

2001 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

World Events Emphasize Continued Need for Volunteerism, Personal Reflection

Speech given by Paddy Bowen, Executive Director of Volunteer Canada

On August 18 this year, Statistics Canada (in partnership with Volunteer Canada and the Centre for Philanthropy) released the results of the 2000 national survey on giving, volunteering, and participating.

While donating rates in Canada have remained stable from three years before (the previous survey was done in 1997), volunteering was down — down by 5%, that is 5% less of the population volunteering, that is one million fewer volunteers active in Canada in 2000 than in 1997.

The survey results provide a detailed and fascinating glimpse into the amount, the ways, and the why's of volunteering in Canada. They are worthy of due consideration by charities, governments, and individuals alike.

At the heart of the learning that is presented in Canada is that central piece of information — volunteering is down. It's down across all age groups; it's particularly down among the educated and employed, and it's down to below one in five for older Canadians. Luckily, those who volunteer are volunteering more hours on average. Luckily, we continue to have a subset of "uber" volunteers in Canada — that although 26% of the population volunteers, 7% of Canadians do 73% of all the volunteer work. I don't know for sure, but I think it's likely that we see similar trends in the U.S., certainly the phenomena of more comes from the few.

Of course, we are blessed by the almost incalculable gifts of that hard core of caring Canadians who carry the weight of giving and volunteering. You know these people well

— they have given thousands of hours here and around the world; they sit for years and through difficult times on boards and committees; they commit time they don't have and spend emotion they can't easily spare. They represent the heart and soul and history of our communities and people.

But is it right that such a small percentage of people do so much? Is this an inevitable and fascinatingly predictable version of the old 80/20? What do we risk as a society, but perhaps more importantly as organizations that depend on volunteers when we depend on such a relatively small subset to come through in a pinch? Will they burn out? Will they move on? Will they come to a time when they feel — rightly so perhaps — that they have done their time, that it's time for someone else to pick up the ball? And why don't "we" — charities and non-profits — do a better job engaging and pulling in a greater number of people? Why do the other 19% of volunteers only do 27% of the work? Where are the other 74% of Canadians? Why do only 18% of people over the age of 65 choose to volunteer after leaving the job market? Why do fewer than one in four young people contribute their energy and skills to a community cause?

We can wring our hands and feel ourselves at the whim of fate. We can posit the possibility that a 31% volunteer rate in 1997 was a blip, that 26% is O.K. We can consider changes in the labour market (more Canadians worked in 2000 than in 1997; people work more hours than they used to; a baby

boomer “sandwich” generation just doesn’t have the time it used to). These external conditions and forces may well explain the phenomena of lower numbers of volunteers and the shrinking number of core supporters, but they only refer to half of the picture.

Volunteerism is the great invisible machinery that keeps communities in this country and in the U.S. ticking, and yet we rarely pay any attention to it.

If we truly consider volunteers to be a resource, as key to the capacity of our organizations to achieve their missions equal say, to money, or paid staff, then like all resources, it needs to be tended. We need to take time to look closely at the way we recruit, allocate, recognize, and support volunteers.

Knowing that time is the precious commodity — the one thing no one has enough of — do we still seek out volunteers and demand of them unreasonable time commitments?

Knowing that families are hard pressed to find things to do together (let alone —once again — the time to spend together), do we offer them ways to volunteer together?

Knowing that many immigrants to this country have gifts to offer, though perhaps limited language skills, do we adapt volunteer positions and deliberately seek out the non-white, non English-speaking person?

Are our programs ready to involve a group of be-earringed youth?

Knowing that volunteer management is a set of skills, a unique combination of interpersonal and technical abilities, do we invest in hiring professional leaders in volunteerism? More importantly perhaps, do we take the time to ensure that all our staff understand basic dynamics about volunteering and are ready to work alongside volunteers in a seamless and efficient team?

There is much that can be done. Systematically, we need to promote and celebrate volunteering. Organizationally, we need to invest time and effort on our management systems around volunteers, from the board to

the mail room. Personally, we need to think about how we foster and empower the volunteers we work with, and for, and beside.

On September 11 we watched in horror as the world’s history took yet another turn toward the brutal, the inhuman. As always at these moments, the best of humanity also rose up before us, and we watched in awe the firefighters and rescuers who gave up their own lives to try and save others, the countless volunteers who stepped forward to work long painful hours, the remarkable efficiency and passion of the Red Cross, The Salvation Army, the United Way and others who swung into action so quickly.

From pundit to “man in the street,” we seem to have agreed that the world will never be quite the same again. I believe this is not only true from a practical standpoint (new security measures, changes in patterns of travel, immigration, impacts on privacy laws, armed forces, and the economy) but from an existential one.

Millions of people have not only observed a situation that few could imagine, we have shared an emotional experience that I think will change our inner landscapes as much as our outer ones.

I have watched the progression of many people from “What can I do? Should I go somewhere? Do something? I’ll give blood. I’ll make a donation” to the deeper and more personal journey that perhaps is inevitable as we work through this collective trauma. “How can this have happened?” “Life is so fragile, transitory.” “Where is my life?” “How am I going to make my life more meaningful, more connected? What if that were me, in that plane, that building... would I have been ready to go? What kind of world do I want to live in... what kind of life can I give my children?” These questions haunt us as we work through the days and weeks following the great break in reality that happened just four weeks ago.

September 11 not only changed the world, it changed us. It embarked us on a shared

journey of looking for reasons, hope, a future. And while for many the answer lies in action — action taken by states, by armies, for retaliation and maybe even closure... for many of us the journey is more internal.

In the small part of the universe that I inhabit, all things come down to volunteering. It is my passion, it is the thing I think about when I can't sleep. My staff like to tease that you could poke me in the middle of the night, and I'd wake up and start giving a speech about volunteers. So perhaps it is only my own unique perspective on the world, but I can't tell you how many people have approached me, and Volunteer Canada, with serious questions and a yearning to think about how they, how we, can now start to build a new way. They know from experience or they see from afar that a world where people live and contribute not only within their families, not only within their jobs, but for and with each other, is a better world.

I think it's the world we all yearn for. I know it's the world I want to live in.

I salute all of you for the part you play to help make that better world. I thank and celebrate the millions of volunteers that help make our countries remarkable, and I stand with you, looking ahead, ready to build and live in that brand new world.