



The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities

The *Rural Senior Volunteers in Rural Communities* project examined the role of senior volunteers in three rural areas within Nova Scotia to understand the contributions of volunteering for seniors and their communities. The project included a literature review, focus groups with rural seniors and interviews with key informants. This publication is one of three providing highlights from the project.

Rural Senior Volunteers: Sustaining Rural Culture

Sustaining Culture in Rural Communities

Volunteering, especially for seniors, is most often about making their community a better place to live for everyone. Many seniors volunteer in the cultural sector. They volunteer in arts, crafts, cultural industries and heritage not-for-profit organizations. They support a variety of local museums, artistic, linguistic, musical, and theatrical events, festivals and organizations. The direct and indirect impact of the culture sector in Nova Scotia, as measured by the contribution to the GDP, was estimated at almost \$1.2 billion in 2001, with some 28,000 direct and indirect jobs depending on culture activities.”¹

Heritage and culture are integral components of Nova Scotia society, and it is evident that seniors play a significant role in transmitting and preserving our cultural roots. Supporting their volunteer efforts in the culture sector will help to ensure the vitality and quality of life in Nova Scotia’s rural communities.

Quality of Life

- Cultural activities maintain a strong and positive impact on the quality of life.
- Arts and culture enhance community sustainability.
- Heritage is passed on between generations.

Volunteers in the Cultural Sector of Rural Community Life

In Canada as a whole, volunteer workers accounted for 65 percent of the workforce in not-for-profit heritage institutions and 40 percent of the workers in not-for-profit performing arts companies. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of volunteers in Nova Scotia in cultural organizations decreased, however the number of hours contributed remained more stable and the average number of hours in cultural organizations went up. In addition to the 18,900 paid jobs in the cultural sector in 2000–2001, there were 11,500 officially counted volunteer jobs.² Of course, many more volunteer hours in culture go uncounted.

In rural Nova Scotia, seniors who volunteer in the arts, culture and heritage sector do so in an average of two different organizations. They contribute on average 4.5 hours per week of formal volunteer time in not for profit cultural organizations.

Community Leaders’ Perceptions of Culture

In urban areas, arts and cultural organizations are run by a combination of paid professional staff and volunteers. By contrast, in rural areas such organizations are run almost exclusively by volunteers, many of whom are seniors.

¹ <http://www.gov.ns.ca/dtc/culture/default.asp>

² “Culture Counts -- Counting Culture”, the Statistics Canada Study on Nova Scotia can be viewed on line at www.gov.ns.ca/dtc/_culture_Incoming_StatsCan/NSReportFinal_2004.pdf

Over half of the 33 organizations surveyed in rural Nova Scotia said that *“our organizations would not exist without senior volunteers.”* The statement that *“our cultural ways would be lost without senior volunteers”* rang true particularly for linguistic and cultural minorities within the larger culture as well as for newcomers to rural communities.

The cultural organizations represented in the three rural communities surveyed in Nova Scotia included:

- The Acadian Village
- The Firefighters Museum
- The Fisheries Museum
- Gaelic College
- Scallop Days
- faith organizations
- organizations supporting education in language, artistic, musical, theatrical, craft and culinary demonstrations and instruction

Sustaining the Life of Rural Communities

Passing on culture, language, history to the next generation as well as to visitors to the local area is one of the six key ways in which senior volunteers view themselves as sustaining the life of rural communities.

Replicating Ourselves – Passing on our Connections

Senior volunteers identified family history and exploring community roots as two different ways to enter into volunteering for not-for-profit community-based cultural organizations. Personal interests and the betterment of the community at large were two ways in which senior volunteers from outside the local community recently joined with long-term residents.

“Hopefully, we can sustain cultural activities. Seniors are an important resource in sharing historical knowledge and creating a sense of belonging.”

“You know, local people who’ve been here forever have their churches and community halls. So [the health centre] is a community centre for Come from Aways... it’s a place where people who aren’t traditional to the community have a place [where they can volunteer].”



Highlights from *The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities* by Jane Gordon and Brenda Hattie with contributions from Sandra Murphy and Rusty Neal, June 2008.

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