

Voluntary Sector Awareness Project

You'd have to look pretty hard to find a sector as diverse in form and in function as that of what we call the "voluntary sector" in Canada.

Comprised of 161,000 charities and non-profit organizations the sector encompasses tens of thousands of organizations with no paid staff and budgets under \$30K as well as thousands of large, multi jurisdictional monoliths with annual budgets in the ten million dollar + range and hundreds of staff people – and every organizational iteration you can imagine in between.

The reach and kinds of work undertaken by the sector are also incredibly broad; from sport clubs to environmental organizations, international aid to disease prevention, from arts to social development, from hands on care to advocacy, research and training.

Three key factors are held in common by this amorphous collection of organizations:

Our regulatory status. We are incorporated as not-for-profit entities. Almost half (76,000) are registered as charities.

We all involve volunteers – as our governors via Boards of Directors and in a myriad of 'service' roles.

And finally, and most importantly, we all exist, one way or the other, to achieve purpose that is "other serving". We are all engaged in work that seeks to provide service, generate ideas, challenge the status quo, help people or communities in need, fix problems, bring to fruition a vision for something more, better, best. In short every organization in the voluntary sector exists to reach dreams.

For many in Canada the true breadth and impact of the voluntary sector is a best kept secret. While many experience the sector in some way, they rarely get exposed to the whole picture. And voluntary organizations themselves are part of the reason for that.

We are, most of us – and understandably so - primarily focused on "our" work. Whether we're coaching a hockey team, organizing an arts festival, recruiting overseas volunteers, participating in an advocacy campaign or working in a health charity or social service agency we tend to look inward, hoping to generate pride and support for the contribution we are making.

How often does the voluntary sector ever speak with the proverbial one voice?

How often do we talk about the importance of sport and culture at the same time?

How often do we seek the similarities between radical environmental organizations and libraries or hospitals?

It's true that sometimes we pause, as a sector, to acknowledge and celebrate the amazing work of volunteers. And every now and then groups of voluntary organizations will come together to speak with funders or on an issue of shared importance. But the times our sector steps forward to present a cohesive vision for itself, for community and for citizens are arguably rare.

Eight national organizations* representing a broad cross section of charitable and nonprofit purposes and organizations, have come together to generate awareness and celebration of the voluntary sector as a whole in Canada.

The Voluntary Sector Awareness Project, funded by Social Development Canada, as one of the last "deliverables" of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, will culminate in the development of an awareness campaign inside the sector *and* out toward the public. The project is led by Imagine Canada, staffed by a small team and works under the direction of the Project Partners listed below.

Our work will unfold as follows:

- Over the summer of 2005 a short discussion paper will be prepared and disseminated broadly internal to the sector. The paper will provide a short argument for the goal of finding our 'one voice' and will proffer the opportunity for people to react, provide feedback to questions, identify their interest in getting involved.
- During the fall 100 "community conversations" will be held bringing together groups of 40 or 50 people, sometimes from a particular sub-sector, like sport or health or arts, sometimes cross sectorally. These community conversations will be hosted by local organizations and will provide an opportunity for dialogue and input on the same issues.
- A report based on the summer and fall discourse will be produced, distributed and will be used to inform the development of a public awareness campaign.
- Promotional resources for use by voluntary organizations will be created and a shared public awareness campaign about the voluntary sector in Canada will be launched and delivered – by the sector, about the sector, for the sector.

We are excited about and committed to this innovative project. Above all we know that the only way to raise awareness about this incredible sector is by engaging the sector. We invite you to get involved. Let us know if you'd like to receive materials, provide feedback, attend a community conversation, adopt the public awareness campaign. Don't hesitate to ask for more information or just tell us what you're thinking in general.

We look forward to hearing from you, working with you and celebrating the voluntary sector in Canada.

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*The Voluntary Sector Awareness Project Partners Committee:

Sharon Baxter – Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association (representing a health charities perspective)
Peter Bleyer – Canadian Council for Social Development (www.ccsd.ca)
Brigitte Gagné – Canadian Environmental Network (www.cen-rce.org)
Victor Lachance – Sport Matters Group (www.sportmatters.ca)
Jean Malavoy – Canadian Conference for the Arts (www.ccarts.ca)
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