

Continuing Strong Traditions: Aboriginal Participation in the Northwest Territories' Voluntary Sector

A Research Report

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Northwest Territories Literacy Council

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ISBN# 1-55401-152-3

Imagine Canada's Knowledge Development Centre is funded through the Community Participation Directorate of the Department of Canadian Heritage as part of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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Acknowledgements

Lois Little, Sandy Auchterlonie, and Bob Stephen wish to thank the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories, and the YWCA of Yellowknife for their role in this research project. We also thank the many volunteers who freely gave their time and thoughts to make the research a success. We also

want to thank Stephanie Sibbeston for collecting information from the Deh Cho communities, Aggie Brockman from Volunteer NWT for providing insightful feedback and input into draft reports, and Cate Sills of the Northwest Territories Literacy Council for her unwavering support to seeing this project through to its successful conclusion.

Continuing Strong Traditions: Aboriginal Participation in the Northwest Territories' Voluntary Sector

1. Highlights

This research into Aboriginal participation in the voluntary sector is the first of its kind in the Northwest Territories (NWT). It provides valuable insights into the strong traditions among Aboriginal people of helping and sharing for the well-being of others.

The objectives of the research study were to gain an understanding of Aboriginal volunteers and volunteerism and increase the participation of Aboriginal volunteers in the NWT voluntary sector particularly in leadership, governance, and decision-making. Three voluntary sector groups – the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories and the YWCA of Yellowknife – sponsored the research project. Approximately 180 individuals participated in the research by completing a questionnaire, or by participating in interviews, in a focus group, or as a role model for a storybook on Aboriginal volunteers. While the ethnicity of the 94 people completing questionnaires is unknown, most other participants are persons of Aboriginal ancestry.

The voluntary sector is made up of diverse sports, recreation, cultural, religious, human service, environmental, and professional groups that serve the common good and engage citizens. The voluntary sector has two parts: volunteers and voluntary groups. Volunteers are people who freely choose to help or

serve without any expectation of financial compensation. Voluntary groups are defined in many ways but typically they involve volunteers and are self-governing.

The voluntary sector is finding its place in the public consciousness and in the daily lives of NWT residents. At the same time, national data show declining trends in volunteerism. Insufficient data exist to know whether these same trends are occurring in the NWT and among Aboriginal volunteers. As the voluntary sector develops and becomes more visible, the need to ensure that it reflects the society it serves becomes more vital.

Aboriginal people constitute one half of the NWT population. Research that is mainly anecdotal suggests that Aboriginal people are active volunteers and voluntary sector users or beneficiaries. Fewer are engaged in the leadership, governance, and decision-making activities that shape voluntary activities in NWT communities. An imbalance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participation in leadership, governance, and decision-making may perpetuate the NWT's colonial history and diminish opportunities for Aboriginal people to enjoy the full benefits and responsibilities of citizenship. The findings from this research project will help to address this concern.

Research Findings

The NWT's Voluntary Sector

The NWT has 620 registered nonprofit groups and 119 are registered charities. The majority of registered groups and charities are located in the main population centres of Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Hay River, and Inuvik. Volunteer boards, committees, or ad hoc collectives of volunteers lead most voluntary groups participating in the survey undertaken as part of this research. Most voluntary groups surveyed serve the general public and one quarter target children and youth. Most groups (86%) surveyed serve Aboriginal people who are estimated to represent an average of 77% of all those served.

Government is the main source of revenue for the groups surveyed. Although 45% of groups report annual revenues of under \$50,000, there is sufficient income for most (70%) volunteer groups to have paid staff, primarily in management and program delivery or support positions. Many volunteer groups (58%) employ some Aboriginal staff in management or administrative and program delivery or support positions.

NWT volunteer groups surveyed typically engage an average of 20 volunteers. Voluntary groups estimate that volunteers of Aboriginal ancestry may make up an average of 35% of the total volunteer complement and contribute 39% of all volunteer hours. Like other NWT volunteers, Aboriginal volunteers mainly spend their time delivering programs or services, in board or committee meetings, fundraising, and organizing special events.

Aboriginal Volunteers and Volunteer Leaders

Aboriginal people have strong traditions of sharing, respecting, helping and caring for each other without any expectation of payment. These practices are most often referred to as 'helping out' rather than 'volunteering.' The values of sharing and helping are still evident today in Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people remain strongly committed to helping anyone experiencing hardship, loss, or extreme need through no fault of their own.

While traditional values remain strong, they are changing. The impacts of a money economy and the nature of volunteer groups are two reasons for changing values. These and other forces reinforce more individualistic views and actions and less connection or commitment to the common or community good.

Aboriginal people are keenly aware of the expectation to help out and want to do so if the conditions are right. Aboriginal people tend to help or volunteer in informal ways for the survival of individuals and families or for the well-being of the whole community. Aboriginal volunteers are less comfortable with structured volunteer activities, goal rather than people-oriented activities, and confrontational or aggressive leadership styles.

Aboriginal volunteers characterize themselves and their peers as sociable, dedicated, outgoing, empathetic, happy, and culturally-motivated individuals. Most often Aboriginal volunteers are middle-age women who are well, sober, employed, or have good traditional skills. Aboriginal people volunteer for many of the same reasons as other Canadians – to help others, to feel good, and to make a difference. Traditions, personal satisfaction, the reputation of the group, being Aboriginal in nature, and the type of activity are

among the other reasons. Aboriginal people volunteer and voluntarily take on leadership positions. Not being asked, feeling uncomfortable, narrow causes, lack of support and recognition, and issues of payment and power are among the factors that discourage Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders.

Aboriginal volunteer leaders have distinct qualities that are illustrated in the storybook that accompanies this research project. Charisma, motivation, compassion, and good interpersonal skills are some of the qualities associated with Aboriginal volunteer leaders. These leaders know themselves and know when they are ready to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. Aboriginal volunteers point to the potential of involving more young, well-educated Aboriginal people in volunteer leadership roles.

Aboriginal volunteers clearly see the benefits and potential of volunteering. Volunteering is an opportunity to strengthen Aboriginal culture, to be self-determining, and to live with respect and dignity. Aboriginal volunteers recognize that volunteers and voluntary groups play a significant role in making communities better places to live in. Meeting unmet community needs (e.g. promoting traditional values, retaining language and culture, guiding youth), improving the quality of life and reclaiming community self-reliance are further benefits known to Aboriginal volunteers.

Challenges and Opportunities

Volunteer groups in big and small communities face challenges in recruiting Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders. Communities with significant non-Aboriginal populations face the greatest challenges. Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders believe that they and their peers are under-represented in certain types of volunteer activities and formally organized volunteer groups mainly in

Yellowknife. As northern society changes, they also see the potential for under-representation in the voluntary sector occurring in regional centres.

Under-representation of Aboriginal volunteers in leadership positions in Yellowknife's voluntary sector means that Aboriginal voices are not being heard in program or project decisions or in discourses with other sectors and groups in the community. For Aboriginal volunteers, under-representation in Yellowknife's voluntary sector is due to the lack of attractiveness or credibility of groups or activities to the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal volunteers suggest that under-representation in the voluntary sector is also due in part to the fact that volunteering is a little known concept compared to the well-known and honoured traditions of helping out. Aboriginal volunteers say that connecting traditional notions of helping out and modern day volunteering may be the key to addressing under-representation in the sector, particularly in Yellowknife.

Notions about paid and unpaid work are confusing and in many ways riddled with contradictions and complexities that impact on Aboriginal volunteer participation. Regular discussion is needed in all communities and voluntary endeavours to address this complex issue in ways that are appropriate to the community and the volunteer activity.

Aboriginal volunteers worry that trends toward more professionalism and more complex structures in the voluntary sector could discourage volunteering and Aboriginal volunteer leaders if they are not managed in ways that promote benefits. For Aboriginal volunteers, the benefits of structured volunteerism are that they keep volunteers safe, ensure fairness and consistency, and strengthen the credibility and reputation of volunteer groups.

The NWT's colonial history still influences human relationships today. Aboriginal self-government regimes offer opportunities for new relationships to develop. While people in the NWT's voluntary sector are uncertain about the implications of these new regimes, there is a growing awareness that stronger relationships are needed with Aboriginal governments and communities. This need is particularly evident among Yellowknife-based territorially mandated groups and the many Aboriginal communities they serve.

Good Ideas and Solutions

This research report provides some best practices for meaningfully engaging Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders. Five main ideas are presented:

1. Linking the concepts of 'helping out' and 'volunteering.'
2. Promoting both informal and formal volunteering.
3. Building relationships.
4. Building capacity.
5. Focusing on one leader at a time.

The strong cultural traditions of helping and sharing deeply engrained in Aboriginal people, along with aspirations to regain control of their own lives and destiny, sets this group of volunteers apart. Meaningfully engaging Aboriginal volunteers and voluntary leaders in the voluntary sector is about continuing and honouring Aboriginal traditions and respecting and empowering Aboriginal people to take ownership of voluntary action in all its diversity.

2. The Voluntary Sector in Perspective

The voluntary sector is made up of diverse sports, recreation, cultural, religious, human service, environmental, and professional groups that serve the common good and engage citizens. Through efforts that serve the common good and engage citizens, the voluntary sector contributes to positive human relationships, understanding, harmony, and equality in society. For these reasons the voluntary sector has been described as a true expression of Canadian values and democratic principles (Panel on Accountability and Governance, 1999).

The voluntary sector has two parts: volunteers and voluntary groups. Volunteers are people who freely choose to help or serve without any expectation of financial compensation. Volunteers have played a vital role in Canada for centuries. In Aboriginal societies, helping has always been viewed as an individual obligation and expectation throughout one's life (Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2001). There are many definitions of a voluntary group. Typically these groups are self-governing and tend to meaningfully involve volunteers. They elect their own leaders; are independent from government and business; and do not distribute profit to members. In Canada, early voluntary groups had their roots in Christian institutions (Campfens, 1997) while more recently, rights-based movements initiated by labour, women, and Aboriginal people have spawned voluntary groups.

For much of the 20th century, voluntary groups and volunteer efforts were very localized. In the 1980s, the voluntary efforts of groups and individuals began to gain profile as a result of global and national economic and social restructuring that had diminished governments' role in meeting citizens' needs. This

trend gave both the private and voluntary sectors a greater role in meeting social and political needs in Canadian communities (Campfens, 1997). Within this environment, the voluntary sector has emerged as the third sector with a significant part to play in delivering human services once provided by government and in building and sustaining citizen engagement and social cohesion (Lutra, 2001; O'Connor, 1998).

While the voluntary sector, or the third sector, has grown rapidly both in size and influence in the last two decades, the sector is still not well known in Canada or in the NWT (Lutra, 2001; Panel on Accountability and Governance, 1998). Also, at a time when the voluntary sector is emerging as the third sector, survey data are showing declining trends in volunteerism (Hall and Roberts, 2001). A growing body of research also identifies several significant challenges facing the sector including capacity, accountability, governance, leadership, organization and professionalism (Chaytor et al., 2002; McKechnie et al., 2000).

Few studies, including national surveys on volunteering in Canada, include the NWT or consider volunteerism among Aboriginal people.¹ Where documentation does exist, the under-representation of Aboriginal people in the voluntary sector is noted and more research is recommended (Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2001; Lutra 2001). As the voluntary sector develops and becomes more visible, the need to ensure that it reflects the society it serves also becomes more vital. In the NWT, Aboriginal people comprise one half of the population. Aboriginal people are active volunteers and voluntary sector users but fewer are engaged in the leadership, governance and decision-making activities within the sector. Both the voluntary

¹ The three northern Canadian territories and First Nations reserves in southern Canada or regions and communities with significant Aboriginal populations were excluded from the 1997 and 2000 *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. NWT, Nunavut and Yukon data were aggregated in the 2004 *National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations*.

sector and Aboriginal communities in the NWT are concerned about the lack of engagement of Aboriginal people in key volunteer positions. An imbalance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participation in leadership, governance, and decision-making may perpetuate the NWT's colonial history and diminish opportunities for Aboriginal people to enjoy the full benefits and responsibilities of citizenship (Lutra, 2001).

Marginalization of Aboriginal people resulting from poorer economic and social circumstances and lack of political power have encouraged the NWT's public and private sectors to implement measures to address under-representation in workplaces. Affirmative action hiring policies, training and education incentives, mentoring, on-the-job support, and 'unbundling' of service and supply contracts have been among the measures implemented. These initiatives have engaged more Aboriginal people and contributed to greater equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Intergovernmental Working Group, 1998; Inukshuk, 1989; Lutra, 2001). Similar initiatives have not been implemented in the voluntary sector.

This research seeks to gain an understanding of Aboriginal volunteers and volunteerism, and increase the participation of Aboriginal volunteers in the NWT's voluntary sector. A particular focus of the research is to increase the participation of Aboriginal people in leadership, governance, and decision-making functions in the voluntary sector. The research examines factors that encourage and discourage volunteering, particularly among Aboriginal people in voluntary leadership positions. This research recognizes the diverse and important role the voluntary sector plays in the social and economic fabric of northern life. It also acknowledges the different understandings, terms, and experiences associated with volunteering and the voluntary sector within Aboriginal communities.

It is expected that the research will assist the voluntary sector to consider measures that support and encourage Aboriginal volunteers.

3. Research Aims, Objectives, and Scope

The sponsors of the research are three voluntary sector groups – the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories, and the YWCA of Yellowknife. The Knowledge Development Centre at Imagine Canada, through the federal Canada Volunteerism Initiative (CVI), funded the research.

The aims of the research are to gain an understanding of Aboriginal volunteers and volunteerism and increase the participation of Aboriginal volunteers in the NWT's voluntary sector. The research objectives are to:

1. Develop a profile the voluntary sector in the NWT to provide the context for understanding the current nature of Aboriginal involvement in it.
2. Describe the main roles and responsibilities of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the voluntary sector in the NWT.
3. Document the perceptions, practices, and attributes of Aboriginal societies and the voluntary sector that discourage and encourage active and meaningful volunteering among Aboriginal people.
4. Make recommendations to increase the quality and quantity of Aboriginal volunteer participation.
5. Make recommendations to assist the voluntary sector to achieve greater accountability and relevance to NWT residents, particularly in Aboriginal communities.

The Aurora Research Institute (ARI) licensed this research after consultations with community-based

Aboriginal government and land claim groups throughout the NWT. The research was completed in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Aurora Research Institute and the policies of the Medical Research Council, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, printed in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, 1998 (updated 2000, 2002).²

The research methods are described in more detail in Appendix B. In summary, the research engaged approximately 180 individuals and involved both qualitative and quantitative research methods. These methods included:

- A review of relevant literature to provide context for the study, the research instruments, and data analysis.
- A territorial-wide mail-out survey of voluntary groups and public sector agencies that likely engage volunteer groups to develop a database and profile of the voluntary sector in the NWT, including Aboriginal participation in it. Ninety-four (94) groups in 15 NWT communities participated. This represents a response rate of 17% among volunteer groups and an overall response rate of 9.5%.³ The small number of participants and poor or incomplete quality of some data limit the usefulness of the survey in this study.⁴
- Thirty-eight (38) key informant interviews to discuss Aboriginal volunteerism and best practices that support Aboriginal volunteer participation and

encourage greater accountability to Aboriginal communities. Ninety-two percent (92%) of persons interviewed have Aboriginal ancestry.

- Two case studies to examine volunteer experiences and activities with lessons to share about improving Aboriginal volunteer participation. The case studies engaged 41 individuals. One case study was situated in Fort McPherson, NWT; 96% of participants in this case study have Aboriginal ancestry. The second case study was situated in Yellowknife; 29% of participants in this case study have Aboriginal ancestry.
- Personal interviews with eight (8) Aboriginal volunteer role models whose volunteer and life experiences are compiled in a storybook.

As discussed in Appendix B, the research was challenging to complete. The main challenges were:

- lack of quantitative data on volunteers and voluntary groups.
- lack of awareness of or priority to volunteer issues, or capacity to participate.

Over the course of this research, many Aboriginal people were somewhat surprised, indignant, or confused that volunteering should be the subject of a study. There is confusion about ‘volunteering’ as most often the idea of giving freely to help or serve is referred to as ‘helping out,’ if it is named at all. If ‘volunteering’ is used, it is understood as a formal way of helping out.

“You just don’t hear a whole lot about volunteering in smaller communities.”⁵

² Under the [NWT Scientists Act](#), the Aurora Research Institute requires the principal investigator to consult with public and Aboriginal government and non-government organizations in the jurisdiction to identify concerns associated with the research and agree on ways to address them.

³ The mail-out involved 987 public and voluntary sector groups - 94 of 987 groups (9.5%) and 73 of 420 voluntary groups (17.4%) surveyed responded. There are 33 communities in the NWT.

⁴ Appendix B provides a discussion of the methods.

⁵ Unless sourced, this and all subsequent quotes in this report are taken from key informant interviews. The research assured that no comments would or could be attributed to an individual. Demographic characteristics were not collected for key informants. As such no identifier accompanies the quote.

As the first of its kind in the NWT, this research provides valuable insights into volunteering and voluntary leadership among Aboriginal people.

The research results are reported in four documents:

1. This report, ***Continuing Strong Traditions***, brings together research findings from the survey, key informant interviews, case studies, personal volunteer stories, and the literature review. The study objectives provide the framework for reporting these findings. The quotes provided throughout the document are taken directly from key informant interviews.
2. ***Fort McPherson: A Volunteer Model*** is a case study of volunteering in a predominantly Aboriginal community.
3. ***Engaging Aboriginal Volunteers in Voluntary Groups with Territorial Mandates in the Northwest Territories*** is a case study of selected voluntary groups in Yellowknife.
4. ***Our Stories*** tells the personal stories and experiences of eight (8) Aboriginal volunteers.

4. The Voluntary Sector in the NWT

This section provides an overview of the voluntary sector in the NWT and is drawn from the profile survey and other available research. It also includes a discussion of Aboriginal perspectives of past and present volunteer practices, and the role that the voluntary sector plays in Aboriginal communities today.

A Profile of the Voluntary Sector in the NWT

The Government of the NWT registered approximately 620 nonprofit groups in 2004. Contact information was available for about two thirds of the registered societies and they were included in the profile survey that was part of this research. The number of unincorporated

volunteer committees and groups in the NWT is unknown.

Most registered groups in the NWT are located in larger centres. Some of these groups, particularly religious or government mandated human service groups in larger NWT centres, are also registered as charities.⁶ Like nonprofit groups, the NWT population is also concentrated in larger centres. Two thirds of the total population and about 43% of the Aboriginal population are residents of four NWT communities – Yellowknife, Hay River, Fort Smith, and Inuvik. The remaining 29 communities tend to have predominantly Aboriginal populations of between 100 to 800 people.⁷

Among the 94 groups responding to the profile survey:

- Almost two thirds are registered nonprofit societies. The ratio of registered charities to nonprofit societies is 1:5.
- Most (60%) function with a volunteer policy or administrative board.
- Most (85%) have existed for five or more years.
- Almost three quarters (73%) operate with annual revenues of less than \$250,000 and 45% operate with annual revenues of less than \$50,000.
- The greatest number are involved in wellness, education or training activities (33%) or in sport and recreation (20%).
- Public government is the main funder.
- Almost 50% serve the general public while another 28% target children and youth.

⁶ The GNWT registers societies under the [NWT Societies Act](#). Five or more persons may register a society under the Act for any benevolent, philanthropic, charitable, religious, provident, scientific, artistic, literary, social, educational, sporting or other useful purpose other than carrying on trade or business. No society can have capital divided into shares, declare a dividend, or distribute its property among the members during the time of its existence as a society. Societies may also be registered as a charity with the Canada Revenue Agency giving them the ability to issue donor receipts for tax purposes.

⁷ Bureau of Statistics, GNWT at <http://www.stats.gov.nt.ca>

- Most groups (86%) serve Aboriginal people. These groups estimate that about 77% of the people they serve have Aboriginal ancestry.
- Almost 70% have paid staff and 58% have employees with Aboriginal ancestry.
- One fifth (20%) did not engage volunteers in the last 12 months.⁸
- About 60% engage less than 20 volunteers.
- Two thirds of groups with volunteers involve Aboriginal volunteers. Aboriginal volunteers make up about one third (35%) of the total volunteer complement.
- Volunteers, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, spend most of their time delivering programs, in committee meetings, fundraising and organizing special events.

The information produced by this survey shows that the voluntary sector in the NWT has both similar and different characteristics to the sector elsewhere in Canada. It is similar in its diversity of endeavour but different in that government plays a larger role in resourcing the sector. For example, if hospitals, universities and colleges are excluded, governments fund 36% of voluntary sector groups in Canada. In the NWT, more than half of voluntary groups surveyed receive government funding.

As mentioned earlier, the voluntary sector in the NWT operates within the context of significant differences between large and smaller communities. In addition to population distribution, small communities differ from larger centres in terms of having less economic activity and diversity. These differences are evidenced in employment levels. In Yellowknife, 82% of the working

age population are employed compared to about 60% in other NWT communities. The percentage of employed adults may be even lower in small Aboriginal communities as shown in the Fort McPherson case study. The employment rate in that community in 2004 was only 34%. Compared to larger centres in the NWT, the cost of living tends to be higher in smaller communities and services and supports to address long standing social issues are fewer. The different circumstances in smaller and larger NWT communities that influence volunteer participation are discussed in Sections 5 and 6 of this report.

In the NWT, Aboriginal people are engaged in the voluntary sector as volunteers, employees, members, and clients. While territorial and national data do not exist on Aboriginal volunteerism, this research indicates that the extent of Aboriginal participation in the sector is a good foundation upon which to increase volunteer engagement.

Aboriginal Perspectives on Volunteering Yesterday and Today

Volunteering in the Past

“It was Dene law to help one another.”

“People believed that if you helped others, when your life was over, you would be one step closer to the Creator.”

Aboriginal people have strong traditions of sharing, helping, and caring for others. In the past, sharing, helping, and caring for each other were necessary for survival in a harsh environment. These values and the expression of them were learned through family and camp living. As young people matured and took responsibility, sharing, helping, and caring for others became accepted as normal and expected behaviour. These values were expressed in the practice of sharing

⁸ Nonprofit or voluntary groups paying honoraria to board members may not consider these individuals to be volunteers. Public sector groups receiving the questionnaire typically include public and Aboriginal government councils, schools, health and social service groups, RCMP detachments, justice committees, housing authorities, education councils, and justices of the peace. These groups may involve volunteers from time to time but had not involved any volunteers in the 12 months prior to the survey.

food, work and material goods, and respecting and caring for the elders and others needing help. These values and practices were nurtured by communal ethics of cooperation and mutual support and respect.

Helping and sharing implies improving the quality of others' lives and making the best use of individual skills, knowledge, time, and experience. Expressing these values also implies the ability to recognize others' needs, to know when people need help and aren't able to help themselves. In the past, helping and sharing among Aboriginal people involved some sense of obligation and reciprocity as far as the individual or his/her family was able and willing. The social responsibility that people felt for others bestowed a sense of well-being, security, and connection among individuals and families as they knew that others would be there to help if help was needed. These values and the expression of them also promoted love and respect for elders and children.

“There was no question that whatever extra one might have they would contribute it to other community members.”

“It is a value of Aboriginal people to give. It goes without saying.”

In the past, family and camp leadership played an important role in mobilizing and directing voluntary effort. Formal and informal leaders who tended to be elders or accomplished harvesters, were aware of the skills of family or camp members. Leaders often assigned responsibilities based on particular skills, competencies, or aptitude and needs within the family or camp setting. Over time, individuals became known for or associated with specific tasks whether it was preparing bodies for burial, making bannock for a feast, hunting for the elders, sewing for a newborn, caring for the ill or any other responsibility that served the others.

“Community service was expected. It was a given that you helped out – your neighbour, the community and in particular, extra effort for the less fortunate or needy.”

Volunteering Today

Family, culture, community, and traditional practices that are passed from generation to generation continue to be very important to Aboriginal communities in the NWT. Helping out or volunteering is one way that Aboriginal people show the value accorded to family, culture, community and traditional practices. As in the past, Aboriginal people continue to help out in informal and individual ways. As a good neighbour or responsible member of the community, Aboriginal people help anyone experiencing hardship, loss, or need through no fault of their own. At these times, Aboriginal people freely help or serve others. They cook, sew, hunt, watch over particular individuals, give counsel and support, listen to the bush radio and pass on messages, cut firewood, build or fix things, do other needed chores, or provide any other needed supports.

Aboriginal people also readily volunteer and donate to meet the needs of others outside their community whether they know them or not. For example in the fall of 2004 when people from Tuktoyaktuk were missing on the land, people in Fort McPherson and other Mackenzie Delta communities fundraised and joined a search and rescue team to search for the missing people. Similarly when Aboriginal communities in the NWT heard of the devastation caused by the southeast Asia earthquake tsunami (December 2004), they were quick to fundraise to help out.

Compared to the past, Aboriginal people today also help and serve in more formal ways as members of voluntary groups or committees that serve the

community or others in the north. More formal or collective volunteer efforts commonly involve:

- Organizing and helping to stage community events and festivities such as jamborees and festivals that share food and celebrate traditional games, music and dance.
- Participating in justice circles that help youth *“to fix what wrong they have caused and make things right by talking to the youth in a nice way.”*
- Being part of community hunts that respect traditions of harvesting and sharing country foods with elders and others in need.
- Coming together in various seasons to improve the community such as repairing gravesites or cleaning up the cemetery or public spaces.
- Bridging intergenerational, cultural, and language gaps in the community by interpreting, orienting, storytelling, mentoring, and helping young people to keep traditional cultural practices and Aboriginal languages alive.
- Holding special events to welcome strangers (e.g. one NWT community hosts an annual feast to welcome new teachers).
- Being a board member with a community or a territorial society.

“Volunteering is about earning respect.”

“Whatever you give to your community, the return will be ten fold. That’s the payment that matters the most.”

In every Aboriginal community, some families, leaders, elders, youth, women, and men remain strongly committed to the traditions of helping, sharing and caring for others. They express these traditions both in informal or individual ways and in more formal or modern ways through a voluntary group. These people

are role models and an inspiration for others, particularly youth. While acknowledging the commitment of this core group in every community, there is concern among many Aboriginal people participating in this research that fewer people are helping out today than in the past. They are concerned that declining voluntary effort signifies a loss of Aboriginal traditions.

“When the kids went to residential school in the 50s, that’s when volunteering changed. Values changed and they have not come back around again.”

Participants in this research identify several reasons for declining volunteerism. These reasons are not unlike those factors affecting volunteering elsewhere in Canada (Hall et al., 2001).

- Because Aboriginal communities are larger and less homogeneous today than in the past, individuals may not feel as strongly connected or responsible for the well-being of others. For example, helping out was a traditional practice that extended beyond the family to the entire community regardless of the direct personal or family benefit. Today, informal or individual voluntary acts tend to be based on personal relationships rather than a broader commitment to the community. Volunteerism also tends to involve some expectation of personal or family benefit. An example cited in this research was the parent who feels compelled to volunteer so his/her own child can benefit. *“If there are no children, adults don’t expect [or feel compelled] to volunteer.”*

“People forget” or “it [helping others] doesn’t seem as important.”

-
- Compared to rural and land-based economies of the past, more people are involved today in the wage economy and in making money for themselves and their families. Within this environment the economic well-being of the individual and his/her family has become more important than the collective or community well-being.

“In the white man’s world everyone is out to make money.”

- In recent decades, the economy of Aboriginal communities in the NWT has changed from subsistence harvesting to an industrial wage-based economy. The reasons for this shift are related to greater exposure to material goods, increasing education levels, changing expectations, government social and economic restructuring and industrial development pressures. The new money economy coupled with few wage-earning opportunities in small Aboriginal communities and high living costs have created economic pressures and some confusion and tension around paid and unpaid work. Incidents of unpaid work for example for child or elder care or coordinating recreation events, becoming paid government or private sector work, compound the confusion and tension.

“Some Aboriginal people feel they should be paid for volunteering. [But] if it’s a traditional activity no one expects to get paid. But if an organization is making money then an Aboriginal person might expect payment.”

- The leadership including the chief doesn’t set an example and doesn’t ask people to help. As discussed in the Fort McPherson case study, soliciting and organizing volunteers to meet collective needs were responsibilities of the chief in

the past. Many people still see the chief having these responsibilities today.

- In many NWT communities, young people and others are engaged in unhealthy behaviours such as drug or alcohol use. Unhealthy lifestyles prevent the transfer of traditional values including the ethic of helping and serving others.

The evolution of voluntary groups and more formal or organized approaches to helping may also impact on the expression of traditional values and volunteer patterns. Aboriginal people participating in this research tend to agree that:

- Helping out is more organized, structured, sophisticated, and demanding today. Within this environment, high-level skills are required or perceived as needed. Many Aboriginal people feel that they don’t have these skills.
- More structured and institutionalized approaches to helping may cause informal or more traditional ways of helping to be overlooked. This may send the message that informal volunteering is less important or less valuable than formal approaches.
- In the old days everyone pitched in to help one another but today people have become accustomed to receiving help from programs run by government or voluntary groups. Programs and services have replaced the individual responsibility that Aboriginal people have traditionally taken for each other and for the collective well-being. This makes Aboriginal people feel that they aren’t expected or needed to help anymore.
- Some community or voluntary groups have expectations that people should only help others through them or help in certain ways. Voluntary groups may also have specific expectations of volunteers that may not be compatible with the

volunteer's own expectations. These approaches to helping are confusing for Aboriginal people who have been taught to view helping and sharing as an individual responsibility and expectation throughout one's life.

- Because many voluntary groups have paid staff, volunteers may assume that their help is no longer needed or they may also expect to be paid. If volunteers don't get paid, they may feel less valued and be reluctant to help out.

"There isn't the sharing that there used to be."

- Voluntary groups tend to have a single focus such as skiing, hockey, early childhood, or youth. Aboriginal people may not be interested in participating in narrow, single interest groups or causes that don't clearly benefit the whole community. They may also be reluctant to engage in a competitive environment that tends to emerge with many narrowly focused interests. This is demonstrated by the many competitive fundraising efforts and the constant struggle among groups to recruit and retain volunteers.

"This [helping out] is the way of Aboriginal people. The question is almost rhetorical as this is the way we do things. Organization and structure are white people's values. We are more driven by necessity, and a sense of helping others as we are 'social' people."

The Voluntary Sector's Role in Aboriginal Communities Today

"The more people volunteer in the community, the happier and healthier a community it will be."

"Volunteering makes the community a better place to live."

"Volunteering fills the gap. It should be as valued as the public and private sector."

"Volunteers and voluntary groups tend to have a positive role in Aboriginal communities as long as they are not perceived to be a threat or competition for funds or jobs."

"The need for volunteers never stops."

Aboriginal volunteers say that voluntary action is about "reclaiming power over our lives" and "having dignity" and "our communities being self reliant once again." The Fort McPherson case study provides many examples of modern day volunteer efforts that build self-reliance and dignity. These efforts are seen in the many volunteers who collaborate and share resources to operate the local radio station, stage events, help those in need, and build connections, well-being and social activity in the community. As in Fort McPherson, volunteers and voluntary groups in most Aboriginal communities in the NWT bring people and resources together, foster collaboration and empower others through engagement and sharing. Volunteers and voluntary groups "make communities more of a community."

"Volunteering generally influences a positive interaction among people."

Key informants and case study participants agree that volunteers and voluntary groups play several other roles in modern day Aboriginal communities. Volunteers and voluntary groups:

- Meet needs that people can't meet themselves or that governments or businesses don't or can't meet. *"Today there are all kinds of programs for everything and everyone gets paid. When there is not enough money to do everything that's when volunteering is important."* *"The more money an organization or community has the fewer volunteers it will use."*
- Create alternatives and choices within the community and for its members. For example, volunteers help youth by *"participating in the justice system, working towards preventing youth from entering the non-Aboriginal justice system, and providing youth with the opportunity to right a wrong."*
- Make communities safer. For instance in Rae and Yellowknife, volunteers patrol streets to make these communities safer for everyone.
- Support and enhance health and well-being through a range of programs, services and events.
- Make a *"significant difference to the people who are on the receiving end."*
- Strengthen local economies through volunteer-run events that bring new dollars or encourage spending in the community. Positive volunteer-run events/activities also help to raise a community's profile and generate community pride.
- Demonstrate the value the community accords to youth through activities, events and trips that help youth become healthy adults and develop relationships with healthy, nurturing adults.
- Help communities to value and share individual skills.
- Revitalize the human spirit and human connections.
- Strengthen Aboriginal cultures. *"Volunteering strengthens and fortifies family and community bonds, and will continue to play an important role*

so long as the cultural values of the Dogrib people are preserved. It is a part of our lives and being."

"Volunteers are maintaining [and strengthening] cultural values that are important to Aboriginal people." Volunteering "helps you remember who you are and where you come from."

"Volunteering has an incredibly positive effect on the volunteer and the recipient of the volunteered service. It restores faith in the good of humans for the recipient and a strong sense of well being in the volunteer. In Aboriginal communities, it helps integrate the different cultures and break down stereotypes."

Volunteering improves the quality of life for volunteers and those affected by them. People who help informally or individually or as a part of a group effort:

- feel better about what they can do as individuals and as a collective;
- feel good about themselves, the work they do and their role and place in the community;
- get personal satisfaction and gratification;
- help bring attention to the needs of groups within communities like youth, elders, unemployed people, and people in trouble with the law;
- create opportunities for those who may be excluded from community activities to show that they too can be responsible, contributing members;
- are role models for others;
- help to strengthen individual, family and community relationships and connections with traditional Aboriginal culture;
- develop skills and experiences that will benefit them throughout their lives;

- learn about the difference between paid and unpaid work and the value of both; and
- help raise the stature of other volunteers and voluntary groups.

“Whenever there is money on the table then there is the potential for competition for resources and fragmentation of power.”

“In the old days volunteering would strengthen the community. In the past ten years, it seems that everyone wants a piece of the action and is looking for power.”

While volunteers and volunteer groups have many positive effects on Aboriginal communities, best efforts to disperse power through volunteer engagement and foster cooperation rather than competition, can be undermined by power struggles and competition for scarce human and financial resources. In this regard, Aboriginal volunteers point to those individuals, families, or groups in every community with a passion and commitment to a cause but an inability or unwillingness to engage or empower others. These people may *“feel threatened by anything new and unknown”* and *“refuse to evolve out of what is familiar to them, including control of resources.”*

5. Aboriginal Volunteers

This section describes Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders, the reasons Aboriginal people volunteer and take on leadership positions, and similarities and differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal volunteers. The representation of Aboriginal people in the voluntary sector, particularly in leadership and decision-making positions, is also examined. Throughout this section, the distinction is made between people who help informally or individually,

and those who volunteer in more formal ways through a group or committee.

Aboriginal Volunteers and Volunteer Leaders

Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders who help informally or in individual or traditional ways tend to be respectful of cultural values. They are also concerned about ensuring that these traditional practices continue. They hunt, sew or care for others. They share their knowledge and their skills freely. *“For them, the concept of helping others is ingrained.”* These informal volunteers are likely to be older people or individuals who have been strongly influenced by elders (e.g. raised by grandparents).

Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders who help in more formal ways describe themselves and their peers as *“movers and shakers”* with a strong sense of community. They are people who are sociable, outgoing, often outspoken, pro-active and willing to work with others. They are self-motivated, dedicated and committed. They are empathetic, happy, hardworking, giving and generous.

In communities with a predominantly Aboriginal population, Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders see no distinguishing age, social, or economic strata among those who volunteer in informal ways. *“Everyone helps everyone else”* on the basis of need. However, volunteer patterns may be influenced by traditional gender roles and responsibilities. That is, people who hunt for others today tend to be male, while women tend to cook, sew and care for others. Traditional gender roles may also be reflected in more formal volunteer activities. In particular, men tend to volunteer for sporting events and women are likely to volunteer for care and nurturing activities that may

be done through the ladies auxiliary or community wellness committee.

Aboriginal people who volunteer or lead volunteers in formal ways such as coaching minor hockey, serving on the justice committee or leading a Girl Guide troupe, tend to share characteristics with other Canadian volunteers. Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders who help out in more formal ways tend to be:

- Middle-aged (30 to 50 years of age);
- Women – *“mostly sober women with children, who have skills to offer (e.g. cooking, sewing, culture, traditional and management skills), are honest, have lots of extra energy, and are not overly aggressive/ambitious.”* Often women are expected by others, including their families, to lead volunteer efforts on their behalf. Female volunteers tend to get involved in a greater variety of volunteer roles and to have greater respect for inclusion than males. There is also the perception that Aboriginal men may think that volunteering is not their job (*“they get things done for them”*) or that only certain male dominated activities such as hockey, are appropriate for male volunteers.
- Well and sober or *“well on the road to recovery.”* People who are well themselves are in a better position to help others. Aboriginal populations in many cases *“are still struggling just to have some balance and bring back a sense of normalcy to their lives as we are currently experiencing the aftermath of cultural genocide and modern society encroaching on traditional values. So volunteerism is low on most people’s lists today.”*
- Employed with good jobs or unemployed people with good traditional skills and knowledge. Unemployed people may also volunteer to keep busy, show others that they are responsible and can do

things when asked, or because it is part of the requirement to receive income support or other government assistance.

- Older people with a strong sense of culture, traditions and concern for the well-being of the community.

These characteristics are confirmed in the case study of volunteers and volunteer leaders in the small Aboriginal community of Fort McPherson. In this community, about three quarters of volunteer leaders in the community today are sober, healthy women with a strong sense of culture and community.

The eight stories in ***Our Stories*** illustrate the qualities of Aboriginal people who voluntarily take up leadership roles. These qualities include self-directed, visionary, motivated, charismatic, compassionate and committed. Other qualities are listed in the table below. Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders share these qualities but among Aboriginal volunteer leaders these qualities are particularly strong. Further, Aboriginal volunteer leaders tend to know themselves quite well and to know when they are ready to take on more responsibilities and a leadership position. This awareness tends to come about through skills, experiences and confidence gained through other volunteer experiences. In other cases, self-awareness develops over time through membership in a family known traditionally for its leadership role. In other cases, individuals by their strength of character or role in the community are accepted as natural leaders.

“Leaders are expected to be good hosts and to watch out for others.”

“.....others in the community have particular skills, talents or traditional roles they are expected to share.”

Self and Peer Assessment of Qualities Often Found in Aboriginal Volunteer Leaders

- easygoing but firm
- outgoing, friendly, positive and sometimes outspoken
- self-motivated and able to motivate others
- able to follow-up, give support and help
- flexible and accommodating within limits
- compassionate, passionate and committed
- persistent, determined and consistent
- self-confident and confident in their skills and ability to contribute
- comfortable with themselves and others
- leadership experience
- organized and able to delegate
- good interpersonal skills
- personal wellness, energetic, healthy lifestyle
- knowledgeable and respectful
- a role model with a good track record
- trustworthy, reliable and responsible

Many Aboriginal volunteer leaders believe that the type of individual attracted to more formal volunteer leadership roles is changing. There are several reasons for this perception, including:

- more voluntary groups are recognizing the need to connect with the Aboriginal community and actively seek out Aboriginal volunteers and voluntary leaders;
- more Aboriginal people are attaining higher levels of education and are aware that volunteer activities can help them gain and demonstrate skills, make connections, get a job, and be contributing members of their communities; and
- more Aboriginal people becoming more comfortable participating with non-Aboriginal groups and individuals.

From working with and observing the many kinds of people who help and serve in NWT communities, Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders conclude that they have much in common with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. They also perceive differences although these are becoming less discernable in modern day society. From an Aboriginal perspective, the main similarity is likely in the significant contribution that volunteers make. The main differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders are in how they help. Non-Aboriginal volunteers and leaders tend to help in formal ways through groups with a single focus (e.g. coach hockey, recycling, or Boy Scouts). Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders tend to help in more informal ways that contribute to the survival and well-being of individuals, families, or the whole community. Other observed differences are noted in the table below.

“They [Aboriginal people] do not need to be recognized. They do it out of the goodness of their hearts.”

Aboriginal Perceptions of Some Differences Among Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Volunteers and Volunteer Leaders

Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more focused on care giving • people oriented • reactive to a need <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • often help privately (e.g. “don’t talk about it”) • reluctant to bring attention to themselves • considered an honour to volunteer <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help out with feasts, gatherings and other things that benefit the whole community • rewarded by helping others <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncomfortable and suspicious of organizational hierarchy • non-confrontational, diffused leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more focused on recreation • idea and goal oriented • making a conscious decision to help • often help publicly (talk about it) • happy to be “under the spotlight” <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “put back into the community what they get out of it.” • help a single cause or group <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rewarded by achieving personal goals and needs • familiar with the hierarchy of organizations • more aggressive, authoritarian leadership

“Aboriginal people hunt, fish harvest food from the land and have cultural backgrounds to share with elders or others in need. They all have some kind of teachings that were passed down from their ancestors. If there is a community feast they can cook their traditional food and bring it to the feast.

Non-Aboriginal people serve as board or committee members in a nonprofit organization such as a day care or seniors group. Many also help to organize jamborees or festivals, get involved in the community and feel the need to become part of the community.”

“Non-Aboriginal people having been immersed in the system for several generations, tend to be more familiar with the hierarchy of organizations. They likely have more trust in organizations or else

know how to bend the rules in the process [to make them work for them].”

“Bereavement in hospitals and elders facilities stimulated the sense of giving of one’s self. Non-Aboriginal volunteers steer clear of reaching out to people who need help.”

“Non-Aboriginal volunteering is more structured and more visible [than helping among Aboriginal people].”

“Some non-Aboriginal people expect to do ‘southern’ volunteering in the north – they do not know the culture, they do not know the town and they look down on Aboriginal people.”

The Reasons Aboriginal People Volunteer and Lead

“Regardless of their different influences, volunteers make a difference.”

“The satisfaction [I get from singing to them] is seeing their faces light up and come alive.”

“When you volunteer it is like having a bright shining light around you.”

“Volunteers typically believe in a cause that will benefit the people.”

As shown in the table below, the reasons that Aboriginal people volunteer and lead others are varied and likely similar in many ways to those of other Canadians (Hall et al., 2001).

Some Reasons Aboriginal People Give for Volunteering

- because they care
- make a difference
- give back to the community
- improve the quality of life
- contribute to society
- enjoy life
- something to do
- feel good
- to gain experience
- thanks and recognition
- personal gain
- personal interest
- commitment to a cause
- because something is important
- to spend quality time with kids
- impart values to others
- use certain talents or skills
- a passion for an event/outcome
- have spare time
- be part of the community
- to look good
- to be remembered
- personal/cultural values
- meet people and make contacts
- achieve personal goals
- sense of personal accomplishment
- to get skills or knowledge
- to be rewarded
- public relations and status
- just to be involved
- personal connection
- a normal human trait to help
- get to know people
- to do something with a spouse
- to meet a need
- to accomplish something
- because it is fun
- to learn new skills
- to be a good role model
- no one else does/will
- for personal gain
- because it is expected
- make a change
- preserve something of value
- was asked
- am well and able to help

Aboriginal volunteers say the greatest encouragement to volunteer and to lead and likely the reason they do, comes from:

- Personal satisfaction or satisfaction with results – the positive impact of volunteer efforts on the community and the feeling of accomplishment. Satisfaction may start with playing volleyball for recreation then evolve to coaching, or other leadership roles. It may come from knowing that a hot lunch is important for kids at school and representation on the Parent Advisory Committee is the way to make a hot lunch program happen.
- Recognition of efforts through lunches, certificates, sweatshirts, sweaters, honoraria and expressions of thanks. Recognition doesn't have to be significant but it should acknowledge the *"special gifts of volunteers."*
- The experience and camaraderie of working with others with similar ideals, commitment and desire to make a difference.
- Issues, activities and groups that people feel strongly about, and may have been personally affected by in the past.
- Voluntary groups or activities with a good reputation in the community that people feel proud to be associated with.
- The type of activity (including the need for it), who asks for help and how the activity is implemented – inclusive, flexible, interesting, appealing and fun activities that show people that *"something is going on that they like and want of be part of."* A sense of pride comes from staging an event (e.g. such as the Kamba Carnival on Hay River Reserve) that attracts people from far and wide, and involves everyone in the community.
- Voluntary groups or activities that are visibly and intrinsically Aboriginal in nature through activities, organization, processes and the people who are engaged.

- Carrying on the tradition of helping. Volunteering is learned in homes with strong cultural or traditional values. Parents who teach their children the importance of volunteering and role model these behaviours will likely see their children helping out where they can. Many volunteer leaders participating in this research took inspiration from family members. One volunteer's father would say to him *"the world doesn't owe you a living. If you want to be pitiful then be pitiful. Make yourself proud. Then I will be proud of you. Just be kind."*
- Support and encouragement at home. People who receive positive reinforcement for their volunteer efforts from loved ones *"feel good about themselves, want to help others and are more likely to take up leadership roles."*

"Volunteering should be on an individual's terms."

While there are several reasons that Aboriginal people volunteer and volunteer to lead others, there are also factors that discourage volunteerism. These include:

- Not being asked, invited or encouraged to volunteer, and being too shy to offer help. Many Aboriginal people lack self-confidence, have low self-esteem, are intimidated by the unknown or feel they have nothing to contribute. Volunteers/leaders that are highly effective are frequently asked to volunteer and have high demands on their time, and a tendency to burn-out. Groups that *"lean on their volunteers too much"* may give the impression they are using their volunteers. This discourages people from taking on leadership roles.
- Not feeling comfortable. *"Good people [on the board] can make you feel more comfortable."*
"When leaders are bossy it turns people off."
- Not relating to or interested in the cause. *"Aboriginal people need to relate volunteering to something"*

in their own lives.” “When I moved back to my community I couldn’t get a house even though I had a very large family. I wanted to find out what was going on so I decided to sit on the Housing Authority board.”

- Causes that are too narrow or benefit only a small group. *“Volunteering is more for the community good.”*
- Lack of support and criticism. Volunteers often receive no orientation or training. Expectations may be unclear, opening volunteers and volunteer leaders to criticism. Being in the ‘public eye’ can also invite criticism. Leaders may feel that this stress/anxiety is not worth it.

“Sometimes these people are the first to blame others if an event they organized is not a success.” “Aboriginal people may not be risk takers and shy away from failure and criticism.” “There is lots of finger pointing and back stabbing if you make a mistake. Dene people may not participate because they are afraid of being criticized.”

- Bad experiences. A racist incident, a negative volunteer experience or burn-out as a result of over-volunteering turns Aboriginal people away from volunteering and volunteer leadership.
- Lack of recognition. There is a popular misconception that Aboriginal people don’t need to be recognized or recognized by their peers or community for helping out. Aboriginal volunteers participating in this research say that everyone needs to be thanked and recognized, regardless of cultural background.
- Payment, power and prestige. In many Aboriginal communities today, leadership roles on government and corporate boards or agencies usually have some remuneration. Boards that don’t pay honoraria may be unattractive and lower in status than those

that do. Prestige (status), payment and power are significant forces in attracting Aboriginal volunteers to leadership positions.

The Representation of Aboriginal Volunteers and Volunteer Leaders in the Voluntary Sector

This research found that Aboriginal people are engaged in the NWT’s voluntary sector as volunteers, volunteer leaders, employees, members, and clients. The extent and nature of volunteer participation among Aboriginal people is greater and more diverse in communities and groups with significant Aboriginal populations. In these environments, Aboriginal volunteers believe they are well represented in various volunteer functions including leadership and governance positions. In these environments Aboriginal volunteers lead soccer or hockey teams, coach baseball or mentor young artists. They lead ad hoc and formal voluntary groups and committees such as spring carnival committees, women’s groups, and elder’s councils.

The under-representation of Aboriginal volunteers in many facets of the voluntary sector in Yellowknife is a concern of voluntary groups and Aboriginal volunteers in the city. This concern is echoed in the case study of voluntary groups with territorial mandates located in Yellowknife. The under-representation of Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders limits the extent to which Aboriginal voices are heard and reflected in program or project decisions and outcomes. Aboriginal people *“want a voice in the community.”* Under-representation of Aboriginal volunteers in Yellowknife’s voluntary sector also affects the attractiveness and the credibility of the group or activity within the Aboriginal community. It also potentially affects the quality and impact of the group or activity, as many Aboriginal believe that *“an Aboriginal perspective is needed to*

serve an *Aboriginal client(s)*.” Aboriginal volunteers also see the lack of involvement by their peers in voluntary groups and activities as limiting the extent to which relationships can be developed with communities and other sectors both within and outside the city. In the longer term, the cumulative effect of under-representation could undermine the sustainability of voluntary groups, particularly those with territorial mandates.

Aboriginal volunteers note that as the wage economy, technology, and other modern-day influences become stronger forces in NWT communities, the potential for under-representation also exists outside of Yellowknife. These comments are made within the context of changing notions about personal and family time, responsibility and connection to the community, and parental and community responsibility for promoting and modelling traditional values and the ‘volunteer ethic’ to youth.

As documented in the Yellowknife case study of voluntary groups with territorial mandates and corroborated by key informant interviews, several factors contribute to the under-representation of Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders. These factors in no order of priority or preference include:

- Lack of understanding of the role, purpose and relevancy of voluntary groups to the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal people may not understand the contribution that a voluntary group or activity does/can make to the community.
- Lack of positive profile, reputation or credibility of particular voluntary groups or activities. Few volunteers want to become associated with a group that is unknown or not well respected in the community.
- The value, status and inter-relationship of paid and unpaid work. Volunteer positions that have the

characteristics of paid employment or workplaces that have paid staff such as recreation, wellness or justice coordinators who work with volunteers, can create confusion and uncertainty for volunteers about the value and status of their volunteer contributions.

- Funding and accountability issues including fundraising responsibilities or funding security. The need to ask for money or the potential for expectations not to be met due to funding issues may deter some Aboriginal volunteers.
- Groups or activities that don’t have direct links to or focus on Aboriginal traditions or lifestyles or the capacity to promote Aboriginal language use and practices. Aside from friendship centres that have Aboriginal-specific interests, other Yellowknife-based groups may not be seen as valuing Aboriginal traditions or interests or to be openly welcoming to Aboriginal people.
- Factors such as wellness, transportation, child or elder care responsibilities. Regardless of cultural background, individuals with personal or economic issues likely volunteer less than those who are healthy and enjoy some level of social and economic security.

In addition to the above, several other factors also seem to contribute to the under-representation of Aboriginal volunteers in leadership and governance positions in Yellowknife. For example,

- Aboriginal volunteers “*may not see leadership as their place*” because they are not originally from Yellowknife or have not been endorsed or supported by community leaders to take up a leadership position.

-
- Aboriginal volunteers may feel uncomfortable or intimidated if they are the only Aboriginal volunteer leader. They may also worry that they lack the ‘right’ skills or that they may be misunderstood or manipulated by more experienced or skilful volunteers.

“Lots of people who do not have experience on boards get manipulated by other board members.”

“There are hardly any Aboriginal people on boards to encourage more Aboriginal participation. The ‘white man’ does everything. There is no one at the board level to offer advice.”

- Aboriginal people may not be invited to participate or they may not feel welcomed. They may see the leadership of various voluntary groups as entrenched with few opportunities available to engage new people or adopt different leadership styles.

“..... is a prime example, Aboriginal people are not represented in leadership positions even though Aboriginal people are actively involved in sports and value the contribution sporting activity makes to individuals and communities.”

- Aboriginal people may feel Yellowknife-based voluntary groups are too structured. For example, one informant left a board position with a Yellowknife-based group with a territorial mandate because the group was too structured and too demanding of volunteer time.
- Aboriginal people may fear being “singled out” or placed in a position of conflict. Because the Aboriginal community in Yellowknife is close knit, Aboriginal

members do not want to be put on the spot or in a position of conflict for example, if a family member or close friend has difficulty with services provided by the organization they lead.

“Aboriginal people are not volunteering because their attitude is different. They see the ‘white man’ trying to teach Aboriginal people the white man’s ways.”

“Approximately 70% of individuals in my community are in leadership positions for the wrong reasons [e.g. for the money or the power].”

“All I wanted to do was to help out but they want you to have a degree in everything – you have to be qualified to be a coach? The white man’s way requires a level 1 coaching certificate and it discourages participation.”

“But now volunteers are being asked to do too much. For example, Sport North requires the NWT Volleyball Association to plan, report, manage, meet and make decisions. Very special skills and lots of time are required to do this work. Volunteers may be required to take time – consuming training [e.g. Level 1, 2, 3 coaching certification] over and above their volunteer activities. These are substantial barriers for some people who just want to invest some time back into their community.”

6. The Changing World of Aboriginal Volunteers

Lester Salamon of the Centre for Civil Society at Johns Hopkins University is one of the leading researchers on the voluntary sector.⁹ He has recorded the dramatic changes and growth within the sector around the world. Many writers reference Salamon's research (1999 and 2004). For example, Barlow and Clarke (2001) draw from Salamon's 1999 research to report that:

- in at least nine countries the sector is growing at a rate four times greater than the economy;
- if all voluntary groups were amalgamated in one country, they would have the eighth largest economy in the world; and
- voluntary groups employ more people than the private sector by a margin of six to one and have annual global expenditures of over one trillion dollars.

Commenting on Salamon's research, Barlow and Clark speculate that at this time in history, the growth of the voluntary sector *"will appear in retrospect as significant an historical development as the creation of the nation-state in the last part of the nineteenth century"* (2001:3).

In the NWT, the voluntary sector is also growing and changing. This section discusses some of the environmental factors that affect the changing world of Aboriginal volunteers and voluntary leaders.

Lifestyles and Expectations

"The younger generation is not volunteering as much and are motivated by only personal

gain or benefit. If current attitudes and values of youth do not change, the community will be in trouble. We need to work to change the 'me' to the collective 'we'."

Many Aboriginal volunteers believe that there are fewer Aboriginal youth volunteers today than in the past. Changing lifestyles and expectations are a reason for this. Traditionally Aboriginal youth were taught to recognize when help was needed and to help without being asked or when the Chief or another leader identified work that needed to be done. Helping out was a way of fulfilling one's individual responsibility to the well-being of the collective, and a way to demonstrate one's maturity. Today many Aboriginal youth lack parental or elder guidance and role modelling that teach the ethic and value of volunteering. Consequently, Aboriginal youth may not see that their help is needed, will make a difference or will be valued. They may also believe that *"there's nothing in it for me."*

Aboriginal youth who do volunteer today do so for a wide variety of reasons. These reasons may be similar to those of non-Aboriginal youth. They may volunteer for personal gain whether it is increasing skills, knowledge or experience, or to learn job skills that will facilitate their entry into the work force. Young people may also volunteer *"to build character"* or acquire positive social skills that help them to deal with adults. They may also volunteer to fill the requirement to give 25 hours of time to the community in order to graduate from high school. School and youth club fundraising activities for a sports team or youth council may be another reason youth volunteer. For example, friendship centres in both Fort Smith and Inuvik reward Aboriginal youth volunteers by offering reduced membership fees and opportunities to travel to the annual Dreamcatchers Youth Conference in southern Canada.

⁹ Lester Salamon's three-phased research project is published in two volumes. Volume 1 was published in 1999 and provides the basis for Barlow and Clarke's remarks. Volume 2 was published in 2004. Volume 1 provides data from 22 countries in western and central Europe, Latin America, North America, Asia and the Middle East. Volume 2 provides information on the voluntary sector in 36 countries with in-depth information on 14.

“This summer at our assembly we talked about establishing a Gwich’in youth council – four youth stepped forward right away wanting to volunteer.”

Changing lifestyles and expectations also affect the extent to which Aboriginal adults help or volunteer in their communities today. The shift toward an industrial wage economy has heightened the profile and importance of wage employment in Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal families may be impacted by rotational industrial employment (e.g. two-week in and two-week out work schedules at northern diamond mines), in-town shift work or busy work and social schedules that leave little time for helping others. Also, in light of the small amount of non-work time that people have, they may not see opportunities to volunteer that involve all family members and provide a quality family experience.

“In the wage economy, time has a different value. Weekends and evenings have become a guarded personal possession.”

Changing lifestyles and expectations may also affect the way in which Aboriginal elders help or volunteer today. While most Aboriginal volunteers believe that the elders continue to help those in need and volunteer to ensure the well-being of the whole community, they may have less opportunity to do so. The reason for this is linked to the less central role that elders play in modern day families and communities. In this respect many Aboriginal elders have become isolated or marginalized in their changing communities. The isolation of Aboriginal elders means that many may need to be invited to help as they may be uncertain about how their contributions will be accepted in the changing world in which they live. Some suggest that if Aboriginal elders are invited to volunteer, they may expect to be compensated for their time. This is a factor of the growing money economy of the north.

“Lots of older people volunteer because they enjoy helping people. They don’t need or want recognition.”

Paid and Unpaid Work

Paid and unpaid work is a complex, confusing, and contentious issue in Aboriginal communities. As discussed in both case studies and elsewhere in this report, issues around paid and unpaid work are impacted by a growing wage economy, disparities in economic circumstances, perceptions that traditional values are weakening, and changing roles and responsibilities within families and communities. Understanding of paid and unpaid work is also affected by the type and nature of voluntary activity and the group involved. The complexity and confusion around these issues is also affected by relatively new phenomena such as employer-supported or workplace volunteer programs.¹⁰

“In the old days the Chief delegated and no questions were asked. Today people ask if they will get paid when the Chief asks them to come to a meeting and Aboriginal organizations are continuing the traditions set by other governments of paying people for everything.”

“Today, Aboriginal people want to get paid for helping out. They don’t want to do anything for nothing.”

“Money influences everything we do in our communities today.”

Aboriginal volunteers say that government and industry practices of paying interpreters, community caregivers and elder participants for work that was once unpaid, have significantly impacted volunteering. *“Money stole volunteerism.”* *“All governments hand out money for*

¹⁰ Through these programs employers support their employees to volunteer for community activities or with groups during regular working hours.

what should be volunteer work – money for elders stories; traditional storytelling; singing traditional songs – who wants to volunteer after that kind of generosity?” Today “people have the attitude that ‘why should I participate if I don’t get paid?’”

The presence of paid government workers such as teachers, social workers, police, and nurses has also affected volunteering in Aboriginal communities. Over the decades, Aboriginal people have witnessed paid government workers take responsibility for many facets of their lives that were previously performed by individuals and families. They have seen the care of children and elders become paid work along with children’s education, treatment of the sick, and even the provision of food, shelter and clothing. The continuing powerlessness associated with not having control over even the basic elements of one’s own life means that many Aboriginal people are unable to take back responsibility that is demonstrated through voluntary action. Many Aboriginal people may also assume that paid government human service employees are still responsible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for responding to a wide variety of human needs. They may also feel that their help is not needed or valued.

In the money economy developing throughout the NWT today traditional values of helping and sharing in Aboriginal communities may be valued less than time, labour and skills that are treated as commodities and rewarded financially. In this economy having money and being able to pay is a sign of independence and pride whereas in the past interdependence and sharing was a source of pride and self-respect. This is explained in the example of a woman who volunteered to give an elder a ride into town (a considerable distance). The elder wanted to know how much money she wanted. This elder was

acknowledging that the trip would cost her money and he also wanted to show her that he was independent and could pay his own way. In a money economy, Aboriginal volunteers also worry that those who do honour traditions and “work for nothing”, may be willing to do anything they are asked to do in order to keep cultural traditions alive. They are concerned that this may put them at risk of abuse and burn-out.

“If you want committed volunteers they need to be paid. Payment is a form of recognition.”

Money has become an accepted if not the most desirable way of acknowledging and recognizing individual contributions. For some, money is a motivator for voluntary leadership positions. These people, although they may not be the best leaders, see board membership as a way of making money. Voluntary groups see these leaders investing little if any effort beyond that which they were paid for. *“Some board members have nothing to contribute and are on the board to collect their honorariums.”*

Aboriginal volunteers come from two schools of thought on the issue of paid and unpaid work. One school believes that if an individual gets paid he/she is not volunteering. *“[We] should get away from paying for volunteering. It spoils volunteers and teaches the wrong values to young people. It is taking away from true volunteering which is helping out with no pay. Bands should spend their money on other things.”*

“All you need is a ‘thank you’ [or a special supper or lunch].”

“If people really cared and wanted to make life better for other people they wouldn’t want to get paid.”

The second school of thought believes that flexibility is needed on this issue, that decisions about financial compensation should be made on an activity or case by case basis. This school believes that volunteers should in some cases, be recognized in a monetary way for their contributions. These activities or circumstances are:

- when a group begins to take advantage of a volunteer (e.g. when a volunteer begins to lose wages as a result of volunteer demands).
- as a way of honouring the wisdom of elders that is equivalent to a highly paid professor. *“The wise elders have a wealth of information to give and are not recognized or utilized enough in our society today.”*
- when knowledge is volunteered and used by others to make money. *“Aboriginal elders are expected to offer their knowledge with no pay but a PhD works for a price.”*
- in cases where unemployed volunteers could benefit from *“any type of remuneration.”*

One Aboriginal volunteer leader suggests that when payment is offered and refusal would be offensive, he accepts payment then reinvests these funds back into community projects.

Regardless of the school of thought, there is agreement among Aboriginal volunteers that:

1. volunteers should be compensated for expenses such as childcare or transportation that they incur while volunteering.
2. rewards support volunteering but they do not have to be monetary.
3. more discussion is needed among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to sort out *“a clear definition of work and volunteering (e.g. where is the line drawn between work and volunteering?).”*

4. at the outset of any activity, it should be clear to all involved as to what is paid and unpaid work.

Structure and Professionalism

Research on the voluntary sector in Canada (McKechnie et al., 2000) and in the NWT (Lutra, 2001) shows that voluntary groups are adopting more formal organizations and structured approaches to fulfilling their mandates. More formal ways of organizing and undertaking activities have come about as a result of increased expectations by funders, clients and users, and government and communities themselves that voluntary groups will or should deliver a broader range of programs and services. Delivering programs and services, many of which were once delivered by government, requires voluntary groups to become more structured in their organization, more professional in their approaches and more accountable to the interests served.

In many ways, greater program and service responsibility is requiring voluntary groups to take on the characteristics of the government or business sectors. This translates into more complex financial and governance responsibilities and accountabilities, and potential liability for the volunteers and staff who fulfill these functions. Within this milieu, the need for skilled professional leaders and managers increases. These trends have implications for volunteers, particularly Aboriginal volunteers with strong traditions of informal, non-structured volunteering. Aboriginal volunteers worry that these trends will create barriers to volunteer engagement and limit the extent to which volunteers can connect with each other and have fun while volunteering. Greater structure and professionalism may also intimidate and send the message to Aboriginal people that they are not qualified and have little to offer. These trends may also frustrate and discourage

Aboriginal volunteers, and contribute to hierarchical groups with authoritarian leaders (especially if they are paid) who may treat volunteers like employees. These trends may also discourage Aboriginal people *“if it [volunteering] becomes more of a chore to do what used to be simple.”*

“We have survived thousands of years without all these rules.”

“First Nation people view volunteer organizations as too highly structured, ‘too white’ and often having too many favourites.”

Aboriginal volunteers counsel on the need to carefully manage trends toward increasing structure and professionalism in the sector. They say that positive elements of these trends should be emphasized. In particular, they agree that:

- While groups that are highly structured and demand professionalism may make volunteering seem too much like a job, well-structured professional groups likely champion strong ethics that can keep volunteers safe from harm (and law suits). Structured groups with strong ethics may increase formal volunteering in Aboriginal communities (e.g. because they will be able to deal with incidents of unprofessional behaviour such as *“pilfering of funds.”*)
- Many Aboriginal people are inherently distrustful of and intimidated by institutions and bureaucracies because they have been poorly served by them so often in the past. Still, Aboriginal volunteers recognize that structured groups have potential to ensure consistency and fair play. These are attractive features to all volunteers including those of Aboriginal ancestry.
- Aboriginal people may have literacy, numeracy and language issues that limit their effectiveness

in highly structured and professional environments. The case study of territorial organizations illustrates that these barriers can be overcome through sensitivity and extra efforts to meet the needs of volunteer leaders (e.g. plain language materials, regular communication and discussion).

- Aboriginal people tend to be very conscious of the reputation of the groups they volunteer with. Any hint of impropriety discourages participation. Trends toward professionalism may have positive effects on the reputation of voluntary groups.
- All volunteers need to be more aware of liability issues associated with volunteering. Awareness of the protection that is available to volunteers may have a positive impact on participation (e.g. liability insurance and criminal records checks).

Colonial Relationships

The NWT’s colonial history is characterized by over a century of paternalistic relationships. Colonial governments took responsibilities away from Aboriginal people including raising children and providing for families. Government created dependency and took away individual zeal, self-determination, pride, and self-esteem, and limited the initiative to volunteer. Colonial governments created a *“mental state of dependency”* among many Aboriginal people that *“everything will be taken care of by the government.”*

“People got used to being looked after [re-warded] and coming to expect something for everything they do.”

In the past, *“non-Aboriginal people were very powerful and could act as they pleased.”* In a colonial environment some Aboriginal families sought to acquire the power of non-Aboriginal people through association and adoption of certain behaviours and attitudes. Some Aboriginal families became quite powerful depending

on how well they could interact with non-Aboriginal people and respond to their expectations. The divisions that were created within a once interdependent Aboriginal society, remain today as evidenced in some local leadership circles and the distribution of power and resources within Aboriginal communities. In many Aboriginal communities today, there are clearly those Aboriginal families with means and those without.

While Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people relationships are changing in recent decades as a result of Aboriginal rights movements, and land claim and self-government agreements, the residual effects of decades of colonialism have lasting impacts. Today the cycle of dependency and powerlessness is being repeated with resource developers. *“Now people expect diamond mines to basically to look after the people because the mines are located on their lands.”*

The NWT’s colonial history and a tendency by some to perceive new relationships with resource developers in the same way, have implications for the voluntary sector. One of the most obvious implications is captured by one Aboriginal elder who commented that it is not surprising that people who *“don’t feel good about themselves say ‘to heck with volunteering’.”* Other implications are in the potential for the voluntary sector whether through narrowness of mandate, limited capacity or structured organization, to reflect past practices that recognize the power of a few and exclude all others.

Itinerant non-Aboriginal residents in Aboriginal communities despite good intentions, energy and ideas to address the things they see as being wrong, may also reinforce colonial patterns of the past. These individuals may *“start a southern recipe for a northern*

stew and this creates resentment, misunderstandings and wastes time, money and energy.” Voluntary activities that are not born or owned by Aboriginal people may create scepticism and send the message of *“trying to change the Dene and make them more homogeneous”* with everyone else. These activities may also be seen by Aboriginal people as risky because they know that non-Aboriginal people will be gone in a year or two and local people will be left ‘holding the bag’ or unable to meet expectations, making them subject to local criticism.

The residual impacts of colonialism may also cause Aboriginal people to be wary of involving themselves in voluntary groups and activities of their own making that are born from grassroots movements and community needs. The wariness may be as a result of investing time and effort in a local group only to have the government or other outside force take it over and use it for its own purposes. A voluntary group formed in Fort McPherson to address alcohol and drug issues provides an example of this. As suggested in the case study of volunteering in Fort McPherson, government appropriation of a successful volunteer group negatively impacted on volunteerism in the community.

“In the past when a non-Aboriginal person was volunteering or working in the community Aboriginal people did not question this person (even if they did not agree with him/her). Nor did they become involved for fear of standing out or making mistakes, a very negative experience for many recalling residential school days.”

New Self-Government Regimes

New self-government regimes are emerging in many regions and communities in the NWT. As these regimes unfold, Aboriginal governments will play more

significant roles in guiding the direction of northern society and its organization. This research considered the role of volunteers and voluntary groups within Aboriginal communities in light of these evolving self-government regimes. The impact of these regimes on Aboriginal volunteers and voluntary leaders were difficult for many key informants and case study participants to address. This is due to the lack of clarity about the future of these new regimes and the absence of any previous discussion about the interplay of the government and voluntary sectors and their respective roles and responsibilities in Aboriginal communities.

The small number of key informants and case study participants, who commented on the role of the sector within Aboriginal self-government regimes, were careful to qualify their lack of knowledge both of the voluntary sector and these new government regimes. Nevertheless they offered the following broad range of thoughts and ideas.

- *“All I know is politics is all based on currency these days which will not increase volunteerism.”*
- *“In Aboriginal communities, volunteer groups tend to be viewed by First Nations as a nuisance. If the Band is mandated to deliver services, then volunteers groups may be looked upon as competition.”*
- Aboriginal governments if they promote traditional values could positively impact volunteering but if they don't address the current *“colonial dependence”*, volunteering could decline.
- Self-government agreements contain no references to the voluntary sector.
- Land claim groups have continued government traditions by paying people to participate and contribute. Aboriginal self-government regimes are expected to continue issuing honoraria. This practice will continue to challenge voluntary groups.
- Self-government agreements together with land claim implementation activities are expected to bring more money and programs to Aboriginal communities. *“If lots of community people are employed and earning high salaries others may say ‘why should I be volunteering my time when others are getting paid’.”* On the other hand, if there are funding shortfalls, significant volunteer effort will be required to raise money for activities and infrastructure.
- Aboriginal leaders will set the tone for new self-government regimes. If leaders are healthy, Aboriginal governments may continue to do much of the work of the voluntary sector as is the case now. However, unhealthy leadership will create more demands on the voluntary sector and further exacerbate already significant capacity issues.
- Hopefully new self-governments regimes will replicate traditional rather than colonial structures and systems. In this environment, volunteers will have a strong role but voluntary groups may not.
- Self-government regimes will decentralize government services and decision making. *“Instead of one government there will be eight.”* *“Volunteering depends on giving away control or power and helping people become independent.”* Within this environment, new government regimes may actually end up restricting volunteering.
- Aboriginal governments do not have a good ‘track-record’ on involving women in decision-making or addressing social and cultural needs. If these trends continue, volunteering will be needed more than ever to engage people and causes that are not on the ‘radar-screen’ of new Aboriginal government regimes.
- New Aboriginal governments will be very busy at least for the foreseeable future. People who are

employed with these new regimes will be too tired to volunteer and likely more protective of their free time.

Most informants and case study participants agree that there is a need for education and discussion throughout NWT society and particularly within Aboriginal communities on the role the voluntary sector plays now and can play in light of new self-government regimes and the desire within Aboriginal communities to shape and control their own lives and destiny. Public discussion and greater understanding of the sector would eliminate any notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, reduce duplication and competition, and foster cooperative efforts that benefit the whole community. Public discussion would also create awareness of common interests both within the sector and Aboriginal governments, and lay the foundation for building relationships that would help both parties to prepare for and evolve with new Aboriginal self-government regimes.

7. Good Ideas and Solutions

Participants in this research offered a range of good ideas and solutions that should be adopted more widely throughout NWT society to meaningfully engage Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders. These good ideas and solutions are presented in this section under five main groupings:

1. linking the concepts of helping out and volunteering;
2. promoting volunteering;
3. building relationships;
4. building capacity; and
5. focusing on one leader at a time.

1. Linking the Concepts of Helping Out and Volunteering

“Today, there is a need to build more of the traditional sharing into structured volunteering.”

Aboriginal people have strong traditions of helping out for the collective well-being. These traditions are the hallmark of citizenship in Aboriginal society. They are also the underpinning of voluntary action in mainstream Canadian society. Conscious efforts to link the traditions of helping and more modern notions of volunteering are good ideas for engaging more Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders.

Fort McPherson gives a good model for this. The community’s volunteer-run radio station regularly invites, recognizes and celebrates the contributions that both informal and formal helpers or volunteers make. The recognition that the community gives to both its traditional helpers and formal volunteers has inspired many Aboriginal people, particularly women to take up more formal volunteer roles in the community including formal volunteer leadership roles.

Volunteer NWT provides another good model for linking traditional volunteer practices with modern day volunteering. This voluntary group makes these linkages through engaging community volunteers, voluntary groups, and other community members and agencies in workshops to increase and support volunteering. It also makes a series of nine books on northern informal and formal volunteer practices, ***Resources to Increase and Support Volunteers***, available to NWT communities.

Other good ideas for linking the concepts and practices of helping and volunteering are evident in the voluntary groups and activities that engage individuals in informal and formal ways, and honour the traditions of Aboriginal

people. Community carnivals, youth and elder events, and territorial Aboriginal Day celebrations are examples of these practices.

2. Promoting Volunteering

“Sport North/MACA used to do a workshop on volunteerism. I think this needs to be actively promoted.”

“We are lacking the essential community and family values that promote volunteerism (we have values that place money before people).”

In the changing nature of Aboriginal communities, the role and value of volunteers and voluntary leaders are not always communicated or celebrated as they were in the past. Further, the practice of role modelling of these behaviours to youth may be less prevalent than in previous times. Regularly promoting helping out in informal ways and volunteering in more formal or organized ways is a good idea.

Aboriginal volunteers and representatives of voluntary groups offer several ideas for promoting informal and formal volunteers. They encourage voluntary groups to collaborate with community governments to offer “community caring awards” for both informal and formal volunteers, participate in the Government of the NWT outstanding volunteer awards and participate in national volunteer week. They recommend an awareness campaign that encourages all community members to recognize and thank the informal and formal volunteers that contribute to their communities. They recommend celebrating, respecting and honouring voluntary leaders and other volunteers through a private or public ‘thank you’, letters of appreciation, gifts, informal gatherings, and other special acts of individual and group recognition. They recommend

that the benefits of all acts of volunteering, big and small and formal and informal be equally valued and celebrated. They also recommend regular dialogue among voluntary groups and with the general public about the benefits of helping and volunteering, and frank discussions of issues associated with paid and unpaid work and the role that each plays in healthy people and healthy communities.

“Many times the communities take volunteers for granted.”

3. Building Relationships

“If volunteer groups want to move into an Aboriginal community they should try to speak the Aboriginal language; ask to participate in traditional activities such as hunting or fishing; learn about culture and history; [and] not be shy about [asking] how things are done in the community.”

Aboriginal and local governments often do the work of the voluntary sector in small Aboriginal communities. For this reason these governments along with Aboriginal volunteers in these communities may not see the relevancy or role of voluntary groups especially those with territorial mandates. For voluntary groups working in Aboriginal communities or seeking to engage Aboriginal volunteers in leadership positions, building relationships with Chiefs and Councils, new self-government regimes and elders is a good idea. Respecting the desire of Aboriginal people and communities to control their own lives and destiny and empowering Aboriginal people to be self-determining is also a good idea.

The NWT Council of Persons with Disabilities and NWT Literacy Council offer good models for building relationships with and respecting efforts to own and

control programs and services in Aboriginal communities. These voluntary groups advise taking six steps to achieve these ends:

1. Be visible in positive ways at community-based events or gatherings.
2. Consult with Aboriginal communities often, know their needs and sponsor workshops and projects in these communities that respond to these needs.
3. Organize special activities in Aboriginal communities that mirror successful community activities, and create a level of comfort and ownership among local residents.
4. Meet with the Chief and Council, Mayor and Council, elders and self-government leaders to keep them informed of voluntary activities, the benefits that they have in the Aboriginal community and ways that local people and communities can own and control these activities.
5. Maintain connections with community leaders and other key contacts by inviting them to attend board and other meetings of the voluntary group, and attending meetings of various Aboriginal organizations.
6. Reinforce through the examples of existing Aboriginal voluntary leaders, the valuable contributions that these volunteers bring to voluntary groups and Aboriginal communities.

“It is all about building relationships in the community.”

4. Building Capacity

Human and financial capacity challenges most voluntary groups. Capacity issues can discourage Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders. Constant attention and priority to taking even small steps to address this significant challenge is a good idea for engaging and maintaining Aboriginal volunteers and voluntary

leaders. Attention to capacity building is also a good idea for supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal communities to take control of local programs and services.

Sport North and the NWT Recreation and Parks Association are good models for building capacity. These groups offer several training events in Aboriginal communities each year to develop coaching and mentoring skills among volunteers. The NWT Council of Persons with Disabilities and the NWT Literacy Council also offer capacity building solutions. These groups endeavour to offer annual professional development and governance training opportunities to their leadership. Volunteer NWT offers another solution through its work to engage government and voluntary leaders in regular discussions to find ways to stabilize funding to support voluntary effort throughout the NWT. Other voluntary groups seek to build capacity through partnerships with larger voluntary groups or with groups in the public and private sectors. Still others seek to build capacity through plans to establish community and territorial foundations that can support human and financial resource needs.

5. Focusing on One Leader at a Time

“Let go of a need of the control...let it unfold at its own pace.”

Leadership development is a process both for the individual and the group. Engaging Aboriginal volunteer leaders is a process that occurs within the context of culture and traditions. It is a good idea to honour and respect these traditions and the unique opportunities that they offer.

“The key is introducing volunteers to positions they are comfortable with and giving them a clear definition of their role.”

“Start people in their comfort zone, then slowly begin to develop people by adding different tasks and responsibilities.”

“Trust that people will learn from their actions and then grow in their experiences to achieve more if given a chance.”

“Our board was recruiting for more involvement from the smaller communities at a strategic planning session. When the usual board members were away for the day, all of the representatives from the smaller communities were more engaged and felt free to talk and openly discuss their views. As soon as the old time members were there and discussing their views, they kept going on and on and pretty soon the new reps were silent. So it is important to be open and to listen.....”

Aboriginal volunteer leaders recommend:

- Creating a welcoming environment by spending time on greetings, opening prayers and on inclusion, rather than just *“barrelling along with the business of the meetings.”*
- Recognizing that Aboriginal people are often less vocal and less aggressive than non-Aboriginal volunteers, and adopting inclusive and participatory practices that encourage quieter members.
- Personally inviting and encouraging Aboriginal volunteer participation in recognition that Aboriginal people may be shy or uncomfortable about offering help or participating with people or groups that are unfamiliar.
- Mentoring or shadowing new leaders to welcome them and ease them into their role.
- Providing orientation, protocols and clear information about the volunteer group or work, how it and the volunteer contributes to the community.

- Following a code of ethics that protects the volunteer and others involved.
- Recognizing that people make mistakes, and provide support and encouragement when they do.
- Training leaders how to deal with jealousy and criticism, to empower others, and to set boundaries so they don't burn out.
- Adopting strategies to reduce the burden of management and reporting functions that distract leaders from governance tasks.
- Regularly letting volunteers know that they are making a difference and their efforts are appreciated.

Aboriginal volunteers also encourage volunteer groups to question their structure and organization. They encourage groups to be clear about why they wish to engage Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders and how their group lends itself to supporting this volunteer effort. They suggest that groups consider how Aboriginal values of helping out for the benefit of the whole community can be honoured, reflected and practiced in the group. They also suggest that volunteer groups consider how decision-making can be altered to reflect Aboriginal traditions of consensus. Finally, they suggest that voluntary groups examine options to hierarchical structures, flattening out organizations in a way that values everyone's participation.

“Best practices that would encourage and support more Aboriginal people to volunteer and have meaningful volunteer experiences are:

- 1. Listen.*
- 2. Recognize gifts and talents.*
- 3. Delegate.*
- 4. Allow learning from mistakes to grow.*

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5. Give literacy support and training on the job.
 6. Be aware of attitudes in the work place about the value of volunteering.
 7. Recognize (award) valuable contributions.
 8. Nurture community connections.
 9. Offer cross cultural awareness.”

Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders have contributed much thoughtful comment to this first-time research into Aboriginal participation in the voluntary sector. It is clear from the discussion that Aboriginal volunteers and volunteer leaders have much in common with other Canadian volunteers. However, the strong cultural traditions of helping and sharing deeply engrained in Aboriginal people, sets this group of volunteers apart. The strong desire to promote voluntary action as a way of “reclaiming power over our lives,” “having dignity” and “our communities being self reliant once again,” also sets this group of volunteers apart from other Canadian volunteers. Meaningfully engaging Aboriginal volunteers and voluntary leaders in the voluntary sector is about continuing and honouring Aboriginal traditions and respecting and empowering Aboriginal people to take ownership of voluntary action in all its diversity.

“The more people volunteer the more people will begin to gain a sense of self reliance and self respect back. It is a part of healing from the oppression and revitalizing the cultures.”

“Volunteering is contagious. Once you start you have difficulty stopping.”

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Appendix A

Key Informant Interviewees

Individual	Community	Organization
Beatrice Campbell	Fort Smith	President, NWT Seniors Society
Joachim Bonnetrouge	Fort Providence	Fort Providence Residential School Healing Project
Terence Courtoreille	Hay River	Northwest Territories Power Corporation
Albert Norwegian Sr.	Fort Providence	Elder
Terry Camsell	Hay River	Northern Transportation Company Limited
David Sanguéz	Hay River	NWT Foster Family Association
Faye Avigana	Fort Resolution	Coordinator, Fort Resolution Justice Committee
Sabet Biscaye	Yellowknife	Dene Cultural Institute, Chipewyan Language
George Tuccaro	Yellowknife	Community Volunteer
Tony Whitford	Yellowknife	Community Volunteer
Kathy Paul-Drover	Yellowknife	Yellowknife Association for Community Living
Jonas Sangris	Dettah	Community Volunteer
Roslyn Smith	Yellowknife	United Way
Karen Wright Fraser	Yellowknife	YWCA
Rassi Nashalik	Yellowknife	Yellowknife Inuit Association
Roy Desjarlais	Yellowknife	Aboriginal Sport Circle, Aboriginal Day
Phil Liske	Ndilo	Yellowknife Minor Hockey
Betty Vittrekwa	Fort McPherson	Fireworks Committee
Victor Stewart	Fort McPherson	Recreation Coordinator
Susan Ross	Inuvik	Volunteer NWT
Shirley Kisoun	Inuvik	Ingamo Hall Friendship Centre
James Ross	Fort McPherson	Community Volunteer
Tonya Cazon	Fort Simpson	Open Sky Festival Society
Leah Keats	Fort Simpson	Girl Guides
Billy Villeneuve	Fort Simpson	Deh Cho Friendship Centre
Tina McNeil	Fort Smith	Uncle Gabe's Friendship Centre
Georgina Fabian	Hay River Reserve	Community Volunteer
Diane Tourangeau	Hay River Reserve	Chief Sunrise Education Centre
Corine Nitsiza	Yellowknife	NWT Council of Disabled Persons
Annie Goose	Yellowknife	Healing and Recovery Program, YWCA of Yellowknife
Theresa Handley	Yellowknife	Status of Women Council of the NWT
Doreen Nitsiza	Wha Ti	Recreation
Violet Mandeville	Fort Resolution	Metis Association
Freda Eliaf	Fort Resolution	Deninu School
Mary Rose Sundberg	Dettah	NWT Literacy Council
Audrey Zoe	Yellowknife	Native Women's Association of the NWT
Beverly Masazumi	Fort Good Hope	Community Volunteer
Brenda Hall	Hay River	Growing Together

Appendix B:

Research Methods

This research was completed in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Aurora Research Institute¹ and the policies of the Medical Research Council, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, printed in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 1998 (updated 2000, 2002).

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The research involved:

- a review of relevant literature.
- developing a database and profile of the voluntary sector in the NWT including Aboriginal participation in it through a voluntary sector survey. Ninety-four (94) groups in 15 NWT communities participated.
- thirty-eight (38) key informant interviews to discuss Aboriginal volunteerism and good practices that support Aboriginal volunteer participation and encourage greater accountability to Aboriginal communities.
- two case studies involving 41 individuals to examine volunteer experiences and activities with lessons to share about improving Aboriginal volunteer participation.

¹ Under the NWT Scientists Act, the Aurora Research Institute requires the principal investigator to consult with public and Aboriginal government and non-government organizations in the jurisdiction to identify concerns associated with the research and agree on ways to address them.

Literature Review

Electronic and library research rendered in excess of 25 documents relevant to this research (listed in the bibliography). In addition, workshop and consultation notes with primarily Aboriginal volunteers compiled in 2004 and available through Volunteer Nunavut and Volunteer NWT also contributed relevant background information. These materials assisted in developing research instruments and analyzing primary data.

Very little documentation exists on Aboriginal participation in the voluntary sector and this is acknowledged as a significant gap in understanding the sector. No specific research on Aboriginal participation in the voluntary sector in the NWT has been published.

The Survey

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect profile information on the nature and characteristics of the voluntary sector in the NWT and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participation in it. A survey implemented by the Government of the NWT provided the framework for developing the questionnaire and survey sample.² The questionnaire was then refined by, tested with and approved by the sponsoring organizations and the recently established Volunteer NWT network. A cover letter signed by the three sponsoring agencies accompanied the questionnaire which was mailed to 995 addresses in 30 NWT communities.

² The GNWT conducted a survey as part of its work toward the development of its 2003 NWT Volunteer Support Initiative. Questionnaires were distributed to a mailing list of 1,000 names drawn from public directories and registries of formally and informally organized nonprofit, membership and community-based public and Aboriginal government organizations that may involve volunteers. While the GNWT has 620 registered societies, not all are listed in public directories and 200 were not included in the profile survey.

Approximately 420 (42%) of the addresses on the mailing list are volunteer groups while the remaining 575 addresses are public sector groups who rely in some way on volunteers. Volunteer groups typically included day care, seniors, women, sports, church, historical, and festival groups. Public sector groups receiving the questionnaire typically include public and Aboriginal councils, schools, health and social service groups, RCMP detachments, justice committees, housing authorities, education councils, and justices of the peace. Of the mail-out, 4% (42) were returned due to incorrect addresses. All but eight (8) questionnaires were rerouted or hand-delivered.

The survey was administered in February-March. During this period the sponsoring agencies issued a press release to provide information about the research and encourage participation. Unfortunately, only one (the '*Inuvik Drum*') of seven newspapers in the NWT followed up on the release. No radio or television network picked up the release. The sponsoring organizations also encouraged volunteers and voluntary groups with whom they regularly network (e.g. shelters, literacy tutors, victims services) to participate in the research.

The response to the mail-out was slow which prompted the research team to undertake considerable follow-up by e-mail, telephone and fax. Reminders and offers of assistance to complete the questionnaire were issued by telephone and e-mail to more than 100 volunteer and approximately 50 public sector groups. Several groups when contacted stated that the spring school break, Arctic Winter Games and fiscal year-end commitments were reasons for the slow response.

Ninety-four (94) questionnaires from 15 NWT communities were returned by fax, mail and e-mail.

About 78% of those responding are voluntary groups. The remaining responses are public sector organizations. Given the survey sample, this translates into a 17% rate among volunteer groups and an overall response rate of 9.5%.³ The survey garnered the input of a cross-section of groups in the voluntary sector however the number of responses from various types and sizes of groups is small. This limits the extent to which multi-variable analysis can be undertaken.

The quality of data rendered by the profile questionnaire is variable. Questions seeking qualitative information were well completed while those requiring quantitative data were not. For example, one third of respondents did not answer questions related to volunteer hours contributed by Aboriginal volunteers.

Several issues impact the response to and quality of survey data. These issues were identified through follow-up contact with approximately 150 groups surveyed.

- The questionnaire required too much data and would take too long to complete or consume too much of already very scarce volunteer or staff time. The questionnaire was complex and required some effort to retrieve and calculate numbers or percentages. Further, the cover letter may not have clearly articulated the benefits of the research particularly to individual groups or communities.
- Data are not kept on volunteer hours and/or the ethnicity of members or volunteers.
- The questionnaire was not relevant because the group involves no volunteers (e.g. government mandated committees or groups).

³ 73 of 420 voluntary groups and 94 of 987 total

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- Aboriginal volunteer participation is not a priority issue. This was indicated by responses to a question in the survey inviting groups to participate in an in-depth interview into Aboriginal participation in the NWT voluntary sector. Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents declined the offer. As one informant noted “*volunteering is not on the radar screen.*”

Survey data were compiled using SPSS statistical software. Due to the highly structured nature of the questionnaire, numeric codes were assigned. Following entry, data were cleaned to address inconsistencies or errors, and enable data weaknesses to be identified. Qualitative data collected through the survey were coded by key concept and themes such as understanding of volunteering, citizen engagement, fairness and equity, sector structure and organization, issues around money and paid-unpaid labour, and cultural issues.

The low response to the survey and variable data quality requires the research team to issue a caution when using most of these data.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews dealt with all research objectives with the exception of profiling the voluntary sector. Interviews with 38 key informants were conducted. Key informants were identified through the profile survey, recommendations from the sponsoring organizations and from Aboriginal volunteers recently profiled in the public media. All (92%) but three key informants are known publicly or self-identified as persons of Aboriginal ancestry. Due to the small numbers of non-Aboriginal participants, no analysis was done to examine differences in perspectives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants.

It was challenging to engage key informants. Several individuals were too busy, refused or avoided interviews possibly due to the lack of awareness of, priority to or perceived relevancy of volunteers or the voluntary sector. After three failed attempts, interviewees were substituted for others known to have experience with volunteering or known to have a history of working in Aboriginal communities and with Aboriginal volunteers.

Many Aboriginal people were somewhat surprised, indignant or confused that volunteering should be the subject of a study. Some interviewees had not thought about volunteering. Others referred to the high value accorded to helping and sharing in Aboriginal cultures, and were somewhat astounded that anyone would question whether Aboriginal people volunteer or voluntarily take on leadership roles. There is confusion about the word ‘volunteering’ as most often the idea of giving freely to help or serve is referred to as ‘helping out’ if it is named at all in Aboriginal communities. If volunteering is used it is understood as a formal way of helping out. The lack of connection between informal and formal ways of helping or serving also created some confusion for respondents. Given the two terms used for helping and serving, reporting relies heavily on direct key informant quotes as a way to avoid misrepresentation.

Interview notes were compiled by key theme including definitions, roles and responsibilities, positive or negative perceptions, enabling or discouraging practices and attributes, consequences, benefits, citizenship, human relationships and equality. Compilation of interview notes also distinguished where possible, issues associated with Aboriginal volunteering in general and volunteer leadership. Key informant interviews provide a range of perspectives on helping and

serving whether as individuals or a group, informally or formally. Perceptions offered in interviews were not analysed in terms of frequency or relative importance. The research report provides the full range of views on Aboriginal volunteering and frequently reports these as direct quotes from key informants.

Case Studies

The two case studies document best practices for engaging Aboriginal volunteers in meaningful ways. One case study is of the voluntary sector in the predominantly Aboriginal community of Fort McPherson, NWT. The second case study involves leaders of selected Yellowknife-based groups with territorial mandates.

The two case studies were selected based on:

- referrals made in key informant interviews (e.g. groups or individuals identified by others as implementing best practices for engaging Aboriginal people within the sector), and
- recommendations from the research sponsors.

The case studies endeavour to represent the diversity of volunteer experiences, circumstances of the voluntary sector in the NWT and the languages, cultures and lifestyles of Aboriginal northerners.

Using the key informant interview guide as a basis, specific discussion guides were developed to gather information for the two case studies. The Yellowknife case study was developed from three focus group discussions. The Fort McPherson case study involved both individual interviews and focus groups.

Interview/focus group information was supplemented with:

- relevant data drawn from published materials,
- information from the survey profile of voluntary groups in Fort McPherson and territorial groups based in Yellowknife, and
- information drawn from key informants interviews with individuals residing in Fort McPherson or affiliated with one of the five territorial groups.

The analysis of case study information replicated the format used to analyze key informant interview data.

In total 41 representatives of voluntary groups, volunteers and clients/members were involved in the two case studies. Of the 27 case study participants in Fort McPherson all (96%) but one is publicly known or self-identified as having Aboriginal ancestry. Among the 14 case study participants in Yellowknife four (29%) have Aboriginal ancestry. No analysis was done in either case study to examine differences in perspectives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants or to quantify or access the frequency or relative importance of perceptions about volunteering.

Role Model Storybook

Respondents to the profile survey were invited to identify Aboriginal volunteer role models. Several were recommended. A cross section (by age, gender, geographic location and volunteer endeavour) of these individuals were contacted to identify their interest in participating as one of eight role models to be profiled in a storybook. Personal interviews, written submission and photos provide the basis for the storybook.

While this research provides a wealth of information and new insights into Aboriginal volunteering, the project was likely too ambitious for a first of its kind in the NWT. Possibly richer qualitative information and stronger quantitative data would have been rendered from a narrower research study. Certainly public communication and greater promotion of volunteering, the research and the benefits of participation along with simplified research instruments would also have likely strengthened the research as well.

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