Family Volunteering:
A Discussion Paper

Introduction

This paper examines family volunteering in Canada and serves as a precursor to research Volunteer Canada is undertaking in 2002 about this topic.

The paper:

▸ defines family volunteering[1];

▸ considers various definitions of family;

▸ examines the renewed interest in family volunteering in North America;

▸ identifies who is most likely to participate;

▸ describes how and why people in Canada are engaging in family volunteering activities;

▸ investigates strategies community organizations are employing to attract families to volunteer (as well as best practices in retaining them); and

▸ examines the barriers and gaps that exist within organizations that may prevent the development of family volunteering.

The paper is most likely of interest to voluntary organizations, volunteer managers and coordinators who work with volunteers, as well as employers (corporate or public sector) who promote employer-supported and retiree volunteer initiatives.

According to the *2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP)*, volunteer rates declined in Canada from 1997. As the national rate for volunteering dropped from 31% to 26% we saw one million fewer Canadians volunteering in 2000 than three years earlier. The Survey results highlighted a number of other trends, including Canada's growing reliance on a sub-set of "super" volunteers, where 7% of the Canadian population does 73% of all the volunteer work. We also observed an increase in employer support for volunteering and a growing concern among Canadians around how they will utilize their time.

We can take heart from the knowledge that although fewer people volunteered in the year 2000, most age groups increased the number of hours given, resulting in a seemingly lower impact from the diminishing numbers.

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[1] In an effort to provide a framework for a definition, this report refers to research from the following sources: the Points of Light Foundation pilot project *Family Matters* (USA); the Independent Sector (USA); Massachusetts Board of Education; Northwest Regional educational Laboratories, Portland Oregon; ISUMA, Canadian Journal of Policy Research; Heritage Canada; The Vanier Institute of the Family (Canada); and, the Federal Department of Human Resources Development.

According to the *2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP)*, volunteer rates declined in Canada from 1997.

On the other hand, the challenge that faces charities and non-profit organizations is clear. Many Canadians are simply choosing not to volunteer. Those that do volunteer indicate that the effective use of their time is an important element in their decision to contribute.

Competing interests for peoples' time obviously include family responsibilities. This is especially true for people in their middle years—Baby Boomers—who may find themselves carefully balancing work, family and personal interests often with children and parents needing support at the same time.

Family volunteering is an obvious way to respond to the need for charities and non-profits to increase (or at least maintain) their volunteer pool while being cognizant of, and responsive to, the competing interests for the time of their potential volunteers.

Despite being a seemingly self-evident way to "kill two birds with one stone"—for both community organizations and families—family volunteering is far less prevalent than we might imagine. Voluntary organizations have

been slow to change tried and true volunteer recruitment methods. Few volunteer jobs are explicitly designed to be carried out by families. Canadians are not widely aware of the opportunities for volunteering by families that could be available.

It appears that the timing is excellent to begin a dialogue within the voluntary sector around the benefits and even the challenges of introducing family volunteering programs. Promotional work should go a long way to raising awareness among the public and policy-making spheres about family volunteering. As a first step, this paper details a number of the issues touched on above and begins to explore the way forward to making family volunteering an integral part of the Canadian volunteer mosaic.

Defining the Family

The United Nations declares that families constitute the basic unit of society, and therefore warrant special attention (1994). However, one of the challenges is to find a comprehensive and widely accepted definition of family. In fact, it is the opinion of the Census Bureau of the United States that there is "no typical family household" (Jalandoni and Hume 2001). The Independent Sector also states that "one of the interesting key elements of families is that they define themselves." For its purposes, Volunteer Canada has adopted The Vanier Institute of the Family's approach to defining family. Resonating universally and used by many countries, the Institute defines family as:

"Any group of two or more people that consider themselves to be a family: parents, children, siblings, foster parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and any others who consider themselves a family."

This definition can be further broken down into six specific types of family configurations, outlined in the box below.

The Six Types of Family Configurations

▶ **Nuclear** families are composed of two parents and their natural or adopted children living together

▶ **Extended** families include parents, children, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other blood relations known to each other, whether living together or not

▶ **Blended** families are composed of a parent who has separated from a first spouse, the children living with the parent, and the parent's new spouse, as well as any children the new spouse brings to the unit, and any children the new couple have together

▶ **Single-parent** families consist of a lone parent and any children living with him or her

▶ **Childless** families consist of a couple with no children

▶ **Common-law** relationships resemble the various married relationships, without the legal tie of a marriage

(Porritt, 1995)

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The importance of the family unit in creating and maintaining society cannot be underestimated. Combining income-generating and individual support functions within family units is an efficient way to ensure that personal, community and societal needs are met. Most important from a volunteerism perspective is the reality of how much the family shapes the values, growth and learning of its members.

More than church, education or other institutions it is within the family that most of us are given our fundamental values. Concepts of community, philanthropy and volunteering are handed down from one generation to the next. Parents are the role models in the family and their actions set the standard around civic stewardship and community responsibility. It is within our family units that we learn how to become citizens as well as individuals.

Today's families face unique pressures around challenging work schedules and more demanding life responsibilities. The widespread trend of women who work outside the home has had a dramatic impact on the day-to-day existence of most families, particularly in terms of how they use their time.

According to Statistics Canada's *General Social Survey (1998)*, although women participate extensively in the workforce, their overall participation in and contribution to household activities and childcare still ranges anywhere from 33% to 66% higher than their male counterparts.

Economic downturns and instability have also created less financial security among more families than might have been the case a generation ago. Twenty years ago, only 30% of couples with children aged 18 or younger in the household were dual earners. By 1990, that percentage had dramatically risen to 71%.

While the factors that have led to this new reality are complex and include the evolution of women's roles, it appears that economic factors are the primary driver as many families now need two incomes in order to match what one earner was making in 1980 (Porritt, 1995).

Lack of time is still cited as the most common barrier to participating more—or at all—in volunteer activities. According to The Vanier Institute of the Family, one-third of Canadians say they worry that they do not spend enough time with their families or friends. This is confirmed by Jones (2000) and Porritt (1995), whose findings indicate that Canadians say they are having trouble balancing their work and family lives.

The 1998 *General Social Survey* confirms Frederick's (1995) findings that over the years total work has increased, as have role responsibilities. These issues are compounded by the necessity for dual-income families, increased involvement in part-time work and people holding down more than one job to meet their needs. Combined work and caregiving hours have increased to 10.3 hours per day for mothers and 9.9 hours per day for fathers—an increase of 2.0 hours per week since 1992 for both men and women.
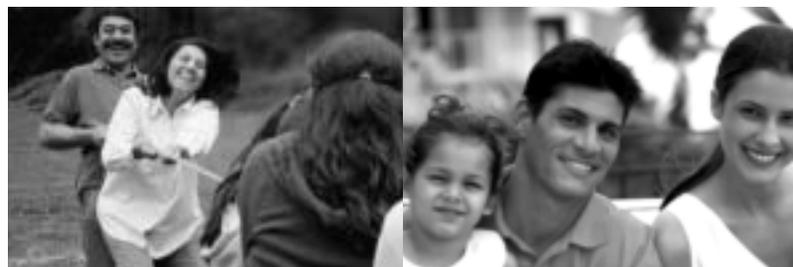
Family Volunteering

In its broadest definition, family volunteering is about volunteer activities carried out by members of a family as a joint activity. This would, of course, include volunteering done by adult members of a family together, for example, sisters delivering meals on wheels together, or a father and teenaged-son coaching hockey.

However, for most community organizations the differentiating factor between family volunteering and "regular" volunteering lies in those cases where the volunteer work is explicitly designed to accommodate either a group of people or adults and children together.

Seen this way, family volunteering is not new. What characterizes the now identified "trend" of family volunteering relates more to the management strategies built around this kind of involvement.

As community-based organizations have moved toward a more formal, professional and organized approach to the involvement of volunteers, they have come to develop unique approaches to engaging different types of volunteers such as new Canadians, youth, employer-supported groups and, of course, families.

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In these cases, the volunteer work or position needs to be expressly designed to involve a family unit. Likewise the recruitment, management and recognition strategies utilized by the organization will likely differ from those used for individual-based volunteering.

In the course of her research, Porritt (1995) discovered that, "While people do not necessarily label their volunteer activities 'family volunteering,' they have been doing it for years. Working together at the art gallery, the church bazaar, knitting mittens, being good neighbours, or delivering meals on wheels are but a few examples of family volunteer activities."

From an individual perspective, the concept of family volunteering introduces a new way of defining and shaping a contribution of time to a cause being made by a person. So while not very different from (volunteer) 'business as usual,' family volunteering takes on a brand or profile perceived as a new approach to a familiar idea. Family volunteering presents excellent opportunities to capitalize on innovative ways to volunteer while enabling families to spend more time together in today's busy world. Almost any volunteer environment that can be imagined—special events, schools, sports, health care, elder care, literacy, the environment and disaster relief—can potentially benefit from the contributions of families volunteering together.

Volunteer work exposes children to real life examples of values-driven action. Through it, children learn how to interact and respond to people in the community who are in need of their help as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the scope of community need.

Whether the volunteering occurs in formal settings (such as through an organization), or is done informally (support given directly to an individual or a family project like a park clean-up), family volunteering enables parents, grandparents, children, and extended family members to give their time to worthwhile activities while being together.

Ultimately, it is the "togetherness" aspect of family volunteering that makes it such an attractive volunteering option. Ironically, it is that same element—the fact that family volunteering is done in groups, often intergenerationally—that presents the greatest challenge to community organizations creating and managing volunteer programming.

Ultimately, there are many benefits to family volunteering for individuals and their families as well as for community organizations and society as a whole.

Given the challenges that many people face to find time to do all the things they want to in life, family volunteering offers a wonderful opportunity for family members to be together while contributing to community or to a cause they hold dear.

"With family time more important than ever, [and] while families are busier than ever, they are still looking for ways to spend time together, teach important values, and share the experience of helping others" (Meléndez, Independent Sector, 2001).

The health and psychological benefits of volunteering are well documented and include a heightened sense of well-being, reduced social isolation, and a stronger connection to community. Volunteer work also increases a person's skills and may contribute to their ability to get or advance in a job.

For parents seeking to introduce their children to the values of reciprocity, caring for others and being part of community, family volunteering provides a remarkable way to practice—together—what they preach.

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Reed and Selbee (2001), along with Jones (2001), confirm the common knowledge that children whose parents volunteer and participate are more likely to be volunteers as adults. The impact of this modeling is clear, as we see that individuals who engaged in volunteering activity as a child or who observed their parents volunteering have a much higher probability of being a volunteer in their adult years. For example, 49% volunteered if a parent had volunteered, compared with 29% if a parent had not.

For organizations, families are a hotbed of potential volunteers. Parents constituted a substantial percentage of the volunteering population in Canada in 1997, with a higher percentage of mothers and fathers volunteering than non-parenting (other) adult women and men (Jones, 2001).

Moreover, parents most likely to volunteer also attended church more regularly, and were more likely to have been involved in student government, sports or volunteering while they were still in grade or high school. This group of parents also stated that they felt very satisfied with life generally (ibid). Perhaps most importantly, family volunteers also volunteer for longer periods of time and more regularly.

Family volunteering acts as a natural multiplier of volunteers, since recruitment of any one family member acts as a catalyst for enlisting other family members. However, if the organization fails to fulfill the needs of one family member, it risks facing one of the most common concerns of family volunteering—if one family member leaves, the entire family may go with them. The loss of a volunteer team can jeopardize the project underway and even the credibility of the organization.

As Canadian society is more and more influenced by technology, increased urbanization, and with it the social, health and environmental challenges that beset large cities, the need for a flourishing voluntary community has never been more important.

Studies have shown that communities with higher volunteer rates have lower crime rates and that people in those communities are consistently happier with their "lot in life" (Putnam, 2000).

Volunteers in Canada contribute more than a billion hours of service every year, making an incredible difference to our standard of living and quality of life. Society depends to a remarkable degree on the willingness of people to help each other, define and respond to emerging problems, create sport, culture, health and environmental programs and to give voice to issues and trends of importance to us all.

As such, any approach to volunteerism that enriches the pool of volunteers and potentially increases the number of Canadians who participate will ultimately be of substantial benefit to the country as a whole.

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The Organizational Environment
for Family Volunteering

As the trend toward family volunteering gains momentum, Canadians and their voluntary organizations need to be prepared. How is family volunteering best promoted? What are the challenges and benefits of this new approach? How do organizations prepare for the changes that are needed to foster viable family volunteering programs?

The introduction of family volunteers will undoubtedly require the organization to examine the types of opportunities it is prepared to offer its volunteers. New and innovative positions and projects will need to be developed, as always meeting the needs of the organization and community while at the same time appealing to the unique characteristics of family volunteers.

Volunteer involvement in any instance requires at the outset an assessment by the organization on how volunteer energies will be harnessed to achieve organizational mission. Approximately 40% of the 180,000 charities and non-profits in Canada have no paid staff at all and, at the other end of the spectrum, are perhaps 10,000 with relatively high ratios of paid staff to volunteers.

In either case, volunteers perform a vast array of tasks from governance (serving on boards and committees) to management, communications, and office and administrative support to direct services that range from counseling, coaching, cooking, tree-planting, and painting—in fact, virtually any set of tasks imaginable.

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Assuming that an organization has policies and procedures in place that guide the recruitment, oversight and recognition of volunteers, introducing a family volunteer program will probably be more a matter of adjusting than complete innovation.

As organizations put together the human resource strategy that will enable them to achieve their goals and objectives, they also need to consider the available pool of potential workers—whether paid or volunteer. While in the end it is the work that needs to be done that determines the allocation of people to jobs, it would be unwise for any recruiter not to also consider the interests, availability and skills of the people we plan to engage.

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This is particularly true in the case of volunteers who will likely come to an organization as interested to meet their own needs as those of the organization. When family volunteers approach an organization—or respond to a recruitment call—they bring with them a unique set of expectations and skills.

As discussed above, the key characteristic that defines family volunteers is the fact that they come forward as a unit of people—usually from a number of age groups. The family volunteers may be one or two parents with one or two children or could be as numerous as a whole 'clan.' Obviously, the more complex the family stepping forward, both in terms of number of people, age diversity and skill ranges, the more complicated it will be to find them the 'right' volunteer position.

Voluntary organizations that wish to embrace and capitalize on the trend of family volunteering will want to create a number of generic family-friendly volunteer positions long before recruiting any actual families. This allows the organization to look at their mission, and across the activities they are engaged in, and assess whether any lend themselves to being done by a family.

A good example that comes to mind is canvassing. While volunteer positions for door-to-door canvassing have traditionally been developed with individuals in mind, canvassing could easily be adapted to families. This is also an instance where the introduction of a family volunteer opportunity may be a real boon to the organization, many of which are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit canvassers.

The introduction of canvassing as a potential family activity could infuse new life into a struggling area of voluntary sector work. Conversely, there may be work done within the organization that would not lend itself to being done by a family, such as crisis or emergency response, one-to-one support, or other counseling-type services. As with any new development, it is ultimately in the implementing that the fine details will need to be explored.

In some instances, an organization may choose to respond to a specific request by a family to contribute. In this scenario, the organization might consider creating a special project for a family—a fundraising event perhaps, a clean-up day on-site, or a communications project.

Although this might seem like a lot of work, as with any one-time or episodic volunteer project, such initiatives can provide an opportunity to get something done that has been waiting in the wings for too long. And, while no organization wants to find themselves customizing all volunteer jobs to specific volunteers, there may be times when doing so will result in attracting more volunteers and possibly even more donors.
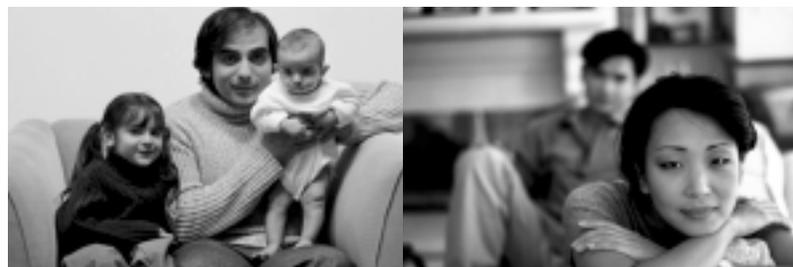
Once a volunteer position for a family is designed the organization will need to think through what the best orientation and training approach will be. Is it best to train one member of the family and designate them to prepare the others? Are special materials needed to explain the position (the organization, the client base, or the cause) to a child rather than those used for adult volunteers? Should families be recruited en masse—around a special project for example—and given a group orientation and training? This last option could make for a wonderful social event and create profile and goodwill for the organization as well as be a lot of fun.

It is perhaps in the area of oversight that family volunteering becomes most complex—largely due to the involvement of children. Policy decisions will need to be made regarding access to information, tools or clients.

Likewise, screening and risk management practices will need to be closely examined if children are to be involved as volunteers. The plus side of involving children via family volunteering is of course that parents will be with their children and can bear responsibility for their safety and their appropriate behaviours within the guidelines of the organizations.

Nonetheless, these aspects of the volunteer management process will need to be made explicit and parents will have to clearly understand the parameters of their responsibility to oversee, support, train and manage the behaviour of their children versus those of the organization.

The introduction of family volunteering into an organization may happen incrementally as Managers of Volunteers find themselves engaging one or two families in a project or it may be adopted as a volunteer recruitment strategy more comprehensively. In the latter case, it is likely that a Board of Directors decision will need to be made and the merits and challenges of involving families as volunteers will be debated.

The general benefits of family volunteering have been described above. Each organization is unique, however, and will need to consider how involving families as volunteers could:

- impact communities' understanding of their role;
- change the way the organization carries out its business;
- impact current volunteer programming;
- be perceived by funding sources; and
- impact staff at the program and volunteer management level.

While there may be instances where engaging family volunteers would be obviously inappropriate these are probably few and far between. For most voluntary organizations, adapting a volunteer position or creating a small project for a family will not require a great deal of effort or change.

Likewise, screening and risk management practices will need to be closely examined if children are to be involved as volunteers.

In some cases, taking the next step—strategically and consciously creating a family volunteer program—may have significant positive impacts. These include the enriching of the volunteer cohort, heightened community profile as a 'good' place to volunteer, renewed interest and energy around the volunteer program and, of course, increased capacity to get the work done (achieve mission).

There are steps common to every volunteer effort that must be followed in developing a family volunteering initiative. McCurley (1999) suggests that before developing a family volunteering initiative a number of questions need to be posed and issues must be considered.

For example, there is a need to review the organization's experience of working with families:

▸ What is the organization's past history of working with families?

▸ Does the organization serve clients who are in family groupings?

▸ Is strengthening families a part of the organization's mission?

▸ Does organization staff have expertise in working with families?

▸ Is the organization ready to broaden outreach to the community?

▸ Is the organization prepared to handle a "diversified" volunteer population?

▸ Does the organization have the capacity to accommodate increased numbers of volunteers?

Further, there is a need to examine the organization's commitment to family volunteering initiatives:

▸ Does the organization have the capacity to implement family volunteering initiatives?

▸ Will the organization develop and implement family volunteering recruitment, training, and retention strategies?

▸ Is the organization flexible enough to accommodate new and innovative volunteering schedules?

Finally, there is a need to assess the organization's ability to prepare, develop and implement family volunteering assignments that are suitable to different types of families and the unique needs of the organization:

▸ Does the organization have the capacity to offer opportunities for parents to function as positive adult role models by putting them in leadership roles?

▸ Will the organization include families and children in meetings that are a part of the volunteering commitment?
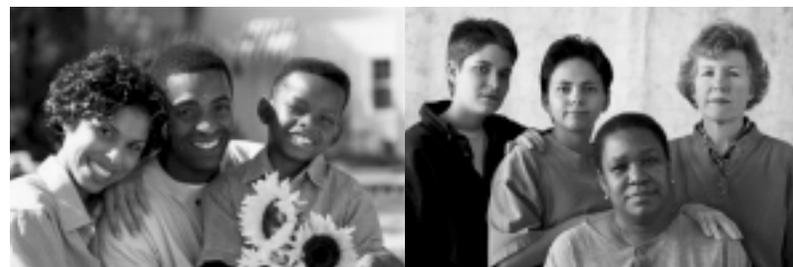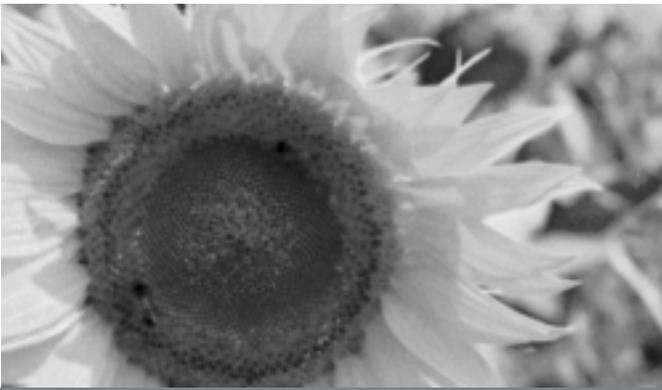
Conclusion

Family volunteering is on the horizon. If it is not on the minds of voluntary organizations, public policy makers or volunteer development specialists, it should be.

Jones (2001) suggests that community leaders and governments should pay greater attention to the amount of volunteering that parents and families are involved in, in an effort to capitalize on this generally overlooked category of volunteering.

Family volunteering is a simple and powerful idea. Families are naturally constituted to be self-oriented and independent. Give a family a job to do and they will find the best way to get it done, allocating specific tasks to members as appropriate, based on their own de facto system of operation.

Family volunteering is a simple and powerful idea.

The family of the 21st century faces a number of challenges and seemingly top among them is a shortage of available time. Many parents despair over how to balance their personal life and their work responsibilities, while also ensuring that their children—or even their parents—are safe, supported and healthy.

Family volunteering allows parents and children, siblings and the many other family constructs to spend quality time together while achieving the goal of contributing to the community and the causes they care about. Even the process of choosing the volunteer work they will do encourages families to explore how they will express their shared values in day-to-day life.

For each family member, volunteering offers an opportunity to develop new skill sets, utilize their existing skills and experience, teach each other and the people they encounter during their volunteer work and, perhaps most importantly, experience the satisfaction of doing something for others and making a difference.

If managed effectively, family volunteering offers voluntary organizations a new and innovative way to expand and enrich their volunteer programming. The end result will be increased productivity that ultimately benefits the causes and communities they seek to impact.

Family volunteering is a unique "win-win-win" situation where the volunteer, organization and community can benefit equally. It is truly a trend whose time has come.

For parents seeking to introduce their children to the values of reciprocity, caring for others and being part of community, family volunteering provides a remarkable way to practice—

together—what they preach.

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