

## 1996 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

### ABSTRACT

*This article explores a successful national model for youth volunteerism. The Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada works to promote a life-long ethic of service among young people of today while helping them develop job-related skills. The program promotes an understanding of diversity and makes service fun. Why this program has thrived, how to get one started, and suggestions how to effectively integrate youth into volunteer programs are described.*

## Making Youth Volunteerism Interesting: The Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada

Christina Willard

Many adults have a misperception of youths today. Youths as a group often are defined in negative terms. Many of their positive qualities are ignored. Teens typically are described as apathetic and disinterested in the community and its future success. Youths often feel powerless and are given little opportunity to participate in solving community problems. When they feel a need to attract attention, young adults may act out using negative behavior to establish some sense of power and control. Most youths I talk to feel disconnected from the community and therefore feel no responsibility toward it.

Opportunities available to young adults typically reinforce the "disconnect-ness" youths say they feel. Activities and programs are designed to remedy youths' needs and shortcomings rather than use their abilities as resources. Although there are excellent programs for young adults offered by many agencies, they are usually meant to keep them busy and out of trouble, to teach them something, or to be fun. Young people are treated as *clients* rather than *contributors*. As service recipients they may not get the

opportunity to learn that their personal growth and development and their attitude are an integral part of the overall health of the community. By gaining an understanding of their obligation to the community, their self-esteem improves and negative behaviors can be dealt with constructively.

Involving youths in the community through the Youth Volunteer Corps program has the potential to transform both the young participants and the communities in which they serve. In contrast with other programs for youths, the Youth Volunteer Corps model empowers them to play a serving/helping role in the community. In addition, issues such as lack of job experience, inadequate knowledge of the community, and youths' isolationist lifestyles in which teens rebel against parents and other figures of authority are addressed.

### THE IDEA

In 1985 David Battey, President of the Youth Volunteer Corps of America, visited existing service programs as part of his research for a public policy thesis on

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youth service. While service opportunities were occasionally available for youths through schools, churches, and synagogues, a broad-based, community organization offering challenging, organized service projects to youths of all backgrounds was not consistently available. Developing a framework for such a program, Battey began to bring this model to life in his native Kansas City, Kansas. He has since repeated this process in 47 cities in the United States.

The first Youth Volunteer Corps site in Canada was established in 1993 by Child Friendly Calgary in Calgary, Alberta. The program was based on the American model. Because of its success, the Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada received funding in 1995 to set up a national office in Calgary. As is true of its United States sister organization, the Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada is the only program in Canada with the express mission to offer large scale, challenging, organized service projects to youths of all backgrounds. The Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada has established programs in Fort McMurray, Edmonton and Medicine Hat and Lethbridge in Alberta, bringing the total number of programs in North America to 52. Additional programs in Canada are planned for Ottawa, Victoria, Winnipeg, and Vancouver.

It is the mission of the Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada to create and increase volunteer opportunities to enrich Canada's youth, address community needs, and develop a lifetime commitment to service. By involving young people in community service, the Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada enables them to see themselves as a vital and necessary part of the communities in which they live. For teens at risk, it provides alternatives to negative activities.

While each program is tailored to meet unique community needs, all programs aim to meet four fundamental goals:

- To serve the needs of the community and its residents;
- To offer young people an opportunity to engage in service projects that are challenging, rewarding and educational;
- To promote among young people and residents a greater understanding and appreciation for the diversity of their communities; and,
- To promote a lifetime ethic of service among young people.

The program's cost-effectiveness and its appeal to diverse groups of young people has attracted established, non-profit sponsors like the YMCA, Red Cross, Boys and Girls Clubs, volunteer centers, municipalities, and school districts.

Held throughout the summer and school year, service projects sponsored by the Youth Volunteer Corps offer young people challenging, rewarding, and educational opportunities to serve their community. Reflection activities and curriculum-based service learning involve youths in a close examination of their service experience toward the goal of developing a lifetime ethic of service in each volunteer. Recruited from the full breadth of the community in which they live, youth volunteers ages 11-18 represent the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the community. Youths volunteer in teams that reflect the community's diversity. Reflection, service learning and the diverse, all-inclusive, team-based approach to volunteering are qualities that make the program a unique experience for young participants.

Studies on Youth Volunteer Corps of America programs (Ford, 1994) show that youths who participate gain in self-esteem, broaden their knowledge of the community, and develop increased tolerance and understanding for diversity. Their expectations of the future are enhanced. Young participants often express gratitude that the Youth Volunteer Corps program gave them an opportunity to break down negative stereotypes about them in their communities.

Affiliates are tied into an international network of program expertise through the

Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada and Youth Volunteer Corps of America. They receive developmental technical assistance, operational technical help, fund development assistance, fund raising materials, program evaluation, volunteer insurance, international conferences, promotional materials, a network for sharing information, Youth Volunteer Corps publications, and bulk purchasing.

## HOW TO INTEGRATE YOUTH INTO VOLUNTEER SERVICE IN THE COMMUNITY

Young people who are turned away from service opportunities at non-profit agencies because they are too young become discouraged from volunteering and are not likely to pursue volunteer opportunities again. Far from the stereotype that young people are lazy or don't care, studies show that 80 percent of teens are willing to serve if only they were asked (Independent Sector, 1992).

By utilizing youth volunteers, entirely different energies are added to an agency. Given the opportunity, youths can develop amazing ideas for projects that may not have been considered, benefiting the organization and the community.

The following recommendations from youth volunteers and the non-profit agencies working with them will ensure successful experiences with teen volunteers.

- Be creative, think young, and make the service interesting and age-appropriate.
- Involve them to their fullest potential. They can achieve great results.
- Treat them as you would an adult volunteer, with respect and trust. Involve them in decision-making wherever possible. They have excellent ideas, and should be given the opportunity to voice them.
- Be organized and keep them busy. Make sure they have enough work to do while volunteering. Boredom demotivates volunteers and leaves an opening for non-productive behavior.
- Design service opportunities that meet real community needs. Take time to talk openly about these needs to help youths make the connection between their contribution and the "bigger picture."
- Find a space for them to put their belongings so they do not feel as if they are in the way. Young people sometimes are uncomfortable fitting into an adult world. Make an extra effort to make them feel welcome.
- Where driving may be necessary, be sensitive to the transportation needs of young people who do not yet drive. Make sure projects are accessible. Don't miss out on utilizing the skills of some great kids where parental transportation or cost is involved.
- Consider scheduling. Be sensitive to the fact that most youths are full-time students. Think in terms of semesters and exam schedules. If you take these facts into consideration you are more likely to get consistent performance from them as volunteers.
- Be excited! Make sure that orientation is interesting and upbeat and moves them from their skill levels to where they should be.
- Be sure appreciation gifts are age-appropriate: not too young (balloons), and not too old (a tie pin with the agency's logo on it).
- Allow them to volunteer with other young people so they do not feel out of place. Understand that they need to socialize with one another.
- Give all staff at the agency an orientation on dealing with younger volunteers. It will help the adults feel more comfortable working with them. Not everyone knows how to relate to young people. Make sure youths are personally introduced to staff on their first day. They may be shy about interacting with the staff.
- Be careful not to set arbitrary age limitations for performing volunteer duties without considering why there is a restriction. The agency inadvertently

might be discouraging youth volunteerism.

## CONCLUSION

Why are there not more youth programs like the Youth Volunteer Corps? The conventional wisdom is that teens are a problem: unreliable, reckless, self-centered, and not to be trusted with important responsibilities. From my experience this is the case in only a very small percentage of young people. In fact, my experience demonstrates quite the opposite.

The Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada targets young citizens who are not often seen as a resource and invites them to become a part of the solution to public problems. They are expected to address real community needs. By offering youths opportunities to contribute and engage in meaningful work, we not only get things done, but transform the perception society has of them. Through programs like these, youths become potential agents of positive change. Through volunteering youths get a chance to learn about themselves and where they fit into the matrix of interpersonal and community relationships.

Youths who are encouraged and trained as volunteers become adults who want to volunteer later in life and who will make contributions to their communities. In fact, one of our young volunteers said, "After volunteering, I have become more patient, more respectful and more accepting. I have a deeper concern for others as well as my community. I have a more positive feeling about the future of

society, and I look forward to seeing more youth coming together and involving themselves in community service."

Service to others has a powerful effect on our attitudes and perceptions. This is as true for youths, who are in the sometimes painful process of entering early adulthood, as it is for adults. As a Youth Volunteer Corps of America board member eloquently said, "If volunteerism did not exist, we would invent it to express ourselves. Everyone needs to give. Life is empty without it." Youths involved in service have the opportunity to be seen and regard themselves as active citizens, as valuable a resource as the adults around them, and as individuals who will make a lifetime commitment to volunteering and community service.

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## ENDNOTE

For more information about starting a Youth Volunteer Corps program in your community, contact the author at: Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada, #720, 640 - 8th Ave SW, Calgary, AB, T2P 1G7, Tel (403)266-5448, Fax (403)264-0266, E-mail: friendly@cadvision.com

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## REFERENCES

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