



The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities

The *Rural Senior Volunteers in Rural Communities* project examined the role of senior volunteers in three rural areas within Nova Scotia to understand the contributions of volunteering for seniors and their communities. The project included a literature review, focus groups with rural seniors and interviews with key informants. This publication is one of three providing highlights from the project.

Rural Senior Volunteers: An Overview

Volunteering in Rural Communities

Volunteering, especially for seniors, takes place in a local context. Volunteer work takes place in local communities for local, national and international organizations.

Three Rural Case Studies

- Western Cape Breton (tourism and rural economy)
- Southwest Nova Scotia (fishing and tourist economy)
- Annapolis Valley West (agricultural economy)

Time, Kinds of Organizations, and Community Life

In Canada as a whole, the 18% of seniors who volunteered in 2000 contributed a total of 179 million hours in 2000, an increase from 1997. The majority of volunteer hours contributed by seniors across the country occurred in three types of organizations.

PERCENTAGE OF HOURS CONTRIBUTED¹

- health 33%
- arts, culture and recreation organizations 25%
- social services organizations 24%
- religious organizations 18%

In rural Nova Scotia, seniors who volunteer do so in an average of three different organizations. They contribute on average five hours per week of formal volunteer time in three different organizations. They contribute even more hours in informal volunteering.

Sustaining the Life of Rural Communities

Rural seniors described their contributions to sustaining their rural communities in six key ways:

- 1) fundraising and bringing financial resources into the community to keep the community alive
- 2) supporting and providing services which government has not adequately provided
- 3) passing on culture, language, history to the next generation as well as to visitors in the region
- 4) sustaining important non-governmental services through rural churches and faith organizations
- 5) providing important services outside of formal organizations
- 6) caring for both young and elderly either family members or neighbours.

Community Leaders' Perceptions of Senior Volunteers

Community leaders representing 33 organizations (of which six specifically served seniors) identified seniors as *“the backbone of their organizations.”* Over half said their organizations *“would not exist without senior volunteers.”*

The statement that *“our cultural ways would be lost without senior volunteers”* was true for linguistic and cultural minorities within the larger culture. Half of the organizations had a majority of senior volunteers. The majority of senior volunteers were in their sixties and the majority were women.

¹ Percentages of hours do not add to 100% because of engagement in multiple types of organizations. For information on 1997 and 2000 National Survey for Giving, Volunteering and Participating at www.givingandvolunteering.ca

The services seniors provided included:

- accounting, administration and governance
- occupational safety education
- cultural education (language, artistic, musical, craft and culinary demonstration and instruction)
- building maintenance
- catering
- fundraising
- entertainment

Community Leaders' Areas of Concern

Community leaders identified the following areas of concern:

- organizational survival and declining membership
- seeming lack of volunteerism among younger generations (including those who are newly retiring)
- burnout among those seniors who do too much
- cost of volunteering



Seniors' Perceptions of Volunteering in Rural Communities

The 28 focus group members and six senior volunteer community leaders volunteered for two key reasons:

- physical, psychological well-being, enhanced social life and sense of self-satisfaction
- benefits to their community – provision of services and community pride

Seniors live in rural areas and volunteer because of:

- environment (pace of life, beauty of the area, nature)
- economics (lower taxes than in the city)
- ancestral roots (family/heritage)
- availability of services nearby
- sense of security in knowing one's neighbours

How to Retain Senior Volunteers in Rural Communities

- adequate and affordable transportation
- adequate housing and levels of care
- close social networks
- adequate health services

Highlights from *The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities* by Jane Gordon and Brenda Hattie with contributions from Sandra Murphy and Rusty Neal, June 2008.

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