



FACT SHEET # 2 - VOLUNTEERING AMONG ABORIGINAL PEOPLES - WAYS OF SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT IN VOLUNTEERISM

Background

The Native Women's Association of Canada worked for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada to expand knowledge on various aspects of volunteering among Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) of Canada to build on existing knowledge by identifying broadly the understanding of, motivations for, and patterns of volunteering among Aboriginal Peoples as volunteers (with a focus on Aboriginal women). The project also aimed to identify innovative practices and methods of engaging Aboriginal Peoples as volunteers.

Although faced by many barriers throughout history, Aboriginal Peoples have always been able to make outstanding contributions to Canadian society. In 2006, Aboriginal people in Canada - surpassed the one-million mark, reaching 1,172,790. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew by 45%, compared with 8% for the non-Aboriginal population. The census counted 50,485 Inuit, 389,785 Métis and 698,025 First Nations people in 2006.¹

While Aboriginal Peoples account for 3.8% of the population,² very little information is available on the issue of Aboriginal volunteerism. This project aimed to contribute to the knowledge base for developing strategic policy options, to support HRSDC's ability to improve participation and inclusion of all Canadians, to build stronger communities, by enhancing and sustaining volunteerism among Aboriginal Peoples in Canada.

Defining Volunteerism

Volunteerism is an inherent part of Aboriginal cultures and is not perceived as volunteerism but rather as "helping out." The findings of our research indicate that Aboriginal people have strong cultural traditions of sharing, helping and caring for each other without expectations of payment. It is understood differently than from non-Aboriginal people. There are many distinctions to Aboriginal Peoples such as the higher rates of participation of women, youth and Elders. Also, women and men still occupy very gender distinctive volunteer roles.

Sustaining Engagement in Volunteerism

Once volunteers have been recruited, it is essential to try to retain their involvement. Generally, Aboriginal volunteers would be more likely to remain volunteers within an organization when their environment is built on a strong relationship between the organization and the volunteer. This positive relationship can be further developed by organizations in order to retain volunteers if they use the various mechanisms suggested by our participants. These include: providing training and team-building activities; providing volunteer support and programs, such as a safe place for children for mothers, transportation (bus tickets) for youth and addressing mobility issues for seniors by providing taxi chits or a ride home for them. Also, by offering an interesting volunteer environment where people can feel useful with responsibilities that are challenging, and where the volunteers will most likely feel compelled to perform.

¹ 2006 Census of Canada

² 2006 Census of Canada, Release no. 5: January 15, 2008



Our research revealed that organizations could encourage its volunteers to participate in the activities that are most geared toward their interests; show recognition and appreciation for volunteering in community; always demonstrate respect towards its volunteers; have strategies in place to reduce and/or prevent vicarious trauma and triggers that the Aboriginal volunteer may face while volunteering; sometimes provide a token honorarium, ingredients, materials, gas money, or a gift to its volunteers; have clear communication about ongoing expectations of their volunteers, and try to make it fun for volunteers to participate as humour is a huge part of Aboriginal culture.

Best Practices

The Research also identified the following best practices in volunteer retention with respect to training. Volunteers would prefer to get pre-session training, but very few are given such a session.³ Organizations should consider developing an orientation manual that can provide consistent foundation for all new volunteers.⁴

The most effective methods for training sessions for Aboriginal volunteers should include the following elements:

- A presentation about the organization;
- An explanation of the volunteer's duties;
- An introduction to the people recruits will be working with;
- A description of procedures and protocols (volunteers should receive a Volunteer Code of Conduct, if available);
- Contact information for volunteers if they have any question;
- An explanation of the importance of their contribution;
- A question and answer period with plenty of time to answer questions and discuss concerns;
- The opportunity to shadow a mentor, if possible; and
- A comfortable community environment.⁵

Providing ongoing supervision and support will increase the volunteer's motivation and ensure that they feel like they belong within the organization. Frequent feedback is important. It will show the volunteer that their work is meaningful and will ensure that organization's objectives are being met.⁶

Community and family are at the heart of the Aboriginal culture and by encouraging families to participate as volunteers allows Aboriginal parents to teach the younger generation about the tradition of helping out.⁷ Family volunteering is a common practice and will ensure a better participation rate and retention as it fosters a sense of community and responsibility.⁸

In most Aboriginal organizations, traditional paintings, gifts, artwork, etc. are often presented at the Annual General Assembly meetings to the Board of Directors, Provincial/Territorial Member Associations, and other volunteers to recognize their work throughout the year. Not only do they receive a token of appreciation but they are given public

³ Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women, 2006

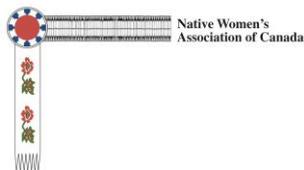
⁴ Volunteer Canada 2011

⁵ Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women, 2006

⁶ Volunteer Canada 2011

⁷ Volunteer Canada 2010

⁸ Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, 2006



recognition in front of the entire membership to acknowledge all their hard work in front of their constituents that they represent.

Informal Volunteering

Informal volunteer opportunities are beneficial for Aboriginal volunteers. This setting allows them to take on a variety of tasks in a more comfortable work structure. This type of setting can alleviate some of the discomfort experienced by Aboriginal Peoples in mainstream hierarchical infrastructure.⁹ Volunteers should have the opportunity to select events, venues and tasks that they want to help do. This idea ties in the traditional holistic view of society where specific interests may be seen as irrelevant or not useful by Aboriginal communities. Offering volunteers the chance to choose their duties, for example, will help ensure that they will be engaged by the work they do.¹⁰

Mutual respect of cultural differences is essential in volunteer retention. Aboriginal people want to feel welcome and comfortable in their work environment. Incorporating cultural practices in the various activities will make volunteers more at ease in mainstream activities.¹¹ Respect for diversity within a volunteer organization will allow Aboriginal volunteers to feel proud of their differences and unique perspectives. Organizations should keep an open-mind, be genuine, be mindful of cultural values and treat volunteers with respect.

Organizations should get to know their volunteers and show an interest in them as individuals and not just volunteers.¹² It is a good idea to develop a contact list to obtain the home and cell phone numbers of individuals so that you can call and text them whenever you need volunteers on short notice. Also, it has proven to be very useful to have individuals on Facebook so you can easily set up an event and invite the regular or occasional volunteers out to an event in advance or with short notice and have it still be a success.

Organizations should provide volunteers with mentors to ensure that they have someone to turn to for advice, help and support. Ongoing recognition will help organizations retain volunteers.¹³

As in any relationship between parties, conflict is inevitable. Organizations should ensure that they have the proper mechanisms in place to deal with difficult situations. In the case of Aboriginal volunteers, it may be more appropriate to use culturally relevant mechanisms of conflict resolution such as talking and healing circles and seeking counsel from Elders on how to handle a situation. Talking circles allow the participant to talk, vent, and heal and are initiated by an individual or group of people who are in conflict with another individual or group of people who seek resolution and guidance.¹⁴

⁹ Volunteer Alberta, 2004

¹⁰ Lois Little for the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories, 2005

¹¹ Volunteer Alberta 2004; and again in McKague, Hoeber et Dorsch, 2007

¹² Institute for Advancement of Aboriginal Women, 2006.

¹³ Volunteer Canada 2011

¹⁴ Ibid.