

Research Report: Taking the Next Step

Millions have taken the next step in their volunteer journey with the support of Volunteer Toronto, Canada's largest volunteer centre.

Over the past half century* we've seen the concept of volunteering evolve. Today, volunteering is professionalized, structured, and a necessary support system of the non-profit sector. For many individuals, it has also become a stepping stone on the road to employment—a way to fill resume gaps, build transferable skills, and gain exposure to a work-like environment.

For individuals who aren't born in Canada, or who face a mental health challenge, disability, or environmental barriers, volunteering is one way to improve meaningful employment opportunities. However, like the journey to meaningful employment, the volunteer sector harbours barriers that often exclude or limit those who need this experience the most.

The goal of this report is to shed light on these barriers and to outline ways the non-profit sector and Volunteer Toronto can improve support for greater inclusion in this sector.



Who Needs Us Most?

As Toronto grows in population and diversity, employment opportunities are not evenly accessible among all citizens. According to recent research by United Way of Greater Toronto¹, access is increasingly dictated by factors over which individuals have little to no control.

- ▶ 47% Toronto's population are immigrants²
- ▶ The rate of newcomer children living below the poverty line is two times the rate of children born to Toronto-born parents³
- ▶ Nearly 1/2 food bank users in Toronto are born outside of Canada⁴
- ▶ 15% of Ontarians report having a disability⁵
- ▶ 1 in 5 Canadians experience mental illness in any given year⁶

While volunteering cannot change where someone is born, their immediate socio-economic status, or physical and mental abilities, it can provide experiences that directly benefit their job search.

Volunteering is a Stepping-Stone to Employment

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework⁷ tells us that if an individual has high “assets” in any of the following five areas, they are less economically vulnerable and have more opportunities available:

- ▶ **Human assets:** skills that an individual possesses
- ▶ **Social assets:** quantity and quality of social connections
- ▶ **Personal assets:** individual perception of self, including confidence and belief in own abilities
- ▶ **Physical assets:** natural resources and space available
- ▶ **Financial assets:** money and/or ability to access loans.

Volunteering develops transferable skills, social connection, self-confidence, and new experiences. These are all qualities that enrich human, social, and personal assets. With these, an individual is more resilient and better equipped to seek out and excel in new roles.

1. United Way, Toronto and York Region, “The Opportunity Equation in the Greater Toronto Area: An update on neighbourhood income inequality and polarization”, (2017)

2. Toronto Foundation, “Toronto's Vital Signs”, (2018)

3. Toronto Foundation, “Toronto's Vital Signs”, (2018)

4. Toronto Foundation, “Toronto's Vital Signs”, (2018)

5. Statistics Canada, “Canadian Survey ON Disability 2012”, (2015)

6. CAMH, “Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and statistics”, (2018)

7. Asian Development Bank, “The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach”, 2017

The SLF has been used in international development projects since the early 1980's. More recently, it has been used to better understand non-financial interventions for poverty at the local level. The strengths of this approach lie in the fact that it is people-centered, responsive, adaptive to a variety of contexts and considers effects of the both internal and external events

Mapping a Better Way Forward

To develop effective recommendations, we approached the issue from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective.

We conducted a comprehensive review of leading practices in engaging marginalized communities. As well as a scan of employment support and community-inclusion services offered in Toronto to understand what activities were successful in supporting community inclusion. Through this research, we were mindful of enhancing effective services, not replicating them.

Additionally, we hosted five focus groups and engaged 60 individuals with lived experience facing obstacles to employment and/or volunteering to understand the factors that contribute to exclusion. We then interviewed 25 local, non-profit professionals to learn what organizational and systemic factors contribute to barriers to inclusion of marginalized groups. This research was conducted over an 8-month period.

Five Key Barriers for Individuals

During our focus groups, five consistent barriers emerged to volunteering:

- ▶ Communication
- ▶ Qualifications
- ▶ Past experience
- ▶ Physical environment
- ▶ Mental health

What Did We Discover?

Barriers Individuals Face

Individuals having difficulty accessing work are often told that volunteering is an easy way to gain experience and increase employability. However, the process of volunteering often mirrors the requirements of applying for a full-time job. Too often, individuals experience the same obstacles faced in a job search during the volunteer process, leading to further social exclusion and emotional trauma.

Barriers Non-Profits Face

Through qualitative interviews we've heard from professionals in the non-profit, private, and public sector. While all subjects referred to scarcity of resources as a contributing factor to inclusion challenges, non-profit professionals cited this as their most predominant challenge. Not only is there a lack of funding for programming, there are many restrictions on how this money can be used. Non-profit professionals also said they want to be more inclusive but they felt there was not the staffing or time to learn how to create more access to marginalized groups, let alone time to implement programs or systems that increase inclusion.

5 Barriers to Volunteering

#1: Fluent Communication Skills

One in 20 Torontonians do not speak English or French⁸. This means that seemingly simple tasks like creating a resume, cover letter, or navigating the interview process with a volunteer manager or future employer is nearly impossible without additional support—like access to translation services.

Additionally, for many individuals who are new to Canada, volunteering may not have been a part of the culture in which they lived, or it didn't hold the same formal and structured role it does in local Canadian context. Our focus group participants with little to no professional experience in Canada also said it was a particularly difficult learning curve to understand how they were perceived and what was expected in their day-to-day and professional interactions.

We also heard that volunteer and work opportunities were nearly impossible to learn about without consistent access to the internet or a dedicated phone line. Low computer-literacy and difficulty finding opportunities hinder individuals' abilities to apply and successfully take on a volunteer role or a job.

Interviewing and Language

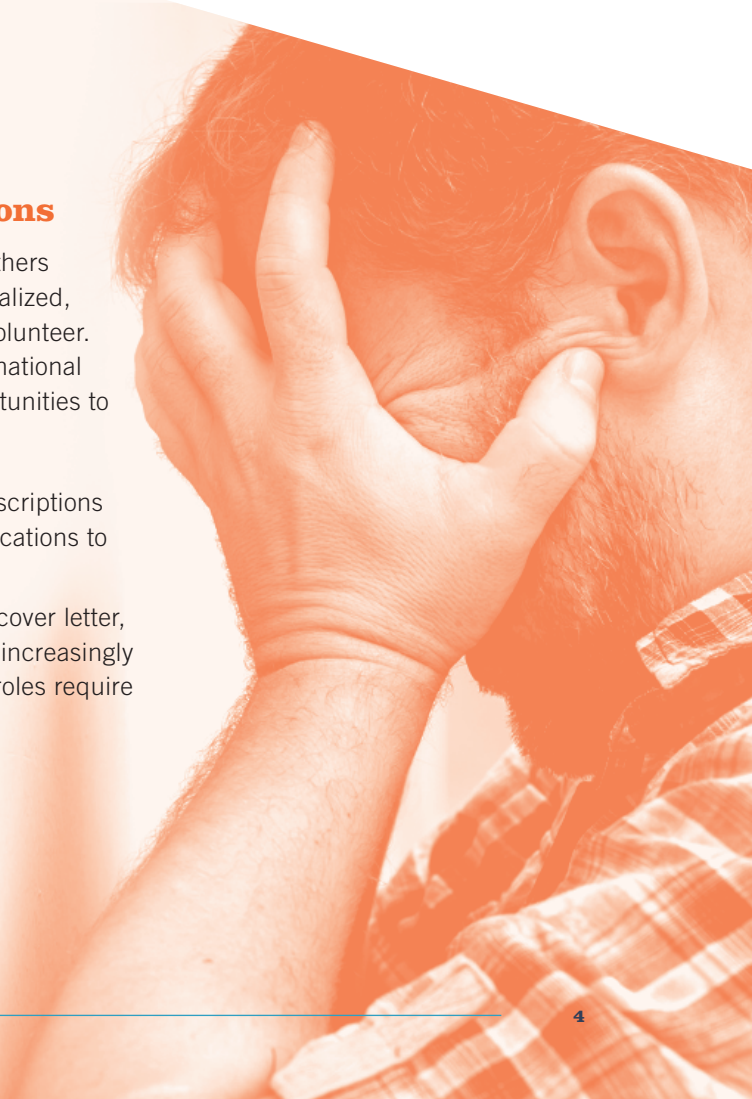
For Tom, interviewing has been a huge barrier. He speaks English fluently, however, it isn't his first, second, or even third language. Tom suspected his low success rate in volunteer interviews was because he spoke slower than might be expected. He recalls translating what he wanted to say and being sure it was precise, but he worries that this is causing interviewers to assume that he is not as intelligent as his experience would indicate. Furthering Tom's suspicion is the low frequency with which he's been accepted as a volunteer. He's estimated that he has given well over 25 interviews over 4 months and has received zero offers.

#2: Required Experience and Qualifications

Volunteering, as a concept, came from people wanting to help others and contribute to a greater good. As it becomes more professionalized, the desire to help is no longer the only reason many choose to volunteer. In addition to pursuing additional education to supplement international qualifications, newcomers are advised to access volunteer opportunities to gain experience. However, they do not have time to do both.

- ▶ Extensive lists of required qualifications on volunteer role descriptions cause newcomers to think they must have all of these qualifications to even apply.
- ▶ There are many unwritten rules on how to write an effective cover letter, structure a resume, and how to engage in an interview. This increasingly affects access to volunteering in Toronto as more and more roles require these things.

8. Nicholas Keung, "1 in 20 Torontonians can't speak English or French: Study", The Toronto Star (July 9, 2018).



#3: Lack of Experience

Lots of volunteer roles now require past experience just like jobs, perpetuating the exclusion of individuals who have yet to gain formal work experience. It's not surprising many feel frustration in this regard and referenced this as a cycle.

Furthermore, many focus group participants said that if their references were from international experiences, they would be met with resistance or told that their references were too hard to contact due to a time zone difference. Many have had potential volunteer supervisors or employers asking them to provide Canadian references, which they did not have or that they were hoping to receive through volunteering.

Criminal Record Checks

The volunteer screening process often requires a criminal record check. Ella shared the experience of being offered a position conditional upon a clear record check only to have the offer reneged when she shared her personal history including a crime that was unrelated to anything that this job would entail and that she had already fulfilled her requirements to society as determined by the courts. She felt it was unfair to not be given the opportunity strictly based on a past bad decision.

#4: Accessibility

Whether they have visible physical limitations or not, multiple focus group members pointed out that the space and the physicality involved in many volunteer positions contributed to their experiences of exclusion.



One participant had limited physical capacity to climb stairs and said that a lot of volunteer opportunities are in older buildings where elevators are scarce if available at all.



Many volunteer descriptions ask applicants to be capable of lifting a certain amount or to stand for an extended period of time, etc. We've learned many were not given opportunities to advocate for themselves and propose adaptations that would enable them to succeed in the role.



Many face transportation challenges in getting to and from a job or volunteer role, which can be linked to the lack of fully accessible public transit in the City of Toronto and lack of dependable WheelTrans service.



Organizations may require the participant to cover costs related to police checks and transportation to and from volunteer shifts. Some healthcare-related roles also require volunteers to acquire a variety of vaccinations. Additionally, the cost of purchasing clothing for volunteering roles was discussed by participants as a barrier they had experienced.

Navigating the city is hard for everyone. Adding economic and/or physical requirements for volunteer roles can unintentionally exclude those who have physical or economic restrictions.

#5: Emotional Health

By the age of 40, 1 in 2 people have experienced mental illness. For employees and volunteers, this can foster an even further isolating experience.⁹

For our focus group participants, their emotional exclusion has had a deep personal and professional impact. Feelings of unworthiness and lack of ability deterred over 70% of participants from applying to volunteer roles because the risk of rejection seemed too certain and too unbearable.

Participants also highlighted a number of key ways that volunteer programming inadvertently perpetuates feelings of isolation, anxiety, or erodes self-confidence:

- ▶ Lack of recognition or visibility in volunteer roles in larger organizations leads to volunteers feeling excluded and like they're not a valued member of the team.
- ▶ Frustration and feelings of exploitation are common as individuals can feel as though they provide free labour for a comparable paid role.
- ▶ If finances are an individual's greatest concern, a sense of helplessness was common. They felt conflicted between meeting their basic needs and the knowledge that volunteering could be helpful in the long-run.
- ▶ A low wage, poor quality job would take priority over gaining experience through volunteering due to necessity.
- ▶ Gaps in the volunteer recruitment process have a strong impact on mental health. A lack of clarity about timeline or steps, not receiving interview feedback, or a long lag in communication about the status of an application contribute to feelings of instability and deters individuals from seeking out opportunities.

9. CAMH, "Mental Illness and Addictions: Facts and statistics", www.camh.ca (2018).



Organizational Barriers to Inclusion

Individuals are not the only ones experiencing barriers. Organizations face systemic issues that stop them from moving the needle on inclusion and supporting those who would benefit from volunteering as a bridge to new economic opportunities.

After conducting 25 qualitative interviews with individuals working in the field of inclusion and accessibility, the most commonly cited reason for barriers to inclusion was lack of resources, including funding, built environment, personnel, and lived-experience perspectives.

#1: Physical and Financial Accessibility

Just like individuals, organizations are aware of the physical limitations of their space. In speaking with staff and volunteer managers, many brought up the desire to address these physical barriers to inclusion. However, the ability to change these elements is directly linked to lack of funding and conflicting funding priorities.. Additionally, we heard that inaccessible citywide travel kept some of their potential volunteers from fulfilling their duties. This was attributed to inaccessible TTC stations and unreliable WheelTrans scheduling.

#2: Limited Staff Time

All organizational participants, at some point during their interview, brought up the strain they felt due to workload and expectations, despite wanting to put a focused effort into increasing opportunities for marginalized individuals. Many also held more than one hat, and volunteer management was considered an add-on to their role.

We've learned that a lack of organizational understanding of socio-economic exclusion resulted in some volunteers experiencing these disadvantages:

- ▶ Asking all employees and volunteers to contribute to seasonal fundraising campaigns and corresponding embarrassment when not being able to afford to contribute.
- ▶ Being met with resistance or hostility when speaking up and addressing discriminatory actions against themselves or others.
- ▶ A discrepancy between the quality and quantity of training available to staff vs. volunteers.
- ▶ Finally, a lack of consistent and on-going support for volunteers through dedicated, full-time support staff.

#3: Lack of First-Hand Experience

Interviewees also felt that those who had relevant lived-experience were omitted in organizational planning or when included, were not compensated appropriately. Often, those with lived experience are expected to share their stories for free or for an honorarium. This compensation devalues the impact of these stories by not compensating in an economically appropriate way (ie. minimum wage).

While interviewees recognized the importance of including and compensating those with lived-experience, they said that it often felt as if they did not have enough power in their role to influence this change and the organizational level.

