

Research Report: Why Toronto's Meals on Wheels Programs Are Facing a Critical Volunteer Shortage

Meals on Wheels programs provide a crucial service to thousands of Toronto's most vulnerable residents. Unfortunately, many of these programs are experiencing a shortage of volunteers, which are a fundamental resource for successful program delivery. Volunteer Toronto set out to better understand the impact of these programs, the main challenges they're facing, and potential strategies to help address those issues.

Information was collected through a literature search, as well as through phone interviews and follow-up surveys with 17 representatives from Toronto's Meals on Wheels programs.

A crucial service for vulnerable clients

Meals on Wheels programs deliver nutritious food to vulnerable people who struggle preparing meals for themselves. Clients are generally seniors or people with disabilities, and they're often isolated or homebound. The benefits of the program go beyond the food itself—a visit from a volunteer provides basic social contact and a safety check. It can also help people keep living independently in their own homes, and take stress off caregivers.

Snapshot: Better Living Health and Community Services

- 200+ clients served
- 65,000 meals delivered each year

Over the years, Meals on Wheels volunteers have played a crucial role in the wellbeing of Better Living Health and Community Services' clients. Not only do they deliver hot, nutritious meals, but they also provide a safety check. Volunteers notice changes in client mood, behaviour, weight, and hygiene, and can refer clients to the social work team when they need more support. They've also been able to get help when they've found clients who were sick or disoriented, had fallen, were being exposed to extreme heat or cold, or were experiencing power outages.

The benefits of home-delivered meals are clear—clients are healthier and happier thanks to Meals on Wheels. Studies have shown that home-delivered meal programs improve nutrition, increase food security, reduce loneliness (Wright et al., 2015), and even lower the risk of falls (Thomas et al., 2016).



Volunteer-driven service

Many people think of Meals on Wheels as a specific organization that functions as a cohesive whole, but it's actually a program that's run independently by many different non-profits. We identified 21 organizations with Meals on Wheels programs in Toronto, including community health centres, seniors' support organizations, and faith-based organizations. We were able to connect with people from 17 of these organizations to find out more about their programs. Although they all have similar structures, they run completely separately from each other. What they all have in common is that they exist to deliver nutritious meals to people who need them, and that they rely on volunteers to do so.

Meals on Wheels programs typically deliver meals to hundreds of clients, several days a week. Since most of the meals are provided hot, delivery needs to be carefully timed and different people need to cover multiple delivery routes at once. All of the people we spoke to rely on volunteer drivers to deliver meals to clients' homes, and most also engage volunteer runners who go along with the driver and bring the meals from the car to the home. Some programs also involve volunteers in other roles, like preparing and packing the food.

Volunteers in Meals on Wheels programs often greatly benefit from the work they do. In fact, it's relatively common for them to become so dedicated to their program that they stay for years, or even decades! Most gain a sense of purpose giving back to their communities and knowing that thanks to them, vulnerable people don't need to worry about their next meal. They also get more tangible perks, like becoming more familiar with the city, making friends with other volunteers in the program, and getting experience in a non-profit.

Snapshot: Canadian Red Cross – Toronto Region

- 480 clients served
- 50,000 meals delivered each year

Volunteers at Red Cross Meals on Wheels build a great rapport with the clients they serve. They generally deliver along the same route, so they get to know their clients by name and they're missed anytime they take a week off. They remember what their clients enjoy—who likes a second helping of soup or more dessert—and they try to cater to those preferences any time there are extras. One long-time volunteer even brings along a treat for a particular client's dog every time they deliver!

A critical volunteer shortage

During our interviews, 15 of the 17 people we spoke to—a whopping 88%—said that recruiting enough volunteers was a current challenge. On top of that, both programs that didn't find recruitment a challenge had recently scaled back their number of deliveries, reducing the number of volunteers they needed to run smoothly. Although some programs have enough volunteers despite the constant recruitment challenge, many are struggling to keep up—on average, programs need a 19% increase in volunteers. There are several factors that make these programs hard to recruit for:

- Most programs deliver hot lunches, so volunteers need to be available mid-morning to early-afternoon on weekdays.
- More and more volunteers are looking for short-term projects, rather than committing to an ongoing weekly shift.
- Many volunteers seek out opportunities where they can build new skills, and although there's plenty to learn and gain from Meals on Wheels volunteering, potential volunteers aren't often aware of those benefits.

Recruiting drivers is a particular challenge—in fact, every single person we spoke to noted that this role posed the most problems. On top of the hurdles outlined above, drivers face additional barriers:

- Not everyone has a driver's licence, especially in large cities like Toronto where you can get around on public transit.
- Most programs can't afford to provide cars, so volunteers need to own one, limiting the pool of potential volunteers even more.
- Even people with a licence and a car may worry about busy downtown driving, the stress of finding parking, and poor driving conditions in the winter.

19%

On average, programs are missing about one fifth of the volunteers they need.



88%

The vast majority of programs struggle to get enough volunteers to run smoothly.

Since volunteer managers in these programs are well aware of the challenges around recruitment, most try to target groups who are more likely to be free during the day. Some have tried to reach out to shift workers or stay at home parents, for example. But the most popular groups to recruit by far are new retirees and post-secondary students.

Although targeting retirees and students can help increase the pool of volunteers, it also comes with its own set of challenges:

- Lots of programs experience low seasons when their volunteers go south for the winter or leave school for the summer.
- Retirees and students are both at a time in their lives when they're more likely to have major transitions that affect the amount of time they can commit to volunteering.



Exploring solutions

One source of volunteers that some organizations have seen success with is corporate groups. Although businesses often encourage their staff to volunteer as part of their corporate social responsibility programs, they often want to volunteer together as a group for a one-day event. Groups that are open to sharing an ongoing opportunity in smaller teams could be a great fit for Meals on Wheels programs.

Snapshot: Dixon Hall Neighbourhood Services

- 500 clients served
- 72,000 meals delivered each year

Dixon Hall Neighbourhood Services needs 40 volunteers a day for their Meals on Wheels program to run smoothly. Luckily, their robust Corporate Meals on Wheels program helps them maintain those numbers while giving businesses a chance to give back to their community. Corporate groups commit to a monthly 3-hour shift for a minimum of 12 months. Some groups choose to send the same volunteers each month, whereas others rotate through a larger team. Their corporate partners include RBC, TD Bank, Scotiabank, BMO, CIBC, TELUS, Industrial Alliance, Sun Life, and Great West Life. This popular program often has businesses coming back for more—some teams have been involved for over 25 years!

Home-delivered meal programs across the globe are expanding and changing to improve their services or keep their volunteer programs afloat. For example, some programs have begun training volunteers to be even more involved in client health and wellness by becoming health literacy coaches (Rubin et al., 2013). This may be an excellent way to increase the opportunity for learning and skill-building that so many volunteers are looking for. Other programs have built partnerships with local urban agriculture programs to provide a share of fresh local produce along with meals, tapping into volunteers who are passionate about urban farming and food security (Wagner, 2016). Some programs are also becoming more efficient thanks to new technology, like a route scheduling algorithm that has reduced delivery times by 15% (Manikas, Kroes, & Gattiker, 2016). Toronto's Meals on Wheels programs could benefit from all of these examples—adapting volunteer roles, building new partnerships, and identifying efficiencies—to adapt to the changing volunteer landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the information in this report, we've outlined four recommendations that could greatly improve the current volunteer shortage being experienced by Meals on Wheels programs.

Recommendation 1: Meals on Wheels programs should focus on partnership building to expand their volunteer pool or adapt their programs.

Ongoing relationships with community partners with compatible missions (such as food security, urban agriculture, senior support, or nutrition), could open up opportunities to reach new groups of volunteers, consolidate resources, or improve services. Although establishing new partnerships takes significant effort up front, the long-term benefits can be well worth it.

Recommendation 2: Corporate groups looking for volunteer opportunities should consider making an ongoing commitment to a Meals on Wheels program.

As employee volunteering becomes a larger part of many corporate social responsibility programs, businesses should focus less on single days of service and more on making an ongoing commitment to the programs that need the most support in their communities.

Recommendation 3: A working group should be established for representatives of Meals on Wheels programs to solve common challenges collaboratively.

Since Meals on Wheels programs share similar structures and challenges but operate completely independently, opportunities to share knowledge and strategies between programs are very valuable. Volunteer Toronto will host an ongoing working group for volunteer managers to learn from each other's successes and share resources.

Recommendation 4: Granting agencies should provide dedicated funding to support ongoing costs of Meals on Wheels volunteer programs.

One of the largest hurdles recruiting volunteer drivers is that most agencies don't have enough funding to provide their own delivery cars. This poses a large financial barrier to anyone interested in volunteering, which could be eliminated with appropriate funding dedicated to keeping the volunteer programs running smoothly.



Meals on Wheels programs provide a vital source of support to clients and an opportunity for dedicated volunteers to give back to their communities in an incredibly meaningful way. Individuals who would like to support Meals on Wheels can visit www.volunteertoronto.ca/mealsonwheels for a listing of current programs across the city.

References

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