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Volunteer Bureau Assessment Report

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Final Report towards completion of the Assessment of Community
Counseling and Resource Center project
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Abstract:

This study is intended to help the Volunteer Bureau develop specific strategies to focus its actions in the community. The research addresses the needs of the community, the needs of clients including organizations needing volunteers and individuals seeking to find suitable volunteer placements, and the ability of the Bureau to meet these needs. The report begins by creating the context of the research by providing some background on the Canadian volunteering and the Volunteer Bureau. It then outlines the methodology used to undertake the research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteers are the lifeblood of civil society and many social services in Canada. They deliver services and programs that improve and enhance community life. The Volunteer Bureau is one of the 200 volunteer centers across Canada that is “dedicated to advocating and supporting the needs of volunteers, as well as the agencies that require volunteer help.” Promoting volunteerism has become especially important in recent years, as Canadians have begun to volunteer less. Volunteer Centers must become more dynamic and effective in their outreach to help reverse this trend and protect the services provided by volunteer-run organizations. To do so, organizations like the Volunteer Bureau are seeking to develop a clearer sense of community needs and a clearer vision of their role.

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The report begins by creating the context of the research by providing some background on the Canadian volunteering and the Volunteer Bureau. It then outlines the methodology used to undertake the research. The research findings are presented in four major sections; Background, Services Provided, Communications, and the Volunteer Bureau and the Community. These sections are split into question responses, which are further subdivided by the sources of the response; the survey of listed organization, the survey of non-listed organizations, the survey of volunteering clients, or the Bureau staff interviews. From the analysis of these findings the authors have created a list of priorities,

goals and specific suggestions for the Volunteer Bureau. The report concludes with some closing thoughts, references, and appendices of the surveys and interviews.

The Volunteer Bureau is one of the seven programs that the Community Counseling and Resource Center (CCRC) provides to the community. The CCRC is a multi-service agency that empowers people and the community through counselling and access to resources. The primary objective of the Volunteer Bureau since it was started has consistently been the recruitment and referral of volunteers to organizations in the community. The second priority of the Volunteer Bureau over the years has been assisting agencies and organizations to develop and maintain their volunteer programs.

The Volunteer Bureau is run by a small but dedicated staff of four people. Three are part-time unpaid volunteer staff who conduct interviews with volunteering clients, help update the databases of volunteering positions, and answer telephones, and a part-time paid Program Manager who is also the part-time Program Manager of the adjoining Information Centre. The main activities of the Bureau include guiding individual volunteering clients through the volunteer opportunities available in Peterborough and helping to identify placements that would suit the client's needs; maintaining and updating databases of these positions; maintaining and updating the online volunteering position database for the www.fourinfo.com search program; answering client questions over the telephone; publicity for the website and services; and providing community outreach workshops and events to facilitate, promote and celebrate volunteerism.

The authors of this report are Kasia Kalat and Heather Stewart, fourth-year students of Comparative Development Studies at Trent University. This assessment was conducted as a partnership between the CCRC and the university. CDS422 "Assessment of Development Project" is a Comparative Development course taught by Professor Daniel

Powell, with the involvement of the Trent Center for Community Based Education. The students learn and discuss assessment methodology during the first term, and conduct an assessment of a community organization in their second term. This assessment is intended to be a major term project involving approximately 160 hours of work over three months and resulting in a report of 30-50 pages in length for the organization.

The goal of the assessment was broad: to determine the needs and expectations of staff and the community in relation to the role of the CCRC's Volunteer Bureau (Volunteer Bureau) in Peterborough in order to help inform the revitalization of the Bureau. The key research question was "how can the Volunteer Bureau provide better volunteering services to the community?"

The project was designed with the goal of benefiting the broader community. In the short run, the research should help inform the revitalization of the Volunteer Bureau. In the middle run, we hope the Volunteer Bureau will be able to provide better and broader service to facilitate volunteer recruitment for local organizations. In the long run, we hope that the civic society and social capital of Peterborough will be strengthened. The student researchers benefit by receiving course credit, gaining awareness of volunteer-run organizations in Peterborough, gaining practical understanding of evaluation methodology, and increasing employability through concrete field experience.

To achieve these goals, the following activities were conducted: study and summarize background material on Volunteer Bureau activities; conduct depth interviews with the 3 Volunteer Bureau volunteer staff and the directors of the Volunteer Bureau and CCRC; prepare and distribute survey questionnaires to 67 listed agencies and 30 non-listed agencies; conduct telephone surveys with 10 past volunteering applicants; analyze results, and discuss findings with Volunteer Bureau and CCRC directors. All activities

were conducted from early January to late March of 2002, in four stages: pre-research and orientation, primary research, data analysis, and report writing and presentation.

In all, 55 respondents contributed to this research – 40 community organizations (listed and unlisted), 10 past volunteering recommendation clients, 3 volunteer staff, the Program Manager, and the Executive Director. The four main themes are Background, Services Provided, Communication, and Community. These findings have been analyzed by theme and subtheme first, and by source within each subtheme. Some thematic summaries follow.

Background

Some important findings include the fact that the majority of organizations listed with the Volunteer Bureau are from the Social Service, Health and Education sectors.

Services Provided

The average percentage of local community organization volunteers recruitment from Volunteer Bureau recommendations is only 12%. Other popular “organization self-help” methods of finding volunteers are through media publicity (22% of listed organizations) and word of mouth (11% of listed organizations and 23% of non-listed). Only 1/3 of the non-listed organizations felt that they had enough volunteers to meet their needs. 83% of listed organizations and 23% of non-listed organizations had attended volunteering-themed events over the past year. Findings indicate that satisfaction with services provided by the Volunteer Bureau is high overall but is inconsistent – some organizations have been disappointed in the past. All clients expect the Bureau to provide information and recommendations, and many believe the VB can and should serve as a

liaison in the community, helping to link organizations with individuals and with other organizations.

Communication

There was a universal demand for more communication with the community to create better publicity and keep listings up-to-date. In terms of finding out about the services of the Volunteer Bureau, 33% used a combination of word of mouth and the telephone book, 25% found it online, and 12% learned of it through a newspaper ad. 84% of listed organizations said they would benefit from greater communication with the Bureau.

Community

There was a strong consensus that the Volunteer Bureau provides service of significant benefit to the community. Some of these benefits include helping increase recruitment and participation, which improves social services in general and individual participant's self-worth in particular, helping to celebrate and educate people about volunteerism, and serving at a liaison between organizations and individuals and between different organizations. As for improving this role, there were once again some main repeated recommendations: increase outreach and communication, increase funding, and get the databases up to date.

The key recommendations derived from these findings are as follows: create strategies to find more funding. Hire an externally-oriented Senior Director for the Volunteer Bureau to firstly get the databases updated and secondly increase publicity and awareness. Increase leadership and communication within the Volunteer Bureau to create

a more dynamic atmosphere. Empower staff with ownership of specific key tasks, such as developing publicity materials or recruiting and supervising a youth volunteer to help out in the office. Continue to look for a new address that is centrally and accessibly located and which has adequate space. Increase links and interactiveness in the FourInfo website, and add posting dates to the position descriptions to help prevent inaccurate entries. However, when pursuing these changes, be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Noted positive elements, such as the good morale and respect between the Program Manager and staff, the value of the blue Community Services Handbook, and the confidence-enhancing qualities of the personal volunteer placements interviews must be maintained and protected throughout the process.

When the findings of this report are compared to goals of the revitalization project, they turn out to be nearly identical. However, that does not decrease their validity. The researchers consider the results a fair and critical reflection of community needs and opinions, which is a tool that the CCRC has needed to help situate and empower its revitalization process. There is a strong likelihood that these results will be used to promote change and renewal, which the researchers find a very satisfying and fulfilling thought.