

Workforce & Education

Loss of valuable human resource will impact nonprofit sector

Volunteer Edmonton addressing shortfall

EVELYN PHAM

While the booming economy is putting a strain on local businesses eager to recruit and retain paid staff, nonprofit organizations are facing similar challenges, but with one addition – unpaid “staff” in the form of volunteers.

Alberta boasts more than 19,000 nonprofits, charities and community-based organizations employing more than 105,000 staff in 2003. These organizations are supported by 2.5 million volunteers donating 449 million hours of time, making Alberta the province with the highest per capita number of nonprofits in the country. What’s more impressive is that 58 per cent of these nonprofits are completely volunteer-run.

With so many organizations relying on a volunteer workforce, the loss of this valuable human resource will have a substantial impact on the community.

Unfortunately, studies from Statistics Canada show that volunteering is on the decline by as much as two per cent a year.

While that may not seem like much, the 2004 Canadian Survey on volunteering, giving and participating (an ongoing research initiative conducted every three years by Statistics Canada) shows that 77 per cent of all the volunteer work in Canada is done by only 11 per cent of the population.

Here in Alberta, the statistics are similar with 75 per cent of the volunteer work done by 25 per cent of volunteers.

Considering that many of these dedicated volunteers are seniors who are shouldering most of the work, the next few years will prove to be a real challenge when they begin moving out of volunteering – especially if there is no one to take their place. We could be facing a

future of reduced services and amenities, more pay-for-access and a diminished quality of life.

To ensure the sector remains vibrant and healthy, addressing the challenge of finding more volunteers will require a complex solution that goes beyond spending money on the issue.

“When a business is successful it brings in money and is profitable. When a nonprofit is successful it spends money delivering programs and services that the community demands – and at the end of the year it’s broke – whereas its business counterpart has money in the bank,” explains Janice Bell.

As director of Volunteer Edmonton, Bell works closely with organizations to help support and promote volunteerism.

“Nonprofits cannot even ‘steward’ their resources in a contingency fund as most funders need proof that at

the end of the year the money has been spent! If it isn’t, many funders require that it be returned to them.”

Much like the private sector, a hot economy combined with the high cost of living is one possible reason why organizations are having a difficult time finding volunteers.

A 2007 study entitled *A Workforce Strategy for Alberta’s Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector* suggests that potential volunteers are choosing to enter the workforce to pay for increased living expenses, rather than volunteer.

Another possible reason is that people are simply not aware of the need for volunteers and the affect that volunteers have on an organization’s ability to operate.

“It certainly puts a stress on the agency and staff when there are fewer volunteers to help out,” Bell remarks.

“Organizations are left to

figure out how to continue meeting increasing needs from the community with less, leaving staff to work more hours or cut corners.

Budgets may be stretched to help pay for positions that would otherwise have been filled by volunteers – money that could have gone into programs and services.

“This leads to lower quality of service for clients,” says Bell. “While the private sector can provide increased salaries and attractive benefit options, the same cannot be said when applied to volunteers.”

Perhaps the solution to the lack of human resources relies on reaching different demographics. With a growing immigrant population and increasing number of corporations developing community investment programs, organizations are hoping to fill the volunteer void by expanding into new horizons.

“We need to rethink who

we are targeting, and how to successfully recruit and retain this valuable human resource,” says Bell, adding that organizations should examine how they manage volunteer resources to ensure that volunteers are recognized and acknowledged for their good work.

“People care about their community and want to help out. It’s just a matter of making people aware of what’s at stake and letting them know what they can do to help.”

(Evelyn Pham is the communications co-ordinator for Volunteer Edmonton which is a program of the Support Network. Volunteer Edmonton works closely with the nonprofit/voluntary sector to help promote the value of volunteerism in the city. To learn how you can become involved in volunteering, visit www.volunteeredmonton.com)

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