VOLUNTEERISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN COMMUNITY AGENCIES

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Introduction

The voluntary sector in Canada includes a wide range of organizations that work to address social justice issues. These issues include health, gender, ethnicity, environment, poverty, disabilities, reproductive rights, and criminal justice. Many organizations address these issues by providing direct services to members of disadvantaged groups and by engaging in community outreach, education, and advocacy activities. All of them rely to some extent on the involvement of volunteers.

In the past decade, the voluntary sector has been transformed by changes in government support to the voluntary sector, including funding cutbacks, the elimination of core funding, an increase in purchase-of-service contracts, and greater demands for community agencies to be accountable to the government for activities that are publicly funded. The demand for accountability makes it necessary for agencies to engage in activities for which they can produce reports and results (e.g., the number of clients served) and reduce their advocacy and community education activities (Ng, 1990).

Volunteers and social justice in community agencies

- The majority (71%) of volunteers in community agencies that address social justice issues were involved in direct service to clients. Only 23% were involved in community education and outreach, or advocacy.

- More than one in three (44%) of these volunteers got involved to serve the less fortunate. Only one in five (20%) volunteered because of a commitment to broad social change. Only 14% were motivated by gaining job skills or improving career opportunities.

- Seventy-five percent of these volunteers reported that the agencies for which they volunteered offered no seminars or workshops on the social justice issues that they address.

- Recognizing volunteers' contributions, organizing social activities for volunteers, and providing an environment conducive to volunteering were effective measures to retain these volunteers.

Furthermore, the shift from grant funding (for all agency work) to individual project funding (for specific purposes identified by the government) may have forced community agencies to spend less time on unfunded activities such as advocacy (Brock & Banting, 2001; Juillet, Andrew, Aubry, & Mrenica, 2001; Mitchell, Longo, & Vodden, 2001; Shields, 2002).

Consequently, community agencies have started placing greater emphasis on providing services to their clients and less emphasis on research, education, community outreach, and advocacy. The impact of these changes on volunteers working in community agencies has been largely unexplored.

This report, based on research done for the International Year of Volunteers, explores how the service-based orientation of community agencies affects the types of volunteers they recruit, the tasks volunteers are asked to perform, and the strategies community agencies use to retain their volunteers. More specifically, our project posed the following questions:

- Do volunteers have an opportunity to identify social justice issues to be addressed by community agencies, or for which community agencies might advocate?

- Do they have a chance to voice their concerns and to shape community agency and government policies?

- What effect do these opportunities — or lack of opportunities — have on their decision to volunteer and their inclination to stay involved?

The research process

For our study, we surveyed two distinct groups. The first group consisted of representatives from 32 community agencies in the Windsor and Essex County, Ontario area, three-quarters of which were registered charities. The second group consisted of 79 volunteers working in 23 of these agencies. We chose the first group by selecting 40 agencies concerned with social justice issues (including issues related to health, gender,

ethnicity, environment, poverty, disabilities, reproductive rights, child abuse, global inequalities, reproduction rights, and criminal justice) from the Windsor Blue Book, a directory of community agencies in Windsor and Essex County. We then interviewed representatives of 32 of the 40 selected agencies.

In addition to meeting with us, agency representatives were asked to provide lists of their past and present volunteers. However, due to confidentiality concerns, not all agencies provided this information. We therefore assembled the second group of survey participants from the lists of volunteers provided by some agencies, supplemented by names from our community networks. We succeeded in interviewing a total of 80 volunteers from 23 agencies in the Windsor and Essex County area.[1] Some volunteers had been associated with more than one agency. We interviewed them on their volunteering experiences in each agency for which they had volunteered.

Our volunteer participants were fairly evenly divided between men and women (46% were men; 54% were women). Slightly more than half (52%) were over the age of 40; three quarters (78%) had post-secondary education; and most (56%) were employed full-time.

Our study used two interview schedules, one for voluntary agencies and the other for volunteers. The interview was composed predominantly of open-ended questions.

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[1] Volunteers from Big Brothers were over-represented because of the agency's enthusiasm for, and cooperation with, this project.

Community agencies' commitment to social justice

All the community agencies in this study were committed to social justice, that is, to a view that there are social inequalities within and outside of the community that need to be redressed. Most worked for social change in the Windsor area by providing services to disadvantaged and marginalized individuals, such as people with disabilities and diseases, the elderly, women, children, immigrants, offenders, and the poor. Their services included counselling, training, and information and referral support to clients, as well as personal assistance for people who were sick, impoverished, homeless, or physically challenged. One agency representative explained how the agency achieves social change by counselling and assisting its clients:
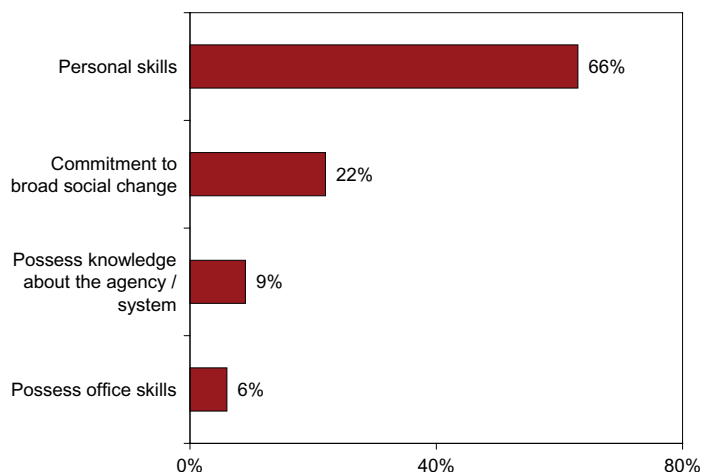
> *Our main goal is to enhance the status of women; do whatever we can to meet the needs of the woman as she presents herself. Primarily, our services would include counselling, training, information and referral support. When I talk about support, I'm not talking about financial support or capital support, I'm talking about emotional woman-to-woman support.*

Many of the community agencies that participated in the study were interested in advocacy, research, and public education, in spite of the government-induced emphasis on service delivery for the voluntary sector (e.g., Ng, 1990; Brock & Banting, 2001). In this context, one representative indicated that the agency's goal was "to promote and encourage a harmonious society in Windsor and Essex County that is multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-faith and to work towards the social equality of all cultures." Other agencies' goals were to "educate the public and to encourage public debate" and "build a stronger community." Yet some of these activities have been limited by the *Income Tax Act*, which allows a registered charity to devote a maximum of 10% of its resources to advocacy. Consequently, research, education, and advocacy played only a minor role in the mandates of most of the community agencies that participated in the study. However, for agencies dealing with such issues as environmental pollution, global injustice, and racism, the most important, if not only, aspects of their work are research, education, and advocacy.

Volunteer recruitment: What agencies look for and how they recruit

What skills or attributes do these community agencies seek when they recruit volunteers? The agencies that participated in our study placed more emphasis on providing services to clients and less on research, education, and advocacy. They, therefore, sought volunteers who were best suited to working directly with members of disadvantaged groups in need of assistance. When asked to describe the ideal volunteer, 66% of agency representatives said that personal skills and qualities (such as empathy, good

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Figure 1

Attributes of the ideal volunteer (according to agency representatives)

Attribute	Percentage
Personal skills	66%
Commitment to broad social change	22%
Possess knowledge about the agency / system	9%
Possess office skills	6%

communication skills, a sense of humour, and reliability) were essential (see Figure 1). Also mentioned were office skills and knowledge of the agency. "Commitment to broad social change" was mentioned by 22% of agency representatives interviewed.

The community agencies that participated in our study used a variety of methods to attract volunteers (see Figure 2). The most important was word of mouth — almost half of the agencies (47%) mentioned this method of recruitment. Other strategies included advertising at information booths and through media sites, referrals from the United Way Volunteer Service, and university contact listings. Interestingly, 17% of agencies reported that their volunteers were former clients of the agency.

What brings volunteers to community agencies?

The most frequently mentioned reason for volunteering among those interviewed for our study was a commitment to the social justice values embraced by the community agencies. As mentioned earlier, community agencies address social justice issues by providing services to disadvantaged people and by engaging in advocacy and community outreach and education. Forty-four percent of the volunteers interviewed in our study mentioned their commitment to serving less fortunate people as their major reason for volunteering (see Figure 3). In addition, 20% said that they decided to volunteer because of their commitment to broad social change. Only a small number of the volunteers in our study (less than 10%) chose volunteering as a way of gaining skills needed for the job market or improving career opportunities.

Among the volunteers who were committed to the social justice values espoused by the community agencies, twice as many explained their decision to volunteer by their interest in helping people, rather than their desire to bring about social change. In practice, social change may result from improvements in individual lives. This has been the case for some groups, such as women and people of colour. However, many volunteers did not seem concerned with the broader implications of their volunteer work.

As one person put it: "It's good to know that ... when I am giving back to the community ... I am giving back to the people who can't do things for themselves or don't have the means to ... do something that I can help out with." Another volunteer commented: "There is something to be said for giving something and not necessarily getting anything back."

Some volunteers, however, *were* strongly committed to improving the social environment. As one volunteer put it, "I just wanted to do some volunteer work and
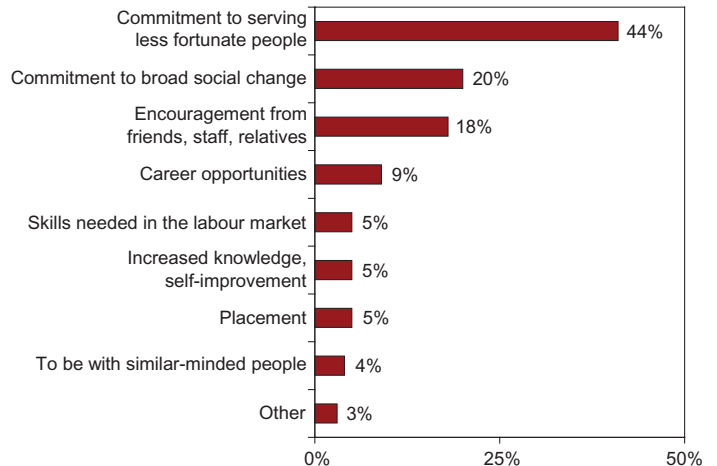
Figure 2

Methods of recruitment used by agencies
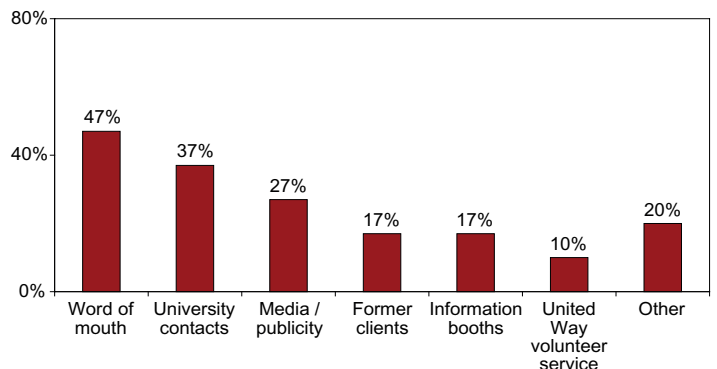
Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents were allowed to give more than one answer.

Figure 3

Reasons for volunteering

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents were allowed to give more than one answer.

help the society." Another expressed similar sentiments: "It just gives me a feeling that I am doing something; that I am participating and making something of this world." One volunteer reflected: "What can I actively do to try and make something better or change something? ... [I'm] trying to be proactive to make changes for the better." Another commented: "When I found out we had in our own community a grass-

roots environmental group that was specifically addressing ... the state of our local environment I thought, 'Well, this is a treasure!'"

It is possible that community agencies advertise their mandates and most important activities in such a way that they attract volunteers who are predominantly interested in helping individuals in need of assistance. As will be seen below, the tasks that volunteers perform for these agencies often correspond both to the agencies' priorities and to their own preferences.

Figure 4

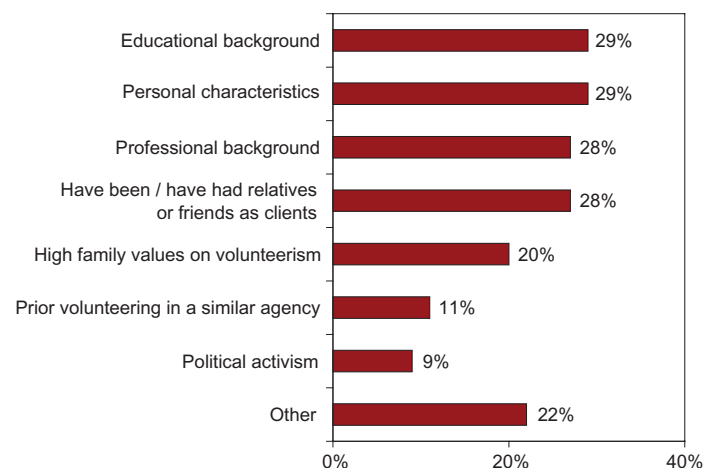**Type of volunteer activities**
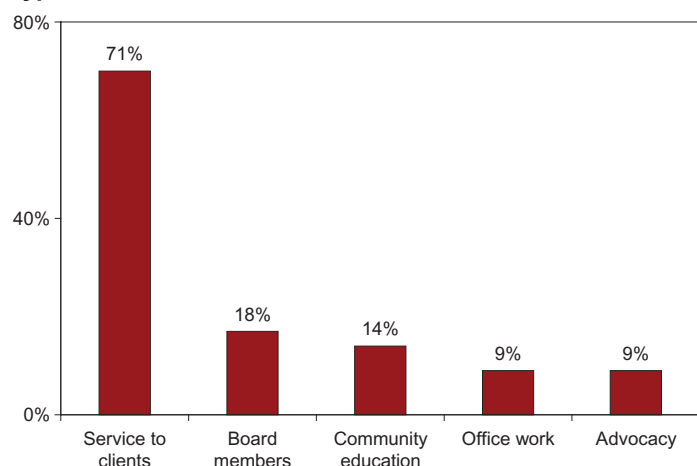
Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents were allowed to give more than one answer.

Volunteer contributions: What volunteers do

Volunteers in community agencies undertake a variety of tasks, from office work to advocacy and community education. More than two-thirds (71%) of the volunteers who participated in our study were involved in direct services to the agencies' clients (see Figure 4). Many of these volunteers provided mentorship, teaching, role modelling, counselling, emotional support, or physical assistance to clients. Only a minority of volunteers were involved in community education (14%) or advocacy activities (9%), including research, dissemination of knowledge, and lobbying on such social justice issues such as environmental protection, anti-racism, child abuse, and violence against women. Eighteen percent of the respondents served on agencies' boards of directors; as board members, some of these volunteers were involved in research, education, and advocacy activities.

Figure 5

Qualities relevant to volunteering

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents were allowed to give more than one answer.

Given the tasks for which they were recruited, it is not surprising that the volunteers in our study thought that the qualities and experience that were relevant to their volunteering had more to do with the ability to communicate with clients and offer office support, and less to do with their previous or current social activism. Many volunteers listed their educational and professional background as the qualities most relevant to their volunteering (29% and 28% respectively) (see Figure 5). Having been or having had a relative or friend in the same situation as the agencies' clients was also considered valuable by 28% of the sample. Personal characteristics such as being friendly, caring,

compassionate, understanding, being able to empathize, and having a desire to help others were also considered useful by 29%. For example, one person said, "I am a good listener, very patient, open-minded, non-judgmental....Being non-judgmental is something that is very important."

It would appear that most volunteers recruited to work in community agencies are not social activists seeking sites from which they can launch and advocate their views. Only 9% of the volunteers interviewed in the study mentioned that their previous activism on issues such as environmental protection, anti-racism, or labour rights provided them with the experience needed for their volunteer activities. These volunteers were more likely to serve on boards of directors and/or to be involved in advocacy. In contrast, front-line volunteers were less likely to be social activists. At the same time, many community agencies indicated that they did not encourage their volunteers to become involved in social justice advocacy work. As one agency representative said, "I think generally volunteers volunteer because they want to help ... someone. And they just want to do it. It's from their heart. They really don't need the big picture." Nor was the "big picture" generally provided. Seventy-five percent of the volunteers we interviewed reported that there were no seminars or workshops on social justice issues organized by the agencies for which they volunteered.

Volunteer retention: How and why they stay

Experienced volunteers constitute an important asset for voluntary organizations. As such, volunteer retention is as important to agencies as volunteer recruitment. Representatives of some of the agencies that participated in our study said that government funding cuts might have contributed to difficulties in maintaining a body of fully committed volunteers. One representative summarized this problem as follows:

> *Probably, to a certain extent, there's been a decrease [in retention] because there's been a decrease in activity because there's been a decrease in funding. We were*
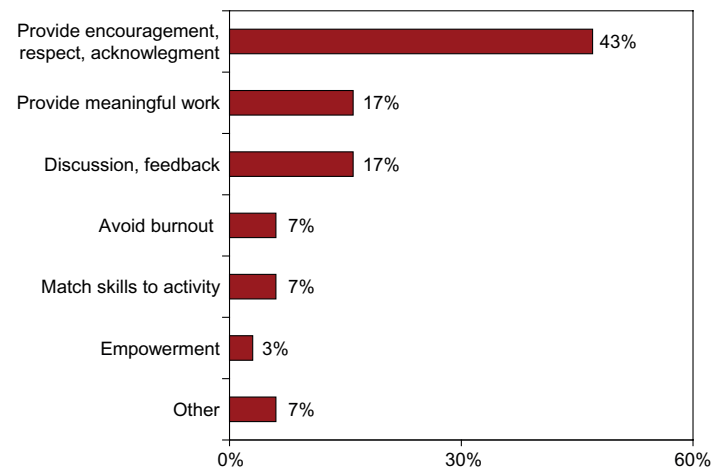
terminated from the Ministry of Health funding. So we're on a wing and a prayer always. So, from that standpoint, the on-going work is more sporadic now. And when things are more sporadic, it's harder to keep people interested …. You have to have somebody who can make volunteers feel like they are being responded to, [that] they're thought of as important. And as much as we think that they are the most important, we can't always keep up.

Many agency representatives in our study, however, reported no retention problems. The 12 agencies (38% of the total) that reported high volunteer turn-over attributed their retention difficulties to students returning to school, people finding jobs, and the burn-out of volunteers.

In an attempt to retain volunteers, community agencies offered recognition gifts, certificates, and dinners. They also tried to treat volunteers "with dignity," "make them feel like they are needed," and assign them tasks that are viewed by the agency as "meaningful work." Agencies tried to ensure that volunteers who deal with challenging cases and clients get "meaningful help when they call." Forty-three percent of agency representatives mentioned the importance of

Figure 6

How agencies tried to retain volunteers

Provide encouragement, respect, acknowlegment	43%
Provide meaningful work	17%
Discussion, feedback	17%
Avoid burnout	7%
Match skills to activity	7%
Empowerment	3%
Other	7%

encouragement, respect, and acknowledgment for volunteer retention (see Figure 6). Seventeen percent said that volunteers are more likely to stay if they are offered meaningful work; the same percentage mentioned the need for volunteers to receive feedback and engage in discussions related to their volunteer work. Other strategies for retention were avoidance of burnout and matching volunteer skills to the volunteer activity (7% each).

When we asked volunteers about effective retention strategies, we found that they thought the most effective methods were: recognizing volunteers' contributions (mentioned by 51% of volunteers), organizing social activities (20%), and providing a conducive social environment for volunteering (13%).

Agencies' efforts to retain volunteers appear to have been fairly successful. Only 15% of the volunteers we interviewed said that they no longer volunteered in community agencies. Furthermore, the vast majority (85%) reported having a sense of belonging to the agency. For most volunteers, this sense of belonging was generated by the social environment (mentioned by 27% of volunteers), recognition of the volunteers' efforts (21%), social activities (19%), and meetings and lectures provided by the agencies (17%). This sentiment translated into a commitment to continue volunteering. In fact, when asked about their reasons for continuing to volunteer, 14 of the 67 individuals who were still volunteering in community agencies (21%) mentioned their commitment to the agency.

Some volunteers, however, expressed the desire for a different kind of recognition. For example, 7% of volunteers in our study mentioned that their sense of belonging was facilitated by an environment that gave them an opportunity to voice their concerns and express their opinions on matters related to the agency's mandate. Volunteers who got involved because of their commitment to social transformation said that it was important for them to feel that their views and opinions made a difference in the way the agency operated. A few volunteers mentioned that their sense of belonging to the agency was related to their ability to voice their concerns and provide input

into policy decisions. When these volunteers were assigned office-related tasks or were asked to work directly with the agency's clients, they felt that their knowledge of, and commitment to, the cause were being undervalued. The wish to contribute to policy decisions came out in a number of interviews. One former volunteer said:

> *I wanted to be a part of bigger things at times, and not just clerical work .... It got to the point that now I have other things that I like to work on, too. I can't work on those things and I can't do stuffing pamphlets for the next five years either ... I think [I had] reached the point where I had ideas that I wanted to express and become much more involved in [discussing ideas]. I think a lot of people withdrew because we hadn't met in quite some time .... If you're not progressing in some sort of form, if you're not actually reaching for the goals, what are you really doing?*

Another volunteer observed: "Volunteers have to feel that they have some ownership on achievements or issues or actions. And if not, they'll get frustrated and walk away."

Still another volunteer commented:

> *The major reason [for continuing to volunteer] is my opportunity to be able to come back to meetings and see that some of the things that we've discussed have been acted upon and that, therefore, we've made a difference, whether it's a small difference or a large difference. But that the things that we've discussed have been acted upon and that you have some valuable input into that organization. And that really is payment enough as a volunteer to be able to say, "I've given some input. I've made a difference here in this organization." And as long as that continues on then my interest is still there with that organization. I know that I'm a valuable part of the organization.*

One volunteer who had left an agency because she felt frustrated that her voice had not been heard commented that volunteerism works only when people "remain open-minded enough to at least listen to and acknowledge everyone's opinion."

Relatively few volunteers in this study were motivated by a commitment to broad social change, some appeared to want opportunities to influence agency decisions and to engage in public policy debates on social justice issues. Unless these opportunities are made available to such individuals, they may become disenchanted and lose their commitment to volunteering.

Conclusion

In the last decade, there has been a perception among some government representatives that there is "a greatly increased awareness of the voluntary sector and the contribution it makes to civil society in giving a voice to citizens, identifying important and emerging issues, shaping policies, and providing important services" (Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2001). The question that our study posed was whether the volunteers working in community agencies have an opportunity to formulate opinions, to voice their concerns, to identify "important and emerging issues," and to shape community agency and government policies.

One of our key findings is that volunteers in community agencies do not appear to get many opportunities to influence social policy. They are engaged more in client service work than in other types of social justice activities. The emphasis on client service work may be in response to the character of the funding provided by the government. Given the emphasis on service delivery, most community agencies focus on recruiting volunteers to work directly with clients. There seems to be little interest on their part in having large numbers of volunteers engage in other kinds of activities.

Despite pressure to become predominantly service providers, most social justice agencies in the Windsor and Essex County area still engage in community outreach, research, and advocacy activities. Yet many have not drawn volunteers into these important aspects of their work. Perhaps they need to rethink their recruitment approaches in order to attract social activists to assist them in their efforts to achieve social change. In addition, they might consider involving their volunteers in discussions on social justice issues through seminars and workshops. We believe that not only would this new orientation inspire volunteers who are interested in social justice to be more committed to the community sector, it would also permit agencies to reconsider their commitment to advocacy, community education, and outreach activities.

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