

# **Building Belonging and Connection through Intergenerational Volunteering**

Brief submitted to the Standing Committee on Human  
Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of  
Persons with Disabilities (HUMA)

Submitted by: Volunteer Canada  
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**To:** Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA)

**From:** Volunteer Canada

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## INTRODUCTION

Canada has a growing loneliness epidemic and an intensifying crisis in volunteering and participation. Some of the solutions to these challenges are at hand. For example, research shows that intergenerational volunteering cultivates belonging and connection, and enhances community wellbeing and resilience. Unfortunately, for the moment, Canada lacks the capacity to develop and implement intergenerational programs at the requisite scale to address these challenges in a meaningful way. Building stronger infrastructure to support and promote intergenerational volunteering is a relatively cost-effective way to address major social and economic issues affecting our country.

The purpose of this brief is to inform and provide recommendations to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) as it undertakes a study on intergenerational volunteering. In this brief, Volunteer Canada provides an overview of two key issues – the loneliness epidemic and the crisis in volunteering and participation – and proposes the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: That the Government of Canada commit to engaging and strategically investing in the development and implementation of a National Volunteer Action Strategy** to support volunteering and participation across the country and to build the infrastructure necessary to revitalize social connection at scale and support the organizations that rely on volunteers to serve communities.
- **Recommendation 2: That the Government of Canada invest in building a robust evidence base on intergenerational volunteering** that collates and strengthens research, including frequent and detailed empirical research exploring areas such as trends across diverse ethnocultural groups and intersectional identity factors; the motivations and barriers to volunteering across generations; rural vs. urban volunteering; digital pathways to volunteering; volunteering and social connection; accessibility and volunteering; and the social, health, and economic impact of intergenerational volunteering programs (on individuals and communities).
- **Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada deepen and expand its investment in long-term, high-impact intergenerational volunteering initiatives** that increase the number and diversity of participants in intergenerational volunteering, including support

for physical infrastructure (e.g., building space for programming; transportation), training and administration, technology, and core operations.

## BACKGROUND

### Issue 1: A Growing Loneliness Epidemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread erosion of social connection, leading to increased social isolation and loneliness.<sup>3</sup> Given that social connection is a fundamental social determinant of health and happiness, its accelerated erosion is troubling. In November 2023, the World Health Organization declared loneliness a “global public health concern,” signalling mounting evidence of its health and societal impacts.<sup>1</sup> Social isolation is more often linked to physical health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and early mortality, while loneliness is consistently associated with mental health problems, like depression and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Combined, social isolation and loneliness have profound consequences for our public health systems and threaten the social capital and sense of belonging<sup>b</sup> that keep our communities productive and connected.<sup>3</sup>

Canada is in the midst of its own loneliness epidemic, with one in five Canadians identifying themselves as lonely.<sup>4</sup> While much of the increase in loneliness is attributable to the pandemic, between 6%-12% of Canadians experience long-term chronic loneliness that pre-dates COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> Although social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone at any stage of life, their effects are unequally distributed across society. Ageism and social isolation are closely associated,<sup>6</sup> leaving certain groups at higher risk:

#### Older Adults:

- Before the pandemic, older adults were already at higher risk of experiencing social isolation due to circumstances associated with ageing (e.g., life events such as retirement, community and societal factors such as ageism, transportation barriers, and lack of access to technology).<sup>7</sup> The risk is compounded for older adults with

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<sup>a</sup> Loneliness and social isolation are related but distinct. The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 [Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community](#) defines loneliness as “a subjective distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or inadequate meaningful connections, where inadequate refers to the discrepancy or unmet need between an individual’s preferred and actual experience.” The Advisory defines social isolation as “objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.”

<sup>b</sup> Per the [Tamarack Institute](#), “Belonging is simultaneously an individual’s feeling in relation to their community and relationship with the systems that influence communities. Belonging to a community is to be an active co-owner of the community and to foster a sense of emotional and communal ownership. A sense of community belonging describes the degree to which individuals are connected to their community and their place within it.”



intersecting risk factors – such as living alone, having compromised health, living with low income, and living in a rural area.<sup>8</sup>

- Recent data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CSLA) reveals that since 2015, rates of loneliness have increased by 67% among women aged 65-74 and by 45% among men in this age bracket.<sup>9</sup>
- An estimated 30% of older adults in Canada are at risk of social isolation,<sup>10</sup> with this number expected to increase as the proportion of older adults multiplies in the coming years.<sup>11</sup>
- In addition to the negative health impacts and reduced quality of life associated with loneliness, the isolation of older adults keeps communities from achieving social cohesion, leads to loss of experience and knowledge, and contributes to higher social and economic costs.<sup>12</sup> As the impacts of the current cost-of-living crisis intensify, tackling these issues is increasingly urgent.

#### **Youth:**

- A 2020 survey by the Mental Health Commission of Canada revealed that 48% of youth aged 12-24 identified feeling isolated and lonely as the top challenge they faced during the pandemic.<sup>13</sup>
- Per a 2021 Statistics Canada survey, nearly one in four youth in Canada aged 15-24 reported always or often feeling lonely, with young women experiencing more significant degrees of loneliness.<sup>14</sup>
- Relatedness (feeling belonging and connection with others) is a central factor in healthy youth development.<sup>15</sup> Given this association, high rates of loneliness among youth are concerning.

Newcomers<sup>16</sup> (and especially older adult newcomers<sup>17,18,19</sup>), members of visible minorities,<sup>20</sup> Indigenous peoples,<sup>21</sup> people living on low incomes, people with disabilities,<sup>22</sup> people with chronic health conditions,<sup>23</sup> people living with mental illness,<sup>24</sup> 2SLGBTQI+ people,<sup>25</sup> and people who are digitally excluded<sup>26</sup> are also at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness.<sup>27</sup>

## **Issue 2: An Intensifying Crisis in Volunteering and Participation**

Volunteering plays a vital role in forging stronger communities,<sup>28</sup> promoting a sense of meaning and belonging,<sup>29</sup> and delivering a broad range of social, recreational, and community services. Volunteering is a safeguard for the support systems we rely upon and a powerful avenue for social connection. Historically, Canada has boasted a robust and resilient volunteer spirit, but there is a growing body of indicators pointing toward the fact that volunteering and participation are no longer a given.

Today, Canada is facing a significant volunteer shortage. According to Statistics Canada, 65% of Canadian organizations in the charitable and nonprofit sector report a shortage of new



volunteers, 50% report challenges with volunteer retention, and 42% report that volunteers cannot commit to long-term roles.<sup>30</sup> 38% of organizations report increasing their reliance on volunteers as a result of challenges they face in finding and retaining new donors,<sup>31</sup> but declining volunteer rates are depleting the pool of prospective volunteers.

Older adults, who historically represented a significant proportion of Canada's top volunteers (the 25% of volunteers who provide the most hours), were among those most vulnerable to COVID-19. Many older adults have not returned to volunteering post-pandemic, meaning that fewer are accessing the important benefits of this type of participation and that the organizations that once relied on this contingent to deliver their services are left with significant capacity gaps. The implications of a rapidly ageing population for the workforce as well as health and social systems (e.g., decreasing ratio of working-age people-to-older-adults, increasing costs of income support, increasing healthcare spending<sup>32</sup>), will also extend to patterns of volunteering and participation across the country.

Youth in Canada have also historically volunteered at high rates. Today, youth are ready and willing to participate: 74% feel it is important to be active members of their community, and 78% want to learn more about how they can make a positive difference.<sup>33</sup> But youth face different economic and social realities than previous generations – many of which are intertwined with the major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These shifting circumstances influence the ways youth work, learn, and get involved through volunteering and other forms of participation.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, the pandemic opened the door for new opportunities to get involved in more informal ways; during this time, we saw youth increase their online engagement in global movements for climate action and social justice.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the disruptions to work and education likely exacerbated long-standing barriers to youth engagement in volunteering, such as not being asked to participate, time commitments, financial constraints, ageism, tokenism, and, for Indigenous youth in particular, the ongoing impacts of colonization and intergenerational trauma.<sup>36</sup>

There is a clear need to scale up our collective response to the loneliness epidemic, but with volunteer rates in steep decline, many charitable and nonprofit organizations do not have the support or infrastructure to operate at the required scale. Given the central role that volunteering plays in upholding our social safety net and building social connection, investigating the barriers preventing different groups – especially older adults and young people – from volunteering is critical.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Intergenerational Volunteering: The Key to Revitalizing Social Connection**



Per Policy Horizons Canada, “Understanding the changing nature of social connection may hold the keys to ensuring the long-term wellbeing of an aging population, and to safeguarding the health and integrity of the democratic institutions that form the backbone of our society.”<sup>37</sup>

Investing in building meaningful social connections will have a positive multiplier effect on our health systems, economy, and community resilience. According to a 2023 Advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General:

Every level of increase in social connection corresponds with a risk reduction across many health conditions. Further, social connection can be a proactive approach to living a fulfilled and happy life, enhancing life satisfaction, educational attainment, and performance in the workplace, as well as contributing to more connected communities that are healthier, safer, and more prosperous.<sup>38</sup>

Volunteering should be a central facet of this proactive approach. There is a virtuous cycle between volunteering and connection. We know that individuals who volunteer are more connected to their communities and experience higher levels of belonging and inclusion,<sup>39</sup> and that the enhancements wellbeing that volunteering offers are even greater among those who are socially connected.<sup>40</sup> Intergenerational volunteering can amplify these benefits. Per the B.C. Association of Community Response Networks, “When the power of respectful intergenerational connectivity is unleashed, it is societally changing. Individuals of different generations nurture friendships, understanding and compassion while strengthening their communities.”<sup>41</sup> Some evidence-based the benefits of intergenerational volunteering include:

- **For older adults**, intergenerational volunteering can lead to an increased sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction, improved quality of life, and better health outcomes.<sup>42</sup> In fact, many healthcare professionals are beginning to prescribe volunteering for older adult patients,<sup>43</sup> and some financial planners are recommending volunteering to their retiree clients. As the need to find solutions that enable healthy ageing becomes more urgent, promoting intergenerational volunteering among older adults can serve as a buffer against social isolation and loneliness.
- **For youth**, intergenerational volunteering can contribute to improved teamwork skills and cross-cultural competency while cultivating a sense of agency.<sup>44</sup> This form of engagement is also shown to increase understanding and awareness among youth of older adults’ lives, improve their perceptions of ageing,<sup>45</sup> and break ageist perceptions that youth might have about older adults.<sup>46</sup> Per the B.C. Association of Community Response Networks, “By involving [youth] now, we give them the tools to build respectful relationships with people across the generations and for themselves as they move through life.”<sup>47</sup>



- **Intergenerational volunteering is mutually beneficial;** it cultivates meaningful relationships<sup>48</sup> among participants and facilitates community connectedness, builds social networks, and cultivates social inclusion, social cohesion, and social capital.<sup>49,50</sup> Intergenerational volunteering also creates space for bidirectional mentoring and co-learning and can lead to the discovery of new interests and ignite lifelong learning.<sup>51</sup> Intergenerational volunteering can also help to address poor educational outcomes, and the digital divide. As the Government of Scotland notes in its 2023 Strategy on Social Isolation and Loneliness, “Intergenerational dialogue has a vital role in ensuring that different generations talk to each other in order to tackle the shared challenges of exclusion and isolation.”<sup>52</sup>
- **Intergenerational volunteering is culturally important,** especially in Indigenous communities, where the transmission of tradition, lessons, culture, and knowledge from Elders to younger generations facilitates generativity and cultural continuity.<sup>53,54</sup> Intergenerational solidarity contributes to positive attitudes and behaviours in Indigenous communities and is linked to better mental health outcomes of Indigenous people who live off reserve.<sup>55</sup>

How older adults and youth are invited to engage in intergenerational volunteering is critical, as is the underlying infrastructure that supports organizations in offering intergenerational programming. There is a breadth of research illuminating wise practices for organizations engaging older adult and youth volunteers,<sup>56,57</sup> and the World Health Organization has outlined a series of guiding principles for intergenerational practice that emphasize the importance of participation, inclusion, equity, universality, friendship, and reciprocity, among others.<sup>58</sup> There are also numerous examples of high-impact programming that promotes and facilitates intergenerational volunteering, such as the [GrandPals program](#), [Volunteer Grandparents](#), and many of the programs funded through Employment and Social Development Canada’s New Horizons for Seniors Program. Volunteer Canada is also leading the development of a Pan-Canadian Intergenerational Volunteering Hub.

Yet, persistent barriers and the growing volunteer shortage signal the need for stronger and more comprehensive infrastructure to promote and support purpose-fit and inclusive intergenerational volunteering programming and services:

- Research points to the importance of **adequate staff training and administrative support** in developing and implementing intergenerational programs.<sup>59</sup> Staff require training to effectively engage older adult and newcomer volunteers, including skills in facilitating intergenerational dialogue. Yet, low investments in addressing capacity issues in volunteer management mean that many organizations are unable to dedicate resources to developing and upholding comprehensive volunteering support infrastructure.

Furthermore, many organizations lack the resources to engage and manage volunteers sustainably, especially with respect to safeguards such as screening.

- **Technology can be a facilitator** of effective intergenerational programming,<sup>60</sup> but many organizations have low uptake capacity for technology, partly due to broader issues related to limited access and funding for such technologies and training.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, many organizations lack the resources and capacity to reach and engage prospective volunteers via digital avenues.
- **The sustainability of intergenerational programs** is critical for their success,<sup>62</sup> but a lack of sustainable, flexible, unrestricted core funding to support organizations often prevents them from maintaining long-term programming. Similarly, there is a lack of core funding dedicated to developing and managing high-quality volunteer programs.
- **A comprehensive empirical understanding** of the aspirations, trends, and factors influencing the engagement of older adults and youth is essential for developing intergenerational volunteering programs that are meaningful, inclusive, culturally relevant, and impactful. Yet, there is a gap in comprehensive, frequent, and detailed data and analysis for specific breakdowns in volunteer trends (such as detailed trends across diverse ethnocultural groups, data related to the impact of volunteering across intersectional identity factors, breakdowns by religious denomination or faith, generational trends in volunteering, and rural vs. urban volunteering).

The above factors are symptomatic of broader issues in the sector. Some of these issues were activated by the pandemic, but most pre-date it. Volunteer-involving organizations that provide essential programs and services require more robust infrastructure, technology, research, and administrative support to innovate and adapt to address complex challenges. In 2019, a Special Senate Committee on Canada's charitable sector identified many of these long-standing issues. The Committee urged the federal government to “implement a national volunteer strategy to encourage volunteerism by all Canadians in their communities, recognizing that the needs of northern, rural and urban communities are unique.”<sup>63</sup>

The Special Senate Committee identified Volunteer Canada as a potential leader of this effort. While excellent examples of public policy that protects, supports, and facilitates volunteering exist in municipalities, provinces, and territories, we lack an integrated, consistent, and cohesive approach at the national level. Volunteer Canada, along with a growing network of stakeholders from across the country, is laying the foundation for a National Volunteer Action Strategy to optimize and futureproof volunteering so that *everyone* in Canada can participate and benefit. Promoting and supporting intergenerational volunteering is an integral facet of this work. The development of a National Volunteer Action Strategy represents a generational opportunity for a comprehensive and coordinated effort to address the volunteering and participation crisis,





increase belonging and inclusion, and create opportunities to address complex challenges and support future generations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of increasing strains on Canada's social support systems and the intensifying loneliness epidemic, Volunteer Canada recommends that the Government of Canada invest in building a stronger infrastructure to solidify volunteering as a foundational component of building connected, inclusive, and resilient communities. As part of this broader effort, the Government of Canada should explore ways to build social connection by promoting and supporting intergenerational volunteering. As such, Volunteer Canada presents the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: That the Government of Canada commit to engaging and strategically investing in the development and implementation of a National Volunteer Action Strategy** to support volunteering and participation across the country and to build the infrastructure necessary to revitalize social connection at scale and support the organizations that rely on volunteers to serve communities.
- **Recommendation 2: That the Government of Canada invest in building a robust evidence base on intergenerational volunteering** that collates and strengthens research, including frequent and detailed empirical studies exploring areas such as: trends across diverse ethnocultural groups and intersectional identity factors; the motivations and barriers to volunteering across generations; rural vs. urban volunteering; digital pathways to volunteering; volunteering and social connection; accessibility and volunteering; and the social, health, and economic impact of intergenerational volunteering programs (on individuals and communities).
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## ABOUT VOLUNTEER CANADA

Volunteer Canada provides national leadership and expertise on volunteerism to enhance the participation, quality, and diversity of volunteer experiences. We are a registered charity engaging over 1,100 charitable and nonprofit organizations as members across Canada. We engage over 150 volunteer centres and partner with over 35 national and international corporations in corporate community engagement. Volunteer Canada conducts and disseminates

research on volunteering, promotes volunteer engagement, assists in capacity building, and convenes and collaborates across sectors to strengthen volunteerism.

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