/Festival Hall/Block Heater
- Music Mile
- Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo
- Lantern Church
- Silver Threads
- Rhubarb Patch
- Woods Homes/YCAP
- RCA (Ramsay Community Association)
- The Inglewood Bird Sanctuary (The City of Calgary)
- Bow Habitat Station

Unofficial Volunteering Opportunities

- Sidewalk and yard care (shoveling, mowing, etc.)
- Offer rides to neighbors with vehicles for grocery trips
- Childcare
- Supper clubs
- New parent/baby visits
- Meal prep and deliveries