

Intergenerational Volunteerism: Insights from the Volunteer Grandparents Organization



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Notice of Motion Monday, November 21, 2022 Tony Van Bynen, M.P. That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study regarding the different ways that the government can promote and encourage intergenerational volunteerism between seniors and youth; that the committee hold a minimum of three meetings on this issue; that the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

Question: How can the federal government best promote and encourage intergenerational volunteerism between seniors and youth?

Volunteer Grandparents endeavors to support and encourage multigenerational relationships and the concept of the extended family. Our mission is to "**bridge and enrich the generations**" by fostering intergenerational understanding, communication, and cooperation between the generations. We have been fulfilling our mission since 1973. For over 50 years we have been promoting and encouraging intergenerational connections.

Specific Recommendations to the Committee:

- Provide ongoing and multi-year financial assistance to support non-profit organizations that offer intergenerational programming. Volunteer Grandparents limits the program promotion that we do in our communities because of capacity issues due to lack of funding. When we receive some positive media exposure, we tend to get inundated with inquiries and participant applications. We currently have one part-time employee.
- Provide grants for the development of new innovative intergenerational programs.
- Organizations should be encouraged to share success stories which can appeal to new potential volunteers. If we focus on all the benefits one receives when participating in an intergenerational program, we are apt to have more individuals participate.
- It would be helpful if there was a central government database that the public could access that provides information on innovative intergenerational programs offered in different communities. On a weekly basis, we receive inquiries from individuals across Canada seeking to get involved in a similar program offered in their area. We do our best to refer individuals to comparable programs but there seems to be a void in opportunities.

General Description of the Volunteer Grandparents Organization and the Programs we Offer Our Community:

Volunteer Grandparents provides three main programs: the Family Match Program, the School Grandparent Program, and the Letters to Seniors Program. Below is a brief description of our three main programs.

Family Match Program (FMP)

The Family Match Program matches volunteers with families who have children between the ages of 3 – 14 years old who do not have accessible grandparents. The program is designed to meet the social and emotional needs of older adults and families. The emphasis is on the creation of long-term extended family relationships. The program has been providing seniors with the opportunity to be an important member of a family, enabling them to share time, love, skills, and life experiences, while offering families the support, love and wisdom of caring seniors. Areas that we serve: Burnaby, New Westminister, Northshore, Vancouver.

School Grandparent Program (SGP)

The School Grandparent Program provides volunteers for assignments in elementary schools throughout the Lower Mainland. The SGP began as a pilot project, in 1996, in response to a lack of opportunities for young and old to relate in an increasingly age-segregated society. The pilot project was a resounding success. Beyond fostering intergenerational communication and cooperation, the program demonstrated significant benefits to educators. The senior volunteers enjoyed the chance to share skills, knowledge, and experience, while providing valuable community service. We work in partnership with educators to develop, place and support volunteers in the School Grandparent Program. Volunteers can participate in a variety of activities: listening, reading, arts, crafts, and special events at the discretion of the individual educator or school.

Letters to Seniors Program (LTS)

The Letters to Seniors Program reduces social isolation for seniors in the community as well as seniors in care homes. Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, this initiative has enabled youth and seniors to form a long-term connection in a safe way. Volunteers can participate in Phase 1 of the program where they send kind messages and letters to seniors, or they can participate in Phase 2 of the program where pen-pal connections are formed between seniors and youth. Since the program launched, we have distributed over 3000 letters to seniors. The program promotes intergenerational bonds that are mutually beneficial.

Recruitment of Volunteers:

Individuals and/or couples must be 50 years and older to volunteer in the Family Match or School Grandparent Program. They also must participate in the organization's complete application and screening process.

Volunteer Grandparents' staff utilize a variety of methods to recruit volunteers including advertising in local print media, participation in information fairs and approaching community centers, churches, and senior centers.

Benefits to Program Participants:

Connecting generations provides opportunities to bring young and old together, share experiences and learn from one another. Additionally, participants begin to have a greater understanding and sharing of cultural values while building positive relationships between generations.

Social interactions are a necessary and enriching part of our lives, and sadly, seniors often feel socially isolated when their loved ones have passed on and they outlive their friends. Often times there is little opportunity for youth to connect to a senior in a meaningful way. Volunteer Grandparents provides seniors with the ability to network socially, adopt a family, receive the support of others, give and receive friendship and companionship with children, as well as benefit psychologically and emotionally from positive interactions with others.

In addition, Volunteer Grandparents provides seniors with the opportunity to share their wealth of knowledge and experience with the receptive, enquiring minds of children. In short, the Family Match program provides seniors with the opportunity to be an important member of a family, enabling them to share time, love, skills and life experiences, while offering families the support, love and wisdom of caring seniors.

Specific Benefits for Children

- Alleviate any type of fear a child has of the elderly (and vice versa)
- Help children and youth to understand and later accept their own aging in life
- Give children and youth a sense of stability by matching them with a reliable mentor
- Fill a void for children and youth who do not have grandparents available to them
- Improve academic performance by having additional classroom support from a school grandparent volunteer
- Having a positive role model enables the child to grow and thrive
- Youth develop a stronger self-esteem and overall confidence in life

Specific Benefits for Seniors

- Boosts the seniors' social network and keeps them actively engaged in their community
- Promotes increased physical activity and mental stimulation
- Encourages cultural exchange and sharing of wisdom

Benefits for Children and Seniors

- Provides opportunities for both age groups to learn new skills and about each other
- Gives children and youth and the older adult a sense of purpose and meaning to life
- Keeps family stories and history alive

- Invigorates and energizes older adults by keeping them active in a life of a child
- Reduces likelihood of depression and social isolation among the elderly and the younger generations

In Summary:

Our community understands that the support, love and guidance that our senior volunteers provide to children enable the children to thrive and reach for their dreams. The bonds that develop through intergenerational mentorship help strengthen the youth's self-esteem and enables them to be more resilient when dealing with adversity. The youth and seniors develop a sense of belonging which builds a sense of community.

Our program is inclusive and serves a diverse population of youth and seniors. By actively engaging in our program it decreases the likeliness that the senior will experience social isolation. We are committed to providing an inclusive and safe environment for everyone, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, cultural identity, or disability.

Intergenerational programs benefit all age groups which is reflected in the continuous support and engagement from our community. For over 50 years, the Volunteer Grandparents organization has aimed to decrease the marginalization of seniors by fostering a sense of social acceptance and inclusion in the community. We offer a program that creates a mutually beneficial relationship that enhances the social well-being and health of all participants. We are very proud to be able to make a positive direct impact on the lives of seniors and youth as we move toward a more age-friendly community.

I would strongly suggest that the Committee invests financial resources in intergenerational programs across our country. Additional funding for organizations that have already completed this instrumental work would help build capacity and enable us to serve more people. I would encourage new granting streams that promote intergenerational connections. This proactive approach to building stronger communities is far less expensive than a reactive approach to problems as they arise when individuals do not receive the support that they require to thrive. Connected youth and seniors contribute to a connected, healthy and vibrant community.