

Family Volunteering: The Ties That Bind

An Introduction to Preparing Your Agency
for Family Volunteers

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WE WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO THANK the many Volunteer Centres and Bureaux across Canada that took the time and interest to answer our questionnaire. We used many of their comments, and gained much insight into the state of family volunteering in this country today.

Preface

VOLUNTEER CENTRES AND BUREAUX ACROSS CANADA recruit and refer volunteers to a wide range of human service organizations in their communities. For the United Nations International Year of the Family in 1994, the Volunteer Action Centre of Kitchener-Waterloo and Area decided to highlight the potential of families volunteering together. The Voluntary Action Program of the federal Department of Canadian Heritage regularly researches and reports on innovations in the recruitment of volunteers, and was happy to publish this report.

The report is intended to guide agencies through the process of involving family groups in programs and projects. We hope agencies that already use this excellent source of volunteers will also find useful suggestions to support their programs, and we encourage them to spread the word about family volunteering.

Organizations that have used family volunteers in their programs cannot say enough good things about what families bring to the agencies they work with and the people they support.

This report has made use of research from the Points of Light Foundation pilot project *Family Matters* in the USA, and from Canadian sources, including the International Year of the Family, the Vanier Institute of the Family, the federal Department of Human Resources Development; newspapers, and national magazines; a questionnaire distributed to Volunteer Centres across Canada; a Family Volunteer Forum attended by nonprofit groups in the Kitchener-Waterloo area; and personal anecdotes.

The theme for this report was “Family volunteering: not a new idea, just a really good one”. In the course of our research, we discovered that while people have not necessarily called it ‘family volunteering’, they have been doing it for years. Partners who work together at the art gallery, a girl who knits mittens with her great aunt for disadvantaged children, and parents who take the kids trick-or-treating at Hallowe’en while they collect pennies for UNICEF, are all ‘family volunteers’.

Family volunteering does not have to be a happy accident: it can be a part of your organizational planning. Recruiting and involving families as volunteers is not significantly different from recruiting individuals. The same qualities of good volunteer management must be there. You must understand your agency's needs, as well as what results you expect — *before you start recruiting*.

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The Canadian Family Today

THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY PROCLAIMED 1994 as International Year of the Family, based on the principle that “families constitute the basic unit of society, and therefore warrant special attention and care”.

The family is an essential element in the economic and social development of a progressive and compassionate society. It is within the bosom of the family that values are handed down from one generation to the next. Yet, according to the Vanier Institute of the Family, *one third of Canadians do not feel they are getting enough family time.*

Canada is made up of 28 million people in close to 7½ million families. Families come in many 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 split up with 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.

Married couples with children account for only 47.8% of the families in Canada.

Today, Canadians are working harder and longer than before. Twenty years ago, 30% of couples with children aged 18 or younger in the household were dual earners. By 1990, the percentage had risen to 71%. Of *all* Canadian families in 1991, 61.2% were two-earner families. Many now need two incomes just to match what one earner was making in 1980.

Canadians say they are having trouble balancing their work and family lives. Their work schedules leave them burned out, with little time left for what they value most — *their families, relationships, and other interests.* But Canadians are starting to actively seek new ways to balance work and family, creating opportunities for families of all ages to take a fuller part in society.

The Vanier Institute of the Family and the Canada Committee for the International Year of the Family ask in their booklet, *Canadian Families*, “How can we support families? How can all the different elements of the community — individuals and families, employers and workers, schools and other institutions, government — pull together to support healthy families?”

Family volunteering is one answer to this question.

What Is 'Family Volunteering'?

FIRST OF ALL, WE SHOULD DEFINE WHAT A FAMILY IS. To reach as many potential volunteers as possible, we should use a fairly liberal definition:

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

The emotional tie is noted as a key ingredient in the overall definition of family, so the exact technical nature of the relationships among the various people is irrelevant, just as long as they consider themselves 'family'.

What is 'family volunteering'?

Family volunteering occurs when family members volunteer together in community service activities. They may come from different generations, in combinations such as parent/child or grandparent/parent/child, or from the same generation, such as adult partners, or brother/sister.

Following are a number of definitions of family volunteering that volunteer centres and bureaux submitted in a survey. The concept most often emphasized was *togetherness*. When family members volunteer, there are enhanced opportunities for building relationships. One centre defined family volunteering as family members volunteering, but not necessarily at the same time or agency.

In this report, we will focus on guidelines for recruiting family members as volunteers in one agency, although family members may volunteer for different times, events, or programs.

Definitions of family volunteering submitted in a survey of volunteer centres and bureaux

- *families participating together in a volunteer activity*
- *families who believe in a specific cause and work together to assist in that cause*
- *an activity that involves the family unit in a nonprofit community-building activity*
- *an activity whereby family members work together to assist an individual, organization, or cause in the community*
- *when two or more people who consider themselves family volunteer at one service*
- *when members of a family unit all volunteer, not necessarily together at the same time or place, but for the same agency*
- *when a family with a common desire to enrich their own lives and the lives of others, offers their time and commitment in community service*

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Why Do Families Volunteer?

THERE ARE MYRIAD REASONS WHY A FAMILY WILL FIND TIME to volunteer together. An overwhelming majority of Canadians still regard their family as the most important thing in their lives, ahead of career, recreation and religion. A very strong motivation for families with children to volunteer together is that parents want to raise their children to believe that everyone has a responsibility to their family, friends, neighbours, and community. These parents choose to make service to others a part of their everyday value system.

All families who volunteer make a conscious effort to be active and to make a difference for their community. And many families want to meet others with similar values. Families are also aware that volunteering is an activity that can help build and sustain relationships within the family unit.

Benefits of Family Volunteering

VOLUNTEERISM IS AN IMPORTANT INGREDIENT OF THE GLUE that binds the family to its community. It allows the family to serve the community and pass on important values to its children, youth, and other adults, and to experience a shared sense of accomplishment — all at the same time. It is also an occasion for the family to spend quality time together, sharing meaningful experiences, common goals, and a sense of purpose.

How families benefit from volunteering

- *They gain a shared sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from giving back to the community*
- *They can discuss service and community issues and get to know each other better*
- *Volunteering creates positive role models for children and youth*
- *Volunteering can help families learn about their own community and social issues that affect it*
- *Volunteering promotes civic responsibility and enhances a family's sense of community*
- *Volunteering builds the self-confidence of family members*
- *Volunteering improves communication and support skills in the family and in the community*
- *Volunteering creates a history of family memories*
- *Volunteers meet people of diverse cultural and economic backgrounds*
- *Volunteers have an opportunity to share time and talents*
- *Volunteering experiences carry over into other parts of volunteers' lives*
- *Giving to others places a volunteer's own problems in perspective*
- *Volunteering forges special bonds between family members*
- *Volunteering helps children and teenagers to relate to other generations*
- *Volunteering gives families an opportunity to be together*
- *Volunteering makes families feel valued*
- *Families can make new social contacts*
- *Volunteer work can show families new ways to solve their own conflicts*
- *Volunteer work gives families a sense of purpose or belonging*
- *Families can participate together in special events (eg., walk-a-thons) without having to leave the kids behind*
- *Volunteering develops family pride*
- *Volunteering can relieve isolation (for newcomers, new parents, et al.)*

The institution of the family has long been seen as a basic building block of our communities. We all have our share of problems, but in the end, it is the family that shapes our children, and thus our society.

Family volunteering can provide charitable agencies with a source of new, vital and energetic volunteers to meet critical social needs in the community. Family volunteering can be an important part of a cycle of positive social change.

How communities benefit from family volunteers

- *Volunteering offers a potential for on-going change: children who volunteer become adults who volunteer*
- *Volunteering teaches the value of service and involvement in the community*
- *Volunteering illustrates the community's needs*
- *Agencies remain vibrant and in touch with the community*
- *Families become informed on community issues, service infrastructures, and the real impact of policy decisions*
- *Families become more responsible and involved*
- *Families build a sense of community within and among 'their' institutions*
- *Families help to build an active community*
- *Volunteering reinforces the importance of the family as an element of the community*
- *The community's activities are given moral support*
- *Families have potential for finding solutions to their community's problems*

The most obvious benefit a family volunteer program brings to a voluntary group is an increase in the pool of potential volunteers and thus in its budget, hours, and services. But an increase in the number of volunteers also challenges a group to review the opportunities it offers for volunteers, and may lead it to develop new programs and projects.

How agencies can benefit from family volunteering

- *Clients, media, funders and other volunteers see families as motivated and sincere*
- *Family volunteers bring a diversity of age, talent and skills*
- *Family connections increase the availability of volunteers for hard-to-fill and short-term positions, and can fill the gap in rush periods*
- *Family volunteering secures the volunteer population for the future*
- *Agencies reap the fruits of the family's collective creativity*
- *Family volunteers bring a variety of perspectives to solving problems*
- *Families provide support through existing relationships and role models*
- *Family volunteers create valuable community relations for agencies*
- *Families come already equipped with their own motivation and recognition*
- *Family volunteers multiply enthusiasm*
- *Family volunteering mobilizes the heart of the community*
- *Family volunteering initiates younger volunteers more effectively by providing parental support*
- *Family volunteering builds on the commitment of entire families*

Employees who have a hard time meeting family commitments often find it difficult to give their best at work. Absenteeism due to family stress, low morale and burn-out are on the increase. According to *Social Security in Canada: Background Facts*, a publication of the federal Department of Human Resources Development, stress-related disorders resulting from overwork cost Canadian businesses an estimated \$12 billion a year.

Family volunteering in corporate volunteer programs

Businesses across Canada have begun to incorporate employee volunteer programs into their daily activities. These companies encourage community volunteer involvement, and have found many positive benefits accrue from encouraging family volunteering.

How companies and employees benefit from family volunteering

- *Volunteering together gives family members positive insight into the company and the workplace*
- *Family volunteering offers a positive view of the role children and other family members can play in society*
- *Volunteering with the family increases employee commitment to the corporation*
- *Family volunteering improves public and community relations*
- *Family volunteering helps relieve employee stress*
- *Family volunteering frees up time to spend with the family*
- *Family volunteering creates positive feelings for the company in the community*
- *The employee loyalty built up through family volunteering will reap benefits from employees*
- *Family volunteering brings families together on neutral territory*
- *Family volunteering develops employees' leadership skills, empowerment and a sense of connection to the community through the company*
- *Family volunteering teaches employees that money is not the most important thing*
- *Family volunteering contributes to confidence in the future of the company and the community*

Family volunteering goes well beyond a 'win/win' situation. When families come together to help in community service activities, they build a stronger, more viable society.

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Some Volunteering Ideas for Families

AMONG THE ACTIVITIES THAT FAMILIES CAN TAKE PART IN are helping older people, programs for children and young people, church groups, sports and school programs, environmental projects, and aid to the homeless.

Following is a list of areas that could easily accommodate family groups as volunteers. Many of these activities could be undertaken by a single volunteer, but family participation adds support and numbers, especially in highly emotional areas like reading to terminally ill patients or working with disabled children.

- Boy Scout/Girl Guide/Brownie leaders
- Hospital gift shop salespeople
- Visiting the elderly
- Organizing a fundraiser or a food drive
- Participating in a fundraiser
- Daycamp helper
- Team driver
- Assistant at a zoo or animal shelter
- Host volunteer for other people or families
- Surrogate family for developmentally disabled people
- Inviting a housebound elderly person in for lunch or dinner
- Shopping for a housebound person
- Bringing a family pet to a nursing home
- Family penpal
- Helping with yard work
- Special Olympics
- Donating clothing or toys
- Organizing an after-school program
- Cleaning up the environment
- Co-teaching a sunday school class
- Helping at a vacation bible school
- Teaching life skills
- Befriending a street youth
- Helping at a shelter or soup kitchen
- Starting a community newspaper
- Writing for a community newspaper
- Organizing a street dance
- Helping at a therapeutic horse ranch for people with developmental disabilities

- Acting as a co-Big Brother/Sister
- Starting a breakfast club
- Painting or making repairs to a hostel or mission
- Spring cleaning at a nonprofit agency
- Organizing a community closet-cleaning day
- Planting a garden at a shelter
- Putting on a musical/play/puppet show
- Organizing a coalition with other families on an important community issue
- Family tutoring another family
- Befriending an out-of-town family with a child in hospital nearby
- Helping at a museum
- Co-working on a crisis line
- Reading to terminally ill patients
- Leading school groups
- Delivering Meals-on-Wheels
- Helping at a food bank
- Helping with Christmas hampers
- Family outings with mentally or physically challenged people
- Helping at daycares
- Organizing parties at a shelter
- Stuffing envelopes
- Forming a family council
- Taking part in cross-generation activities
- Teaching crafts classes
- Building a home (Habitat for Humanity)
- Teaching kids to swim
- Organizing a community garden or play area on an unused plot of land
- Running a soda shop with teens to raise funds for other teens
- Building equipment for a playground
- Supporting new Canadians
- Planting trees
- Staffing a concession booth
- Selling raffle tickets

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Program Examples

VOLUNTEER CENTRES AND BUREAUX ACROSS CANADA participated in a survey that looked at the extent of family volunteering activity. Here are a few of the groups and programs that are already making an effort to include family volunteers.

St John's, Newfoundland

- Canadian Red Cross
- Meals-on-Wheels
- Husband-and-wife teams for AIDS
- Clean and Beautiful St John's

Fort Frances, Ontario

- Special Olympics Bowling
- Adopt-a-Highway program
- Rotary Meals-on-Wheels
- Rotary Adopt-a-Foreign-Student

Edmonton, Alberta

- Trout Unlimited's Yellow Fish Road Program
- Catholic Social Services
- Host Program
- Edmonton Spawn and Salmon Centre,
family interpreters

Calgary, Alberta

- William Roper Hull Child & Family Services

Kingston, Ontario

- Family Relief Program
- Extend-a-Family
- EF Foundation for Foreign Study, host families
- Terry Fox Run

Cambridge, Ontario

- United Way special events
- Big Brothers

Etobicoke, Ontario

- Host Family

Hamilton, Ontario

- school `read-a-thons', `skip-a-thons'

Sault Ste Marie, Ontario

- St John Ambulance
- Soup kitchen
- Girl Guides

Kitchener-Waterloo

- Volunteer Fair, clowns and face-painters

Guidelines for a Family Volunteer Program

IT CANNOT BE EMPHASIZED TOO STRONGLY THAT YOUR organization must fully understand its own needs and capabilities before it starts a new program. If, on due reflection, a family volunteer program will not enhance your group's activities, then you should not implement one. On the other hand, if the addition of family volunteers will strengthen your programs, then go ahead. The following guidelines will help ensure successful implementation of a family volunteer program.

- The Co-ordinator of Volunteers and senior managers must support the concept.
- Survey all staff and current volunteers to determine what kinds of activities are appropriate.
- What existing volunteer programs could be geared to family participation?
- Identify the kinds of family relationships that would fit your programs (*eg*, a women's shelter may want to recruit only adult female relatives).
- Identify existing opportunities for family volunteering. Start small.
- Develop a special family volunteering section in your newsletter.
- Establish a Family Volunteer Committee or Advisory Council.
- Write job descriptions that indicate age appropriateness and anticipated results of the activity for the family as well as for the agency.
- Talk to other agencies that are already making use of family volunteers.
- Be very clear about your expectations, and then evaluate volunteers and program on that basis.
- Develop policies that support and protect family involvement.
- Identify the benefits family volunteering brings to the agency, the volunteer, and the community.
- Identify how family volunteering fits into your mission statement.
- Review your family volunteering program from time to time. Is it meeting expectations? What have the benefits and challenges been?
- Create a flyer on family volunteering opportunities in your organization and the benefits they offer to volunteers.
- Invite current volunteers to get their families involved.

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Evaluating Your Organization

OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND! YOU'RE READY TO MAKE a family volunteering program work for your organization. Here are some questions to consider in your practical planning.

Recruiting

- Do you need to develop new methods of recruiting, managing and recognizing family participation?
- Do you have activities that will be attractive to two or more members of a family?
- Will families be interested in the positions you have available?

Acceptance

- Are members of your group reluctant to involve young people?
- What will you do if all members of your agency do not buy into the family volunteering concept?
- Will there be resistance by clients?

Training

- Can family groups fit into your existing training schedule?
- Do you need to add training programs?

Scheduling and accommodation

- Do you have space on your premises to accommodate family groups?
- Can you accommodate families with very young children?
- Are there some jobs that just cannot be done by family groups?
- Can you schedule events for early evenings and weekends in order to accommodate working families?
- Are you prepared to deal with the absence of an entire family on occasion?
- Can family schedules be co-ordinated — by the family, as well as by the agency?

Supervision

- How will family groups be supervised?
- Is staff supervision available after your agency's regular business hours?
- Will you need more supervisory staff?

Standards

- Can your job descriptions be applied to shared jobs?
- Can you maintain confidentiality standards?

- Can you apply your existing screening process for individuals to family groups?
- How will you deal with a situation where one member of the family is not suitable for a position the family requests?
- How will you deal with unrealistic expectations by family members?

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Readiness Assessment Checklist

INVOLVING FAMILIES AS VOLUNTEERS IS NOT SO VERY different from involving individual volunteers. The same elements of good volunteer management are necessary: a clear understanding of your needs and expected results, sensitivity to the needs and interests of your potential volunteers, a job design process that seeks to involve the volunteer, an effective recruitment program, suitable orientation and training, supervision and, of course, recognition.

Here is a checklist to help you assess your organization's readiness to put a family volunteering program into effect.

Organizational Issues

Does your organization:

- have one-time or seasonal events?
- have on-going programs?
- have a family volunteer component?
- need policy changes to implement family volunteering?
- have insurance that covers your risks in using volunteers?
- have the support of your board of directors?
- need more education for staff and administration?
- orient staff on the best ways to actively involve volunteers in programs and projects?
- make sure that volunteers have the supervision and direction they need to do the job properly?
- require a confidentiality agreement from volunteers?
- have flexibility to waive its age requirements if a child is accompanied by an adult?

Recruitment and Placement

Does your organization:

- currently recruit family volunteers?
- actively recruit from schools, community centres, corporations or religious organizations?
- actively recruit from culturally diverse areas?
- actively recruit from the physically challenged population?
- actively recruit from the senior population?
- actively recruit young people?
- have positions suitable for child or youth volunteers?
- need to develop position descriptions for family volunteers?
- meet the volunteers' need for flexible working arrangements?
- have cross-generation volunteering opportunities?
- involve families in leadership roles, such as boards or advisory groups?

Orientation and Training

Does your organization:

- provide orientation and training for *all* volunteers?
- need to develop orientation for family volunteers?
- have orientation and training material that is sensitive to populations that are culturally diverse or that cross generational lines?
- provide volunteer information packages to all new volunteers?
- need to develop information packages especially for family volunteers?
- ensure that adequate and continuing 'on-the-job' training is provided?

Recognition and Evaluation

Does your organization:

- provide recognition to volunteers?
- need to establish recognition to family-group volunteers?
- allow volunteers an opportunity to give feedback?
- ask volunteers for input?
- evaluate volunteers' performance?

Documentation

Does your organization:

- document volunteer numbers and time contributions?
- keep position descriptions up to date?
- document family statistics and relationship of the family participants?

Conclusion

SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES DO NOT `JUST HAPPEN'. They come about through careful planning, good job design, and attentive management. When you have answered all the questions and filled in all the blanks, and you are sure that a family volunteering program is going to benefit *your* organization, then you can put a plan of action into place to increase your pool of volunteers by using family groups of volunteers. Time invested at the start in careful planning will be repaid many times over the years to come in benefits to your organization, the families who work with you, and the entire community.

We hope this report will benefit many groups that have the potential to build a stronger community by expanding their pool of volunteer resources.

Spread the word!

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Who should read this book?

- Anyone interested in maintaining or increasing their volunteer base
- Administrators and managers of volunteer programs
- Boards of directors and their committees
- Executive directors and all staff of voluntary groups
- Volunteers