



Fewer Volunteers, Higher Stakes: Can Canada Rebuild a Culture of Giving?

Mary Barroll: Hi, I'm Mary Barroll. In this episode of CharityVillage Connects, we take a close look at a crisis in Canadian volunteerism, where a sharp decline in both participation rates and total hours has left the already depleted nonprofit sector struggling.

But first, here's a word from our partner.

Sponsor's Message: Today's podcast is brought to you by WUSC. For more than 50 years, WUSC has been working alongside communities around the world to drive positive education and economic outcomes for young people.

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SFX: Office sounds

Mary: Welcome to CharityVillage Connects. I'm your host Mary Barroll.

SFX: Hummingbird flying and tone

That's the sound of a Hummingbird pollinating our world and making it a better place.

Music

The Hummingbird is CharityVillage's logo because we strive – like the industrious Hummingbird – to make connections across the nonprofit sector and help make positive change.

We'll offer insight that will help you make sense of your life as a nonprofit professional, make connections to help navigate challenges and support your organization to deliver on its mission.

SFX: News buzz

News clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMrCmM25NVo>

Poll: Local organizations dealing with significant drop in volunteers, CJAD 800 Montreal, April 2026

“We have times of the year when we reach out and say, “Okay, we need some help here and there, but then don’t really consider how volunteering overall in general has been affected. And the numbers that come out in a new poll show, well, the situation is clearly not good.”

News clip

One billion volunteer hours lost in Canada: StatsCan, CityNews, April 2026

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWcX7EIUn8M>

“Canada has seen an overall decline in volunteer rates. In a 2025 data by Statistics Canada shows from 2018 to 2023, the number of volunteers dipped by around 8% across the country. In terms of hours, that’s falling from five billion to 4.1 billion hours. And it is a concerning trend from organizers and city leaders pointing to the pandemic shifting volunteer habits and affordability to be some of the main factors of the decline.”

Mary Barroll: At a time when Canada needs strong communities more than ever, the people and organizations that hold many of these communities together are under growing strain. With a trade war with the United States threatening our economy, challenges to our sovereignty, a rising cost of living, a growing demand for charitable services and an urgent need to strengthen unity at home, nonprofits are being asked to do more—while struggling to recruit and retain the volunteers they depend on to deliver on their missions.

But this is about more than a shortage of volunteers. In this episode, we speak with leading experts about the demographic, economic and social forces reshaping volunteerism in Canada—and why rebuilding our volunteer capacity matters to the country’s social and economic resilience. We explore how nonprofits can better engage younger Canadians, newcomers and older adults, what needs to change in the way organizations recruit and support volunteers, and whether Canada needs to think much bigger about how we invest in service and civic participation.

Because ultimately, the question isn’t simply how we find more volunteers. It’s how we rebuild a culture of participation, connection and giving—and strengthen the sense of shared purpose and community Canada may need now more than ever.

Sara Lyons: It’s frankly very alarming. What we’re seeing is a fairly precipitous drop in two aspects of volunteerism. The first one being the percentage of Canadians that volunteer and the second one is the number of hours they volunteer. So we’re really seeing a compounded or double crisis.

Tara McWhinney: When we surveyed charities, 41% in 2026 and 45% in 2025 did not

have enough volunteers. But this number rises closer to 50% if we exclude charities who don't work with volunteers. So, when charities don't have enough volunteers, the additional pressure falls on the people who remain, which can further contribute to staff burnout and turnover.

Adam Janes: Volunteering in Canada is hugely important. And you look at the numbers of the Stats Can and trying to conceptualize what 2.1 billion hours looks like, volunteering across Canada is actually larger than the entire workforce of the Eastern foremost provinces. It's huge. And then you have this little group of professionals who are handling a lot of how to make that better. So, we look at that and we go, okay, wow, where do we start?

Alyssa Brierley: Retired Canadians do contribute more volunteer hours than any other group, but participation among older adults, in formal volunteering opportunities, at least, has dropped over the past decade. Older adults are working longer than previous generations. Right now, we have the largest workforce of adults over the age of 65, in history. And this is a result of some older adults choosing to work longer, while some older adults need to work longer because they can't afford to retire.

Olga Stachova: Volunteering is often promoted as the first step to securing jobs. But there are limitations of what newcomers can actually gain by volunteering, if they expect that the volunteering opportunity will lead to a job. I think the main and a very real barrier is the need to earn income. Finding a job is the first priority newcomers have, when they arrive. And often, unfortunately, it is a survival job, just to be able to pay bills.

Michael Burns: The idea is that we're bringing young people from various backgrounds, from social economic classes, from different parts of the country, to work and learn from each other. We want to see teams of young people from Alberta working with young people from Quebec, people from the territories and elsewhere coming together, at a time in their lives where most would not have had that experience, whether they're doing their work locally or outside of their local communities or their provinces.

SFX: News buzz

News clip

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.7053183>

Some community associations struggling due to low memberships and volunteers, CBC, Jan 2026

"At the Sandstone McEwen Community Association, a small group of volunteers is keeping things going. But the president says they're not getting any younger and there aren't enough new people stepping up. I don't know if this will go by way of the Dodo, you know, after me. If the City of Calgary doesn't have to come up with another way to manage this, I simply don't know, because volunteering hours are down, right across the board, we all know it."

Mary Barroll: Canada's nonprofit sector is facing a severe volunteer challenge at a critical moment when social needs are rising. The crisis in Canadian volunteerism is a compounded one, where a sharp decline in both participation rates and total hours is impacting the charitable sector, at a time when it is already struggling with staff burnout and funding and service cuts. Many factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have played a role in the declining numbers of volunteers. Cost-of-living pressures have also squeezed the capacity of Canadians to give back and significant technological changes have fundamentally changed the way we connect with each other. But it's also important to note that this decline in volunteers was already in progress, pre-pandemic.

Research undertaken by Charity Insights Canada Project or CICP finds that currently, half of the Canadian charities working with volunteers do not have enough volunteers to meet their needs. A feminist political economist whose research examines gender, unpaid labor, and nonprofit service delivery in Canada, Dr. Tara McWhinney is currently a postdoctoral fellow with Charity Insights Canada Project. She spells out what the declining numbers in volunteerism means for the organizations and communities that depend on them.

Tara McWhinney: When we surveyed charities, 41% in 2026 and 45% in 2025 did not have enough volunteers. But this number rises closer to 50% if we exclude charities who don't work with volunteers. But what does that "not enough" mean operationally? Well, actually, in both surveys, we asked those charities, the ones that didn't have sufficient volunteers, what effects that had on their operations. The most common one was the effect on operations, an increased workload for staff and existing volunteers. So, when charities don't have enough volunteers, the additional pressure falls on the people who remain, which can further contribute to staff burnout and turnover.

And more than half of the charities reported these challenges, in both years of the survey. This finding is particularly important, if we view it alongside other trends that we're seeing in our data, including challenges with paid staff turnover that have been connected to staff being overwhelmed or burnt out.

Mary Barroll: The impact of the volunteer shortage goes well beyond simply having fewer people available to help. For organizations already stretched by rising demand and limited resources, it can affect the wellbeing of their teams and leave little capacity to innovate or respond to emerging needs. More concerning still, some organizations are struggling to maintain the programs and services they already provide. Tara McWhinney explains what the research is showing.

Tara McWhinney: We also asked charities, every year, about any changes to mental health challenges among both staff and volunteers. And overwhelmingly, the majority state that there's been some measure of increase of mental health challenges. So, that one is quite significant. The next most common impact that the volunteer shortage has on operations is the ability to innovate or to take on new projects. So, this really speaks

to an organization's capacity for growth and innovation. Charities are facing a rising demand for services. And so, with this rise in demand for services, they may recognize emerging community needs or opportunities for more programs. But what we're seeing is that a volunteer shortage might hinder their ability or their capacity to respond to those emerging needs. And then the last one that came up, in both years, was that charities are also telling us that volunteer shortages affect their delivery of current services and programs and said they were unable to fully meet community needs because of volunteer shortage.

Music

Mary Barroll: Ultimately, when charities face these shortages there are ripple effects across their operational capacity, their sustainability, and their ability to fulfill their mission and serve their community. According to Tara McWhinney, even those charities whose volunteer numbers have increased still report having insufficient volunteer support. Volunteer numbers decreased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic but this global health crisis actually only exacerbated structural trends already underway. And even as people return to in-person volunteering, post-pandemic, other factors play into the volunteer shortage. A headcount of volunteers alone is an incomplete measure of an organization's capacity. Tara McWhinney explains why.

Tara McWhinney: What we found, through an analysis, was that many of the charities that had been increasing their numbers of volunteers still did not have the support they needed. So, I want to link this to another survey we did in 2024. Because in 2024, CICP asked about the loss of volunteers since the pandemic, and 61% of charities indicated that their number of volunteers had decreased over that time. And of those charities, 65% had still not returned to pre-pandemic volunteer numbers.

But headcount is an incomplete measure of capacity. That capacity also depends on having the right volunteers with the right skills, available at the right times, and also whether the organization has the resources to recruit, train, coordinate, and retain them. We heard repeatedly that some charities have enough volunteers for one-time events or short-term roles, but they're really struggling to find volunteers for leadership positions, board roles, fundraising, any specialized technical work, and for long term commitments. And we actually heard from a few that they had people interested in volunteering but lacked the staff capacity to manage them effectively. So, when we talk about volunteer shortages, we're not always talking about the total number of volunteers. We're talking about the gaps in skills, availability, reliability, or organizational infrastructure to manage them. That's why volunteer headcount alone can be a misleading measure of whether a charity has the volunteer support it needs to serve its community.

Mary Barroll: The volunteer shortage isn't simply about headcount. It's also about whether organizations have the right volunteers, with the right skills and availability—and the capacity to support them. But the national numbers themselves are troubling. Statistics Canada found that between 2018 and 2023, the formal volunteering rate fell

from 41% to 32%, while the average number of hours contributed by volunteers dropped from 131 to 112 hours a year.

Sara Lyons is Chief Strategy and Program Officer at Volunteer Canada and has spent more than two decades working across Canada's nonprofit and philanthropic sector. Her experience includes senior leadership roles with Community Foundations of Canada, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Equality Fund, working across sectors to address some of the complex challenges facing Canadian communities.

I asked Sara Lyons what these numbers tell us about the state of volunteerism in Canada.

Sara Lyons: Those statistics are accurate and it's frankly very alarming. What we're seeing is a fairly precipitous drop in two aspects of volunteerism. The first one being the percentage of Canadians that volunteer and the second one is the number of hours that they volunteer. So, we're really seeing a compounded or double crisis.

And it really has effects, in a few ways. At Volunteer Canada, we look at volunteerism as having really three layers of impact. The first one is its positive impact on individuals, in terms of their participation, their connectivity, their health, both physical and mental. The second one is that organizations and those can be everything from community level service organizations to arts festivals, to sports leagues, to hospitals, count on volunteers, in order to deliver the level and scale of services. So, that's an issue. And the third one is maybe a bit more ethereal, but I think really relevant to today's conversations, which is that volunteerism is a type of civic participation. It's a type of belonging, in our communities. And so these drops started before the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19, for fairly obvious reasons, has contributed to these declines. We actually saw these trends before COVID, and now we see these trends continuing, now that everything is still open.

Mary Barroll: Tara McWhinney provides some of the context for the decline in volunteering during the pandemic and points to one significant group of people who are now volunteering less.

Tara McWhinney: We know the sharp decline in volunteer numbers during COVID. There were lots of reasons: public health restrictions, health concerns, and service interruptions, and those were temporary. Now, since then, some charities have rebuilt their volunteered base, but at the same time, there are others that still have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. We know from the national research, done by Statistics Canada on volunteer participation rates, that there's been a steady decline in numbers of Canadians who volunteer. So, with the 2023 survey on volunteering and giving, there was a drop between 2013 and 2018, but then a more significant one from 2018 to 2023, so over the pandemic, with women actually showing more of a decline in participation than men, since 2018. So, this is a trend of a general decline in volunteer participation that began before COVID, but has since been intensified because of the pandemic, especially for women, who we know were carrying the bulk of care giving responsibilities

during the pandemic.

Music

Mary Barroll: In addition to a decline in women volunteers, Sara Lyons points out that youth and people with less formal education are also volunteering less today than in the past.

Sara Lyons: Another very important statistic is that young adults are also seeing very steep declines. And by young adults, I mean adults 24 to 35. So, this is very alarming for a couple of reasons. This is a group of folks who have, you know, lived a fairly tumultuous last five or 10 years. We've had a lot of economic uncertainty. We, of course, had the pandemic during key late teenage and early adult experiences for them. But they're also the next generation of volunteers. And so, because volunteering tends to be something you get engaged in and stay engaged in, throughout your lifetime, declines in youth participation are a little bit of a bellwether for the future.

Another group we saw declining was lower education groups. So, that would be people with high school or less. And that's concerning because those are people who probably could see a lot of benefit from volunteerism, in terms of their connection to community, their sense of participation in community, their mental health. But there's some signals there around their capacity, under today's economic times, to participate.

SFX: Sounds of coins dropping

Mary Barroll: Sara Lyons makes it clear that the cost of living is a significant reason why we are seeing less volunteering from these particular groups.

Sara Lyons: Volunteer Canada, has been out doing research and consultation for the last two years in rooms with both volunteers, volunteer managers, organizational leaders. We also have been doing a really deep dive into the existing research and statistics, mostly from the Government of Canada.

Some of the theories that we've been hearing are firstly, that people are very crunched with the cost of living. People are busy. People are often working more than ever. They might have more than one job. They're dealing with traffic and distances to get places they're going. They may be caring for aging parents, etc. And so, people are really feeling strained, in terms of their time and their money.

Mary Barroll: The increasingly disconnected nature of our world may point to something bigger. As more of our daily lives have moved online, the ways we meet people and build relationships have changed too. And while traditional "in person" volunteering may not always fit easily into people's lives anymore, the desire for connection and a sense of belonging hasn't disappeared. In fact, it may be more important than ever.

Sara Lyons: My sense is that we're in a sort of interesting moment around community and connection to community. Something we heard in our consultations is that people are actually really looking for connection to community, to meet new people, to feel part of something, but they're uncertain about how to do that and what that will feel like. And so, there's a bit of a disconnect there.

SFX: News buzz

News clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMrCmM25NV0>

Poll: Local organizations dealing with significant drop in volunteers, CJAD 800 Montreal, April 2026

“Right now we have some problems to get a lot of people doing volunteering and it's not the same way it was before. We are searching for people over 50 years old to do it and they are not there anymore, the way they used to be before. So, that's where we are working on to try to find.”

Mary Barroll: As Canada looks to rebuild its volunteer capacity, three populations could be particularly important to its future: older Canadians, newcomers to Canada and young people. Each presents different opportunities—and different challenges—for organizations looking to engage volunteers.

Canada's ageing population adds a particular urgency to that conversation. Older Canadians have long been an important part of our volunteer base, contributing significant time, skills, experience and community knowledge. As longtime volunteers age out of their roles, nonprofits risk losing an enormously valuable source of support. Yet Canadians are also living longer, and many older adults are looking for meaningful ways to remain active, connected and engaged in their communities.

Alyssa Brierley is a lawyer and public policy professional with the National Institute on Ageing. With more than a decade of experience spanning public policy, law, advocacy and nonprofit leadership, she brings a valuable perspective to how Canada can better engage older adults—and what volunteering itself can contribute to healthy ageing.

Alyssa Brierley: First and foremost, social connection, in general, is really important for healthy aging. Meaningful relationships help older adults maintain their independence, stay engaged in their communities, and build resilience through life's transitions. Meaningful relationships also support physical and mental well-being, provide a sense of purpose, belonging, and emotional support.

And these benefits aren't just nice to have. They're essential for helping people age with dignity and confidence. And when those connections are missing, the consequences can be significant. Volunteering is a very significant source of those connections and those relationships. So, it is a very important element to helping people stay connected to their

communities, also staying engaged and purposeful as they age. That having been said, it's also somewhat dependent on older adults being reachable, in the first place, and for volunteering to be accessible. So, if an older adult is isolated or in poor health or struggling financially, those are significant barriers that may prevent them from being able to volunteer, in the first place.

Mary Barroll: Alyssa Brierly lays out what current research shows about the decline in volunteering by seniors. One significant factor is that older Canadians are retiring later than they used to.

Alyssa Brierley: Retired Canadians do contribute more volunteer hours than any other group, but participation among older adults has dropped over the past decade. But it's also important to keep in mind that older adults are not a homogenous group, and people's experience in retirement is closely related to their health, as well as their income. Older adults are working longer than previous generations. Right now, we have the largest workforce of adults over the age of 65, in history. And this is a result of some older adults choosing to work longer, while some older adults need to work longer because they can't afford to retire.

At the National Institute on Ageing, we do an annual survey of 6,000 older Canadians, from coast to coast to coast. It's called the Ageing in Canada survey. And our 2025 survey revealed a drop in the percentage of older adults who report that they can afford to retire from 35 to 29%. And that was just in one year. So, the people who are working may feel socially connected from their work and they don't need to seek out opportunities to do that elsewhere. They also might have less time available to volunteer. In addition, many older adults are also managing care giving responsibilities, which could take time away from other activities like volunteering.

Mary Barroll: As seniors find less time or energy to volunteer, they may also be missing out on some of the social connections these activities have historically created for them. Alyssa Brierly points out that the data also shows a significant increase in social isolation.

Alyssa Brierley: Many older Canadians are experiencing social isolation and loneliness. Our 2025 Aging in Canada survey found that 43% of older adults are at risk of or are actually experiencing social isolation, and 57% report experiencing loneliness. The reason why this is a health problem is that social isolation and loneliness are linked to higher rates of chronic disease, even premature mortality. Social participation is declining at the same time. Fewer older Canadians are engaged in the groups, activities, and networks that foster that really important connection and sense of belonging.

We know that staying socially active can combat the health impacts that are associated with social isolation and loneliness. And we know also that staying mentally and socially active can have positive effects on our brain health, in particular. Volunteering combines several things that are associated with healthy brain aging, at the same time: Social connection, again, cognitive stimulation, as well as physical activity, learning, a routine

that people can get into and a sense of purpose.

Volunteering is a way to tackle this. It enables that social participation. It can help combat isolation and loneliness by bringing people together. It brings people together in regular contact. It provides a sense of belonging. It gives people a role within a community and a reason to leave the house and to stay engaged. But again, that that having been said, the people who are experiencing social isolation and therefore might benefit the most from the social aspects of volunteering may also have the weakest networks through which that they would hear about these kinds of opportunities, given their limited number of social connections.

Music

Mary Barroll: Alyssa Brierly explains that the biggest barriers preventing older Canadians from volunteering more are economic, health-related or connected to isolation or a lack of time.

Alyssa Brierley: Our annual Ageing in Canada survey does ask older adults, who report that they don't participate in social activities as much as they would like, what the reasons are for that. It was because of a lack of funds or because activities cost more than they can afford. It was due to health conditions that they were experiencing. It was because they were too busy or had other responsibilities. So, when we think about volunteering, those types of barriers need to be addressed, in order to encourage older adults to look at volunteerism as beneficial to their social engagement and well-being.

Expenses can certainly be a barrier, particularly costs associated with transportation. Organizations can and should look at that. But there's a number of different ways to think about accessibility. Not just transportation, but also physical accessibility, digital access, language and cultural inclusion, programs designed to engage volunteers should be designed to welcome a broad range of older adults, not only those who are healthy, financially secure, highly educated, or already connected. I think the goal here should really be to make volunteering easier for people to enter, so low barrier, easier to sustain and just generally more responsive to the realities of ageing today.

Mary Barroll: Senior volunteers can bring tremendous professional expertise and life experience to an organization. Alyssa Brierly says nonprofits looking to recruit senior volunteers, should also consider designing opportunities that make better use of what older adults have to offer, as well as considering whether their recruiting and screening strategies embody ageist assumptions.

Alyssa Brierley: For example, assuming an older adult does not want a leadership role, won't be comfortable with technology, or can't learn something new. It's really important to tackle against these ageist assumptions, by offering a wide range of opportunities to older adults that they can choose from. Also just talking to them and understanding what they want to do, as you would anybody else, understand what their interests are, what

their skills and experience and expertise is, without making assumptions.

Many older adults bring decades of professional experience and community knowledge and lived experience. They might want a mentor, they might want to advise or lead on a project, solve a problem, or contribute a specific skill. And I think, like all volunteers, they want to know that their contribution matters. Flexibility also matters a lot. Older adults may be working, traveling, care giving, managing changes in their health and energy. So, organizations can be responsive to all of that, by offering different levels of commitment, remote or hybrid participation, and the opportunity to work on shorter term projects, for example, for people that allow them to increase or decrease their involvement, over time. Ultimately the strongest volunteer relationships are reciprocal and the organization benefits from someone's knowledge and expertise, while the volunteer gains purpose and connection and the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way, according to their interests and skills.

SFX: New buzz

Media clip

<https://www.facebook.com/reel/1354852420189911>

“Volunteering in Canada is not only about giving time. It can build local experience, new relationships, more confidence. A stronger sense of where you fit. Sometimes the opportunities that shape your future start before the paycheck does. CanadianVisa helps people look at Canada as a place to grow, not just arrive. Share this with someone preparing for Canada.”

Media clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg4la5IKpjc>

CANADIAN IMMIGRATION: Why volunteering is the key to networking in Canada, Canadian Dream Podcast, Sept 2025

“So, when I came to Canada, obviously I didn’t know anybody, so what I did, I started volunteering. So, that is the one way where you will open up a lot of venues for yourself.”

News clip

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.6949415>

Helping immigrant women get their feet in the door, CBC News, October 2025

“Grow Women Leaders, we are an agency that is dedicated to increasing the participation of women in the workforce. Though we work with all women, there is more focus on immigrants and minority women. And of course, when we look at these immigrant women, we see that a lot of them are facing difficulties, not being able to transfer the experience that they have from back home.”

Mary Barroll: Newcomers to Canada represent another important opportunity for the

volunteer sector, bringing skills, professional experience and perspectives that can enrich nonprofit organizations and the communities they serve. But volunteering can also play an important role for newcomers themselves—as a way to build connections, gain experience in a new country and become part of their communities.

Olga Stachova is CEO of MOSAIC, one of British Columbia's largest immigrant-serving organizations, serving more than 45,000 people each year. For newcomers, volunteering can be about much more than giving time. It can provide a way into a new community—helping people understand and navigate unfamiliar systems, build relationships and establish a sense of belonging.

Olga Stachova: Volunteering is a great way to establish that you are able to effectively work and operate in Canadian environment. It is a way to build your professional networks, as those are really crucial in your ability to land a meaningful job. It is also a way to build a pool of potential references, whether it is for the future job or for your landlords, if you're looking to rent. It is also about understanding the systems and structures in Canada that may be very different than in their home countries. But it's also about being able to give back to the country that welcomed them, and that is such a strong motivator. And being able to give back, especially in those volunteer leadership positions like boards of directors and advisory committees and being recognized for the skills and experience that newcomers actually bring is such a strong driver in building the sense of belonging, in this new country that newcomers call home now.

Mary Barroll: While newcomers may choose to volunteering in order to combat isolation, build networks or show gratitude to their new country, there's a tension in encouraging newcomers to volunteer as a pathway to employment. If volunteering is presented as a way to acquire "Canadian experience," what does that say about the professional experience and expertise they already bring with them? Olga Stachova says the job market emphasis on Canadian work experience systematically undervalues their talent and skills learned internationally.

Olga Stachova: I really believe that framing volunteering, as a way of gaining Canadian work experience, is problematic. It absolutely undervalues not only the experience, the expertise that newcomer brings, but also the soft skills that the newcomers have demonstrated. When you look at the soft skills that employers demand these days, a lot of it is around adaptability, about problem solving. Well, if you move half the world away and manage to build a life in a new country and in the language that you haven't quite mastered, that shows resilience, that shows ability to adapt and problem solve. And while these are highly sought after soft skills, somehow the proven track record of establishing yourself in a new country is not seen as sufficient proof. And the other view that I find a bit problematic is our fascination with Canadian work experience. The world we live in and the work we do is increasingly global. Canada is not a big enough market for businesses to thrive. Most of them are trying to reach foreign markets. So, shouldn't we be looking for a global work experience rather than our insisting on the experience in our small Canadian sandbox?

Mary Barroll: Though volunteering can support a newcomer's employment journey, its potential to do so often remains limited because the opportunities available may bear little relationship to their skills—or to the work they hope to pursue in Canada.

Olga Stachova: Volunteering is often promoted as the first step to securing jobs. But there are limitations of what newcomers can actually gain by volunteering, if they expect that the volunteering opportunity will lead to a job. Just look at the volunteering opportunities that are available in the not-for-profit sector. We need a lot of people to support the various events we run, who will help with registration, event setup. Managing flows of people, supporting activities with our clients. And those are all very valuable volunteering opportunities if you're looking to give back. But we see immigrant professionals who are usually looking for opportunities that lead to jobs in their field of expertise. So, we see immigrants who are HR, IT, finance professionals, who are data analysts, economists, and they're looking for volunteering opportunities in the field that can help them get that job. But these are not generally the volunteering opportunities that exist in our sector.

Mary Barroll: Even when the motivation to volunteer is there, finding the right opportunity isn't always easy. And for newcomers already navigating the financial and practical demands of establishing a new life in Canada, there can be other significant barriers to getting involved.

Olga Stachova: I think the main and a very real barrier is the need to earn income. And we need to remember that newcomers come to this country without the social and professional networks and the safety nets that locals have. Finding a job is the first priority newcomers have when they arrive. And often, unfortunately, it is a survival job, just to be able to pay bills. And it's truly heartbreaking when we see immigrant professionals dropping out of our training and upskilling programs because they really don't have the luxury to wait for the job in their field, because they need to support their families immediately. So, it might not be realistic to expect that they will be able to volunteer their time, when they have real financial needs.

Mary Barroll: Olga Stachova explains that there are also unrecognized and more subtle barriers to recruiting new immigrants to volunteer positions, such as language expectations, credential requirements, or even a newcomers' uncertainty about whether their contribution will be welcomed.

Olga Stachova: What I heard from many of our clients is that they are really unsure if certain opportunities would be open to them. When we reached out to the volunteers, to newcomers, who indicated they are interested in these type of opportunities, a majority of them stated they were unsure if they would be welcome. They might think, Oh, I'm just a temporary resident. I'm sure this is not for me. Or I'm just a permanent resident. I'm sure it's only for citizens. So, there's a lot of assumptions, also on the newcomer side. So, it's important for organizations looking for a diverse pool of volunteers to explicitly state so.

State that the type of lived experience that you would like to see. And explicitly state that you are looking for people with lived experience and immigrants, refugees, or temporary residents. That will take the guesswork out of the equation. But the other piece is language. And I would like to ask everyone to consider what language proficiency is actually required for a particular role. Some immigrants are very proficient in English, many are not. So, as you look at volunteer opportunity, assess the level of proficiency you actually need. Because when you are directing parking to an event, is different when you expect someone to sit and debate in a boardroom. So, be realistic and be explicit about the level of proficiency you actually need for that particular volunteer role.

Mary Barroll: Making it clear that newcomers are welcome is a vital first step. But truly engaging them also means recognizing that there is no single newcomer experience—it's also important to understand what each person hopes to gain from volunteering.

Olga Stachova: It's really important to take time to understand the motivation for someone who is seeking volunteering opportunities. Both volunteers and organizations have the best experience, if their expectations align. So, when you work with a volunteer, is it that the newcomer is looking for a job? And if that's the case, does the volunteer role support that goal? Or is there anything your organization can do to augment that volunteering role, to help newcomers meet their goal?

Or, often it's really about giving back, and in which case the volunteers may be open to more hours, and they really could serve in roles like mentors to others. And just understand that every immigration journey is different. And it's important to make sure that that we don't make assumptions, but we really try to understand the individual journey and motivations and this is when volunteering opportunity you provide can have real impact.

Mary Barroll: That kind of individual understanding can make the difference between simply filling a volunteer role and creating an experience that is genuinely valuable—for both the volunteer and the organization. But creating that sense of belonging requires more than good intentions. Sometimes the very practices organizations take for granted can send an unintended message about who belongs, whose skills are valued, and who gets the opportunity to contribute.

Olga Stachova: This could include assuming that language barriers reflect lack of skills or knowledge, and assigning only very basic tasks, without really considering a person's professional experience, or failing to provide clear role expectations or adequate training for the role. Organizations can also unintentionally exclude newcomers by relying on recruitment through informal social networks because newcomers are often excluded from those. Barriers can also occur when scheduling activities, not considering cultural or family obligations, or not actually creating opportunities for volunteers to share their perspective and their feedback. But the one thing that also is important is the representation in leadership. So, if newcomers don't see the newcomer population represented in the leadership of the organization that can also contribute to feeling of

isolation, undervaluation, or even question whether they would be welcome in that environment.

Mary Barroll: Ultimately, meaningful inclusion is also about who gets to contribute ideas, shape decisions and lead. Olga Stachova says nonprofits should look beyond seeing newcomers primarily as people who need support—and recognize the expertise and leadership they already bring.

Olga Stachova: There's a lot of statistical data on how well educated immigrants are and how much expertise they bring. We all know that our immigration system gives preference to those with higher level of education, strong work experience. But in real life, really the best way to adjust the lens is through actually getting to know newcomers. And that will also inform the type of volunteer opportunities you open for them. Consider opening your board positions to newcomers. Many of them have governance experience from their home countries and could be a real asset to your organization. And having newcomers again in leadership positions will give a very clear signal that you have a strength based view of immigrants rather than viewing them as vulnerable populations that relies on supports.

SFX: News buzz

News clip

One billion volunteer hours lost in Canada: StatsCan, CityNews, April 2026

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWcX7EIUn8M>

“Gen Z, Alpha Gen, they want to volunteer differently, very differently. They don't really care about organizations in the way that maybe their parents and grandparents did and they don't have that affinity to an organization. They care about a cause. They really deeply care about that. But they want to get in and get out.”

News clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkWk1RoJUH0>

Gen Z and the changing face of volunteering in Canada, CBC News Manitoba, Dec 2025

“What motivates you to volunteer? I would say it's also the generosity, it's also good for work experience, though. I mean, that's a valid thing, right? Yes. Absolutely, I think that's why you're seeing a decline because people are volunteering more out of necessity than out of the want to be kind, out of the want to create good in the world. Do you think that's a generational thing? I absolutely do. I think people want to make an impact.”

Music

Mary Barroll: If there's one thing the evidence makes clear, it's that Canada's volunteer challenge won't be solved by simply trying harder to recruit people into a model that no longer fits the way many Canadians live. The volunteers are changing. Their lives are

changing. And what they expect from volunteering is changing too. As Tara McWhinney explains, the challenge isn't to rebuild the volunteer workforce Canada had before the pandemic. It's to build one for the Canada we have now.

Tara McWhinney: We have some charities reporting an aging volunteer pool, difficulty recruiting younger volunteers, and growing challenges, filling leadership or specialized roles. Some also describe volunteers as being less interested in long term commitments and more interested in flexible, online, short term, or project-based opportunities. So, while the pandemic may have accelerated these trends, many charities believe they are dealing with broader changes in volunteer behavior and demographics. The challenge today is not simply rebuilding the volunteer workforce that existed before COVID, but it's adapting to a volunteer landscape that might be fundamentally different from the ones that charities relied on in the past.

Mary Barroll: And that transformation may have to start with something even more fundamental: how we think—and talk—about volunteering itself. The traditional message has largely been about giving back. But for a new generation of volunteers, contribution and personal value don't have to be competing ideas. Sara Lyons says it may be time for a new value proposition—one that recognizes both what volunteers give and what they gain in return.

Sara Lyons: Other areas that have emerged through the research and consultation, one is a bit of a reframing around the narrative of volunteerism. Many people said this to us, particularly younger people, in our consultations and research, that, in the words that we tend to use around volunteerism, which tend to be highly focused on transaction and giving your time or doing good, we haven't necessarily captured the kinds of frameworks or narratives that align best with what people are seeking right now.

Of course, people want to contribute to community and be generous and help others but they're also very conscious it's a highly competitive world of, well, what skills are they learning? What leadership aptitudes are they developing? What experiences are they accumulating? And so, I think it's perfectly fine to have a conversation about reframing the way we talk about volunteerism as a giving and a getting. That's just something that warrants further conversation. And that applies to young people, to newcomers, etc.

Mary Barroll: But changing the way we talk about volunteering is only part of the solution. If the structures themselves were built for a different era, organizations may need to question some long-standing assumptions about what a volunteer role should look like in the first place. Sara Lyons says this requires more than simply improving recruitment or onboarding.

Sara Lyons: A lot of the structures around volunteerism, at the organizational level, the way we think about it, the way we tend to organize it, perhaps created in the fifties or sixties. And our society is just so different now. Who are we? How do we spend our time? We all have these, sort of, phone computers in our pockets. A lot of us have a

strong preference for doing things in a punctual rather than in regular way. We want to book things online or learn about things online, as opposed to going somewhere. I think, probably the answer for a lot of organizations isn't going to be a snappier poster or a better one hour onboarding module. It's probably going to be to do some deeper thinking about how people are able and want to give their time and what they're looking to get from it.

Mary Barroll: Younger volunteers offer a good example of what that rethink could look like. The issue isn't necessarily that young Canadians don't want to volunteer. Research suggests many of them do—but they may be less interested in committing to one organization or a traditional, ongoing role. Tara McWhinney says nonprofits may have more success if they meet young people where they are, creating easier ways to get involved initially and pathways to deeper engagement over time.

Tara McWhinney: CICP has definitely heard from a few charities that there's a lack of interest or willingness to commit to volunteer roles, often, when they're discussing trying to attract younger generations. And we know that the research is showing that youth have high rates of volunteer engagement, but the kind of volunteering youth are doing is to quote the Canadian Knowledge Hub for Giving and Volunteering, it's "more episodic, more informal, and more likely to be connected to a specific event or cause than to a sustained relationship." And these findings are definitely reflected in the comments that we see from CICP panelists.

There is some data that came out on youth and volunteering and there were some really great strategies. It's on the Canadian Knowledge Hub for Giving and Volunteering. That youth may also find that it is important to start off the training without having a high barrier to starting off. So, if we're looking at youth and those that are just getting engaged, a really long training program may not be the way to start. So, to think about how you're onboarding volunteers, especially newer volunteers. And then, they're already trying to get those more flexible, short-term commitments. So, for some of the longer, the ones that you need more commitment, that might be starting off volunteers in one position and really thinking about that how are they moving, how can we retain them and then slowly move them into other roles within the organization, for those that might have the capacity.

I think it's really tough though that with the cost of living, for the things we don't control. So, I think there's a real challenge there for sure but reading up on some of the research about the younger volunteers, because we did hear a lot of discussion about how they are finding that they are interacting when they're volunteering is different.

Mary Barroll: Sara Lyons highlights several emerging approaches to engaging younger volunteers. She points to the value of meaningful incentives, group-based volunteering, and connecting volunteerism to broader issues such as civic and climate resilience.

Sara Lyons: Some of the innovations that we heard about, in our consultations, are that

rewards, so, things like coffee mugs and T-shirts and stuff are more important than ever. Just accepting that, investing in it, doing a good job of it. I remember after a consultation we did in Winnipeg, one day, somebody came up to me after and said, we've started structuring our volunteer opportunities for young people, for groups. So our invitation to them is not for them to come themselves and help us out with something. We specifically say, come with two friends. And we've structured the role for more than one person, which, I think, probably reflects the way young people want to do things now. I think there's opportunities around connecting to some of our bigger themes, to do with civic resilience or climate resilience. Those things have momentum. You know, if you can connect to those things, even in a referral way, I think that's an opportunity. And then, we really need that broader infusion of enthusiasm.

SFX buzz

Media clip

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jT1yCGSJQZ4&t=371s>
Volunteer Leadership: Transforming Nonprofits

“OK, you do-gooders, come on down! How do we think about being strategic? And being a strategic volunteer manager?”

Music

Mary Barroll: In order for charities to be able to adapt to the changing volunteer landscape, they need resources and Sara Lyon suggests it is high time we acknowledge that volunteer centers and volunteer coordinators are social infrastructures that are as vital and necessary as all the other types of national infrastructures. In this light, Volunteer Canada has launched the National Volunteer Action Strategy, a major initiative to modernize, revitalize, and future-proof volunteerism across the country. Through research, widespread sectoral consultations and government alignment, the strategy is designed to combat the nationwide volunteering crisis.

Sara Lyons: We're about two years into it now. And it's a very comprehensive effort to really understand what is happening out there, what are its impacts, what innovations are organizations already trying, what will it take to reverse these trends and start the work of creating the collaborations and investment frameworks to reverse these trends. So, trying to understand some of the practices that organizations or volunteer centers, which are local, sort of, matchmaking organizations between volunteers and organizations, what the current best practices are, where those organizations may require some modernization or further investment, in their scale.

Volunteer centers are community level organizations that do a variety of things, but one of their principal purposes is matchmaking between potential volunteers and volunteer opportunities. And except in Quebec, which is where I live, they don't have any core government funding. And so, we're trying to make the case that these organizations are

very enabling of the whole not-for-profit sector and that they're, kind of, worthy of ongoing investment by governments.

Mary Barroll: Other research demonstrates that paid volunteer coordinators are the single most critical factor in successful volunteer programs, yet these were the first positions facing layoffs during the pandemic.

Sara Lyons: Volunteer Toronto has done some really interesting research that shows that one of the most important factors in whether organizations are successful at attracting and retaining volunteers is the presence of a paid volunteer coordinator or manager role.

Those are roles that were very common, before the pandemic. They were one of the first roles to get cut, for, kind of, obvious reasons during the pandemic. If you don't have anybody coming in or doing visits, hard to keep a person on staff to coordinate that work. But that role hasn't really returned robustly since the pandemic. And so, there's research to show that that's actually one of the most important factors in the ask being made, in the role being packaged up, in a way that's appealing, in people being welcomed and appreciated, etc.

Music

Mary Barroll: The research points to an important part of rebuilding Canada's volunteer capacity: nonprofits need to invest not only in volunteers, but in the people responsible for engaging and supporting them. Yet volunteer management is still sometimes treated as an administrative task that can simply be added to someone's existing workload. Adam Janes is a Certified Volunteer Administrator and President of Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada, the national association for professionals working in volunteer engagement. He's also part of the team leading volunteering at the Ottawa Food Bank. Adam explains why effective volunteer engagement requires dedicated expertise—and why the role is about much more than recruiting volunteers and filling shifts. It's about building the conditions in which volunteering can thrive.

Adam Janes: Looking at the not-for-profit, what the charitable sector looks like in Canada, a lot of organizations are small so, they either have one staff or no staff and they're volunteer-driven so volunteering is an extremely important part of the DNA, in the sector. But as organizations grow, sometimes people don't invest in that ecosystem of volunteering, along with it. And so there's these all-run volunteer organizations that are doing amazing things and doing the pull-up-your-bootstraps-work of nothing, all the way to some organizations who get the money and the staff and then forget the power of volunteering that can really help expand their community. And that word really ties into what I believe a volunteer engagement professional does is they shape the community. They really work at the systems, the ecosystem, and all the things surrounding volunteering so that an organization not only gets volunteers, gets hours, gets help, but develops a strong community of volunteering as part of who they are as an organization.

And I think that's a really key piece.

Mary Barroll: Building that kind of volunteer community doesn't happen by accident—and it's difficult to achieve when volunteer engagement is treated as something that can simply be managed “off the side of someone's desk.” It requires dedicated time, expertise and investment, not just in individual volunteers, but in the environment that allows them to thrive.

Adam Janes: Yes, you can go recruit volunteers on the side of your desk, but can you build a community of volunteering that thrives on the side of your desk? Not without significant intention, time and energy built into it. So, it is a really key difference. Just like a farmer knows you have to invest in the soil and the plants to grow healthy crops, a volunteer engagement professional knows you have to really invest in the ecosystem, as well as the volunteer themselves, to make sure that you have a thriving community that will help build your organization capacity.

Mary Barroll: That work draws on a surprisingly broad range of skills—from recruitment and relationship building to communications, training, risk management, program design and organizational strategy. Adam Janes says the scope of the profession is much greater than many organizations realize.

Adam Janes: Leaders of volunteers are community builders. So, what does it mean to create that healthy community, that healthy environment? The term I use is a skilled generalist. We do things like marketing, we do outreach, customer service, we advertise, we do internal and external communications to varying, to leaders, to cross to peers, to volunteers, all across the organization. We practice public speaking, we do orientation, training, event planning, there's event leading, there's scheduling, there's dealing with difficult situations and risk management. The shaping of culture, recognition, awards, appreciation efforts. There's ethical decision-making, efforts into EDI, staff up-skilling, interviewing, reporting, data procurement, analysis, and more. Sometimes if you distill it down to “ask for people to help and make sure that they get a thank you on the way out the door,” it seems straightforward. The volunteer management profession had a task analysis done that is actually has one of the largest task lists of all the professions in the not-for-profit. So, it is not just a plug and play type thing that can be done. And that's why a lot of organizations, I think, struggle with their volunteer programs because they think it's easy and think it's simple and that they miss the depth of what can be built when somebody is trained and really has a passion for helping develop that healthy volunteering community.

Mary Barroll: Despite the breadth and importance of this work, Adam says the profession itself is under increasing pressure, as nonprofit organizations face declining resources.

Adam Janes: We're at a time where that's at risk. We're eroding as a profession, as the erosion of the volunteerism investments are waning. So, we're in an interesting time

where we're trying to do more with less. In the sector, what does that look like for us? we're seeing more and more roles go from full-time roles to halftime roles and more halftime roles to just do it.

Mary Barroll: To better understand and advocate for the profession, VMPC has launched the first major national study of volunteer engagement in more than 20 years.

Adam Janes: There's really this sense that volunteer engagement, volunteering in Canada is hugely important. And you look at the numbers of Stats Can and you know, trying to conceptualize what 2.1 billion hours looks like, the amount of volunteering hours that go across Canada equals more than all of the work that gets done in Eastern Canada. It's huge. And then you have this little group of professionals who are handling a lot of how to make that better. How do you improve that? How do you support that and foster it and build people that want to give more of their time and see the value of giving more of their time? How do they get appreciated and built into long-term? So, we look at that and we go, okay, wow, where do we start?

The study is the first step in going forward to say, we are a small but mighty and important part of this volunteering infrastructure and we need to better put ourselves on the map as to who we are.

Mary Barroll: Adam sees the study not only as a way to understand the profession, but also as a way to demonstrate the much larger societal investment represented by volunteering.

Adam Janes: It really is this idea of evaluating a large scale societal investment that volunteers bring. We spend more on fireworks than we do on volunteer engagement, at a national level investment. That's just showing you where we hit on the priority scale. Governments need to invest in volunteering, not just because it's important, but because the societal good that strengthens all communities. We see people also stepping in for emergencies, in all kinds of ways, shapes and sizes, that if it was entirely up to the government to do that our society would not be as resilient and as able to respond to emergencies as it does because the community steps up to volunteer. Why not invest in that ecosystem daily and why not invest in that ecosystem broadly, instead of going, Oh my goodness, thank you, after the fact.

Mary Barroll: Adam Janes argues that volunteering is woven so deeply into Canadian communities that its importance can easily go unnoticed—and that modest investment could have a significant impact.

Adam Janes: I believe Canada is the way it is, mainly one of the huge, quiet, but significant factors is the volunteering ecosystem where people are volunteering. A lot of times not even thinking about the fact that they're volunteering. They don't always see it

in the perspective of volunteering, but we are a volunteering country, and that's such an important part. And to have that erode without investment just is a tension point that needs to be heard. The small investment would have a huge impact on strengthening that engagement, opening access, helping youth have better ways of getting involved in volunteering, having newcomers have better supports to get into volunteering that not only gives them Canadian experience, which is the government directly tells them to go and do because of that, but also that community building to meet people that build that social network, have more people that know you, that will be there to teach you things, to connect to what, you know, other things that are going on in the community. I think, there's so much value that could be added if there was more investment in that ecosystem.

SFX: News buzz

News clip

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_cLonDjiQw

3 ideas for a better Canada, CBC, September 2025

“How can Canadians build a stronger, healthier democracy? It’s a big question that feels especially urgent right now. It’s a polarizing time and we’re living through an affordability crisis, a housing crisis and the leader of our once ally is threatening to annex us. It should be a galvanizing factor in re-engaging Canadians with their system. We had this idea, a few years ago, to travel the country and talk to Canadians about local ideas that can inspire national change.”

Mary Barroll: Rebuilding Canada's volunteer capacity will require nonprofits to innovate, invest in volunteer engagement and rethink how opportunities are designed. But what if it went further? What if Canada created entirely new pathways into service—ones designed around the lives, aspirations and challenges of a new generation?

One ambitious idea would make service itself a national investment in young Canadians: giving them paid opportunities to contribute to their country while gaining skills, experience, leadership and a stronger connection to their communities. Its proponents argue that the benefits could extend well beyond volunteering—helping to strengthen civic participation, social connection and Canada's ability to respond to the challenges ahead.

Michael Burns is a Canadian business, philanthropic and civic leader with more than three decades of executive experience across the business and charitable sectors. He has helped raise more than \$1.5 billion for causes including healthcare, scientific research, veterans and military families, youth empowerment and refugee support.

Today, Michael is Chair of Engage Canada, an independent, nonpartisan initiative advocating for a modern national youth service program. The proposal would give young Canadians, between 18 and 25, the choice to participate in paid national service,

contributing to their communities and country while developing skills, experience and leadership of their own. Michael Burns explains how it could work.

Michael Burns: The program would, right now, be open to those that are 18 to 25. At 18, Canadians would register, like they do for other government benefits, to be put into a database where they could apply for national service. It would be not mandatory, but voluntary and selective. And what I mean by that is that young people would apply, they would go through a competitive process.

We're really going to have really an opportunity to pick the most motivated Canadians, between the ages of 18 and 25, who want to participate. If they're selected, the idea is that they would go through what we describe as a shared experience. And what we're proposing is that there would be some modified basic military training, that all participants would go through, let's say over a six to eight week period. And it's not just to learn how to shoot a gun or drive a tank. It would be working in teams. It would be working, to some extent, under duress. It would be championing and working with others to achieve an objective.

The idea here isn't to tear the individual down; it's to build them up. It's to give them the confidence and to build in the resiliency and allow them to achieve something that's gonna give them the confidence, as they move forward with their lives.

Mary Barroll: After that common training experience, Michael Burns explains that participants would be able to choose how they want to serve, either through the military or through a range of community-based opportunities working for, and beside, non-profit organizations.

Michael Burns: After that shared experience, the idea is that folks would have an opportunity either to stay in that military stream and continue their training. Or, they could choose any number of what we're describing as community streams. And those could be working with our Indigenous in the Arctic, could be working in local communities, helping elders. It might be working on emergency and preparedness response to natural disasters that are happening across the country, or perhaps it's building and protecting critical infrastructure that needs to be built across the country.

Mary Barroll: A key feature of the proposal is that young people would be paid for their service. Michael Burns says compensation is essential to making the program accessible rather than limiting participation to those who can afford to volunteer.

Michael Burns: It was really important, when we were having these discussions, that the service that the people going through with the participants were appropriately compensated for the work. First and foremost, we didn't want this to be an elitist program. We didn't want to just attract or be able to accept youth that could afford to participate. A lot of young people today, and this is, in part, why we're seeing a decline in volunteerism in Canada, really for the first time in decades, because young people are

struggling to either find a job, or in many cases, they're working one or two or three jobs in order to pay for their rent and cover their living expenses, to then ask them to free up time to volunteer and not be compensated. That's a real challenge for a lot of people. So, we wanted to take that barrier off the table and pay them for their work and their contributions, while they're going through Engage Canada. The second piece is that it's also really important that we're not being viewed as taking advantage of these young people, as we've seen, with the private sector, from time to time, when they're recruiting young people and not paying them for job experience.

Mary Barroll: For Canada's nonprofit sector, that community-service stream could offer something particularly significant: a new source of young people, paid through the national service program, working alongside organizations to expand their capacity and deliver services. Placements could span a wide range of community needs—from supporting vulnerable and underserved populations to strengthening communities, responding to emergencies and contributing to major national priorities.

But the value proposition goes beyond providing additional people. The model is designed so that nonprofits wouldn't have to find the salary dollars to employ participants—or simply absorb the additional costs of hosting them. Michael says funding would follow each participant, providing organizations with resources for supervision, training, administration, equipment and other support required to make the placement successful.

Michael Burns: We believe that funding should follow the participant and whatever delivery partner that we have in the nonprofit space should receive resources for things like supervision, training, administration, perhaps equipment and any other additional costs that they may incur. Otherwise, it becomes a burden and there's going to be little or no appetite for nonprofits to want to perhaps participate in a national service program with us.

Music

Mary Barroll: The model is also designed to address another challenge we've heard throughout this episode: capacity. Rather than asking already stretched nonprofits to recruit, screen and prepare participants on their own, Engage Canada would take on much of the common administration and provide foundational training before participants arrive. The idea is to give organizations additional capacity without creating an additional administrative burden.

Michael Burns: Engage Canada should manage the common administration responsibilities around recruitment, compensation, insurance, safeguarding the program and evaluation. And the participants who arrive should arrive with some foundational training so that host organizations should not be starting someone from ground zero, that people that enter a nonprofit can hit the ground running and start to contribute, during their placement through Engage Canada.

Mary Barroll: For a program like this to be genuinely accessible, participation has to mean more than simply offering young people a paid position. There are practical barriers to consider—from travel and housing to equipment, disability, mental health and family responsibilities. But there's also a larger question about who gets to participate and what happens when young people from very different parts of the country have the opportunity to work alongside one another.

Michael Burns: The program is going to need to provide for appropriate support for things like travel, for housing, equipment, people with physical disabilities, mental health needs and perhaps even family responsibilities. We understand that. And that'll be part of the plan. That being said, part what you're getting at is the social cohesion piece of this. And that's a real important element to all of this. We don't want just one category of youth to be participating in this program. The idea is that we're bringing young people from various backgrounds, from social economic classes from different parts of the country to work and learn from each other. We want to see teams of young people from Alberta working with young people from Quebec, people from the territories and elsewhere coming together, at a time in their lives, where most would not have had that experience, whether they were whether they're doing their work locally or outside of their local communities or their provinces.

It's going to be really important that we get that balance right, reassuring that the social cohesion piece is a real pillar and part of the DNA of this program, to ensure that we're getting a real cross section of people from various walks of life because, I think, at a time like this, especially when we're seeing the potential for a vote on separation, not just in Quebec, but now in Alberta, that social cohesion piece is going to be really important. And over time, it's going to help allow our citizens to better understand others and parts of the country that perhaps they've never visited or been to.

Mary Barroll: Whether Engage Canada is successful in winning the government's buy-in to develop a national service program, the proposal raises a broader question for nonprofits trying to engage young people: what makes an experience meaningful enough to make them want to keep contributing? Michael Burns believes part of the answer is giving young people real responsibility—and making the connection between their service -- and the tangible impact it makes.

Michael Burns: My experience tells me that young people want to know that their work matters. They're, in most cases, less interested in being given symbolic roles or routine tasks with no visible sort of connection to impact. And I think that a robust national service program can deliver that to them. And, you know, I think organizations should explain the problems participants are helping to solve and show them that the results of their work matters. I think that we're going to learn a lot through this process, that if given real meaningful tasks, that young people are going to be more motivated after going through national service to want to volunteer in their local communities and take up that mantle. The challenge for nonprofits is they're just stretched, right? They never have enough money, enough people, enough capabilities, to do everything that they wanna

do. I also think on the output of all of this is that we're going to have a more highly engaged, motivated citizenry that is going to want to participate, not just through national service, but a lifetime of giving back to local communities. So I think it's a win-win all around.

Mary Barroll: And that's where the potential impact could extend far beyond the period of national service itself. If young people have a meaningful experience contributing to their communities and country, Michael Burns believes it could help build a lifelong commitment to giving back—strengthening not only the individuals who participate, but Canada's volunteer sector and civic life for years to come.

Music

Michael Burns: When we were going through this exercise, at the beginning, one of the first things we asked ourselves, not the what and the how this program would work, but the why and that case for support. And it's in part where the name Engage Canada came from. But what we landed on was engaging in a bigger future. And what that meant was a bigger future for the individuals who would be participating in the program. We hope that they're going to leave with new skills in leadership, teamwork, communications, problem solving, and really get them on a trajectory that would have been different had they not had this experience. Obviously, the experience of meeting and working with other Canadians, of their generation, is going to be transformational as well. But also engaging in a bigger future for the country, and the benefit that the country is going to have is going to be important. It's going to have citizens who have got more confidence, that they're resilient, that they're not afraid to take on tough challenges, that we're going to meet our obligations both domestically and internationally.

Mary Barroll: What emerges from Michael Burns' vision is a program that sees national service as more than a way to give young people work experience. At its heart is an effort to build connections across generations, communities and regions, at a time when social cohesion is under strain. The proposal also suggests that meaningful service could have a lasting ripple effect: equipping young people with skills and confidence, strengthening their sense of belonging, and encouraging a lifetime of civic participation. For the nonprofit sector, the experiment could offer another important lesson—when young people are given meaningful responsibilities and a clear connection to impact, service can become not just something they do, but something that shapes how they see their role in their communities and in the country.

This transformative shift from temporary volunteerism to lifelong civic identity isn't just Michael Burns' hope—it's the unifying thread that ties together everything we've explored today. To close our conversation, let's hear, one last time, from all six of our guests reflecting on what the future of giving back should look like.

Music

Tara McWhinney: Volunteers are incredibly valuable, but they are not free. Recruiting, screening, onboarding, training, scheduling, supervising, recognizing and retaining, and that all requires staff time and organizational resources. Without that infrastructure, even charities with strong community interest in volunteering may struggle to convert that interest into meaningful volunteer capacity.

Olga Stachova: Be really explicit when you're looking for volunteers, that that you are looking for volunteers with diverse lived experience and explicitly state you are looking for people with lived experience as immigrants, refugees, and temporary residents. And then, lead by example. Ensure that newcomers are represented in your organization, in your leadership and on your board of directors.

Alyssa Brierley: Ultimately the sector needs to shift from recruiting older adults to fill volunteer shifts or positions to building relationships with older adults as partners in their communities. Not millions of people suddenly becoming available to perform unpaid work, but millions of Canadians with knowledge, experience, and a desire to remain connected and make a meaningful contribution, are ready and willing to do exactly that. The organizations that understand that distinction will be much better positioned for the next decade.

Sara Lyons: Try to position volunteerism and the infrastructure associated with volunteerism, as a bit of a counterpoint to the current conversation in our country around investment in steel infrastructure or trains or airplanes, to say this is critical social infrastructure that meets a need in our communities that benefits individuals and that needs both a best practices approach but also a systemic approach.

Adam Janes: With that investment in volunteer engagement, at a time like this, we're recognizing the value of the sector in Canada. It's not a lot. I joke it's less than one jet engine on one of those jets. It could really reinvigorate volunteering across Canada and get more and more people involved. The difference between a checkbox hour, or no hour at all, into purposeful volunteering and being part of a community that you feel belonging, but also you feel impact and being able to shape the community that you want.

Michael Burns: If you kind of look at what this program could deliver over the next decade or two, is highly trained citizens who are prepared for what's in front of us, but all of the other things that we can't predict today. And I think, in uncertain times like this, and we know that if there's one thing that we can count on and that's change, and it's coming fast that we've got citizens that are ready to take on those big challenges and deal with them, not just for themselves, but for their communities and for the country that they live in.

Mary Barroll: Canada's volunteer crisis is not simply a story about fewer people willing to give their time. Throughout these conversations, we've heard something more hopeful: Canadians still want to contribute, to connect, to make a difference. But the way people

live has changed, and the systems we rely on, to turn that willingness into meaningful service, haven't always changed with them.

Rebuilding Canada's volunteer capacity will require investment in the people and infrastructure that make volunteering possible. It will mean creating opportunities that reflect the lives, skills and expectations of younger Canadians, newcomers and older adults. And it may mean being willing to experiment with entirely new approaches to service. Because ultimately, this is about more than filling volunteer positions. It's about rebuilding the connections between people and their communities, creating a stronger culture of participation and ensuring that Canadians are ready to contribute when their neighbours—and their country—need them.

And that may make volunteerism not simply a resource for Canada's nonprofit sector, but an essential part of Canada's social infrastructure and our collective resilience for the future.

I want to thank all our guests for sharing their insights, ideas and, importantly, their optimism about what the future of volunteerism in Canada could look like. And thank you to our podcast sponsor WUSC.

Music

And at CharityVillage, we don't want to simply report on this challenge. We also want to support those working to find solutions.

For more than 30 years, CharityVillage has worked alongside Canada's nonprofit sector, helping organizations find talented people, strengthen their teams, and build their capacity to serve their communities. Today, we're excited to announce the next step in that work.

CharityVillage is supporting the relaunch and expansion of **Volunteer Success**, a registered charitable organization and national platform dedicated to strengthening volunteerism across Canada.

Volunteer Success was founded by Brian Prosserman, whose vision and commitment created an engaging online platform and a strong foundation for connecting volunteers with the communities and the causes that need them. Now entering a new chapter, Volunteer Success plans to expand its reach, introduce new services and develop training, e-learning and practical resources to support volunteers and the organizations that engage them.

CharityVillage and Volunteer Success will work in alliance, bringing together complementary strengths: CharityVillage's longstanding connection to Canada's nonprofit community and Volunteer Success's focused charitable mission to promote and strengthen volunteerism.

And the goal for Volunteer Success is bigger than creating another place to post volunteer opportunities. It's about helping to address some of the challenges we've been exploring throughout this episode: making it easier for Canadians to find meaningful ways to contribute, helping organizations engage and support volunteers effectively, and building a stronger, more accessible and more resilient volunteer ecosystem across Canada.

Volunteer Success looks forward to working with nonprofit organizations, volunteer-engagement professionals, sector leaders and volunteers themselves, as it builds this next chapter.

At CharityVillage, we're proud to support that work—and to be part of an alliance committed to strengthening volunteerism across Canada.

If you'd like to hear more of what our guests have to say, check out our full video interviews on our website. CharityVillage is proud to be the Canadian source for nonprofit news, employment services, crowd funding, e-learning, HR resources and tools, and so much more. Please take a moment to check out our website at charityvillage.com. We love to receive your feedback about our podcast and your ideas for stories you'd like to hear about, so please follow us, like and comment, wherever you get your podcasts.

Theme music

Mary Barroll: AI is changing how we work, learn and connect with each other. But what is it doing to our mental health? We'll dig into the growing conversation around AI and mental health and wellbeing, including chatbot companionship and youth wellbeing, cognitive burnout, workplace fatigue, and the risks of relying too heavily on AI for thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. We'll look at what nonprofit leaders need to understand as AI becomes more embedded in daily work, and how organizations can use these tools thoughtfully without losing sight of human judgment, care, and connection.

That's in our next episode of *CharityVillage Connects*. I'm Mary Barroll. Thanks for listening.