

The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities

Jane Gordon and Brenda Hattie

with contributions from Sandra Murphy and Rusty Neal

JUNE 2008



NOVA SCOTIA CENTRE ON AGING
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We also want to express our appreciation to the many seniors who took the time to participate in the focus groups and follow-up consultations. The passion, energy and time you put into your small communities was truly inspiring. You exemplify the fact that without senior volunteers many rural Nova Scotia communities would not be sustainable, much less the creative and cultural enclaves that many are despite the trends of out-migration, globalization, and urbanization.

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JANE GORDON AND BRENDA HATTIE



Introduction

This report describes the findings of a research project that investigates volunteering from two perspectives. The research team explored the self-described benefits to rural seniors of being involved as volunteers, and the benefits in their communities of this volunteer work as seen from the perspective of those communities in which they volunteered. What was found serves as a contrast to much of the discussion around population aging which focuses on the costs of caring for a large population of seniors.



Older volunteers make “miracles.” They provide loving care to children who are starved for attention; they provide transportation, homemaking, caregiving and a whole range of other kinds of help to frail elderly; they run cultural programs at museums, theatres, and music centres; they are mentors for university students; they repair leaky faucets for “poor people” – the list goes on. Older citizens working as volunteers make enormous contributions to their communities, to charitable and cultural organizations, and to individuals who depend on their help.

FISCHER & SCHAFFER, 1993 P.4



Literature Review

Senior Volunteers in Charitable and Non-Profit Organizations: Literature Relevant to Rural Nova Scotia Seniors

Older people are sometimes presented as a “social problem” (Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Freedman, 2002; Gallagher, 1994; Le Mesurier, 2003). At the same time, they have also become a force to be reckoned with through the politics and demographics of “grey power”. In rural communities, groups such as the Women’s Institutes, Ladies Auxiliaries, women’s church organizations, the Royal Canadian Legion and local service organizations continue to provide the face of rural senior volunteers who serve community needs. Lunch and social programs funded by New Horizons federal funding also attract seniors as members, users, and volunteers. Occupational retiree groups and local heritage, culture and service organizations have memberships that draw on rural senior volunteers.

Over the past few decades, popular and scholarly literature has increasingly focused on senior volunteers and the opportunities volunteerism presents for seniors (e.g. Chambre, 1984; Davidhizar & Bowen, 1995; Wheeler, Gorey & Greenblatt, 1998). The National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP)¹ reports that the contribution of senior volunteers, while significant in both urban and rural communities, is declining from what it once was. At the same time, the academic

research literature cites a broad spectrum of issues and concerns relevant to senior volunteers, both rural and urban (Auld, 2004; Bruce, Jordan & Halseth, 1999; Colman, 2003; Gottlieb, 2002; Hoodless, 2003; Narushima, 2002; Warburton, Terry, Rosenman & Shapiro, 2001).

Fewer Seniors Contributing More Hours

In 2000, 18% of seniors in Canada (those aged 65 and over) volunteered for either a charity or non-profit organization as compared to 27% for the Canadian population as a whole (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001). The contribution of all volunteers was down from 31% in 1997, giving cause for concern. Despite this decline, senior volunteers in the Canadian population contributed more time (on average 162 hours) in 2000, than they did in 1997 (149 hours). Even with the lower participation rates among senior volunteers (18% in 2000 as compared with 23% in 1997), those seniors who were active and formal volunteers in 2000 paradoxically volunteered a greater number of hours – on average 269 hours per year – than any other age group under 65. Younger age classes in 2000 contributed an average of only 130 hours per year for 15–24-year-olds to 181 hours for the 55–64 age class. Compared with the NSGVP data from 1997, the sharpest increase in average hours volunteered occurred among volunteers age 65 and over. Their annual average contribution in volunteer hours rose by 67 hours between 1997 and

In 2000, senior volunteers contributed on average 269 hours per year – more than any other age group under 65. By 2004, this number had fallen only slightly to 268 hours per year.

¹ More recently known as the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

2000. For all other age categories, the average increase was only between 5 and 21 hours per year. Thus, fewer senior volunteers in 2000 were doing even more work. By 2004, the average number of hours volunteered by seniors had fallen only slightly to 268 hours per year (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2006).

Even with the ever-decreasing participation rates among senior volunteers (15% in 2004 compared to 18% in 2000, and 23% in 1997) those seniors who were active as formal volunteers volunteered a greater number of hours than any other age group under 65.

Nova Scotia: An Interesting Place to Study Rural Senior Volunteers

The population of Atlantic Canada, in general, is older than the national average. However, at 15.1% (Statistics Canada, 2006) of the population, Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of seniors over 65 in the region and the second highest in the nation,² making the province an interesting place to examine the contributions of senior volunteers. This percentage represents an increase from 13.9% in 2001 and 13.1% in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2006). The median age of Nova Scotia's population is 41.8 (up from 38.8 in 2001 and 35.8 in 1996), compared to 39.5 for the nation overall, making it the province with the oldest median age in the country (Statistics Canada, 2006).

According to Statistics Canada (2005) the share of seniors residing in rural areas of Nova Scotia (defined as having a moderate, weak or no metropolitan influence) is 40%, the fifth highest in Canada. The Nova Scotia Seniors' Secretariat (2005) advises that, when compared to regional municipalities and rural Nova Scotia, small towns have the highest proportion of seniors in the province. In 2003, just under 20% of the residents living in towns throughout Nova Scotia were seniors.³ Thus, determining the proportion of seniors living in rural Nova Scotia depends on how one defines "rural".

Within Nova Scotia, the rural areas have the highest median age. The demographic projection is that one quarter of the general population will be 65 years of age or older by the year 2026 (Nova Scotia Seniors' Secretariat, 2005). Additionally, the rural areas are also aging more rapidly than the urban centres as the younger generations increasingly migrate to the cities. In 2005 the rural counties, which comprise most of the province outside of the Halifax and Sydney metropolitan areas, already had a median age of 40.7 years, an increase of 3–4 years from the 1996 Census (Nova Scotia Seniors' Secretariat, 2005).

Nova Scotia has:

- *the oldest population in Atlantic Canada*
- *the second oldest in the country*

² 15.4% of Saskatchewan's residents are over 65.

³ This compared to 16.6 per cent for Cape Breton Regional Municipality, 11.0 per cent for Halifax Regional Municipality, and 14.5 per cent for rural Nova Scotia. See Nova Scotia Seniors' Statistical Profile, 2005.



Perceptions about Volunteers in the Literature

What follows in this section of the report is a review of the relevant literature that has been written about volunteers in general as well as the literature which has specifically examined volunteering among seniors. The review demonstrates that ideas about volunteering and seniors' volunteering are varied. Indeed, debates about why and how people volunteer reveal many different points of view and come from a variety of disciplines, including medicine, community development and gerontology.

Research literature has exploded with information on the personal and individual nature of volunteering, and the personal benefits to volunteering (Jirovec & Hyduck, 1998; Morros et al., 1998; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario & Tang, 2003; Schmotkin, Blumstein & Modan, 2003; Van Willigan, 2000). Volunteering has been described as a key component of "productive aging", which can serve to counteract the marginalization of seniors in Western society. Volunteering may also be seen as an activity which allows seniors to replace the socio-psychological benefits gained through employment, such as social networks, sense of self worth and sense of purpose (Hood, 2007). The literature also includes important and considerable nods to the larger worth of volunteering to the sustainability of community (Gallagher, 1994; Hall et al., 2001; Lasby, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Robb et al., 1999).

Factors influencing seniors' economic security, and by extension, their availability to volunteer:

- *reduction in secure, life-long jobs*
- *fewer people retiring with employment pensions*
- *restructuring and resulting reduction in net income*

In 1997, Gordon and Neal argued that the context of volunteerism had changed in Canadian society and that a new research agenda was needed. They identified issues around the politics of requiring voluntary boards and the economic viability of volunteer work from the perspective of the volunteer. To date, these issues have not been thoroughly addressed.

Recruitment and Retention of Senior Volunteers – a Hot Topic

Recruitment and retention of volunteers is a "hot" topic for organizations which rely on volunteers, as shown by the number of publications and resources which focus on this topic (Davidhizar & Bowen, 1995; Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Hoodless, 2003; McClintock, 2004; Noble, 2007; Singh, Levin & Forde, 2006). It is recognized in these resources that those who have a history of volunteering may be the most likely to continue to volunteer when they retire, and feel a sense of personal satisfaction as long as they are able to do so (Chambre, 1984; Gottlieb 2002; Hooyman & Kiyak, 1999; Moen & Fields, 2002). It should be noted that the more resources one has, such as time, money, access to health services and education, the more likely it is that they will formally volunteer (Chappell & Prince, 1998; Fischer et al., 1991; Herzog & Morgan, 1993; Morgan, Dye & Hybels, 1979).

To date, research has shown that certain social and economic values and conditions have fostered community engagement in volunteer activity (Bouma & Dixon, 1986 cited in Warburton, 1997; Gottlieb, 2002; Sperling & Hall, 2007). Economic security has been linked to participation in volunteering. In addition, seniors have been seen as a population with the leisure to engage

in formal and informal volunteering. Recent economic approaches have raised questions about whether this will continue. In Canada, economic restructuring has led to major changes in the labour market. The most relevant changes include a reduction in the reality of secure, life-long jobs and an increased number of short-term contractual and marginal jobs that in turn will result in fewer people retiring with employment pensions, affecting economic security of people in retirement.

Other changes in work have also occurred, which have serious negative implications for employees. In Nova Scotia, for example, restructuring has led to an increase in the work week in some industries with resulting changes in how overtime pay is calculated and a reduction in net income for affected workers (Elliot-Lopez, 2004). Changes such as these can result in seniors reaching retirement years with less economic security than in the past. The implication for future seniors who may reach retirement age with less economic security than today's seniors is obvious. Such changes have raised questions about the sustainability of past assumptions and practices when it comes to volunteering (Elliott-Lopez, 2004; Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Freedman, 2002).

Finally, another major change in the labour market is the abolition of mandatory retirement in a number of jurisdictions, including Ontario, Manitoba, and Quebec, and pending in Nova Scotia. This, too, may affect the number of seniors available to take on major volunteer commitments and the choices they make about how to use their time (Shannon & Grierson, 2004; Van Sluys, 2005). Many older adults may choose to work, some as a matter of choice, and others out of economic necessity.

The implication of the above raises questions about the capacity of both current and future seniors to sustain a level of volunteer work essential to the maintenance of the quality of life in communities. This concern will exist no matter how sophisticated and effective the recruitment efforts of organizations become.

Hindrances to Volunteer Work

Much of the research around recruitment of volunteers has been concerned with addressing individual barriers to volunteering (e.g. Lasby, 2004). While the benefits of volunteer work in rural communities are an acknowledged part of rural life, barriers to seniors' involvement in formal voluntary activities in the literature on senior voluntarism generally fall into two categories: personal and organizational. Transportation, especially in rural areas, provides particular challenges (Gallagher, Menec & Keefe, 2007; Hoodless, 1983). Living on fixed, and often low incomes is the other important economic challenge and constraint for senior volunteers (Warburton et al., 2001). Transportation provides particular challenges in both categories, as do the economic constraints for low-income seniors living on fixed incomes (Gallagher, Menec & Keefe, 2007; Warburton et al., 2001). While these both operate as personal constraints, they are systemic in nature.

Recently retired seniors may prefer flexibility and spontaneity and may be reluctant to make ongoing commitments to volunteer work. Economically comfortable and healthy seniors may prefer travelling and visits to distant family and friends to staying home and donating their time as volunteers.

Ill health and lack of time are the two most common reasons given by seniors for not

Lack of transportation and fixed, often low, incomes can hinder seniors' volunteer work.

Ill health and lack of time are the two most common reasons given by seniors for not volunteering.

*Seniors view
volunteering as an
opportunity to:*

- *use skills and
experience*
- *maintain a sense
of structure and
routine*
- *give back to the
community*

volunteering (Fischer et al., 1989; Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Mansfield-Cohen, 1989; NSGVP, 2000; Ozawa & Morrow-Howell, 1988). The largest group of senior volunteers is among the younger age group of the senior population, aged 65-74 (NSGVP, 2000). However, it is not uncommon to find very active senior volunteers in rural areas in their eighties and nineties as long as their health permits and they do not over commit themselves to any one organization (Keefe & Side, 2003).

Recruiting seniors as volunteers presents a “paradox of access”, meaning that while older people are seemingly more available due to diminished responsibilities in work and family life, they are interested in other things. Senior volunteers are also susceptible to the changing availability of operational and program funding, which may affect the organizations in which they volunteer.

Motivations for Volunteer Engagement

Most people say they volunteer because of a commitment to or belief in a cause, a desire for self-fulfillment and development, or a desire for social engagement (Hall et al., 2001). Motives for volunteering among Canadians across three age groups (45-54, 55-64, 65+) are relatively stable and are also most often related to altruism. In Canada, there is a definite link between religious involvement and volunteer engagement (Hall et al., 2006; McKeown et al., 2004). Religious affiliation encourages voluntarism within church organizations while membership in a faith community also encourages altruistic behaviour in general (Bouma & Dixon, 1986, cited in Warburton, 1997). But one need not be an active member of a faith community to still be shaped by what

that community has earlier taught them about the value of voluntary work. Ideas about charity or social justice are as much related to altruism as are the ideas of walking in other person’s shoes and lending a hand to those who might need that assistance at a particular time in their life.

The Canadian Centre on Philanthropy in 2000 ranked the most commonly cited motives for volunteering in people over the age of forty-five. Volunteers did so to express a belief in a cause (97%), to use one’s skills and experience (71%), to satisfy a personal connection to an issue (66%) to fulfill a religious obligation (49%), to explore ones’ own strengths (37%) and to volunteer with a friend (31%).

A small proportion of seniors (3%) see volunteering as an opportunity to improve job skills (Canadian Centre on Philanthropy, 2000). They do, however, see volunteering as an opportunity to use their skills and experience, as a means to maintaining a sense of structure and routine in their lives, and to fulfill their sense of obligation to give back to the community from which they have gained a benefit over the years (Bowen & MacKechnie, 2001; Gottlieb, 2002).

Senior Volunteers Identify with the Local Context

Volunteering, especially for seniors, takes place in the local context. While some seniors volunteer for activities that take place outside their immediate community, many only volunteer in what they perceive and identify as their own community.

In general, four different and sometimes interrelated kinds of organizations are the main beneficiaries: religious; social service; health; and arts, culture and recreation

organizations are the places where seniors invest their time and energy. Health organizations are the first priority for seniors (33%). A quarter of their volunteer hours (25%) then goes to arts, culture and recreation groups; followed closely by social service organizations (24%), with religious organizations (18%) taking up the rest (NSGVP, 2000). Although this contrasts earlier studies noting the predominance of religious organizations (Fischer & Schaffer, 1993), there is no doubt that the work of making our community a better place to live is a goal that all of these organizations share in common.

How Does Volunteering Benefit Seniors?

During the past three decades the greatest body of literature about senior volunteers has focused on the benefits of volunteering to seniors. Volunteering has become associated with an increased sense of well-being, increased life satisfaction, decreased mortality (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Musik et al., 1999; Schmotkin et al., 2003; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), better mental health, strong ego development, and enhanced quality and quantity of life (Bradley, 1999; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003; Van Willigen, 2000). In medical and health terms, voluntarism supports physical activity, strength while aging, maintenance of cognitive abilities, social support, and even a decline in television watching (Brown et al., 2003; Chappell, 1999; Fisher et al., 1998; Herzog & House, 1991; Wheeler et al., 1998).

Gender and Volunteering

Volunteering is still considered by many to be the responsibility of women because of its association with social welfare and caring. Some researchers extolling the value of volunteering have found that volunteering may be even more important for men than women. Women and men bring different life experiences to their decisions about volunteering.

For life-long stay-at-home mothers and wives who have not volunteered over a lifetime, issues of anxiety and lack of self-confidence can keep them out of voluntary activities. As more and more women develop professionally and acquire managerial skills in addition to the traditionally-defined female identified skills, it is likely that all domains of volunteer work will open to both men and women. On the other hand, using both descriptive and multivariate analyses isolating gender through using only households headed by single men or single women, results of a survey examining consumer finances in Canada indicate that women are more likely than men to give both time and money to philanthropic organizations which are voluntary in nature. Men, therefore, may need to be encouraged to participate in voluntary work.

While gender roles have been in flux during the past 25 years, the current seniors grew to adulthood in a time of more traditional gender roles. This had an impact on how women and men spent their younger years. Labour force participation for women in middle and upper income families was likely characterized by exits and re-entries, and it is highly likely this age cohort was full-time, stay-at-home mothers. Their volunteer efforts were likely spent in neighbourhood,

Four kinds of organizations that benefit from senior volunteerism:

- health
- arts, culture and recreation
- social service
- religious

NSGVP, 2000

Volunteering and the benefits to seniors:

- improved mental health
- enhanced quality and quantity of life
- decreased isolation
- maintenance of cognitive abilities
- strengthened social supports
- decreased mortality

Today's female workers will likely reach retirement without the same history of community volunteerism as their foremothers due to their work patterns; they may not see volunteerism as the same kind of normative social role in old age.

Rural residents in Nova Scotia are actively engaged in providing informal volunteer work or unpaid help to others.

school and church-related activities. Inasmuch as women outnumber men in the over 65 age group in Canada, it is likely that these women will continue to focus on volunteer work in these domains.

The next generation of seniors, which will likely include women who have had professional careers, will not bring as much of a history of volunteer engagement, and may want to use their senior volunteer energies differently, if they volunteer at all.

Notwithstanding the benefits of volunteering for both women and men, we must also understand that in the past quarter century women's labour force participation rate has gone up and the impact on volunteering has become more evident with time. In 2004, women were 47% of the paid work force, compared to 37% in 1976. Put another way, 59% of all women 15 and older were part of the paid labour force, up from 42% in 1976. While women may volunteer more in ways that were like men or as part of their labour market commitments, they may also volunteer less in the traditional "ladies auxiliary" or "women only" method of volunteering. The changed labour force dynamics have also resulted in increasing time pressures on families and a familial economic dependence on two incomes. The time demands on two-earner families and the increase in lone parent female headed households make the emergence of the ethic of volunteering more difficult or complex than it once was.

Senior volunteers of the past raised their families in a very different social environment than currently exists. Today's workers will likely reach retirement without the same history of community volunteerism and, thus, may not see volunteerism as the same kind of normative social role in older age.

Hall et al. (2001) indicated that more women than men still volunteer and contribute more hours of volunteering time. "Married" marital status is also correlated with voluntarism, in part because being married in the senior years means access to higher incomes which in turn creates better conditions for pursuing voluntary activities.

Regardless of gender, voluntarism is still viewed by most researchers as particularly beneficial to retirees with low income and those who are in ill health. Men are especially encouraged to see the increased opportunities for social participation and decreased risk of social isolation through volunteer activities.

Rural Senior Volunteers and Informal Volunteering

A sole focus on formal volunteering or the work for charitable, non-profit community organizations excludes the myriad of unpaid services that people do for others. In addition to formal volunteering, rural residents in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada, like elsewhere, are actively engaged in providing informal volunteer work or unpaid help to others (Keefe & Side, 2003).

Informal volunteerism can be viewed as an extension of these unpaid helping behaviours. These unpaid "caring for others" kinds of activities are often gendered, with women typically providing more assistance and hours of assistance than men (Keefe & Side, 2003). While individual helping behaviours may be a strategy to support and maintain the health of rural communities, population trend and shifts in traditional gender roles is requiring communities to re-think and re-tool their current helping strategies or forms of formal and informal voluntarism.

Social Cohesion and the Role of Volunteering in Building Community

Social cohesion is not just about maintaining a homogenous society but fundamentally about relationships among people from different paths of life. To build cohesion in any community, whether urban or rural, policy analysts and community decision makers and members need to identify a community's assets, including voluntary organizations, and to know the community's social and economic context in order to look beyond a community's immediate gates. Only when that process is undertaken and communicated with community members will rural communities, like other communities, be able to build multiple capacities.

To nurture social cohesion, links are needed in the voluntary sector (as in other social and economic sectors) to reverse the years of rural decline and to maintain what currently works well in rural volunteer organizations. The mobilization of social capital and entrepreneurial social and economic infrastructure along with supports for grassroots governance will require ongoing action and debate. Appropriate public policy, education, and social support for voluntary organizations across the country can only be developed in the context of how broader economic and political issues have shaped the economy in which volunteering takes place.



For people over 65, pensions, benefits from life-time earnings, and returns of investment represent an important form of wealth inside rural communities. These same people also represent to local organizations an important source of labour and skills to voluntary and community organizations. It will be important for rural organizations and communities to build on the social wealth that exists in their communities if they are to sustain the quality of rural life in the face of urban centralization. As Le Mesurier (2004) notes, "...those currently entering old age are the most likely people to have the skills and experience to take on community responsibilities, an important consideration in the context of long-term policy for the health and vitality of rural communities (p.3)."

...those currently entering old age are the most likely people to have the skills and experience to take on community responsibilities, an important consideration in the context of long-term policy for the health and vitality of rural communities.

LE MESURIER, 2004



Project Study Methods

This project was an examination of the contribution of senior formal volunteers in rural communities hypothesizing that this has a positive impact on:

- a) the viability and sustainability of their communities as a whole, and
- b) the physical and psychological health of senior volunteers as well as their ability to “age in place” within their community.

The research methods used included focus groups in three different rural communities; individual interviews with key informants from each focus group; as well as informants suggested by focus group members; telephone interviews with community leaders; and short surveys of project participants, both members of seniors’ groups and identified community leaders. Related documents were collected and examined. Each of these was asked about their experience with senior volunteers and their benefits to the community, as well as their ability to age in place.

The Statistics Canada files providing census data organized by postal code were used, as were statistics from the Nova Scotia Community Counts website to provide basic demographic information on age, gender, income, employment and ethnicity for each community. Observations by researchers to each community site were augmented by a community forum at each community site which developed the themes based upon the findings to date and reviewed the findings of each focus group for a larger community group which was open to anyone in the community. The initial step in the



research was the community focus groups. A select group of seniors spent several hours discussing theirs and others’ volunteer efforts in the community providing an overview of how they saw their volunteer work in the community. Further information on each of these data collection approaches follows.

Criteria for Selection of the Three Community Sites

In this research, each site had to be a specific distance from an urban centre because of the focus on rural communities. On the mainland the communities were at least 150 kilometres from Halifax, and in Cape Breton at least 50 kilometres from Sydney. In the selection of research sites each community had to meet specific criteria, which included: 1) geographically dispersed with economic, linguistic and cultural traditions that were different from each other; 2) large number of seniors; 3) linkages/network contacts with either the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging or Community Links that were willing to undertake the organization of local events.

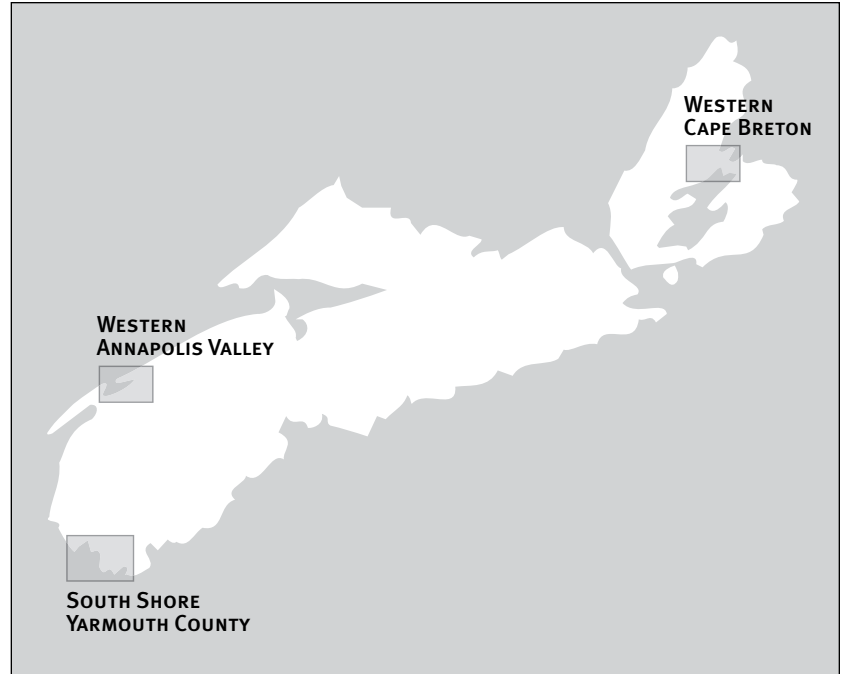
The Communities

The three sites included one in western Cape Breton, another on the south shore of Yarmouth County, and a third in the western area of the Annapolis Valley. The sites drew from several villages and dispersed communities in each area. The first site, western Cape Breton, has a strong tourism industry and a significant English-speaking population with Scottish heritage. The second, the south shore of Yarmouth County is noted for its fisheries, and has a predominantly French-speaking Acadian population. The third site, the western area of the Annapolis Valley, has an economy based mainly upon agriculture and has a predominantly English-speaking population with a Loyalist heritage. All three are more homogeneous in ethnicity than are most urban areas in Canada today. All three have long-term residents who have been residing in the area for many generations, as well as newcomers who are primarily from other parts of Canada rather than from other parts of the world.

Focus Groups

Once a verbal commitment was received from a seniors' organization in each site, a confirmation letter outlining the research project as well as the researchers' expectations for composition of the focus groups was distributed. Criteria for participants included: variation in age, a mixture of men and women, and if possible, a diversity of work histories. Information was provided to support the organization of both focus groups and community forums.

Honoraria of \$150 were given to the organizing groups to use for their organization and to recognize the contributions of the members of organizing communities, focus



group participants, and individual interviewees. Refreshment costs of \$75 were also provided to the organizing group to enable a social atmosphere at each event. These arrangements were made for both focus groups and community forums.

Twenty-seven seniors participated in the three focus groups which were held during the summer and fall of 2005. The focus groups, which lasted two to three hours, ranged in size between seven and eleven participants. Two facilitators led the participants through a series of open-ended questions. The questions explored four key areas. First, participants were asked to talk about their experiences as volunteers, including reasons for volunteering, and ways in which volunteering affected their lives. Next, they were asked to comment on their community: their reasons for living there, what they needed to live their daily lives, what services they felt were lacking in their community, and reasons they might con-



sider leaving. Third, participants were asked to comment on how they felt seniors contributed to their community. Finally, participants were invited to suggest community leaders who might be able to provide more information that would help us better understand the community and how it works. All sessions were taped and the tapes transcribed. Flip-chart notes produced from each of the groups were used in the community forum meetings held later in the project. The findings from the focus groups were incorporated into a summary of findings, a preliminary fact sheet, and a Power Point presentation, which were used later at the community forums.

Criteria for Selecting Key Informants

Two categories of key informants were identified. The first was derived from individuals identified by focus group participants. The second represented the team's identification of major organizations and community activities, and representatives of those. Staff and or key volunteers with voluntary organizations perceived to be of relevance to focus group members were the first. The second were community leaders as identified either by focus group members or by designated position in the community. Once identified, key informants were sent a letter,

accompanied by a project description, inviting their participation.

Key Informants

Thirty-four community leaders drawn from the three communities were interviewed. Key informants included members of chambers of commerce, religious institutions, organizations concerned with economic development, and senior-specific community organizations. Some key informants were individuals in strategic positions and others were well-respected individuals in the community. A list of organizational questions was sent to staff or volunteers of organizations prior to interviews to solicit information on the organizations. The questions asked of community leaders were not provided in advance, but were posed either in person or on the telephone. Interviews lasted between one and one half hours and included both open and closed ended questions. All interviews were tape-recorded. Tapes were used to create summary notes.

Community Mapping

Of interest to this study was the geography of each community as it related to the location of services, social gathering places and residential areas. How did seniors live their daily lives in terms of access to the facilities they needed for shopping, health care services, banking, church, voluntary organizations and other essential components? Where were these things in relation to one another and how far did people have to travel? Physical location of essential services is necessary to permit seniors to age in place.

Assumptions about the importance of the location of facilities were not borne out in either the interviews with seniors or

community leaders. While transportation was identified as an issue vis-a-vis proximity of centralized villages and towns, a majority of participants seemed to think that the current crop of seniors was able to manage as they could either drive themselves, or find a drive with someone in their community.

Photographic collages featuring neighbourhood senior volunteers in action, local services (such as banks and pharmacies) that support seniors to remain in their communities, and local culture were given to each participating community organization as acknowledgement of their contribution. We suspect these will become focal points for sustaining current activities.

While visiting the three community sites, researchers collected documents such as newspapers, newsletters, minutes of meetings, economic and social planning reports, and information circulated by government services which related to community services for the purpose of community mapping. Information was also gleaned from these documents highlighting the presence and contributions of seniors in the community, the activities and concerns of voluntary organizations and information related to future economic and social sustainability of the community. In addition, distances between selected sites and vital services such as banks, health care offices, churches, medical clinics, grocery stores and gas stations were recorded. Community based non-profit organizations were identified and listed for each community. The picture of the physical and organization layout of each community provided additional insight into the patterns of social relationships.



Rural seniors volunteering at a local church

Community Forums

The same local non-profit and voluntary or community organizations that scheduled the focus groups organized the community forum meetings. These forums were also advertised through local newspapers, public service announcements and notices to seniors' groups. All research participants whether from focus groups or individual interviews were invited to attend through a mailed invitation. Written invitations were also sent to local mayors, community councillors and recreation coordinators. A written summary of the preliminary findings of focus groups and interviews was included with the invitations. Presentations of these findings were made and at each site and participants were invited to comment on them. Notes about responses were taken at each meeting. These comments were collated for each forum.



Seniors Volunteering in Rural Communities

Seniors tend to volunteer within their own communities and close to their homes. Volunteer work takes place in local communities for local, national and international organizations.

In the three rural case studies located in western Cape Breton (tourism and rural economy); southwest Nova Scotia (fishing and tourist economy) and western Annapolis Valley (agricultural economy) it is apparent that many seniors participate in voluntary organizations. Seniors tend to volunteer within their own communities and close to their homes. Volunteer work takes place in local communities for local, national and international organizations.

Volunteering rates for the communities studied were similar to the volunteer rates of seniors in Canada as a whole. 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. As mentioned, the majority of volunteer hours contributed by seniors across the country occurred in four types of organizations⁴ – health (33%), arts, culture and recreation (25%), social service (24%), and religious (18%). In Rural Nova Scotia, seniors who volunteer do so for an average of three different organizations – arts, culture and recreation, social service, and religious. These volunteers contribute on average five hours per week of formal volunteer time. According to community leaders seniors contribute even more hours in informal volunteering.

Sustaining the Life of Rural Communities – Seniors' Perceptions

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.

Seniors believe that their volunteer efforts are important, as do the community leaders.

⁴ 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, see <http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca/>

Community Leaders' Perceptions of Senior Volunteers

“Our cultural ways would be lost without senior volunteers...”

Community leaders representing thirty-three 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 most true for linguistic and cultural minorities within the larger culture (Acadians and those with Gaelic heritage). Half of the organizations surveyed in this project had a majority of senior volunteers. The majority of senior volunteers were in their sixties and the majority were women.

Community leaders spoke at length on the benefit of having seniors involved in voluntary activities in their communities. They also identified the following very real areas of concern. Organizational survival and declining membership were particularly relevant to organizations where the cohort of seniors were older. The seeming lack of volunteerism among younger generations (including those who are newly retiring) was viewed as a pressing concern for most. Burnout among those seniors who do too much was identified as a potential problem in keeping organizations healthy and alive. While the cost of volunteering was acknowledged, many felt that recognition events just barely scratched the surface of the true worth of senior volunteers.

Seniors' Perceptions of Volunteering in Rural Communities

The twenty-seven focus group members and six senior volunteer community leaders volunteered because of physical, psychological well-being, enhanced social life and a greater sense of self-satisfaction. They also volunteered to provide benefits to their community through the provision of services and the active creation of community pride.

Seniors live in rural areas where they volunteer because they like the slower pace of life, the rural beauty of the area, and the proximity to nature. They pay attention to the economics of living in a rural area, citing lower taxes than in the city. Many live in rural areas as a means to maintaining ancestral roots through family networks of heritage. They are pleased when they are able to find an availability of services nearby. They fully appreciate and enjoy the sense of security in knowing their neighbours.

While seniors actively chose to stay in rural communities or to return to the communities of their roots they are able to identify that there are certain things they need to continue living in place. They also cite the following needs as the means for retaining senior volunteers in rural communities. All participants in every focus group were in agreement that affordable transportation, adequate housing and levels of care, close social networks, and adequate health services are all required in order to sustain senior volunteers in rural communities.

Declining membership and burnout among seniors who do too much were identified as challenges to keeping organizations healthy and alive.

What is needed to sustain senior volunteers in rural communities?

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



Sustaining Culture in Rural Communities

The direct and indirect impact of the culture sector in Nova Scotia, as measured by the contribution to the GDP, was estimated at almost \$1.2 billion in 2001, with some 28,000 direct and indirect jobs depending on culture activities (Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage, 2005). Thus, the fact that sustaining the culture of rural communities and sustaining culture in rural communities was an important theme for all focus group participants is not at odds with economic development of their communities. Volunteering, especially for seniors, is most often about making their community a better place to live for everyone. Many seniors volunteer in the cultural sector. This was especially evident at both the Acadian municipality of Argyle and the regional municipality of Victoria County where the linguistic and cultural traditions were more central to the identity of local residents than in the larger provincial community.

Seniors contribute an average of five formal volunteer hours per week to the arts, culture and heritage sector. They firmly believe they are the means to ensuring that future generations do not lose the cultural aspect of their quality of life.

Seniors in all three community sites consistently volunteer in arts, crafts, cultural and heritage not-for-profit organizations. They support a variety of local museums, artistic, linguistic, musical, and theatrical events, festivals and organizations. Senior volunteers would agree with the provincial government that “Nova Scotia is blessed with a rich and diverse heritage” that “gives us a deep knowledge of our past, a clear understanding of our present, and a solid foundation for our future. Recognizing and safeguarding this heritage is...essential to our growth as a people” (Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage, 2008, p.2).

Senior Volunteers in the Cultural Sector of Rural Community Life

In Canada as a whole, volunteer workers account for 65% of the workforce in not-for-profit heritage institutions and 40% of the workers in not-for-profit performing arts companies. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of volunteers in Nova Scotia in cultural organizations decreased, however the number of hours contributed remained more stable and the average number of hours performed in cultural organizations increased. In addition to the 18,900 paid jobs in the cultural sector in 2000-2001, there were 11,500 volunteer jobs (Statistics Canada, 2004b). Of course, many more volunteer hours in this sector are given but not captured in statistics.

The seniors in all three communities described voluntary work in the cultural sector as important to enhancing their quality of life. They noted that cultural activities maintain a strong and positive impact on the quality of life and that arts and culture enhance community sustainability. They firmly believe that heritage is passed on between generations and that they are the means to ensuring that future generations do not lose this cultural aspect to their quality of life. Like their counterparts who work in other domains, seniors in rural Nova Scotia who volunteer in the arts, culture and heritage sector, spend an average of five hours per week on this activity.

Community Leaders' Perceptions of Culture and Senior Volunteers

In urban areas, arts and cultural organizations are run by a combination of paid professional staff and volunteers. By contrast, in rural areas almost exclusively volunteers, many of who are seniors, run most such organizations. The cultural organizations represented in the three rural communities surveyed in Nova Scotia included organizations, such as The Acadian Village; The Firefighters Museum; The Fisheries Museum; The Gaelic College; Local Commemorative and Celebratory Days; churches of varying denominations; as well as a large number of organizations supporting education in language, artistic, musical, theatrical, craft and culinary demonstrations and instruction. As mentioned earlier, organizations which use senior volunteers were clear that “cultural ways would be lost without senior volunteers”.



Sustaining the Life of Rural Communities

Passing on culture, language and history to the next generation as well as to visitors is one of the six ways in which senior volunteers view themselves as sustaining the life of rural communities. The two sites which had homogeneous and unique cultures and histories were most concerned with transmitting that culture to the young and showing it off to visitors. The third site, the western Annapolis Valley, was more general in its idea of culture. Further, newcomers in this site were welcomed by local residents and local community groups when they indicated a willingness to work. One participant noted:

“So [the health centre] is a community centre for Come from Aways⁵...it's a place where people who aren't traditional to the community have a place [where they can volunteer].”

While most senior volunteers in the cultural sector had some immediate connection to local history, those who were newcomers to rural areas were also able to find connections. Some of these seniors identified either family history or exploring community roots as two different ways to enter into volunteering for not-for-profit community based cultural organizations. Personal interests and the betterment of the community at large were two ways in which senior volunteers recently from outside the local community joined with long term residents.

Passing on culture, language and history to the next generation as well as to visitors is one of the ways in which senior volunteers feel they sustain life in rural communities.

“Hopefully, we can sustain cultural activities. Seniors are an important resource in sharing historical knowledge and creating a sense of belonging.”

⁵ In Nova Scotia, the expression “Come-from-Away” is used to refer to a newcomer.



Organizational Considerations

Key questions for organizations to ask:

- *What are the best strategies for recruiting new senior volunteers?*
- *What strategies will work to maintain their participation?*

Volunteers are at the heart of sustaining rural communities. They commit time, energy and expertise to the community tasks at hand. Volunteering is also a form of active engagement with benefits to individuals and their communities. Many senior volunteers benefit immensely from volunteering but they sometimes do so at the cost of overextending themselves.

From the point of view of organizations, two key questions emerged about senior volunteers. The first was how to recruit new seniors to organizations, and the second was how to maintain their participation once they were there. The next section of the report outlines the impediments to volunteering and suggests, from an organizational point of view, how some of these concerns can best be understood and then addressed.

- *closure of local schools*
- *retraction of church-based organizations and their services*
- *women's increased labour force participation*
- *centralization of services and commercial enterprises*

These changes create time demands on individuals which reduce time for community work. New ways of attracting women and men of all ages to volunteer participation may be required.

Structural Impediments to Volunteering

Implicit in the literature on volunteering is the notion that voluntarism is good for organizations and individuals. Also implicit is that organizations which rely on volunteers ought to be able to sustain themselves through this volunteer labour. However, the continuity of local organizations in rural areas requires the existence of other local institutions which provide space for voluntary organizations and contribute to a sense of community. When this is not present, maintaining voluntary organizations is more difficult.⁶

Closure of local schools has created a lack of local space for non-profits and depleted the resources that once were present to assist in their development. Without well-maintained buildings and the resources of teachers in small communities, local people get drawn to areas where there are schools. The population base and infrastructure of local communities are adversely affected. Families move away, community meeting space is reduced and maintaining voluntary organizations, including those focused on seniors, becomes more difficult.

⁶ The government of Nova Scotia in the winter of 2006 began to require consideration of schools as community centres in discussions around school closings. This acknowledges the important community function that schools play.

Retraction of church-based organizations

and thus their services has also required community groups to replace these services while existing church groups try and struggle on with much less population base, leadership and infrastructure than they once had. The challenges for seniors who are still affiliated with churches means that they often have to do the work that was once done by clergy.

Women's increased labour force participation

has led to a generation of women whose lives have been spent in the labour force and not the community. This likely means that the time available for voluntary community activities is restricted. Downsizing of health care means increased need for family caregivers, most of whom are women. This includes caring for ill family members as well as those with poor health due to aging.

Centralization of services and commercial enterprises (such as gas stations, grocery stores, pharmacies) means that rural areas simply become more difficult to navigate for any voluntary organization when these services are withdrawn. This means that the entire population, including seniors, spends more time travelling in order to acquire necessities.

These changes create time demands on individuals which cut into available time for community work. New ways of attracting women and men of all ages to volunteer participation may be required.

Recruitment

Senior volunteers often see a need that is related to them as individuals or members of their community when they join a voluntary organization. When seniors volunteer, it is often a result of personal circumstance. Like other volunteers, they participate in voluntary activities around issues or topics that affect them or about which they know something.

Community organizations in the past have not had major problems in recruitment of volunteers. However, continuity and renewal has been identified as a significant issue for voluntary organizations. This is particularly true for organizations which rely on senior volunteers.

According to participants in our focus groups, the best ways to recruit senior volunteers still include personal contact or through "word of mouth" in a social network. Stressing the benefit of volunteering as beneficial to more than just an individual and to a larger group is a message that helps to draw people into an organization. When people are trying to entice newcomers into a volunteer organization it is very helpful if they outline the benefits of volunteering to community and demonstrate the usefulness of the volunteer tasks that senior volunteers undertake.

Most importantly, to work well for seniors or indeed most volunteers, voluntary tasks need to be broken down into tasks with a beginning, middle, and end which have meaningful markers of accomplishment. Without these markers and a sense of accomplishment, people become discouraged and prone to burn out. This is particularly true for seniors.

Voluntary tasks need to be broken down into tasks with a beginning, middle, and end which have meaningful markers of accomplishment. Without these markers and a sense of accomplishment, people become discouraged and prone to burn out. This is particularly true for seniors.



Individual Barriers to Volunteering

Barriers to volunteering include:

- *out-of-pocket costs*
- *failure to adequately pace oneself*
- *overextended and stagnant organizations*
- *lack of transportation*

The individual barriers to seniors participating in voluntary community organizations are the costs that seniors have to pay out of their own pockets to support any organization. When the issue was raised in focus group discussions, all members concurred. The costs that add up over time, such as gas to get supplies for fundraisers, long distance calls to suppliers, and extra electricity and baking supplies for bake sales, may seem inconsequential to some, but for low-income seniors, in particular, they represent a significant portion of one's income. If the costs are simply too great, seniors can be discouraged from volunteering.

Senior volunteers, if they don't adequately pace themselves, can suffer from burn out. Organizations can also become overextended and stagnant. If there are not enough volunteers to keep an organization vibrant and healthy, one or two individuals may try and do it all and suffer the inevitable consequences of burn out. This particularly happens when successor groups of volunteers are not mentored within an organization.

Finally, simply getting to and from places where volunteers are required in rural situations requires available transportation. Many seniors drive other seniors and maintain an informal transportation infrastructure. Without transportation, participation is not possible.

Strategies for Addressing Individual Barriers for Senior Volunteers

There are a number of simple strategies organizations can implement to address individual barriers to participation by senior volunteers. A few suggestions from the project participants follow.

REIMBURSE COSTS Organizations which reimburse costs whenever possible encourage all seniors to take part in an organization regardless of different income levels. Senior volunteers who do not need the reimbursement can simply turn the money back to the organization's programs. This strategy ensures that a person's income does not restrict his/her activities. This is particularly important to people on fixed and limited incomes.

PROVIDE SUPPORT TO VOLUNTEERS Providing support to volunteers with opportunities to acquire knowledge, to engage in social time, to share food and drink and to take part in opportunities to network ensures the continual engagement of volunteers. Indeed, many voluntary organizations that serve volunteers do this for their intended beneficiaries as well as for the volunteers who run the organizations.

IDENTIFY BEGINNING AND END POINTS FOR VOLUNTEER TASKS Identifying beginning and end points for volunteer tasks is the quickest and easiest way to address over commitment and burn out. While loyalty to an organization is important for many seniors, it is equally important that people have a

kind of balance in their life they feel good about. Breaking down the goals of an organization into discrete and concrete tasks also makes it easy to identify when and where volunteers can best find a place in any organization.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL RECOGNITION

Recognition both formally (through public means) and informally (with sincere pats on the back) instils the sense of loyalty any organization can benefit from. While some senior volunteers say they do not need recognition, and indeed shy away from it, they still agree that it is important to let others know they are doing a good job.

KEEP TRACK OF VOLUNTEER HOURS There are two further strategies that organizations might consider to encourage participation by seniors. First, is keeping track of the number of volunteer hours the organization uses, as this may assist the organization in making visible the important role of volunteers in its work. Some organizations are not fully aware of the degree to which volunteers contribute to their operation, and indeed, survival. Keeping track of hours can be an “awareness raising” exercise that leads to more support for volunteers.

INCOME TAX BENEFITS Groups which use volunteers might also consider how income tax benefits can be extended to volunteers – whether permitting charitable donation credits for out-of-pocket expenses connected to volunteering or for donations in kind, including time.

More Clever Recruitment Strategies

SHOW THEM THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS COUNT Senior volunteers bring occupational skills and life experience to organizations. They describe their contributions to sustaining their rural communities through volunteer organizations in six key ways previously cited in this report. Senior volunteers, like other volunteers, are more interested in seeing their contributions count than in simply responding to recruitment advertisements.

STRESS SOCIAL BENEFITS When recruiting senior volunteers, it is always best to stress the social benefits (and indeed the fun and enjoyment of volunteering) to volunteers. Information that helps seniors decide in favour of volunteering include knowing how the support and services of voluntary work complement other services. It means identifying the support and services that various levels of government have not provided.

ACCOUNTABILITY Seniors want to know that fundraising and bringing financial resources into the community at large and the various organizations within communities will be done through the voluntary organization with accountability. They respond enthusiastically to the ideas that passing on culture, language, history and opportunities for equality to the next generation as well as to visitors in the region is an important worthwhile endeavour.

MAINTAIN THE WELL-BEING OF ALL VOLUNTEERS An appreciation of the social processes involved in addressing the impediments to volunteering in rural communities requires organizations to radically rethink and rework the ways and means of recruiting newly retired seniors into voluntarism. To enhance the recruitment of senior volunteers into organizations, it is also important to maintain the well-being of all volunteers, seniors included, in community organizations.





Evaluation

Three major factors limited this research. The first was **the need to rely on key informants for entry into a local community**. While this approach had worked effectively in the past for the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging, it may not have always provided access to the best site for our work. For example, the communities at the Cape Breton site were so geographically spread out that it presented very different issues than the two other locations. First, distances compounded by worse winters became a hindrance to year-round volunteer efforts; second, the more dispersed rural environment and more severe winters meant a higher number of seniors left for the winter; third, the seasonal nature of tourism, which is the area's major economic activity, meant a sharp drop in the population and a closing of community services. Neither of the other two sites identified these issues as problematic.

Second, because we worked through organizations we suspect that **seniors unaffiliated with formal organizations were not well represented** in spite of our requests to focus group organizers to issue invitations. We also suspect, based on remarks of participants, that these unaffiliated seniors contribute a lot of informal volunteer time to their neighbours and communities.

Finally, it appeared that people came to the community forums expecting information and answers rather than discussion. **There was no debate about the researchers' interpretation of material.** Whether this is because participants agreed with the researchers or because they were being polite is uncertain. This lack of response may have been due to the format of the community forums which required the researchers to present information. The discussion in focus groups was much more participatory and researchers' comments were frequently challenged. The interviews also elicited a great deal of information and discussion.

Conclusion

The results of this research serve as a contrast to much of the popular discourse around population aging, which tends to present older adults as a social problem, one that is placing an increasing strain on our social and economic resources. Instead, this research reveals a group of people whose volunteer contributions play a significant role in terms of the ability of rural communities to not only survive, but thrive. It is frequently through their efforts, for instance, that services are provided to make it possible for other seniors to age in place in their community. Senior volunteers also play a key role in the heritage and culture and industry of the province, sharing cultural practices and language with the next generation and in the process generating tourism dollars that benefit their communities. Yet, it is clear that senior volunteers are increasingly under pressure. Out-of-pocket costs, the lack of transportation systems in rural areas, dwindling volunteers due to outmigration, and the retraction of services are placing increasing demands on senior volunteers. Burnout is a concern for many.



It is clear that a good deal of the vitality evident in the rural communities represented in this research is linked to senior volunteerism. One key to maintaining that vitality is to support their efforts. The participants in this study offered a variety of organizational strategies, such as reimbursing out-of-pocket expenses and establishing clear start and end dates for volunteer duties that would mitigate some of the challenges associated with volunteering. These strategies might not only help to retain senior volunteers, but entice others to join in their efforts. There is also clearly a need for more effective strategies aimed at recruiting younger volunteers who can relieve senior volunteers who are currently juggling too many demands. Nevertheless, these strategies, in and of themselves, will not be enough to support senior volunteers. Support from government, whether through volunteer tax credits or subsidized transportation, is also needed if rural communities, and the volunteers living in them, are to thrive.



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Appendix

Rural Senior Volunteers: An Overview

Rural Senior Volunteers: Sustaining Rural Culture

Rural Senior Volunteers: Organizational Considerations



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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Rural Senior Volunteers: Sustaining Rural Culture

Sustaining Culture in Rural Communities

Volunteering, especially for seniors, is most often about making their community a better place to live for everyone. Many seniors volunteer in the cultural sector. They volunteer in arts, crafts, cultural industries and heritage not-for-profit organizations. They support a variety of local museums, artistic, linguistic, musical, and theatrical events, festivals and organizations. The direct and indirect impact of the culture sector in Nova Scotia, as measured by the contribution to the GDP, was estimated at almost \$1.2 billion in 2001, with some 28,000 direct and indirect jobs depending on culture activities.”¹

Heritage and culture are integral components of Nova Scotia society, and it is evident that seniors play a significant role in transmitting and preserving our cultural roots. Supporting their volunteer efforts in the culture sector will help to ensure the vitality and quality of life in Nova Scotia’s rural communities.

Quality of Life

- Cultural activities maintain a strong and positive impact on the quality of life.
- Arts and culture enhance community sustainability.
- Heritage is passed on between generations.

Volunteers in the Cultural Sector of Rural Community Life

In Canada as a whole, volunteer workers accounted for 65 percent of the workforce in not-for-profit heritage institutions and 40 percent of the workers in not-for-profit performing arts companies. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of volunteers in Nova Scotia in cultural organizations decreased, however the number of hours contributed remained more stable and the average number of hours in cultural organizations went up. In addition to the 18,900 paid jobs in the cultural sector in 2000–2001, there were 11,500 officially counted volunteer jobs.² Of course, many more volunteer hours in culture go uncounted.

In rural Nova Scotia, seniors who volunteer in the arts, culture and heritage sector do so in an average of two different organizations. They contribute on average 4.5 hours per week of formal volunteer time in not for profit cultural organizations.

Community Leaders’ Perceptions of Culture

In urban areas, arts and cultural organizations are run by a combination of paid professional staff and volunteers. By contrast, in rural areas such organizations are run almost exclusively by volunteers, many of whom are seniors.

¹ <http://www.gov.ns.ca/dtc/culture/default.asp>

² “Culture Counts -- Counting Culture”, the Statistics Canada Study on Nova Scotia can be viewed on line at www.gov.ns.ca/dtc/_culture_Incoming_StatsCan/NSReportFinal_2004.pdf

Over half of the 33 organizations surveyed in rural Nova Scotia said that *“our organizations would not exist without senior volunteers.”* The statement that *“our cultural ways would be lost without senior volunteers”* rang true particularly for linguistic and cultural minorities within the larger culture as well as for newcomers to rural communities.

The cultural organizations represented in the three rural communities surveyed in Nova Scotia included:

- The Acadian Village
- The Firefighters Museum
- The Fisheries Museum
- Gaelic College
- Scallop Days
- faith organizations
- organizations supporting education in language, artistic, musical, theatrical, craft and culinary demonstrations and instruction

Sustaining the Life of Rural Communities

Passing on culture, language, history to the next generation as well as to visitors to the local area is one of the six key ways in which senior volunteers view themselves as sustaining the life of rural communities.

Replicating Ourselves – Passing on our Connections

Senior volunteers identified family history and exploring community roots as two different ways to enter into volunteering for not-for-profit community-based cultural organizations. Personal interests and the betterment of the community at large were two ways in which senior volunteers from outside the local community recently joined with long-term residents.

“Hopefully, we can sustain cultural activities. Seniors are an important resource in sharing historical knowledge and creating a sense of belonging.”

“You know, local people who’ve been here forever have their churches and community halls. So [the health centre] is a community centre for Come from Aways... it’s a place where people who aren’t traditional to the community have a place [where they can volunteer].”



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Rural Senior Volunteers: Organizational Considerations

Volunteering in Rural Communities

Senior volunteers are at the heart of sustaining rural communities. They commit time, energy and expertise to the community tasks at hand. In return, senior volunteers experience gains in levels of physical activity and life satisfaction, greater exposure to the wider social world, better social supports and better mental health, as well as the maintenance of cognitive abilities and a decrease in television watching. Many senior volunteers benefit immensely from volunteering, but they sometimes do so at the cost of overextending themselves.

Structural Impediments to Volunteering

To enhance the recruitment of senior volunteers into organizations, it is important to maintain the wellbeing of all volunteers in community organizations. The issues of organizational survival and declining membership and the perception of a seeming lack of volunteerism among younger generations (including those who are newly retiring) are not, however, solely individual problems. The burnout among the seniors who do too much and the cost of volunteering to those who can't afford to volunteer in the ways they would like to, are the result of structural impediments and changes over time which have not been adequately addressed by society in general. These impediments and changes include

- physical barriers (inaccessibility for those with various disabilities)
- closure of local schools: lack of local space/resources

- retraction of church-based organizations and services
- changing needs for caregiving and of caregivers
- centralization of services and commercial enterprises (such as gas stations, grocery stores, pharmacies)
- labour market restructuring and the massive entry of women into the paid labour market

An appreciation of the social processes involved in addressing these impediments to volunteering in rural communities requires organizations to radically rethink and rework the ways and means of recruiting newly retired seniors into volunteerism.

Recruitment

Recruitment of volunteers into community organizations is most often a concern for organizations who have not consciously built in successor groups of volunteers to their organizations. Any organization that draws on volunteers from only one generation will ultimately face this problem. When seniors volunteer, it is often a result of personal circumstance. Senior volunteers see a need that is related to them as individuals or members of their community.

The Best Ways to Recruit Senior Volunteers

- personal contact
- word-of-mouth through a community network
- stress the benefit of volunteering as beneficial to the individual
- outline the benefits of volunteering to community
- demonstrate the usefulness of the volunteer tasks
- provide meaningful markers of accomplishment

More Clever Recruitment Strategies

Senior volunteers bring occupational skills and life experience to their organizations. They describe their contributions to sustaining their rural communities through volunteer organizations in six key ways. Senior volunteers like other volunteers are more interested in seeing their contributions count than in simply responding to recruitment advertisements. When recruiting senior volunteers, it is best to stress the social benefits (and indeed the fun and enjoyment of volunteering) to volunteers as well as to demonstrate how the community organization looking for volunteers is:

- 1) supporting and providing services which complement and also support and providing services that various levels of government have not provided;
- 2) fundraising and bringing financial resources into the community at large and the various communities within communities with real accountability;
- 3) passing on culture, language, history and opportunities for equality to the next generation as well as to visitors in the region.

Biggest Individual Barriers to Volunteering

- financial cost
- fatigue or burnout
- available transportation

Community Organizations Can Address Individual Barriers for Senior Volunteers

- reimburse costs whenever possible
- provide support (opportunities to acquire knowledge, social time, food, drink, opportunities to network)
- identify beginning and end points for volunteer tasks
- break down goals into discrete and concrete tasks
- provide recognition both formally (through public means) and informally (with sincere pats on the back)
- create successor groups of volunteers
- coordinate transportation
- lobby for income tax credit for volunteer hours



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