
Representing Volunteers in Alberta

Reflections from Volunteers



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Acknowledgements

We are so very lucky to work with our partner Volunteer Centres across Alberta. Thank you for supporting us through these early stages and helping us understand how to make the VolunteerConnector the best it can be for volunteers.

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Thank you,

Andrea and Janet

Purpose

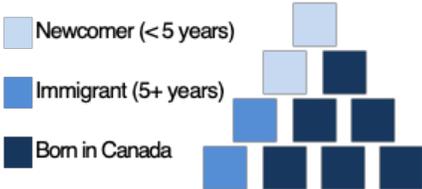
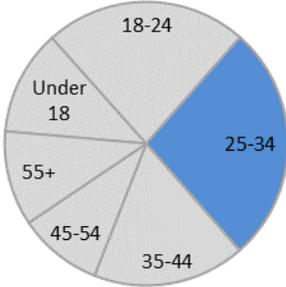
This document is meant to serve as a reflection of the current state of volunteerism in Alberta, as experienced by volunteers.

It is the first in a series of reports detailing the state of volunteerism, what the sector can learn from data (both new and existing), and how we can use these insights to make improvements and move forward together – with volunteers at the centre.

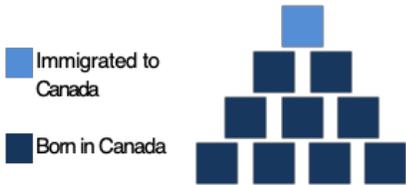
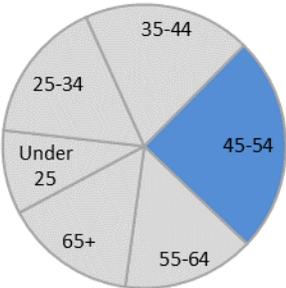
Demographics

Yes, we know, demographics can be a bit of a dull place to start. But for this survey, they are fascinating! The profile of the ‘average’ Urban vs Rural respondent that the demographics unveil begin to tell the story of two very different groups of volunteers. The sample profiles described below are based on the most commonly selected demographic descriptors and other survey findings.

- Urban profile: Early-30’s, big-city dweller, born in Canada (or very recently immigrated to Canada), volunteers about three times / month, involved with a couple specific causes they connected with online, interested in using and building their skills.



- Rural profile: Early 50’s, from a small community, born in Canada, volunteers weekly, involved with many different charitable organizations through personal connections, passionate about their community.



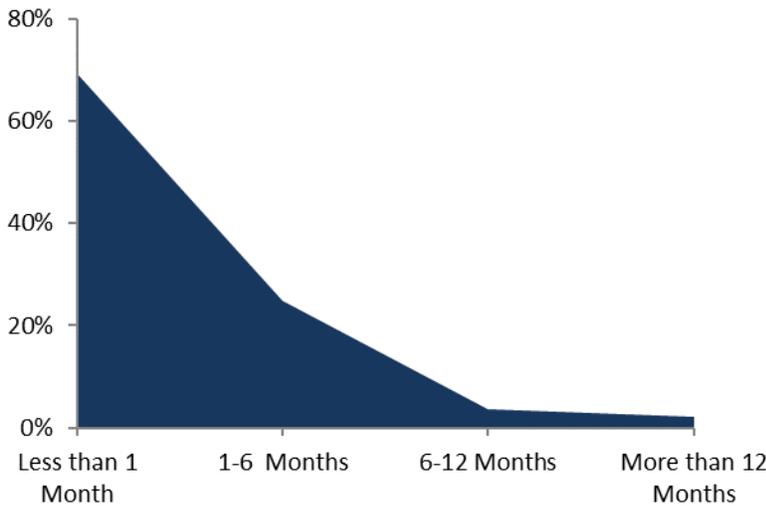
Getting Involved in Volunteering

In this section, we will get to know Alberta’s volunteers: when do they plan to get started, how, with whom, in what capacity, and to what extent? This will give us insight into the types of opportunities volunteers are currently involved in/pursuing, and help us understand their preferences, needs and challenges so we can keep them at the centre of our volunteer engagement strategies.

How long do you think it will be before you volunteer again?

A big take-away from this survey was that 68% of volunteers, regardless of location, expect to be volunteering within one month of beginning their search. For those who are not already regularly volunteering, 55% still expect to find a new position and begin actively volunteering in less than a month, while a whopping 94% stated they intend to be volunteering within six months or less. This staggering statistic tells us that:

“Volunteers are looking for positions they can start asap, not months from now.”



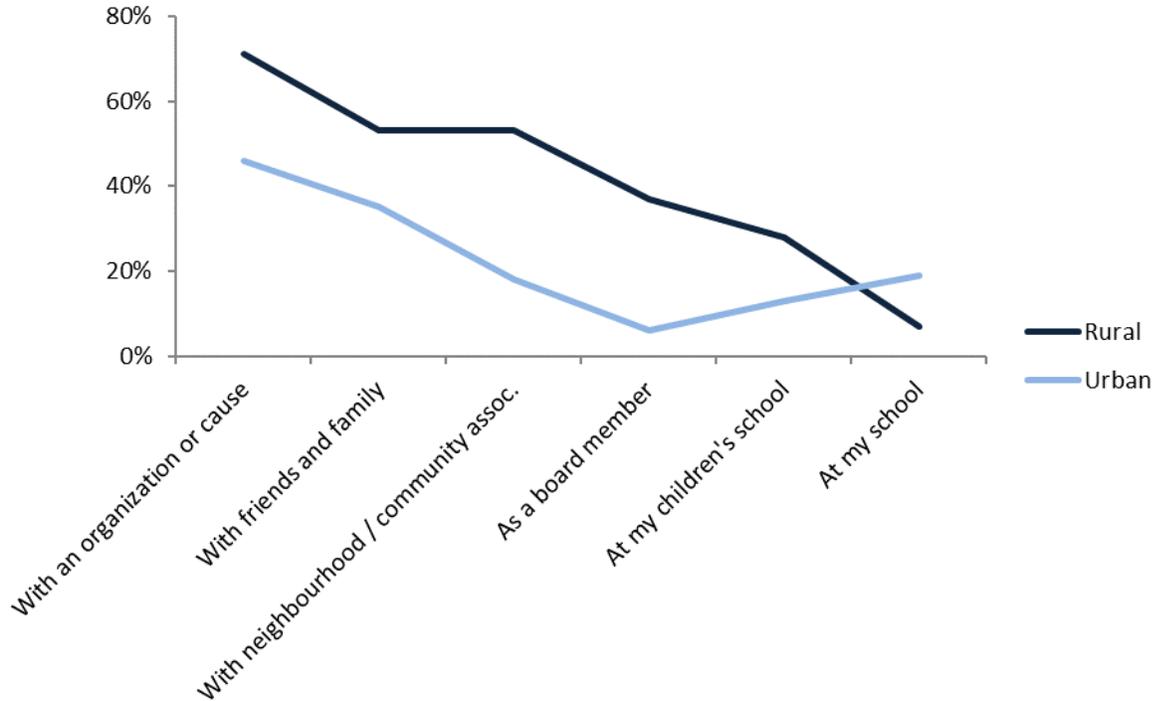
Interestingly, when looking at the data generated by volunteerconnector.org (the largest volunteer opportunities database in Alberta), the average lag time between the opportunity publish date and start date is 176 days. That is to say organizations (on average) are looking for volunteers nearly 6 months before the opportunity is set to begin – but almost all volunteers don’t want to wait that long. This is a significant mismatch between organization and volunteer interests!

How do you volunteer?

In both Rural and Urban settings, volunteers reported that their top two ways of volunteering are:

- 1) Volunteering with organizations or causes (Both: 51%; Urban: 46%; Rural: 71%)
- 2) Helping out informally with family and friends (Both: 38%; Urban: 35%; Rural: 53%)

Beyond these top picks, there were a couple stark contrasts between Rural and Urban.



Rural volunteers, for example, were much more likely to be involved in community groups or neighbourhood associations (Rural: 53%; Urban: 18%), and on boards (Rural: 37%; Urban: 6%). Urbanites were more likely to report volunteering with their own school (Urban: 19%; Rural: 7%), while Rural-dwellers had higher rates of volunteering with their children’s schools (Rural: 28%; Urban: 13%). Some of these differences can be attributed to the average age of Urban vs. Rural volunteers.

It was observed that Rural volunteers juggle more than three roles, raising the question:

“Are Rural volunteers at greater risk of burn-out?”

How do you find new volunteer opportunities?

Now we know how people are getting involved, but how do they find these opportunities in the first place? The top two ways that all volunteers find their positions are:

- 1) Online (Urban: 80%; Rural: 41%)
- 2) By being directly asked (Urban: 26%; Rural: 63%)

These stats, combined with the ones in the previous question, start to paint a vivid picture:

Rural volunteers are regularly asked to get involved by their fellow community members – and they do, with an assortment of groups, in many different ways. Their focus is *contributing to their community*.



Urban volunteers are perhaps less directly connected to their communities and are thus scanning the internet for ways to get involved with the causes they care about. Their focus is *contributing to a cause*.



How do you like to volunteer?

Volunteers shared that they are happy to get involved with one-off events or projects, but typically do so in addition to their on-going volunteer activities. By and large though, volunteers prefer flexible volunteer activities on their own schedule (Both: 71%). In fact, 1/3 stated that this is the only way that they like to volunteer. Because that’s a noteworthy stat, we’ll say it again:

“71% of volunteers want flexible volunteer activities on their own schedule.”

However, from the data generated by volunteerconnector.org, we know that flexibility is typically not a feature of most volunteer opportunities.



Of the nearly 700 opportunities that have been published so far this year (January – March 2019), only 1/3 are listed as flexible.

Reasons for Volunteering

People volunteer for a host of reasons, in accordance with their perception of the value it adds to their community, and their personal values and priorities. While everyone is different, there were some notably common threads in our survey findings.

How do you describe the value of volunteering in your community?

Once again, volunteers in both Rural and Urban settings are in-sync in their views that:

- 1) Volunteering makes communities better for everyone (Both: 66%; Urban: 64%; Rural: 78%)
- 2) Volunteering shows others that we care (Both: 64%)

Notably different though, is that 55% of Rural volunteers described a key value of volunteering as ‘saving causes money’, while 48% of Urban volunteers prioritized ‘creating safe spaces for people who are different’. This further suggests that Rural volunteers are more likely to experience a loyalty or connection to their community affiliations, while Urban volunteers are drawn to the causes they care about.

Why do you volunteer?

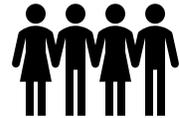
In Urban settings, themes of personal growth were more prominent:

- E.g.: “Volunteering teaches me new things” (Urban: 68% vs. Rural: 52%)
“Volunteering helps me meet people” (Urban: 66% vs. Rural: 27%)



In Rural areas, the emphasis was on communities:

- E.g.: “Volunteering makes me feel connected to community” (Rural: 67% vs. Urban: 53%)
“Volunteering helps me teach community values to my children” (Rural: 35% vs. Urban: 16%)



Across the board though, one key reason rang clear: people volunteer because it ‘makes them feel like they are making a difference’.

And yet, a concerning volume of volunteers don’t feel that their volunteer efforts are meaningful. Only 57% of volunteers said that their current volunteer work is meaningful to them, which leaves us with 43% that feel it is only partially or not-at-all meaningful.

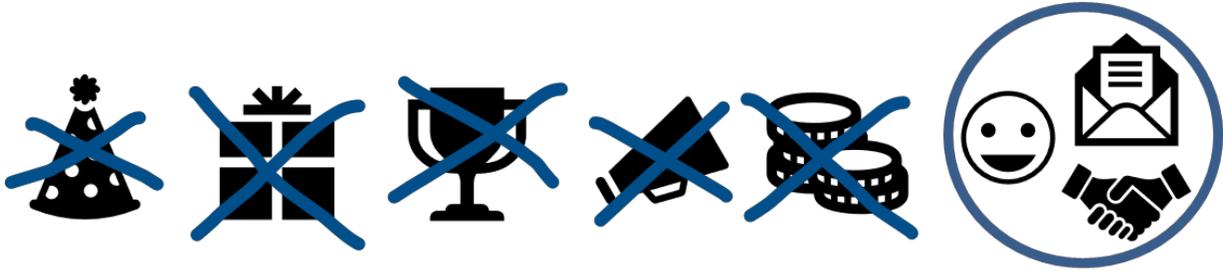
Armed with this knowledge, it leaves the Non-Profit Sector to contemplate:

“How can we ensure that volunteers are filling roles that are meaningful to them?”

Thanking Volunteers

Generally, volunteers aren't too fussed about receiving a lot of formal recognition for their work.

That said, they don't want to be totally ignored either – because who does? While parties, public acknowledgement, awards, honorariums, and gifts are not top recognition picks amongst volunteers, a simple demonstration of gratitude – a card, thank you note, or smile goes a long way, and is what most volunteers are after (Both: 62%).



Given how volunteers prefer to be recognized and that they volunteer because they want to make a difference (see: 'Why do you volunteer?' section, above), we need to ask ourselves:

"How can you show volunteers that they've truly made a difference?"

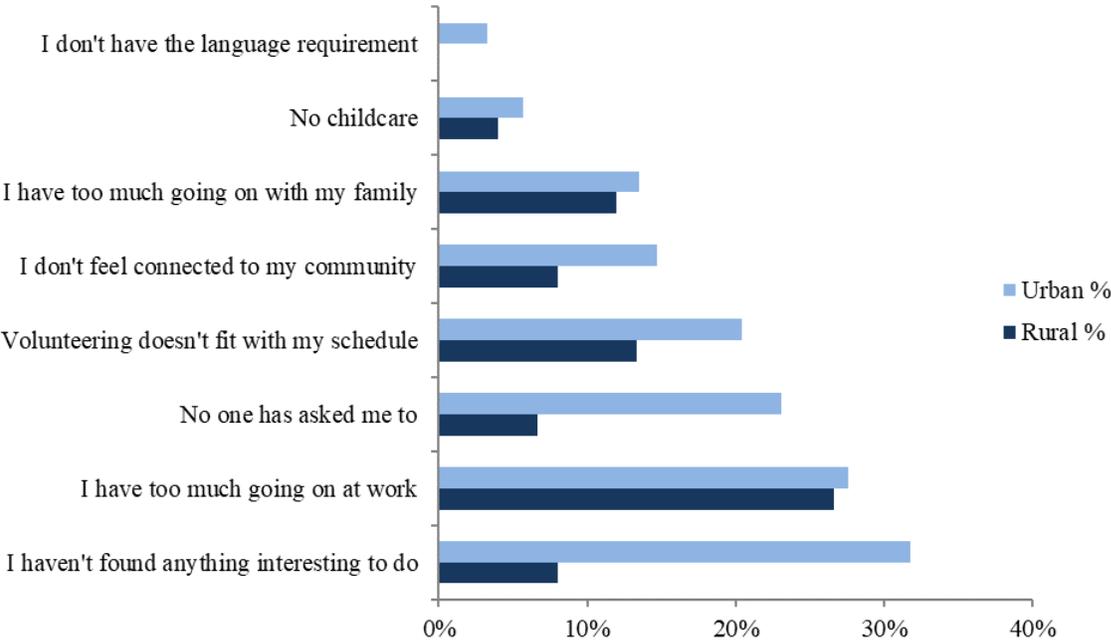
Barriers to Volunteering

As you have read, volunteers shared that volunteering enables them to participate in so many wonderful ways ... so what's holding them back from committing more of their time to volunteering? Let's find out.

What keeps you from volunteering?

When it comes to Rural populations, the biggest barrier is time. Responses such as: "I have too much going on at work" (27%); "volunteering doesn't fit with my schedule" (13%); and "I have too much going on with my family" (12%); were the most common.

Urban is a different story. While they agree with busy-ness being a key barrier (see the chart below) they also express another set of challenges related to inclusion and opportunity.



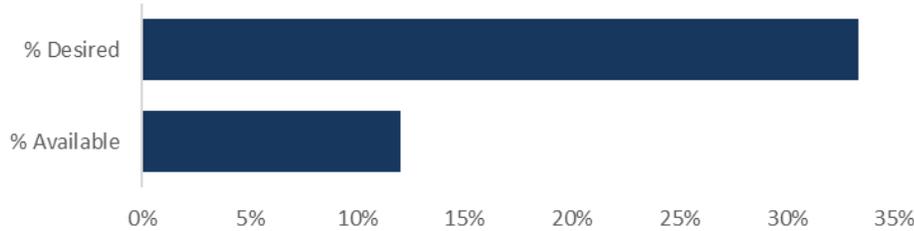
Looking at the above graph, there are a couple instances where Urban volunteers report significant barriers that are comparatively minor for Rural. Please note that Urban volunteers report the number one barrier to volunteering is they could not find interesting opportunities.

In this space, we are already working to improve access to volunteer opportunities for everyone by expanding volunteerconnector.org. With higher volumes of volunteer opportunities, a portable profile that supports a volunteer's journey, and fewer barriers to begin volunteering, we hope to see fewer would-be volunteers reporting that they 'can't find anything interesting to do' in the near future.

What else keeps you from volunteering?

Flexibility doesn't take the same form for everyone. Rural volunteers are more likely to want to work from home (33% vs Urban 26%) while Urban volunteers opt for more online-opportunities (28% vs Rural 10%). Everyone agrees that flexibility, in general, is high on their priority list.

Virtual / Remote Opportunities



When it comes to volunteer opportunities available on volunteerconnector.org, it's pretty slim-pickings for e-opportunities: only 12% of opportunities published between January and March 2019 are listed as virtual/remote:

"What volunteer opportunities are required in the digital age?"

Volunteers Want You To Know

In summary, the key messages in this report from volunteers in Alberta are:

- Volunteers are looking for positions they can start asap, not months from now.
- Volunteers want to engage in flexible activities on their own schedules – at home and online.
- Recognition efforts should focus first on a simple demonstration of gratitude.

Some questions we asked that merit further consideration by volunteer engagers were:

- Are Rural volunteers at greater risk of burn-out?
- How can we ensure that volunteers are doing work that is meaningful to them?
- How can we show volunteers that they truly make a difference?
- How do we adapt volunteering for the digital age?

The VolunteerConnector provides us with the opportunity to understand volunteering as we never have before. We will continue to work with our partners across Alberta to ensure insights on volunteerism are shared.

About the Data

In the early months of 2019, volunteers across the province were asked a series of questions regarding their volunteering habits, preferences, experiences, and beliefs. This report summarizes some of the key findings from the 408 respondents (333 Urban, 75 Rural). When you see 'Both' it is a weighted average of Urban and Rural based on the number of responses. Each of the 18 survey questions was completed by up-to 408 individuals (we say "up-to" as every respondent did not choose to answer every question).

Definitions

As the volunteer experience can differ by region, we have elected to subdivide the findings for those in Urban versus Rural settings. For the purposes of this report, the following definitions were used:

- Urban: Municipalities with populations greater than 100k, and the towns surrounding them. In this report, this includes: Calgary and area, Edmonton and area, and Red Deer.
- Rural: Municipalities with populations less than 100k. This includes: Hanna, Lethbridge, Okotoks, Wood Buffalo Region, etc.

How We Collected Information

In order to understand volunteerism in Alberta through the eyes of volunteers, a survey was developed in partnership with the Government of Alberta Community Engagement Branch to gain their insights. This survey was open for volunteer responses from January – March 2019.

The data that serves as a basis for this report was gathered in two key ways:

- Responding to the survey was presented as a 5-minute digital volunteering opportunity, which was shown as a banner at the top of www.volunteerconnector.org. This hands-off collection method resulted in 328 (primarily Urban) responses
- Volunteer Centres in Lethbridge, Red Deer, and Wood Buffalo region sent out the survey link to their members, affiliates, and local organizations. This resulted in 80 (primarily Rural) responses.

Technical Jargon

Given that 44% of the population is estimated to volunteer¹, and the population of Alberta is approximately 4.3 million², an estimated 1.9 million of Albertans are active volunteers. Therefore, a sample size greater than 385 (which we achieved) represents a 95% confidence level with a 5% Margin of Error (as per industry standards).

Limitations

As there were low-volumes of respondents from Rural regions, the responses (while informative) are not necessarily representative of all those volunteering in the regions they represent. Further research into Rural-specific volunteer challenges and experiences would add breadth and confidence to the findings discussed in this report. As in many studies, the nature of data collection possesses an inherent challenge: those that can be located and are willing to participate in the survey present a certain bias. However, due to the volume of responses, we still consider our findings, taken as a whole, to be representative of the experience of Albertan volunteers.

¹ As per Statistics Canada's most recent data (2013). See: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2015001-eng.htm>

² As per Government of Alberta Population statistics (2018). See: <https://www.alberta.ca/population-statistics.aspx>

To get started on your volunteer journey, visit:

www.volunteerconnector.org