

ISSUES

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Decline in volunteerism impacting city festivals

EVELYN PHAM / volunteeredmonton.com

Every day, people across Canada volunteer. By donating just a few hours a week, month or year, their combined contributions make a lasting impact on our communities.

But what happens when these volunteers disappear? What happens to food banks that provide meals to the needy if there's no one to help sort and pack donated items? Who can community leagues turn to if there are no coaches for their little league teams? What if the elderly and physically challenged have no one to drive them to their next medical appointment? What happens to festivals that have no volunteers to help organize and operate the events?

These situations may sound dire and even impossible to imagine—especially in an affluent province like Alberta—yet according to statistics, volunteerism is on the decline by as much as two per cent a year. That may not seem like much, but with each year that passes the number of volunteers lost adds up. Just ask any number of our summer festival organizations.

In 2007, Volunteer Edmonton conducted a survey of the organizations that organize Edmonton's summer festivals. Many of them indicated that this was the first year that they were unable to fill volunteer positions.

In fact, many mentioned that recruiting and retaining volunteers has become increasingly difficult, but luckily the volunteers who signed up for one or two shifts were willing to take on additional shifts. How long folks will be willing to do double-duty is a big question.

If this trend continues unabated, our hypothetical questions of "what if?" will result in a future of fewer services, more pay-for-access and even the loss of our title as "Festival City."

This doesn't come as a surprise to Linda Graff and Paul Reed. Graff, a leading expert in nonprofit management, has worked in the sector for over 20 years and has witnessed first hand the changes in volunteerism. Reed, a senior social scientist at Statistic Canada and professor at Carleton University, has studied the trends and compiled startling data that shows volunteerism is weakening. Their national campaign, entitled *Who Cares?* Canada, is helping to raise awareness of the importance of volunteering and other forms of community involvement, and what we stand to lose to if we don't take action now.

Graff and Reed's campaign isn't meant to instill a sense of fear or preach doom-day predictions, but rather is intended to be a way to engage Canadians to become involved, to care about their communities. Simply put, their campaign is urging people to volunteer.

IN A SERIES of recorded conversations, Graff and Reed discuss why no one seems to be noticing this shift in commu-

nity participation. Graff suggests that "volunteers are pervasively taken for granted," because they've always "been there for us, and we continue to assume that they will always be there for us."

According to the 2004 Canadian Survey on Volunteering, Giving and Participating (an on-going research initiative conducted every three years by Statistics Canada), Graff has a point. Statistics show that 77 per cent of all volunteer work done in Canada is only done by 11 per cent of the population. Provincial statistics show similar results, with 75 per cent of volunteer work done in Alberta supported by 25 per cent of volunteers. These statistics might explain why there hasn't been a drastic, noticeable decline—a small group of dedicated volunteers is shouldering most of the work. This is hardly a sustainable model when you consider that the majority of these volunteers are now seniors: in their 60s and 70s, and will be moving out of volunteering in the next decade.

Kyla Danard, a volunteer manager for Edmonton's Fringe Festival, believes festivals are facing a volunteer deficit because of the increase in events over the summer, which stretches the volunteer community thinner and thinner every summer.

Faced with fewer volunteers, she devised a plan to showcase volunteer opportunities—not just for the Fringe Festival, but also for all other arts and culture festivals in Edmonton that require volunteers. From there, the idea of a volunteer fair was born.

When Volunteer Edmonton heard about Danard's idea they jumped on board to help organize and publicize the event. The fair is a win-win situation for everyone: potential volunteers have a "one stop volunteer festival shopping opportunity," festivals can gather in one place to recruit and network with one another, and our city wins big by continuing the proud tradition of being a leader as a festival city.

The Festival Volunteer Fair features 15 festivals and takes place on May 14 at the TransAlta Arts Barns (10330 - 84 Ave) from 3 to 7 pm. Organizers hope hundreds, even thousands, of Edmontonians will stop by and sign up for volunteer positions at a variety of festivals.

More importantly, the hope is that the volunteer fair—much like the *Who Cares?* campaign—will bring the spotlight to an important issue that needs our attention before it's too late. ▼

*Evelyn Pham is a communications coordinator for Volunteer Edmonton, a local nonprofit group that works closely with the nonprofit/voluntary sector to help promote the value of volunteerism in the city. Visit canadawhocares.ca to learn more about the *Who Cares?* Canada campaign.*

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