
Helping Others or Helping Yourself? The COVID-19 Pandemic and WE Charity Scandal Have Forced a Long Overdue Discussion About Volunteering in Canada

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As the COVID-19 pandemic raged in March, Bayan Khatib knew she had to act quickly.

The executive director of the Syrian Canadian Foundation was in charge of a program that taught English to newcomers to set them on the path to integration, and another that funded and mentored refugee women who want to become entrepreneurs. She relied heavily on volunteers, around 100 a year, mostly University of Toronto students referred to her organization by their instructors, to work with individuals who had suffered great hardship to come to Canada.

The lockdown threw their plans into disarray. But six months later, after a brief lull, the programs are again in full swing, mostly virtually.

“At first, when the pandemic started, it seemed like the whole world stopped for a moment, and none of us knew how to proceed,” she said. “We shifted everything online.”

The foundation began distributing donated laptops to newcomers who could not afford them, published training videos to teach them how to use online learning platforms, and moved tutoring and mentoring online. The student volunteers found the arrangement more flexible and dove back into the programs with more time on their hands amid a challenging job market.

“The services we provide are essential to integration, and language is the first step to that,” Khatib said. “We can’t get by without volunteers.”

The foundation’s experience aligns with broader trends in Canada’s volunteerism or “service” sector, both in the aftermath of the pandemic and in recent years, as the sector has seen a rise in informal forms of volunteering that are not managed or organized by government institutions or volunteer centres. Virtual volunteering to counteract the risks of COVID-19 and maintain safety measures during the pandemic is increasingly common.

Together, these changes augur a deeper shift in a Canadian practice that continues to play a key role in providing services for vulnerable communities, even amid the pandemic, and whose strength is seen as a reflection of national values.

The sector was rocked this summer by the controversial Student Service Grant program, which the federal government has since abandoned. WE Charity, which had been chosen to manage it, recently announced the closure of its Canadian operations, partly blaming the fallout from the cancelled volunteer project.

Some experts hope this will trigger a broader conversation on volunteerism and its role in a healthy and equitable society. They say the \$900-million program, which planned to offer post-secondary students money in exchange for volunteering hours at non-profits, highlights key issues that the volunteerism sector has struggled with answering for years, including the creation of financial incentives so that poorer, underprivileged students can volunteer. Additionally, the sector has grappled with changing trends, such as the decline in formal volunteering through registered charities, and with how to create meaningful volunteering opportunities for youth that advance their careers.

The pandemic has exacerbated these and other existing challenges. Though thousands of Canadians have registered with volunteer centres since March, charities have struggled to offer placements due to limited resources. Many senior citizens, who make up most of the volunteers in Canada, stepped back because they are at higher risk of contracting and dying from the virus.

The WE scandal has revived questions about the relationship of the federal government with the non-profit sector. Many volunteer centres said the government did not consult them about the program and experts say the money would have been better spent in directly supporting charities. They say the now-cancelled program’s deficiencies ought to revive proposals calling for a renewed mechanism for collaboration with the federal government or for the non-profit sector to have a seat at the table, such as through a dedicated ministry.

“I think there is an opportunity here for us to really bring labour and those involved in volunteer engagement together and come up with some clearly articulated principles of what volunteering is,” said Paula Speevak, the president and CEO of Volunteer Canada.

Volunteerism is often seen in altruistic terms: a service without financial compensation. But experts say that thinking is outdated because financial incentives can make volunteerism more equitable and worthwhile for low-income youth. In 2013, 52% of people who made more than \$120,000 a year volunteered, compared to 33% of those whose annual income was less than \$20,000.

They also say volunteering offers concrete benefits to youth, including networks that can help them land jobs, the development of new skills, and a sense of empowerment as participants in civil society.

Christopher Dougherty, an expert in philanthropy and non-profit leadership at Carleton University, said that in addition to income disparity, volunteering reflects other societal trends like systemic racism. Volunteer recruitment and screening policies often eliminate marginalized youth from service programs.

“A lot of these young volunteers tend to be from privileged backgrounds,” he said. “A lot of organizations require a clean police check, so no convictions at any point for anything, so if you have someone coming from a marginalized community, or a community that has experienced systemic racism at the hands of the police and justice systems, they are unable to access volunteer opportunities because they have a police record.”

Niduk D’Souza, the founder of Impact With Intention, which works with charities and non-profits to help them manage volunteers, says the unpaid work model of volunteerism is dead.

“By creating functional roles in an unpaid capacity, what you’re actually validating as an employer, whether you’re in the for-profit or non-profit space, is that you’re saying that that labour does not have value,” she said. “People will protest that of course it has value. No, it fundamentally does not because the reality is you are unwilling to pay for it. If you truly valued it, you’d put money into it.

“Take that one billion dollars and create jobs,” she added.

Formal volunteering through volunteer centres and associations has declined over the years. While 47% of Canadians volunteered in 2010, according to Statistics Canada, that figure fell to 41% in 2018. The numbers are evened out by higher rates of informal volunteering, however, in which community members spontaneously come together to help neighbours in need.

Canada ranks third among the 37 member countries in the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) in volunteering rates. Between 2008 and 2014, the OECD estimated that more than 40% of Canadians had volunteered at least once in the past year, just slightly behind the Netherlands and the United States.

An estimated 12.7 million Canadians formally volunteered in 2018, mostly with hospitals, religious organizations, and as part of sports programs, giving a total of 1.6 billion hours, or the equivalent of 858,000 full-time jobs. However, informal volunteers were estimated at about 22.7 million people, or three quarters of all Canadians who are older than 15, devoting approximately 3.4 billion hours.

Both formal and informal volunteering efforts can be a lifeline for underprivileged communities. Joulnar El Hussein is a volunteer who translates for refugee claimants, newcomers, and immigrants in both informal and formal settings like meetings with social workers, court hearings, or childcare disputes. She said she had to step back from volunteering at the start of the pandemic due to the uncertainty surrounding the virus in the early days. When she began translating again in mid-May, most of it was over the phone, but she said the number of cases has declined, and some issues, like child protection disputes, are difficult to gauge properly

without being present in-person.

This can mean that, without support for volunteering efforts, societal ills like domestic violence, on the rise globally since the pandemic's onset, can go undetected.

In 2019, the Senate published the results of a year-long study of the charitable sector, which also explored changes in volunteering trends. The [Catalyst for Change report](#) called for a national volunteer strategy that encourages volunteerism by Canadians in their communities, describing volunteers as the “lifeblood” of non-profits and communities. It urged the government to support volunteers responding to the unique needs of northern, rural, and urban communities; to help pay for the cost of recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers who deliver services for non-profits; and to explore ways to offer “recognition” to volunteers who make important contributions in areas like public safety.

Before the pandemic, Canadians aged 53 and older carried out most volunteer hours. But roughly half of young people aged 15-22 also volunteer, many through school programs – the highest rate in any of the age groups.

Ilona Dougherty, the co-creator and managing director of the Youth and Innovation Project at the University of Waterloo, said youth tend to mix formal and informal volunteering, and to gravitate towards opportunities linked to causes that they believe in, such as social justice and inequality.

But she said there is a disconnect between their aspirations and the ability of non-profits to engage them by providing meaningful volunteer opportunities.

“We have a big gap in this country when it comes to understanding what a meaningful opportunity for a young person looks like and understanding the capacity necessary to meaningfully engage young people in civil society,” she said. “There are a lot of times where we fall short, where the non-profit sector has fallen short.”

Dougherty said financial incentives are important to make volunteerism fair. But she notes it is also crucial to ensure that youth volunteer experiences are meaningful in a measurable way. Organizations should shift their thinking and see youth volunteers as having unique abilities with brains wired for finding innovative solutions to problems; they must foster an environment of “intergenerational collaboration.”

“We really don’t believe in what we think is a myth, which is that young people are only around to learn and adults are all-knowing and have tons of wisdom and knowledge and are there to impart it to young people,” she said, noting that having diverse mentors from different ethnic backgrounds will encourage more youth to participate in volunteerism.

The question of how to match youth with volunteer opportunities is one that local volunteer centres around the country, which form the core of the formal volunteering sector, have spent decades trying to answer.

Marie Eveline, the executive director of Volunteer Ottawa, said volunteer centres were largely left out discussions in the run-up to the announcement of WE Charity’s role in the Student Service Grant program. For decades, these groups have built up pools of candidates and have

expertise matching them with viable opportunities with non-profits. They have also developed training programs that helped potential candidates volunteer during the pandemic, including safety training protocols and guidance on virtual volunteering.

Eveline's organization, which has existed for 62 years and works with 300 non-profits, has a pool of around 9,000 volunteers, as well as 3,000 people who have registered to help with pandemic-related activities.

COVID-19 has altered the volunteering scene. In addition to seniors taking a step back due to the risks, office closures and cancelled activities meant that there have been fewer placements than volunteers, even though some groups have offered virtual volunteering opportunities. Demand may rise with phased reopening, but it is too early to tell whether seniors will feel safe enough to participate.

"Volunteers are an essential component of any non-profit organization and when we start looking at the post-COVID world and what it looks like, the financial uncertainty for a lot of non-profits will be very high, because we know that all levels of government will have pretty high deficits," Eveline said. "And whether and how non-profits are going to be able to sustain themselves, COVID is going to be a real challenge, and the need for volunteers is only going to increase."

Given the upheaval and the costs for charities to onboard volunteers, Eveline said the proposed WE model under the Student Service Grant program was not ideal. Rather than a mixed approach, she believes it is more efficient to offer grants to students and direct support to non-profits and volunteer centres, particularly given the safety protocols during the pandemic.

"The organizations play a crucial role in serving the community," she said. "Without a lot of social services that are provided by non-profits, most of the needs of the vulnerable in communities would not be met."

Yet Eveline argued that financial incentives for volunteers ought to be more carefully considered.

"Volunteering is volunteering, and paid employment is paid employment," she said. "A lot of other issues raise their head when it comes to whether the employee is a volunteer or paid employee, and that need for liability or insurance, all of these kinds of issues are different if you're a volunteer or an employee, so for a lot of non-profits it becomes quite a challenge to figure out how to manage that, and with the lines blurred it's quite confusing to figure out how you deal with those issues."

The face of volunteering has been changing for some time. Youth are increasingly looking for opportunities in organizations that support causes they care about, such as social justice and equality, rather than simply approaching service as a prerequisite for graduation.

In addition, the rise in informal volunteering may in fact be a marker of a healthier Canada, despite the decline in formal service – it denotes a society with an instinct for help and collaboration at the grassroots level.

Speevak said these organic and direct ways of giving have increased in recent years, partly

because technology makes it easier to help or raise funds for local causes, and partly because it feels empowering to take action.

“When you think about communities and social ties and extended families, you could argue that when there’s a strong social network and a socially cohesive community, that the natural, informal way of helping one another happens and you don’t need the intervention of organizations and formal volunteering,” she said. “You could argue that that’s actually the sign of a healthy network and community.”

These trends are likely to accelerate due to the pandemic, as people normalize seeking support within their communities and are more open about their needs. In neighborhoods across the country, Speevak said, there is a resurgence in local community initiatives and support.

But she maintains that the formal sector has an important place within society more broadly – not just as an institution that helps people give back to their communities and participate in civil society, but also because organized volunteers have helped spearhead important legislative changes that benefited their communities, whether on safety issues like seatbelts or linked to social justice causes like same-sex marriage.

The expertise of volunteer centres around the country can be a lifeline for non-profits and other organizations that need volunteers to keep offering services to their communities.

Speevak said the WE debacle and the changing landscape of volunteering during the pandemic present an opportunity to reassess the federal government’s relationship with the non-profit sector, perhaps by reviving and revisiting the deal with the sector that was signed in 2001 by Prime Minister Jean Chretien. The Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector was meant as a first step in forging a deeper relationship between Ottawa and the charitable sector. It featured a commitment by the government to engage the sector in issues of legislation and the development of policies and programs, to help build its capacity, and give it a seat at the ministerial table.

Speevak says it’s time to revisit the accord and consider reforms like a government ministry for the sector and a joint apparatus for government and the voluntary sector to work together.

Dougherty, of Carleton University, agrees that the formal sector has an important role to play, particularly in more challenging arenas like working with vulnerable children, but notes that the trend towards people altruistically helping their neighbours is also worth encouraging.

“If we could as a society and country find more ways and opportunities to do that, and to encourage that pro-social behaviour, move away from this hyper-formal, regulated and insured form,” he said. “We can be a lot more flexible and find ways to encourage people to just help their neighbours.”