



Learning from the Field

Insights & Recommendations for Volunteer Centres in Alberta

BACKGROUND

This research overview presents key insights and recommendations from a mixed-methods, community-based study led by Volunteer Alberta from 2023 to 2025. The study endeavored 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.

The core objectives of this initiative were:

- 1) To gather clear insights into the purpose and function of volunteer centres in a broad sense, but more empathically, to better understand how they operate in the Albertan context.
- 2) To better understand the key characteristics, realities, successes, and challenges experienced by volunteer centres in Alberta over the past two years.
- 3) To explore how these organizations have adapted to recent social shifts and to surface their aspirations and priorities for the years ahead.
- 4) To identify any causes for advocacy, inter-organizational support, or innovations that might leverage and strengthen the vital roles that Volunteer Centres serve in their communities.

RESEARCH DESIGN & PARTICIPANTS

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 in 2023 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 in 2025 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.

COMMUNITIES & GEOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

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 were with representatives from nonprofit organizations**
- **6 interviews were with representatives from municipalities and FCSS programs**
- **3 interview were with former executive directors of nonprofit organizations**

Note: In cases where multiple interviewees represented the same organization or community, the community was counted only once.



KEY 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.**

VOLUNTEERING INFRASTRUCTURE

Within volunteering literature, “infrastructure” is 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 this study, **volunteerism infrastructure** is understood as the strategies, systems, structures, processes, and relationships that help volunteering work and endure over time.

As *Volunteer Toronto* cautions in a 2025 article, “volunteering doesn’t just happen.” They emphasize that community enablers, such as volunteer centres, play a critical role in sustaining local volunteering and volunteerism by providing intentional coordination, ethical recruitment practices, and ongoing investment in relationships and systems.

VOLUNTEER CENTRES AS COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

Across interviews, the concept of volunteer centres as community connectors strongly resonated.

Volunteer centres, similar organizations, or even individuals, were frequently described as entities that connect people to community resources, networks, services, and **third spaces** (e.g., community events, libraries, public places including community spaces, etc.) 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.

WHAT VOLUNTEER CENTRES IN ALBERTA DO

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.

COMMON CHALLENGES & EMERGING NEEDS

Resource Constraints and Underfunding

Chronic underfunding and reliance on short-term or project-based funding limit stability, long-term planning, and staff capacity. More urgently, loss of funding can lead to organizational closures, which have occurred with long-standing nonprofit volunteer centres in recent years.

Shifts in Volunteering Trends

Recent shifts in volunteering and volunteerism trends (e.g., higher interest in short-term flexible roles, demographic shifts, etc.) have forced volunteer-engaging organizations to revisit their processes, policies, and engagement practices. These trends have re-shaped core operations of various volunteer centres with various initiatives being implemented to support other nonprofits with their volunteer management practices (e.g., learning workshops, coaching, consultation services, etc.).

Capacity Gaps

Several interviewees described limits in their ability to support their core work given limited resources, staff capacity, and overlapping organizational priorities.

Adapting to Change

Some interviewees observed that long-standing systems and ways of working can be difficult to change, which can make it harder for organizations to respond to shifting volunteer needs and expectations. In some cases, these practices can unintentionally create barriers for volunteers.

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.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN NONPROFITS AND MUNICIPALITIES

This research focuses on two primary types of organizations that support local volunteering: nonprofit organizations and municipality-led agencies operating through the FCSS program. While these entities often share similar goals related to volunteering and community wellbeing, they operate within different funding environments, operational structures, and capacity constraints.

Some key differences:

	Municipality-Led Agencies (FCSS)	Nonprofits
Funding Stability	More stable, predictable funding tied to municipal budgets and FCSS guidelines	High funding insecurity; reliant on grants, fundraising, contracts, donations
Strategic Alignment	Strong alignment with municipal priorities, community wellbeing frameworks, and FCSS requirements	Driven by organizational mission; often includes broader sector advocacy
Capacity Structure	Capacity shaped by municipal department structure, staffing, and scope	Capacity constrained by funding volatility and competition for resources
Focus of Work	Often more targeted focus on volunteerism within community development	Broader mandate including volunteerism, sector advocacy, and community needs
Sector Dynamics	Less competition; more centralized coordination	High competition for limited funding; risk of duplicated services

MUNICIPALITY-LED AGENCIES THROUGH THE FCSS PROGRAM

Working closely with municipal strategic priorities and FCSS guidelines

For municipality-led volunteer centres, programming and core operational activities are closely shaped by municipal plans, community wellbeing frameworks (e.g., strategic plans focused on community wellbeing), and provincial FCSS requirements.

Generally more stable and predictable funding

Participants cited that municipal funding structures provided predictable financial stability, though resources remain influenced by local priorities and budget cycles.

Capacity shaped by departmental scope and structure

The scale and focus of volunteer-related work depends on specific department, staffing levels, and how responsibilities are distributed across teams.

More targeted focus on volunteering and volunteerism within community development

While this varied by community, several municipal representatives noted that their primary role focused on supporting local volunteering. This focus often provided greater capacity and resources to develop initiatives centered on volunteer engagement.

NONPROFITS

Funding insecurity and reliance on diverse revenue sources

Funding insecurity was cited as a core and recurring concern by nonprofit respondents. More specifically, needing to depend on various project-specific revenue sources such as grants, contracts, fundraising, and donations meant that some (smaller) organizations were limited in their ability to make long-term sustainability plans. Underfunding has also led to two organizations shutting down since 2020.

Broader advocacy for the nonprofit sector

Beyond volunteerism, several nonprofit representatives also shared that their organizations engaged in advocacy efforts for the needs and priorities of the nonprofit sector, including funding, workforce development, and broader sector issues.

Competition for funding and revenue sources

A growing concern for some nonprofits was the environment of competition that results from limited funding sources, duplicated services, limited collaboration, and the rise of fee-for-service consulting projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS & ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

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.

In particular, strengthening volunteer infrastructure requires shared responsibility across governments, funders, volunteer centres, and volunteer-engaging organizations. The following recommendations, advocacy priorities, and opportunity areas reflect the need for action and mobilization at different levels of the social ecosystem that support the wellbeing of our communities.

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.
- 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 GOVERNMENTS AND FUNDERS

- Provide stable, long-term support for volunteer centres and volunteerism infrastructure.
- Fund local volunteer infrastructure as a public good, including specific investments in coordination, volunteer management capacity, evaluation and learning – not only project-based activities.
- Ensure funding models are flexible and inclusive, allowing volunteer centres to respond to local context, community-led priorities, and evolving needs.
- Invest in public education and awareness to strengthen understanding of the value of volunteering and civic participation, including the systems, relationships, and labour that make volunteering possible.
- Support intersectoral dialogue and collaboration at local and regional levels.
- Enable innovation and adaptation at the local level by supporting pilot projects, experimentation, and learning approaches that respond to shifting forms of participation, including informal volunteering and mutual aid.

DEVELOPMENT & OPPORTUNITY AREAS FOR VOLUNTEER ALBERTA

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.

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

Build on existing research that helps organizations understand and communicate the impact of volunteering and civic engagement to community wellbeing.

Relationship-Building, Convening, and Collaborative Practice

Expand training, and tools, and learning opportunities that support organizations in convening, facilitating, and strengthening community relationships.

Supporting Mutual Aid & Informal Volunteering

As communities increasingly rely on informal, grassroots, and neighbour-to-neighbour forms of support, particularly during times of crisis, VA can help clarify and communicate the importance of diverse forms of volunteering to our communities.

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