

A Report Prepared for the Rural Municipalities of Alberta by the
Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities at the University of Alberta

Declining Rates of Volunteerism in Alberta and the Increasing Threat to Rural Municipalities

Authors

Clark Banack, PhD

*Director, Alberta Centre for
Sustainable Rural Communities
University of Alberta*

Meredith Jevne, BA

*Research Associate, Alberta Centre
for Sustainable Rural Communities
University of Alberta*

About the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities

The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC), located at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta in Camrose, has, since its founding in 2009, assisted rural communities in meeting diverse challenges across many areas of public policy through fostering constructive dialogue, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and developing partnerships. The Centre's mission is to link the research, outreach and educational capacity of the University of Alberta with students, researchers, rural communities, rural community organizations and policy makers at multiple levels across the province, nationally, and internationally in order to support the improved sustainability of rural communities and populations.

Thinking respectfully and reciprocally with, not just for, rural communities is a main objective of the ACSRC. Through dialogue and collaboration, the Centre operates an outreach program that provides direction and stimulates innovation in the development of rural communities. This is built around various collaborations with educational institutions, municipalities and not-for-profit organizations on research projects that seek to create resilient rural communities across Alberta.

Recently, we have been engaged in rural-focused projects related to sustainable economic development opportunities, community mental health, the delivery of social services, enhancing inclusivity, advancing the transition to renewable energy, aiding municipal collaboration, and better understanding rural public opinion and rural-based populism. To read more about us and the work we do please visit: www.uab.ca/ACSRC

About the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) and the Project

The Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) advocates on behalf of Alberta's rural municipalities. RMA's members consist of 63 municipal districts and counties, five specialized municipalities, and the Special Areas Board. The RMA's 69 members have several common traits: large land masses, small populations, and a lack of a traditional "population center." RMA members provide municipal governance to approximately 85% of Alberta's land mass; Alberta is unique in Canada in that municipalities govern land throughout the entire province, from border to border.

RMA has heard from several members that in recent years, levels of volunteerism have declined among rural residents. By extension, the viability of rural voluntary organizations has become threatened. This has direct impacts on rural residents in the form of reduced community services. It also has direct impact on municipalities, which often work closely with voluntary organizations and provide support in the form of grants or other financial subsidization, capacity-building training, sharing of resources or municipal spaces, etc. Even though many of the services that rural voluntary organizations provide are outside the scope of municipal responsibility, municipalities see their value to the community and therefore actively support them.

When voluntary organizations struggle to recruit volunteers, all aspects of their operations are compromised, including service delivery, fundraising, administrative functions, and more. In some cases, this puts municipalities in a challenging position, as they can either increase their support to the voluntary organization, consider taking on delivery of the service themselves, or do nothing. In many cases, municipalities also lack the financial resources and capacity to increase their involvement in delivering services that are normally provided by voluntary organizations.

The work undertaken by the ACSRC allows for a better understanding of the role that voluntary organizations play in delivering community services in Alberta's rural area, as well as what trends exist related to levels of volunteerism, the sustainability of rural voluntary organizations, and the role of municipalities in supporting voluntary organizations in fulfilling their mandates.



Executive Summary

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that volunteers are the backbone of rural communities. Volunteers play critical roles within rural FCSS offices, local firefighting and victims services, recreation and cultural organizations, co-operatives, libraries, school councils, churches, municipal committees, and more. Rural volunteers ensure that youth sports and community events proceed, that recreation facilities are maintained, that social and educational opportunities are provided, and that a wide variety of organizations are overseen with integrity.


Yet, rural volunteer organizations throughout Alberta are struggling with sharply declining volunteer rates. In fact, respondents in this study used nearly identical language to describe the situation they are seeing on the ground: “it is getting harder and harder to find volunteers,” “it’s the same ten people doing all the work across all the different groups,” “the existing volunteers are getting older and there is no one stepping up to replace them,” “they are burning out.” In other words, the volunteer crisis is very much here, in rural Alberta, and many volunteer organizations are subsequently experiencing declining capacity. This volunteer shortage, in conjunction with the broader challenges of increasing costs, paperwork, liability concerns, and an increasing need to seek external grants, has placed a wide array of rural volunteer organizations in an extremely vulnerable position.

Moreover, the persistent decline in the capacity of volunteer organizations in rural Alberta poses a significant threat to rural municipalities across the province. As these groups are increasingly unable to provide the programming or facility maintenance they have in the past, rural municipalities will have little choice but to take this work on. In speaking with rural municipal representatives, it is clear that the prospect of having to take on an increasing share of the programming and facility maintenance traditionally completed by volunteer organizations is a source of considerable anxiety. And it is already happening: rural municipalities across the province are increasingly having to dedicate more and more resources to support fledgling volunteer organizations or, in a growing number of cases, already taking over programming and facility maintenance that volunteer groups can no longer perform. This trend represents a significant threat to the fiscal stability of rural municipalities in Alberta.

This report closes with a series of recommendations for rural volunteer organizations, rural municipalities, and the Government of Alberta meant to **a)** assist in generating more interest in volunteering at the community level, while also acknowledging the importance of recommendations that are **b)** meant to address the reality that it is highly unlikely volunteer rates will suddenly rebound in a significantly positive direction and municipalities and the provincial government must prepare for, and respond accordingly, to a future wherein volunteer organizations are no longer able to perform the many significant acts of service delivery or facility maintenance as has traditionally been the case. Although there is much each of these entities can do, ultimately, we call on the Government of Alberta to provide adequate fiscal resources to assist municipalities in meeting these growing challenges. To choose not to is to jeopardize the programs and services that form a central pillar of the quality of life of rural citizens in Alberta.

THE NEW TOWN CO

1. Introduction	1
2. The Study	3
3. How Rural Alberta Municipalities Currently Support Volunteer Groups	4
4. Trends In Volunteering	6
5. What is Driving These Trends?	10
<i>Structural Changes and a “Lack of Time”</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Value Changes and a Declining “Commitment to Community”</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Demographic Changes</i>	<i>12</i>
6. How is this Impacting Rural Municipalities?	14
<i>Administrative Support</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Financial Support</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Facility Maintenance and Programming Support</i>	<i>16</i>
7. Recommendations and Conclusions	18
A. For Rural Volunteer Organizations	18
<i>Increase Flexibility and Embrace the Ideas and Capabilities of Younger Volunteers</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Rethinking the Role of the Board and Embracing “Micro-volunteering”</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Embrace Strategic Planning</i>	<i>22</i>
B. For Rural Municipalities	22
<i>Facilitating Coordination Between Volunteer Groups in Your Community</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Engaging Local Volunteer Organizations in both Facility and Organizational Viability Assessments</i>	<i>25</i>
C. For The Government of Alberta	27
<i>Promoting Volunteerism across Alberta: Incentives, Promotional Campaigns, and Youth Education</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Reducing the Burden on Rural Volunteer Organizations: Granting, Toolkits, and Website Support</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Adequately Fund Municipalities to Account for the Rising Costs Associated with Declining Volunteerism</i>	<i>30</i>
Bibliography	31



It's been increasingly problematic over the last decade, and it's getting worse and worse...I'm not sure what it is, but people are dropping off. And it seems like it's always the same ten people who are doing things, getting involved. And yeah, it's kind of stressful, to be honest... And I have been talking to many people, and we have to get our head around what the problem really is.

- Long-time Rural Alberta Volunteer

It's very concerning if [the capacity of volunteer groups] continues to decline further. Many of those services would [transition] to direct delivery service coming through the county, at a much higher cost.

- Central Alberta Municipal Official

1. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to suggest that volunteers are the backbone of rural communities. Indeed, volunteerism has been entrenched within rural communities for generations, stretching back to the earliest days of settlement and the communal “barn-raising” mentality that allowed settlers to successfully “homestead,” through the establishment of a wide range of co-operatives in the early and mid-20th century, and into the modern period of program offerings that contribute to the quality of life of rural inhabitants. Today, basically all the critical social infrastructure that supports quality of life in rural areas remains hugely dependent on volunteers. In fact, it is difficult to think of an area of rural municipal responsibility in Alberta that does not, in some way or another, rely on volunteers. They play critical roles within rural Family and Community Social Service (FCSS) offices, local firefighting and victims services, recreation and cultural organizations, co-operatives, libraries, school councils, churches, municipal committees, and more. Volunteers ensure that youth sports and community events proceed in rural areas, that community halls, recreation facilities, cemeteries, and more are maintained, that social and educational opportunities are consistently provided, and that a wide variety of organizations and boards are overseen with direction and integrity. And, of course, none of the examples listed above speak to the more “informal” forms of volunteering that persist in rural communities when neighbours pitch in to help each other out with everything from extra help around the farm at harvest time, to assistance with “chores” big and small when someone is away or unwell, to the untold hours of volunteer childcare that happens in rural communities. To imagine a rural community without volunteers is to imagine something simply unrecognizable. Indeed, both volunteers and volunteer organizations symbolize “the very fabric of the community,” making them “the glue” that holds together many disparate parts.¹

¹ See David Bruce, Paul Jordan, and Greg Halseth, “The Role of Voluntary Organizations in Rural Canada: Impacts of Changing Availability of Operational and Program Funding,” *Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation: New Rural Economy Project* p iv

Existing academic research demonstrates what most citizens in rural communities already instinctively know: volunteerism in rural communities serves as a catalyst for community involvement and sustainability – something essential to “sustain services within aging rural environments.”² In addition, volunteering in rural communities aids in keeping costs low, builds a positive sense of community, and further enhances people’s social capital.³ Volunteerism has also been shown to decrease rates of social isolation—something more prevalent in rural settings— and can make a positive influence in their lives in terms of relationships, and personal development.⁴ For older rural community members in particular, volunteering enhances their “well-being and self-identity, typically through increased social participation.”⁵

Yet, we have all heard, if not experienced directly, the increasing difficulty a wide variety of organizations across much of the world are now having recruiting volunteers. Indeed, it is common today to speak of a “crisis” in volunteering – a situation wherein far fewer people are likely to volunteer at rates consistent with those even a decade ago. Across rural areas in particular, this is now resulting in the “same ten people,” often aging and facing significant stress and burnout, having to increasingly shoulder more and more of the burdens associated with service delivery and facility maintenance in their communities. In certain cases, it has simply become too much – some organizations are scaling back on what they can offer their community, while others are taking the more drastic step of dissolving entirely, simply unable to meet even the most basic goals of the organization in question.

It is within this context that the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities at the University of Alberta was approached by the Rural Municipalities of Alberta, to further explore this issue, both in terms of the trends various rural organizations are noticing on the ground with respect to volunteering, but also with an eye on the current and potential future implications these trends are (or will) have on rural municipalities across Alberta. After a brief overview of the research methodology employed, this report will outline the various ways in which rural municipalities are currently supporting volunteer organizations in their communities, speak to the trends in volunteerism in rural Alberta currently being experienced, and highlight the various ways these trends are impacting rural municipalities. The report will close with a series of recommendations for volunteer organizations in rural Alberta, rural municipalities, and the Government of Alberta, aimed at both helping to revitalize volunteering as well as responding in required ways to a future wherein the capacity of several local volunteer organizations throughout rural Alberta continues to decline.

² Amber Colibaba, Mark W. Skinner, and Elizabeth Russell, “Rural Aging during COVID-19: A Case Study of Older Voluntarism.” *Canadian Journal on Aging* 40 (4), 2021. p. 582, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0714980821000386>.

³ See “Community Pubs: A Better Form of Business.” *Plunkett Foundation*, Accessed 15 June 2024. See also: Colibaba, Skinner, and Russell, “Rural Aging during COVID-19”, 581

⁴ Ann MacLeod, Mark W. Skinner, Fay Wilkinson, and Heather Reid, “Connecting Socially Isolated Older Rural Adults with Older Volunteers through Expressive Arts.” *Canadian Journal on Aging* 35, no.1 (2016), p.14. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26934547/>

⁵ “Rural Aging during COVID-19,” p. 582

2. The Study

To address this set of issues, the ACSRC research team utilized a study design that was reviewed and approved by the research ethics board of the University of Alberta (Pro00137231). The research began with an academic literature review and jurisdictional scan to familiarize ourselves with the existing research findings related to this topic. We then conducted 27 semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with individuals deemed knowledgeable about this topic. The study included a wide geographical range, ensuring a solid representation of views from Southern, Northern and Central rural Alberta.

Location of Interviewees

7	Southern Alberta	11	Central Alberta
5	Northern Alberta	4	Provincial Wide Organization

Those interviewed included representatives of twenty different rural municipalities across Alberta, including five CAOs, seven county administrative employees, six reeves/mayors, and two sitting councillors. We also interviewed the leaders of seven different volunteer organizations based in different parts of rural Alberta. That said, there was significant overlap in the conversations given that many of the municipal representatives were also active members of volunteer organizations in their community, and some from the volunteer organizations had previously held elected positions within their rural municipalities.

Study Participants

5	Municipal Chief Administrative Officer	6	County Reeve / Mayor
2	County Councillor	7	County Administration
7	Representative of Rural Volunteer Organization		

Twenty-six of the interviews were conducted online, via Zoom, while one was in person. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, 24 were audio recorded and transcribed and we took detailed notes for the remaining three. Finally, the transcripts and interview notes were coded and subjected to thematic analysis by the research team.

3. How Rural Alberta Municipalities Currently Support Volunteer Groups

Volunteer organizations of all kinds play an extensive and significantly important role across many areas of service delivery and facility maintenance within rural communities. Rural municipalities across Alberta have, in turn, developed unique pathways by which they interact with and support these organizations. Every single rural municipality we spoke with recognized the incredibly valuable work volunteer organizations completed in their communities and have long sought to support them in a myriad of ways, although no two municipalities' approach in this regard was identical.

Every municipality we spoke with offered some form of financial support to volunteer organizations although the manner by which this granting took place, the types of groups who qualified, and the amount available per group, differed across municipalities. Generally, rural municipalities in Alberta made modest annual grants to volunteer groups in support of their program offerings or events within the community and to help offset basic maintenance and utility costs related to the facilities they supervised. It was also common to offer larger, although less frequent, "capital grants" to assist with major upgrades or repairs to these facilities. Not only do these grants represent a much-needed source of reliable revenue that most local organizations require to maintain their operations, one municipal representative noted that these funds are also meant to make "it easier to be a volunteer because that's the most stressful part for a lot of groups...they are constantly in fundraising mode. And that can eventually wear [the volunteers] down."

Many rural municipalities also allow certain volunteer organizations to operate under the umbrella of the insurance policies they purchase as a way to further support these groups by taking on the burden of an increasing expense, although this was not a universal practice and, in fact, some municipalities felt strongly that they ought not support groups in this way, especially given growing concerns over rising insurance premiums and fears over future liability.

Most municipalities also dedicate resources to assist volunteer organizations with advertising/promotion, offer degrees of administrative support from photocopying to the generation of meeting agendas/minutes, to assistance with grant proposals, and are often willing to help with board governance training. We also heard of many examples of existing municipal councillors and administrative staff sitting on the boards of various local organizations, municipalities going out of their way to utilize (rent) facilities operated by local organizations for municipal meetings or events, and of municipalities willing to assist organizations by donating the use of large equipment for the maintenance or upgrading of facilities or sports grounds. It is also very common for municipalities to work to formally recognize local volunteers in some fashion, often with a community event of some kind.



Despite all the different ways municipalities have long supported volunteer organizations noted above, one of the most striking themes that emerged in this research project was how, in an environment where more and more local volunteer organizations are facing additional challenges due to both an increasing scarcity of volunteers (see more on that below), and increasing costs on pretty much everything, most rural municipalities are feeling pressure to not only increase these more traditional forms of support, but also adopt more significant measures. The most obvious development over the past several years has been the increased budget for community services staff and, even more particularly, staff dedicated entirely to serving as a support person for local volunteer groups as well as an official liaison between these groups and the municipality. As one long-time municipal councillor noted:

We are up to three full-time community services staff and, in the past, that was a role that you just did not have because communities were doing their own things. You had all these community groups putting on their events and running programs, so that community service piece wasn't needed.

A second more recent development, again spurred on by increasing pressure faced by local volunteer organizations, is the role municipalities are starting to play working with these groups on facility assessment and viability plans. The vast majority of community facilities operated by local volunteer groups, from sports facilities and community halls, to libraries and heritage buildings, are approaching a critical stage in their lifecycle. Increasing maintenance costs and the prospect of major required renovations in the near future is generating significant stress for the organizations and municipalities alike. This, in turn, has led to a growing number of municipalities launching formal procedures wherein the municipality and organization in question work in tandem to make realistic short – and long-term plans regarding the future of the facility in question. In an era of declining populations and evolving tastes in certain rural regions, these are often difficult conversations wherein the literal shuttering of some facilities emerges as real possibilities but, as we will argue in more detail in our recommendations section, now is often the time for municipalities to be conducting realistic strategic planning for the future in this regard.



4. Trends In Volunteering

Volunteerism across the international landscape is facing a consistent decline. In multiple countries, and especially across North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, reports of a vanishing class of volunteers are common. Several recent studies out of the United States note that volunteerism has been in decline for many years, and the majority of volunteer organizations in the country report that recruiting volunteers remains “a big problem,” that has gotten noticeably worse since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. During the height of the pandemic, in 2021, research collected from the United States Census Bureau “found that formal volunteering dropped more than 23%” from 2019.⁶

A 2022 Statistics Canada report similarly noted that more than 65% of Canadian non-profit organizations are experiencing a shortage of volunteers and nearly 36% had issues retaining volunteers, a trend seconded by a Canadian Survey on Business Conditions.⁷ In both reports, respondents noted that the COVID-19 Pandemic made things worse. An Ontario Nonprofit Network Report illustrates this trend, demonstrating that 62% of provincial non-profit organizations surveyed lost volunteers over the pandemic. Furthermore, “more than 50% are struggling to recruit new volunteers, and 40% say they are having difficulty convincing former volunteers to return.”⁸ Similarly, in 2023, Volunteer Canada reported that “up to 65% of organizations in the country are struggling with a shortage of volunteers, and up to 35% of those that are have had to reduce services as a result.”⁹ Moreover, significant numbers of existing volunteers across Canada say “they are unable to commit long term (42%) with many (26%) reporting burnout and stress.”¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, this “critical lack of volunteers,” as one recent report noted, is placing many volunteer organizations in Canada under severe pressure and often negatively impacting their capacity to deliver their services.¹¹

Closer to home, the trends are the same. In Alberta, a recent report noted that, from 2020-2023, there has been: “a dramatic decline in formal volunteering with 42% of organizations identifying a lack of volunteers is an immediate concern for their operations. At the same time, 68% report an increase in demand for services, and 74% identify increased levels and complexity of needs to the people and communities they serve.”¹²

⁶ “New Data and Resources on Volunteers,” *National Council of Nonprofits*, Updated April 12, 2023, <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/new-data-and-resources-volunteers>.

See also: “American Volunteer Rates are on the Decline,” *Vision Monday*, Updated March 19, 2024, <https://www.visionmonday.com/business/research-and-stats/article/american-volunteer-rates-are-on-the-decline/>

⁷ “Canadian Survey on Business Conditions Fourth Quarter 2022,” *Statistics Canada*, Updated November 25, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/221125/dq221125b-eng.pdf?st=xs-x7ArG>.

⁸ “Volunteerism: In Crisis or at a Crossroads,” *The Philanthropist Journal*, March 14, 2023, <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2023/03/volunteerism-in-crisis-or-at-a-crossroads/>

⁹ “Critical Lack of Volunteers putting Canadian Non-Profit at Services at Risk: Volunteer Canada,” *CBC News*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/volunteer-shortage-caanada-1.6723348>

¹⁰ Chris Zimmerman, “Shortage of Volunteers Threatens Non-Profit Sector: Volunteer Canada,” *The Wellington Advisor*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.wellingtonadvertiser.com/shortage-of-volunteers-threatens-non-profit-sector-volunteer-canada/>

¹¹ “Critical Lack of Volunteers”

¹² Megan Conway and Miki Stricker-Talbot, “Opinion: Expanding Volunteering Vital to Alberta’s Social Fabric,” *Edmonton Journal*, April 15, 2023, <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-expanding-volunteering-vital-to-albertas-social-fabric>

These trends can be witnessed in a more direct way in rural Alberta. Provincial Agricultural Societies, perhaps the most ubiquitous, and certainly the longest serving, volunteer-run organizations in basically every corner of rural Alberta, have witnessed a remarkable decrease in the number of volunteers province wide. In 2015, it was estimated that roughly 58 000 Albertans volunteered in some capacity for a local Agricultural Society. In 2023, that number was down to about 35 000 – a decrease of essentially 40% in less than a decade.¹³ There is no way to sugar coat a decrease of this magnitude – Agricultural Societies throughout the province are experiencing a tremendous challenge in this regard, a challenge that will undoubtedly ripple throughout rural Alberta given the vast array of programming and facility upkeep these groups conduct throughout the province. What is especially troubling is that a University of Saskatchewan report in 2015 already noted that “Rural and Aboriginal western Canadian communities – in contrast to the classic perception of a high volunteer turnout – are, in fact, entering a deepening volunteer crisis.”¹⁴

Unfortunately, these numbers further correspond with academic research into trends in volunteerism in rural areas across Canada stretching back into the 1990s.¹⁵ While studies routinely indicate rural citizens are more likely to volunteer than its urban counterparts, overall, rates of volunteering have decreased over time.¹⁶ More recent academic research has demonstrated the manner by which the COVID-19 pandemic further enhanced the decline in volunteerism in rural areas by, “[eroding a] number of volunteer hubs” and ultimately, shifting the way “older volunteerism” operates.¹⁷ The pandemic especially highlighted the “precarity of older volunteers and aging rural communities and the sustainability of rural services and programs” creating a fracture that for many communities, persists today.¹⁸

The interviews conducted for this study with representatives of both rural municipalities and rural volunteer organizations throughout Alberta strongly confirmed that these more abstract trends are very much at work in rural communities across the province. In fact, almost every single respondent used nearly identical language to describe the situation they are seeing on the ground: “there is a clear decline,” “it is getting harder and harder to find volunteers,” “it’s the same ten people doing all the work across all the different groups,” “the existing volunteers are getting older and there is no one stepping up to replace them,” “they are burning out,” “they won’t be able to hold it together much longer.” And, as one responded succinctly put it, “You know, it’s really across the board, because there isn’t a single group that doesn’t come in the door at the county that isn’t complaining that they can’t get volunteers.” A second interviewee added:

What we are hearing from groups is that they are struggling to get people, not to come to events, but to help organize events, and to help run the facilities and manage them. So, for example, you can run a Fall supper and you probably have 300 people show up. But there may only be ten to fifteen core, dedicated volunteers that are willing to put on the event, and it’s always those same ten to fifteen core volunteers that are doing that, and they are getting burnt out.

¹³ These numbers were provided directly to the ACSRC Research Team by the Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies.

¹⁴ Co-operative Innovation Project, “Volunteering in Western Canada,” September 2015. <https://coopinnovation.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/volunteer-crisis-final.pdf>

¹⁵ Bruce, Jordan and Halseth. “The Role of Voluntary Organizations,” p. 1-65

¹⁶ Laurie Paarlberg, Rebecca Nesbit, Su Young Choi, and Ryan Moss, “The Rural/Urban Volunteering Divide,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 33, no. 1 (2021): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00401-2>

¹⁷ Don McRae, “Volunteer-Supporting Charities are Closing at Alarming Rates,” *Panl Perspectives Carleton University*, 22 August 2023, <https://carleton.ca/panl/2023/volunteer-charities-close-at-alarming-rates/>. See also: “Rural Aging during COVID-19,” p. 581 – 582

¹⁸ “Rural Aging during COVID-19,” p.582

More specifically, local volunteer organizations in Alberta are especially struggling to recruit volunteers from younger generations. This was a concern shared by every single person we interviewed for this study. Not only are existing volunteers “burning out,” they are increasingly unable to complete many of the physical jobs required of the organization. Yet, given their passion for the organization in question, and for the community more generally, many are very concerned about succession – about the viability of the organization in an era when it is becoming far more difficult to find new people to step up and continue the work of the group. As one respondent observed:

There is a decrease in new members. And so, those on the board are having to stay on longer and longer...but they are running out of steam. There's no replacement, so if someone steps off the board, there is no one to replace them. [And] they are having to adjust service levels because now, those members that were, you know, 50 years old, and could go and set up the tables and mop the floors, now they are 85 years old, and they are not able to do that. So, they're having to adjust service levels...because they physically can't keep up.

In other words, the volunteer crisis is very much here, in rural Alberta, and, according to those we spoke with, it has been going on for some time now. In fact, several individuals we interviewed pushed back against the notion that the COVID-19 Pandemic was a critical turning point in this regard. Yes, the vast majority of respondents noted that the pandemic was hard on volunteer organizations and, in many cases, volunteer numbers have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. And yes, many believe that all manner of social relationships within their communities, including those related to volunteering, have not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels either. However, the general decline in volunteerism they have been experiencing, the persistent difficulty they are having convincing community members to step-up and join/support community organizations, was a significant problem prior to 2021 as well. And this understanding strongly corresponds with the existing academic literature cited above that documents a broader decline in volunteerism across Canada and elsewhere.

That said, many respondents noted that not every single rural organization was struggling to find volunteers. Indeed, despite a marked decrease in volunteerism overall, several examples were raised in the interviews we conducted wherein particular organizations were bucking this trend. We will return to this notion of unique “success stories” below. More generally, the trend of declining rural volunteerism is not happening at the same rate in every rural municipality in Alberta. A representative of an organization that works with volunteer groups noted that “it’s actually a mixed bag.” They continued:

So some organizations are actually doing fine. Some organizations are even thriving. It kind of depends, place to place. Actually, in our own research, we have found that the narrative of the crisis of volunteerism has been around since the 80s. Which, if that is the case, if we've been in a crisis for volunteerism since the 80s, how can we still have volunteers? And how can we still have organizations that are doing great? Yeah, it [varies from]...place to place.



In other words, what is happening on the ground throughout rural Alberta is more nuanced than an outright decline in volunteerism. Nor is the problem simply that of most community members “turning their backs” on local volunteer organizations. Many interviewees spoke of an increasing willingness among community members to “write a cheque,” that is, make a monetary donation to an organization, rather than commit their personal time to the group. Similarly, respondents noted that, among those still willing to volunteer in their communities, there remain large swaths of people willing to help out with “one-offs” such as agreeing to work an event concession, help out at the sports tournament for a shift, or pitch in for a few hours on a facility maintenance project. However, it was nearly a universal sentiment among interviewees that there is a clear decline in those willing to make a more substantial and long-running commitment to a volunteer organization, like agreeing to join the board of directors. Indeed, it is at the board level that the majority of rural community organizations are struggling most strongly today.

Overall, the notion that many, many rural volunteer organizations across rural Alberta are experiencing a period of declining capacity given the volunteer shortage they are experiencing was the most forceful message we heard. This shortage, in conjunction with the broader challenges of increasing costs, especially related to utilities costs for facilities and insurance, as well as a more general struggle keeping up with the paperwork and various new requirements related to liability issues as well as an increasing need to seek external grants, whose applications are seemingly become more and more onerous, has placed a wide array of rural volunteer organizations in Alberta in an extremely vulnerable position. And, as one respondent noted, “even if a group has stayed status quo, it’s still declining because community needs are growing.”

Throughout this project, we heard several examples of organizations, of all kinds, simply not being able to offer the community-level programming of year’s past, let alone meet the new needs emerging within their community, or increasingly unable to keep up with routine maintenance in the facilities they operate, or even having to cease operations altogether. For those organizations that are, thus far, managing to maintain a consistent level of programming or facility maintenance, most admitted that it was getting more and more challenging every year and, as one respondent noted, “the writing is on the wall,” in terms of an anticipated decline in capacity in the years to come given the trends they are seeing.



5. What is Driving These Trends?

The decline in volunteerism experienced across so many countries has been pondered from many different directions and it is clear that several unique and long-running factors have conspired to influence these trends. Both societal and individual values have naturally shifted over the course generations, there have been broad structural changes within the economy that have forced many changes in behaviors, technological advancements have introduced new forms of entertainment, and shifting demographics add further complexity into the mix. Over the course of the interviews conducted for this study, the two most common observations related to the challenge rural Alberta organizations face in recruiting volunteers were related to the “lack of time” residents tend to suffer from these days in addition to a broader “lack of interest” among residents, especially the younger generations. This is not the place for an overly detailed analysis, especially of some of the deeper-seated reasons behind the global decline in volunteerism but, in the paragraphs that follow, we will speak briefly to some general trends that are connected to broader societal-level changes that increase the cost of volunteering for citizens and thus further contribute to the problems identified in this report, before narrowing-in on some rural-specific factors that are impacting these trends.

Structural Changes and a “Lack of Time”

One of the most obvious changes in how families within communities operate over the past several decades has been the steady emergence of the dual-income household. For reasons related to both broad structural changes within the economy, changing societal mores, advances spurred-on by the Women’s movement, and general “inflationary pressures,” there are fewer and fewer families that include a full time stay-at-home parent.¹⁹ The full story of this development is rather complicated but, in general, it is safe to say that there is a relationship between the increase in dual-income households and a decrease in time individuals have available for “extracurricular” activities outside of the home, including volunteering. Throw in the increasing commuting times individuals face to and from work and those precious few leisure hours are reduced further. Moreover, the fact that many leisure-type activities that families take part in, ranging from entertainment options, kid’s activities beyond traditional schooling, and even the length and distance of the modern “vacation,” all work against traditional volunteering. Indeed, it is more and more common to hear of families driving farther from their home to partake in various entertainment events, taking more elaborate family vacations, or frequently traveling far and wide with their children for hockey tournaments, dance recitals, band camps and the like, than it was in the past. Such commitments add considerable time pressures to families already lacking the time previous generations enjoyed. These societal-level changes represent, without a doubt, critical factors that are contributing to the noticeable decline in volunteerism among younger generations.

¹⁹ Allan Schweyer, Allan, Ashley Whillians and Tesa E Leonce, “The Inevitable Rise in Dual Income Households and the Intertemporal Effects on the Labour Market,” Compensation & Benefits Review 52, no. 2 (2020): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886368719900032>



Value Changes and a Declining “Commitment to Community”

Related to many of the changes noted above, most would agree that there has been a shift in certain values, especially across generations, that have impacted how individuals, and especially younger individuals, view volunteering. Fundamentally, there was a strong sense among those we interviewed that young people are far more “individualistic” than in the past, a shift that corresponds to a general decline in a “commitment to the community” compared to previous generations. Indeed, there is ample academic research that points to the increase in individualism across Western culture, defined as “an orientation towards independence and self-reliance, pursuing personal goals, maintaining relationships when the costs do not outweigh the benefits, and having the freedom to express oneself.”²⁰ In 2000, famed social scientist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, a landmark book that connected the emergence of these values, especially as they relate to putting individual interests ahead of communal ones, to the declining social and civic engagement emerging in American life.²¹ In 2009, Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell added further to these concerns, providing a wide array of evidence that narcissism, or simply, living with a profound “sense of entitlement,” was increasing significantly among American youth.²² More recently, Nathan Dietz and Robert Grimm Jr., continuing this focus on value change in American society, concluded that “America is changing in profound ways and those transformations tend to make an individual less anchored to their community and less likely to participate in charitable behaviors such as giving and volunteering.”²³ In particular, they noted declining religious affiliation and delayed family formation (two trends likely related to a rise in individualism) were strongly tied to a decline in volunteerism in America.

There is obviously far more that could be said about both the history and implications of such value transformations but, for our purposes, it is sufficient to simply highlight this general trend. Although this research was focused on the United States, it is clear, especially to those we interviewed for this project, that similar patterns could be detected here in rural Alberta.

Many interviewees in senior organizational roles further legitimated this observation, expressing little doubt that, for many rural Alberta youth, the inclination to volunteer in a local organization is simply not nearly as strong as it was in generations past and they attribute this to a broader change in values in general and a declining commitment to community in particular. In addition, multiple interviewees noted a shift over time in the expectations younger citizens have when they do step forward and volunteer. As one respondent noted that, not many years ago:

there was a level of understanding...I'll call it citizenship where, if you need a volunteer, it wasn't a question of trying to force somebody into something...[but] we are probably in a generational shift right now...I've seen a significant level of self-gratification – volunteerism where I'm here because 'I want this'...the attitude now is less about 'I need to volunteer for the betterment of the community at large and more about 'how can I satisfy my own needs?'

²⁰ Ashley Humphrey and Ana-Maria Bliuc, “Western Individualism and the Psychological Wellbeing of Young People: A Systematic Review of Their Associations,” *Youth* 1, no. 2 (2022), <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-995X/2/1/1>

²¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

²² Jean M Twenge, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, (New York: Free Press, 2010)

²³ Nathan Dietz and Robert T Grimm Jr, “A Less Charitable Nation: The Decline of Volunteering and Giving in the United States,” *Explaining Declines in Volunteering and Giving*, (2020), 2, https://cphp.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Grimm-Robert-Dietz-and-Grimm_A-Less-Charitable-Nation_March-2019-USC-Conference-Paper.pdf



A very common message we heard throughout the interviews was encapsulated very well (and in very blunt terms) by a northern Alberta rural councillor and longtime volunteer:

[Today] it's the 'generation of me.' I think we have a very selfish, 'me' generation that [feel like] 'if it doesn't affect me, if I can't see a benefit for me, then, I don't want to [volunteer]. For me, it's like, okay, but I think [you are] missing the point, you know. Sometimes you just have to do things, because it's the right thing to do. Or sometimes you just have to do things because, you know, it might not benefit you directly, but if it helps your neighbours, or if it helps your community, or whatever the cause is. And, [today] I think it's more and more, 'well, what do I get out of it?' So, in a nutshell, I think we are [in the midst], of 'the movement of me.' I don't know how else to word it. But that's what I see.

More generally, another long-time rural volunteer and former county councillor, acknowledged that it is time we come to terms with the fact, given the value changes described above, that rural Alberta itself has changed, and any path forward must begin here:

We have to start recognizing we're not the Alberta of the 1960s or 1970s...we have to start understanding what the definition of community really is, as opposed to this nostalgic view of rural [Alberta].

Demographic Changes:

Like “structural changes,” and “value changes,” we could again write a book on demographic changes that have taken place across rural areas of Canada and Alberta. Instead of doing that, let it be enough to acknowledge, first, that the overall population of most rural communities in Alberta has declined, especially in relation to the proportion of Albertans who live in large urban centres. In addition, along with depopulation and urbanization, it is well-known that rural communities are aging faster than urban ones.²⁴ In other words, there are not only fewer people in rural areas – there are especially fewer younger people. These are obviously not novel concepts, nor should it be surprising to suggest that, with a declining population of residents to draw from, and an especially decreasing pool of young people, volunteer-based organizations in rural areas are bound to struggle with recruitment. Add to this fact the increasing difficulty residents are having finding “time” to volunteer given the structural changes described above, in addition to the decreasing “commitment to community” encompassed in the value changes described above, and one can draw a direct line to volunteering rates that are reaching a “crisis” level in rural communities.

²⁴ Statistics Canada, 2017 qtd in Colibaba, Skinner, and Russell, “Rural Aging during COVID-19: A Case Study of Older Voluntarism.” Canadian Journal on Aging 40 (4), 2021. p. 582, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0714980821000386>

²⁵ Paarlberg et al., “Rural/ Urban Divide”, 107

²⁶ Richard E. Ocejo, “When Gentrification Comes to Small Towns,” Time, July 2, 2024, <https://time.com/6992970/gentrification-small-towns-essay/>



However, there is an additional factor that seems to be working against volunteer organizations in rural areas in particular. Traditionally, it was understood that rates of volunteerism were generally higher in rural rather than urban communities because of the strong social bonds and sense of community and trust that prevailed in these communities.²⁵ However, to the degree that there are more people moving out to rural areas from cities than in the recent past (something that seemed to rise during the COVID-19 Pandemic²⁶), many of those interviewed for this study noted that these new residents are often arriving with differing expectations in terms of what services ought to be available to them and especially, who is responsible for offering them. Obviously, having new people move into rural areas, often in the form of new acreage owners, can provide clear economic benefits to the community. Yet many of the interviewees for this project noted that these newcomers are often not aware of the monumental role volunteer organizations play in terms of service delivery and facility maintenance in rural communities. Indeed, these newcomers likely assume that the performance of such tasks are simply the job of the municipality, in the same way they were in the city from which they came. In other words, volunteering for local organizations may not come naturally to them simply because they don't realize the vital function these groups play within rural communities. This ignorance, however unintentional, further compounds the problem of a lack of willing volunteers in rural areas.

Thus far, we suspect we have not presented much in the way of information that was not already known. That volunteerism is declining across multiple countries and regions, including right here in rural Alberta, is not exactly a secret. Nor will it be a surprise, we suspect, to learn that these declines are having a wave of unique and largely negative effects on both rural municipalities and rural communities more generally. What we hope to do with the remainder of this report is to move in more novel directions, working to show how these trends are concretely impacting rural municipalities across the province in increasingly significant ways, before closing with a discussion focused on a set of realistic recommendations for rural volunteer organizations, rural municipalities, and the Government of Alberta, meant to assist in relieving the negative pressures these trends are having on rural municipalities and communities.



6. How is this Impacting Rural Municipalities?

In 1999, as part of the New Rural Economy Project, a team of academics with an expertise in rural community development, highlighted the manner by which rural communities, so dependent upon voluntary organizations, were likely to face increasing challenges in terms of program offerings and facility upkeep as these organizations continued to face growing pressures. Their study noted that funding, burnout, management issues and isolation, were all areas where rural voluntary organizations across Canada were struggling.²⁷ Unfortunately, these challenges have only grown in the 25 years since.

There is now little doubt that the persistent decline in the capacity of volunteer organizations in rural Alberta represents a significant threat to rural municipalities across the province. As noted in the introduction of this report, volunteer organizations play critical roles in social service delivery, local firefighting, recreation and cultural programming, facility maintenance, and more, across rural Alberta. It stands to reason that, if these groups are increasingly unable to provide these services, they will either fail to be performed or, more likely, municipalities will themselves feel significant pressure to take them on. In an era of reduced provincial transfers, the continued failure of some oil and gas companies to pay their municipal taxes, and increasing costs, most rural municipalities in Alberta are already experiencing significant strain.²⁸ In the interviews we completed with rural municipal representatives, it was universally agreed that the prospect of having to take on an increasing share of the programming and facility maintenance traditionally completed by volunteer organizations is a source of considerable anxiety. Of course, the degree of decline in terms of community volunteerism, and especially its impact on the existing capacity of local volunteer organizations, varied across municipalities we interacted with. In other words, the actual “on the ground” impact of a declining volunteer rate is, at this moment, impacting rural municipalities in different ways. Below we highlight the three interrelated areas wherein municipalities are already having to expend more resources in response to the declining capacity of volunteer organizations in their communities.

²⁷ Bruce, Jordan and Halseth, “The Role of Voluntary Organizations”

²⁸ Mrinali Anchan, “Rural Alberta Municipalities Call for more Infrastructure Funding.” *CBC News*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/rural-alberta-municipalities-call-for-more-infrastructure-funding-1.7188557> See also “Band-aid Solutions Fall Short: Oil and Gas Companies Continue to Ignore Property Taxes as Regulator sits on Hands.” *Rural Municipalities of Alberta*, February 27, 2024 <https://rmalberta.com/news/band-aid-solutions-fall-short-some-oil-and-gas-companies-continue-to-ignore-property-taxes-as-regulator-sits-on-hands/>

Administrative Support

In basically every interview we completed, the notion that municipal staff were being asked to dedicate more hours to assist community organizations was raised. Generally born out of a recognition that these volunteer groups are increasingly struggling with underwhelming volunteer recruitment, in addition to significant burnout among their existing volunteers, it is now very common for municipal staff to offer administrative support to these groups, assisting with everything from photocopying and communications, to strategic planning, to searching for and applying for grants, and even to completing the duties of “treasurer” when groups cannot find a local volunteer to serve that role. Municipalities are also increasingly offering groups support with board governance, often in the form of training sessions or one-on-one advice. An increasing number of municipalities are also hiring staff whose primary responsibility is to work directly with and in support of local volunteer groups. In all of these cases, this “support” equates to the spending of an increasingly precious resource, the paid time of municipal staff who, in many cases, were already facing increasing pressures on their time due to the growing complexity of their more traditional tasks.

Financial Support

In addition, although every municipality represented in our study has long had some form of internal grant program wherein pockets of funds were made available to local volunteer organizations to assist with the costs of programming or facility maintenance, in almost every case we explored, municipal respondents spoke of increasing demand for these funds from local groups, especially those responsible for facility maintenance. For many volunteer groups, a declining overall capacity also entails increasing challenges related to fundraising. Add to this rising utility costs, declining internal capacity to complete certain maintenance tasks and, above all, a growing number of aging facilities that will require significant renovations, and local organizations are now facing no real choice beyond approaching their municipality for more funds. In many cases, municipalities are responding positively to these requests, often shuffling money around to meet this demand. However, we certainly encountered examples wherein municipalities were unable to do this and, moreover, even in cases where municipalities have been able to successfully meet this demand, their resources are finite and many municipal respondents noted that they would not be able to continue this practice over the long term. As one councillor explained:

This is very much the discussion every year at budget time. You see the nonprofit requests that come in, and you know, they are growing, but you go through it, and it's like, 'Okay, do we nickel and dime this?' But it's like, "okay, well, if we don't fund this, and we have to provide that program or do that maintenance, are we going to be able to provide the program?" And where the heck is that funding coming from, because let's face it, it's going to be double what they're asking for. And that is always the conversation...Look we're all volunteers on at least a couple of these organizations... [and we realize], if we don't, as a municipality, continue to fund this one, well, it very well might not be here next year. But, if the county has to run these, you know, it's going to cost a lot more, and where's that money going to come from? It is still going to come out of [the ratepayers] pocket, because it's going to come out in taxes, or we are going to have to cut something else in order to do this. The pot is only so big.

Facility Maintenance and Programming Support

In addition to the increasing resources municipalities are having to expend to assist volunteer organizations in terms of administrative support and growing cash payouts, a potentially much larger issue looms with respect to facility maintenance. Rural Alberta municipalities are dotted with community halls, hockey and curling rinks, ball diamonds, rodeo grounds, libraries, heritage houses, swimming pools, campgrounds, cemeteries and more that, in general, have been very well maintained by a wide variety of volunteer organizations. However, as those groups enter a period of decline, the future of this maintenance emerges as a significant question going forward. For many municipalities, the future, in this regard, is here. We heard of many stories of municipalities increasingly having to dedicate staff hours to perform maintenance on these facilities. Most common, at this point, were instances wherein the municipality was forced to take on considerably more lawn care or snow removal than in year's past – tasks that, at first sight, may not seem to be an incredibly tall order but, when this involves loading and hauling equipment from one end of a rural municipality to another, the cost of this type of extra maintenance can quickly escalate.

The increasing fear, however, is the scenario wherein a volunteer organization that has long operated a facility finally reaches a breaking point and dissolves, leaving the burden of facility maintenance entirely at the feet of the municipality. We are already hearing instances of this: municipalities having to take over the maintenance and operation of certain recreation facilities, campgrounds, cemeteries, heritage houses, and libraries. In each of these cases, the municipality in question had little choice but to utilize additional resources to take over these sites.

That said, these instances of complete facility take-over have not been, at least at this point, experienced by all rural municipalities in Alberta. However, the anxiety related to the prospect of having to shoulder the significant level of responsibility and cost associated with having to take on the maintenance and operation of a string of community halls, or hockey or curling rinks, or campgrounds, was universally shared with us over the course of the study. Indeed, this anxiety over what the future responsibilities of rural municipalities could look like, and what the costs would be, in an era of persistently declining volunteerism and the corresponding capacity of rural volunteer organizations to continue to operate and maintain facilities, was the clearest theme to emerge from this project. Rural municipalities are simply not, even in a remote sense, in a fiscal position to take on the costs associated with a large-scale transition of this form of responsibility. Thus, many of the respondents questioned what community programming and facilities will look like in ten or twenty years from now, with the effects of decreased volunteerism becoming more pronounced.

Below are just some of the many observations we heard on this topic that speak to the anxiety rural municipalities are feeling in this regard:

We're not in dire straights...but it is moving in that direction. For sure it is. Because, we know that when you volunteer...it makes the community affordable. And when you don't have those people helping out, you have to have the municipalities fill that role. Well, that's got to be paid by somebody. So that starts to fallback on taxpayers... but of course, they don't want their taxes to go up. Who does? So it's a catch-22 for the municipality. If they're required to take over some things that were normally volunteer-driven, then...you are either cutting a service or you're raising taxes.

- Central Alberta County Reeve

If the non-profit [that runs the arena] goes under [and it is turned over to us], then the hours change and the free skating changes and all that kind of stuff changes because the non-profit had three volunteers that come in and provide the free skate and run the Zamboni. I'll have to pay someone to come and do that. So I can't provide the same hours, I can't afford it....[And] the ratepayers will be ornery...

- Southern Alberta Municipal CAO

Our Council, we really worry about that. We definitely discuss it three to four times a year. I think right now that if we ended up with a skating arena or a hockey arena [being turned back to us], we would probably shut it down. That would be a huge loss to the community, a huge loss of programming for kids, but we just don't have the staff or the ability to run it.

- Northern Alberta County Reeve

So, what next? How does a municipality, a province, or even a country, begin to think through "next steps" given the enormity of the problem and the seeming inevitability of the decline of these volunteer organizations? In the final section, we will offer a realistic path forward for volunteer organizations, rural municipalities, and the Government of Alberta to begin to respond systematically to this growing problem together.



7. Recommendations and Conclusions

There is no shortage of ideas to address both the declining rates of volunteerism witnessed in so many countries across the globe. In this section we highlight the potential actions that are most applicable and realistic in the context of contemporary Alberta. Although we separate these recommendations between those meant for, respectively, rural volunteer organizations, rural municipalities, and the Government of Alberta, it is important to acknowledge that, in our view, little meaningful headway will be made unless all three entities move in these directions. Indeed, many of the recommendations listed below are unlikely to accomplish anything of substance “on their own.” Rather, their success will often require simultaneous action on the part of the other two entities mentioned below.

In addition, the reader will quickly note that, for all three entities, we make recommendations that are both a) meant to assist in generating more interest in volunteering at the community level, while also acknowledging the importance of recommendations that are b) meant to address the reality that it is highly unlikely volunteer rates will suddenly rebound in a significantly positive direction and all three entities, but especially municipalities and the provincial government must prepare for, and respond accordingly, to a future wherein volunteer organizations are no longer able to perform the many significant acts of service delivery or facility maintenance as has traditionally been the case in rural communities.

A. For Rural Volunteer Organizations

In the face of the large-scale structural, demographic and value shifts that have occurred across the western world, it is of course completely unrealistic to expect local volunteer organizations in rural Alberta to overcome such trends and adopt new strategies capable of returning us to volunteerism rates of a bygone era. In addition, given the degree of “burnout” so many volunteers across rural Alberta are already experiencing, it seems especially unfair to place a good deal of the onus of this overarching problem at their feet. That said, we encountered many observations and pieces of advice throughout this research project that are largely “low-cost” in terms of money or time commitment, but could help such organizations go some way toward increasing their capacity, at least in the short-term.

Increase Flexibility and Embrace the Ideas and Capabilities of Younger Volunteers

As noted above, it is especially at the board-level where organizations are struggling to find new members to join and play a key leadership role. A consistent message we heard throughout the interviews was the challenge a “reluctance to change” poses to rural volunteer organizations, especially in terms of recruiting youth, to these board positions. Several interviewees highlighted the problem of long-serving board members who hesitate to diverge from “the way things have always been done,” especially with respect to the type of events or programming on offer. Many interviewees discussed the way clinging to a nostalgic view of the organization’s role within the community can hold the groups back, as the volunteer pool they are drawing from may not have the same perspective or memories tied to place.

It is understandable that a volunteer organization that has long enjoyed success offering the same stable of programming, and are comfortable with set routines, may not want to change course, but we heard several stories wherein young people would join a board for a short period, only to learn that their ideas for new programming were not taken seriously, or they were assigned “less important” tasks that did not really align with their interests or aptitudes, and they subsequently felt discouraged and quit. In an era when it is already quite difficult to attract younger volunteers, having some agree to join, only to become discouraged and quit, is a significant problem.

In fact, one senior organization leader told us a tale of two separate Ag societies they had been a part of over the last couple decades. One group, they noted:

managed to address declining volunteerism by getting new members to join and letting them do things differently, or offer different programs [that they were more interested in]. By embracing different ideas and different interests [and allowing new members to take on leadership roles], we managed to reinvigorate the group... we saw we could [do this] by looking at what the community actually wanted.

This experience stood in stark contrast to the actions of a second Ag Society they were a part of, one that was “reluctant to embrace change” and the result is “a small group, small participation, less volunteers, and just focusing on one thing and leaving the building not used to its optimal capacity.”

Similarly, many respondents, especially those with significant experience within rural volunteer organizations, noted the importance many new volunteers place on “knowing they will make an impact,” and “feeling appreciated for the talents they bring to the table.” Part of this is related to the notion of long-standing rural organizations being open to new ideas from younger members, but it is also as simple as ensuring they do what they can to **provide younger members the opportunity to take on meaningful roles/challenges within the organization.**



Beyond being more open to the ideas and capacities of a younger generation, several interviewees suggested that local rural groups could try to do more to reduce the burden on individual volunteers, especially those with young families who find it difficult to commit due to time constraints. One key recommendation was to **consider offering short-term and informal child care** during board meetings. In fact, a recent report focused on the challenges of volunteerism in rural firefighting units noted that “a group of women that is typically actively involved in the community is stay-at-home mothers; [for them] the availability of childcare may be a deciding factor.”²⁹ In addition, **providing dinner over meetings** (i.e.: ordering a couple of pizzas), or **making meetings available online over zoom** to make attendance easier for those with young children or for whom travel in certain circumstances was a challenge, are also actions that would modestly increase costs for the group but could go a long way towards making it far easier for many, especially local parents, to participate meaningfully at the board level.

Others noted the importance of embracing the various online tools that could make it easier to both connect with the community more generally and make pitches for volunteers in particular. Building a basic website that is regularly updated and having one or two social media accounts was a common recommendation. In fact, this is a responsibility that is best suited for younger members.

²⁹ “Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention,” Volunteer Alberta, May 15, 2010, p. 5

Rethinking the Role of the Board and Embracing “Micro-volunteering”

As noted above, most organizations are struggling most concretely with the challenge of filling board positions. Several interviewees noted that, given this reality, organizations had to do more to “rethink” the role of the board and embrace changes that lightened the load on board members by better utilizing community members who can only make short-term volunteer commitments. That is, more groups ought to embrace the notion of Micro-Volunteering, which can be defined as:

the process of providing short-term, low-commitment opportunities as a way to engage more volunteer prospects and create value. Micro-volunteering is built on the idea that people are more likely to volunteer if short and convenient assignments are offered. Micro-volunteerism provides time-crunched volunteer prospects with opportunities to...volunteer for short outcome-focused assignments...[and] the ability to learn more about an organization before fully committing.³⁰

A long-time organizational leader from rural Alberta put their own spin on this concept by making a distinction between what they considered “the work of the board,” basically organizational leadership, strategic planning, and governance, and “committee work,” the mostly “on-the-ground” work delivering the program or event in question. They then urged the boards of rural volunteer organizations to essentially adopt this idea of using “micro-volunteers” for more service delivery thereby making board members less susceptible to burnout:

Most boards of volunteer organizations do very little ‘board work’ and massive amounts of ‘committee work.’...they are planning the events, and they are taking care of the building, then they are planning the next event. But they are not doing anything strategic, not looking broader. And yet, their structure for operations is the ‘ten people around a board’ model, and that’s who does everything. They have not looked at a [different] model where people don’t have to be on the board to do stuff. They haven’t looked at engaging new volunteers in short windows of meaningful work...That, to me, is the piece that is missing today. The structure around this – this tiny group trying to accomplish everything.

This type change of approach will require some new techniques on the part of rural organizations such as improved communication with community members to ensure they are aware of “micro-volunteering” opportunities, maintaining an up-to-date contact list to assist with call-outs to potential short-term volunteers, and a clear planning protocol to allow the board to easily delegate different jobs to those micro-volunteers. However, it is our view that making these investments has the potential to significantly lessen the burden on existing board members, something that can help to reduce burnout and potentially make the job of selling a community member on joining the board less onerous.

³⁰ Eric Burger, “Micro volunteering: What is it? How can Volunteer Programs Benefit from it?” *Volunteer Hub*, May 04, 2022, <https://volunteerhub.com/blog/micro-volunteering> See also: Jesse Heley, Sophie Yarker and Laura Jones, “Volunteering in the bath? The Rise of Micro-Volunteering and Implications for Policy,” *Policy Studies* 43, no.7 (2022): 76-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1645324>

Embrace Strategic Planning

Related to the notion that many volunteer organizations fall victim to a reluctance to change, a central theme that emerged from the interviews completed for this project was that rural organizations often fail to engage in broader strategic planning sessions wherein they are able to clarify their mission and purpose and reflect on the degree to which their current activities are meeting their overarching goals. This failure is most likely strongly linked to the fact that, in so many organizations, board members are already overwhelmed given the increasing burdens they face and the fact that they are often so busy with “on the ground” service delivery or facility maintenance work. However, several respondents noted how important **strategic planning** is, not only to ensure the organization remains on course, but also as a way to potentially re-energize board members and generate a more general excitement in the community that could lead to an increased willingness to volunteer. As one Central Alberta county councillor noted:

I think our volunteer boards have to start looking at things a bit differently [with respect to] how they can recruit and attract more people to be involved...[I see so many boards] that struggle with what their mandate is. With some strategic planning...I think you can really energize people beyond just coming out to monthly meetings and going through the motions without really knowing what their goals are, what they are trying to accomplish. So I think these organizations need to do a bit more work to try and refocus to get more people involved.

B. For Rural Municipalities

As previously noted, rural municipalities across Alberta already support rural volunteer organizations in a wide variety of ways, and, in general, this support is growing. The concern, of course, is that this support is increasingly costly for municipalities already under fiscal strain and, as the capacity of rural volunteer organizations continue to decline, these costs will escalate considerably. Two of the more abstract questions that emerged throughout the interviews completed for this study were “whose role is it to increase volunteerism in rural communities?” and “what is the exact role municipalities are to play in terms of supporting volunteer organizations?” In general, the observation by one county reeve encapsulated well the feelings of municipal officials we spoke with:

I think municipalities have a role. But the role isn't to take over. The role is to enable...we always say, our job is to set the table...we are not there to do the work but, how can we support the work?

That said, municipal representatives varied somewhat on what this meant. Some advocated for far more generous support while others felt that municipalities had limited room to do more and, instead, more onus had to be put on the organizations to address the problems they are facing going forward. Yet, most agreed that existing supports and efforts to reduce the burdens of local groups, in addition to **doing more to recognize local volunteers**, helping with **governance education**, and **streamlining grant application processes** and **reducing paperwork** for overburdened groups, are all “low cost” things municipalities could do. In addition, the importance of doing more to **communicate the needs of volunteer groups to the community** at large while also **stressing to community members the potential consequences of a continued decline in volunteerism**, was raised by many respondents.

As one county reeve noted:

I guess we need to be clear with people and explain to them that if we don't have volunteers, then this is what it is going to cost to keep this [service] or this facility running. So people need to see clearly...and maybe this will motivate people to help out again.

Another councillor agreed:

You know, we really need to start educating people on what volunteers mean to our community. And how volunteers play a role in ensuring service delivery. Everyone is talking about the cost of living right now. Can you imagine, if all of a sudden, all the volunteers stayed home for the day. And if every one of those programs that are [currently taken care of by] volunteers across this province, had to be picked up by a tax base? Do you know what that would do to our cost of living? And I don't think people really understand this....

We heard other innovative approaches as well that some rural Alberta municipalities are employing in an effort to boost local volunteerism, including creating a new grant program aimed at encouraging new social events in the community a way to build “community spirit” in the wake of the Pandemic, engaging with local schools to ensure “local history” and “the continued importance of local volunteering” is integrated into student lessons, and even tying employee performance evaluations to a requirement to volunteer with a local group in a modest way.

Although each of these initiatives is worthy of further study, we focus the remainder of this section on two more strategic steps municipalities ought to be taking given the reality that, notwithstanding a small number of success stories, rural volunteer organizations will continue to face challenges recruiting new members and their capacities will continue to decline.

Facilitating Coordination Between Volunteer Groups in Your Community

Many respondents, from both rural Alberta municipalities and volunteer organizations, noted that, despite the “tight-knit” nature of rural communities and the fact it is often “the same ten people” who sit on multiple volunteer boards in the region, there often remains a lack of coordination between volunteer groups in any given community. Likely related to the hesitation many groups encounter with respect to “embracing change,” as well as the difficulties they sometime encounter in terms of strategic planning, several interviewees told us stories of different groups within a single community “trying to accomplish the same thing,” often resulting in the duplication of services or offerings, rather than working with other groups to ensure a more efficient process and satisfactory outcome. This seems to be especially common for organizations in neighboring towns within a single rural municipality who insist on offering the same range of programs and events they did 30 years ago, despite their own declining capacity, in addition to a declining population within their town.

For example, it makes little sense for volunteer organizations in neighbouring communities to continue struggling to find the volunteers necessary to both offer undersubscribed youth baseball or hockey programs, when a single program could suffice. There are several other examples where this same notion applies, from the scheduling of fundraising events like Fall Suppers or Toy Bingos to insisting underutilized community centres remain in operation in every hamlet along a twelve mile stretch of highway (more on this below). Yet, resistance to change, and even the petty politics of local towns, can prevent such groups from coming together to coordinate their offerings in a more efficient manner that ensures programing continues in the area, but with far less stress on a shrinking volunteer pool.

In such cases, rural municipalities are very well-positioned to bring together a collection of local groups and assist with facilitating the conversations that could lead to a more efficient outcome that both residents and volunteer groups could benefit from. The municipal-led forums used to facilitate this strategic planning could further be used to share ideas on how local organizations could work together in other ways, potentially sharing volunteers, pooling other resources, or offering new programs or services that are a better fit for an ever changing community. This seems like such a simple idea that could lead to so many different beneficial outcomes but, in so many cases, this type of communication between volunteer groups in rural communities often does not take place without a larger body, like a municipality, taking the lead in this regard. Thus, we would urge all rural municipalities to consider what a form of inter-organizational facilitation could look like in their communities and take steps in this direction.

Engaging Local Volunteer Organizations in both Facility and Organizational Viability Assessments

Very much related to the concept of municipal-led facilitation explained above, it has become clear to us that rural municipalities can do more in terms of engaging key rural volunteer organizations in a structured process designed to realistically assess their viability as an organization going forward in the face of the increasing challenges they face. There is little point, of course, in continuing to provide precious resources municipalities have at their disposal to groups that lack the capacity to deliver the programming they have in the past (or perhaps is not in demand to the same degree it once was).

Perhaps more importantly, municipalities should be working to engage rural volunteer organizations who either own or are responsible for maintenance of key recreational facilities in their communities in a process of facility assessments. We encountered a few different examples of municipalities already doing this – basically working with existing groups to assess the “lifecycle” of the facility in question, identifying major repairs anticipated in the next number of years, and making a firm plan with respect to a) the wisdom in continuing to dedicate resources to the upkeep of this facility given current and anticipated usage rates and the current and expected capacity of the organization in question and b) a plan to fund the anticipated maintenance and repairs should it be decided that a continued investment in the facility is warranted.

Of course, to raise the question as to the wisdom of continuing to pour resources into specific recreation facilities or community halls that have played such a central role in any given community’s history, and remain very valuable to a section of the population, is to invite the prospect of some uncomfortable conversations, including conversations with community members who have literally dedicated hundreds (if not thousands!) of hours of their time to the facility in question over their lifetime. Speaking to this issue within the context of the shifting population distribution within their municipality one Rural Reeve admitted:

If there is nobody left to run it [a facility in one community], maybe there is nobody to use it anymore, right? I think...we have to accept that rural municipalities are being depopulated...and the notion of ‘community’ for a 40-year old in my municipality may not be the same notion that a 60 year old has. Their “community” has moved to the metro region...whereas [the 60 year old’s] community is still [the small town]. And we have to acknowledge that perhaps [the 40 year old] is recreating in other places... So as a municipality, we have to ask that question. Who is the volunteer organization [in that small town] serving? Is there anyone left to serve?

For those who care about the sustainability of rural communities, such an acknowledgement is perhaps a tough pill to swallow. But we do not think such an acknowledgement is an admission of defeat. Rather, it is a plea for rural municipalities and volunteer organizations throughout rural Alberta to **engage in a process of frank but realistic conversations around the viability of many facilities, and a commitment to double-down in terms of strategically supporting those that continue to offer meaningful programming or opportunities to a meaningful swath of rural citizens.**

One excellent example of this approach is that recently conducted by the County of Barrhead. In a report outlining their “Community Hall Strategy,” they acknowledge that rural community halls act “as a focal point for community activities, encouraging community participation, forming relationships, and creating a sense of belonging” that is integral for fostering a healthy and vibrant community.³¹ Yet, they fully realize the increasing challenges volunteer groups responsible for community halls are facing and the potential future costs for the municipality in terms of ongoing maintenance funding. In addition, four existing halls in the county have long-standing dissolution agreements requiring the municipality to take over and operate the Hall for a minimum of two years should the community group dissolve – a prospect the county strongly wants to avoid given the costs involved.

In response to these realities, the municipality hosted a well-attended engagement session for elected representatives and representatives of the halls throughout the municipality, wherein volunteers could voice their concerns and municipal officials introduced SWOT (Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat) tools designed to allow community groups to begin to access their own viability moving forward. One county official told us:

The council loved it. They thought it was a great idea. The halls really, really enjoyed it as well, just giving them the opportunity to be heard. While we were having the discussion, the elected officials were engaged in it... it gave the council the opportunity to hear from the grassroots, what was going on, what the challenges were, what [the community groups] were thinking, what opportunities there were, what they expected of us.

They continued:

[We had fifteen halls at the time]...and that itself begs the question, why do we have so many? Right? And so that was part of one of our strategy exercises: Is there a way to, instead of trying to spread the wealth, and the volunteers, around fifteen halls, could we just focus on having six or seven or eight really good ones, and let the other ones dissolve, take those monies and bolster the other ones? There was a discussion that got started, in this process...

Eventually, a summary of the event was distributed and a second engagement session was held to collectively discuss recommendations for a municipal “Community Hall Strategy,” eventually encapsulated in the 2023 report. This contains several recommendations for both the community groups and the municipality to ensure the suitability of the community halls in question or, should the circumstances demand it, the closing of certain halls in the future. In fact, in the midst of the engagement and assessment process, one community group decided to dissolve and privately sell their underutilized hall. More could be said about the details of this approach, and it is clear that the municipality and the halls are still in the process of working out the long term viability of the remaining fourteen halls, but we strongly encourage all municipal officials to read the county’s publicly available Community Hall Strategy.

Of course, to engage in a process like this is not to suggest the County of Barrhead has adopted a process that represents a panacea for the particular problems unique municipalities face with respect to declining volunteerism. However, this struck us as an excellent example of a municipality proactively engaging with relevant community groups in the difficult conversations around viability and strategic planning that are increasingly necessary.

³¹ “Community Hall Strategy.” *County of Barrhead*, (2023): 3 <https://www.countybarrhead.ab.ca/p/community-halls-1>

C. For The Government of Alberta

Throughout this research project, a number of ways the Government of Alberta can support rural volunteer organizations and rural municipalities were identified. Below we highlight the most viable potential courses of actions, separated by three related categories: promoting volunteerism, supporting rural volunteer organizations, and increasing transfers to rural municipalities to account for the rising costs associated with the decline in volunteerism.

Promoting Volunteerism across Alberta: Incentives, Promotional Campaigns, and Youth Education

One idea often debated by those within the voluntary sector, in addition to academics who study volunteerism, is the notion of provincial (or federal) governments issuing tax credits for volunteers in a manner similar to those currently on offer to volunteer firefighters. In theory, it is plausible that the **introduction of tax credits** could bolster volunteerism by offering a concrete incentive. However, given the many structural factors that are contributing to declining rates, it seems unlikely that a Tax Credit worth a few hundred bucks would move the needle much. In addition, such a policy intervention could potentially increase the burden on already overburdened volunteer organizations given the likelihood a policy like this would significantly increase the paperwork required of these groups.

A more promising idea that was viewed positively by many respondents in this study, tied very much to the notion that fewer and fewer residents seem to fully grasp the substantial roles played by volunteer groups in their communities, and are especially unaware of the potential costs associated with their decline, is a **province-wide promotional campaign** aimed at educating the public in this regard and being more deliberate about promoting volunteerism as a central component of a thriving community. Indeed, the province seems perfectly positioned to launch a general campaign aimed at motivating more people to volunteer, even if it is the type of “micro-volunteering” mentioned earlier that existing organizations should be embracing.

One councillor went even further, noting that in an era that is increasingly defined by individualistic outlooks that are, many worry, leading to increasing loneliness and a detachment to social groups and community more generally, now is the perfect time to be promoting the value, to both communities and individuals, of joining a volunteer organization:

I really think that there are a lot of individuals out there that are trying to find a place to belong... How do we, as a society, you know, promote or teach the ability to belong, and [to discover] that good feeling when you contribute in a volunteer capacity? [Can] the province do this because I think volunteer organizations do a really crappy job of that, actually. It's kind of always on the tail end of their business plan. It's like, 'oh, yeah, we need to recruit' but it's like, that's the last thing you're thinking of when you've got fourteen different events coming up...

Similarly, the province possesses full oversight over the educational curriculum in Alberta. To what degree is the value of volunteering, for both communities and individuals, being taught in our classrooms? Surely broad notions of citizenship are standard fare in various Social Studies classes, but one wonders about the degree to which this messaging is laid out in concrete, rather than abstract terms, in ways that clearly highlight the value of volunteering in their respective communities, for current students. Such lessons could further be connected to mandatory local volunteer-for-credit programming, ensuring students that are perhaps a generation removed from witnessing first hand examples of significant volunteering by family members, are given real-world experience in this regard. We do not claim to be experts in primary school social studies curriculums, but we would encourage the Government of Alberta to think hard about ways in which our schooling system could aid in this issue.

Finally, on the topic of educating youth on the value of volunteering, more than one respondent in this study mentioned the demise of the Provincial Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) in 2019 as a blow to volunteer organizations across rural Alberta. Not only did many organizations make use of the program to hire a student for a subsidized summer position, thereby acquiring much-needed temporary support, these opportunities also served to introduce many students to a plethora of volunteer organizations throughout the province and the important work they did. For many volunteer organizations, this represented an opportunity to begin a longer-term relationship with a young person who would be far more likely to volunteer in the future. For these reasons, revisiting a similar summer youth employment program would be a worthwhile investment for the province.

Reducing the Burden on Rural Volunteer Organizations: Granting, Toolkits, and Website Support

Representatives of volunteer organizations in Alberta and current rural municipal officials with experience in local volunteer organizations were both adamant that there are many things the Government of Alberta can do to reduce the burden on these organizations. One issue that was frequently raised was the various granting programs currently in place in Alberta. Not only did many respondents express concerns that there was a lack of coherence or clear vision present in the various granting programs made available to volunteer organizations by the province, with some grants appearing or disappearing without any obvious reason. Respondents further complained that granting opportunities were often poorly communicated, with the vast majority of volunteer groups simply unaware of the opportunity or made aware too late to pull together a competitive application. Moreover, many noted the increasing burden onerous grant applications were placing on volunteer organizations already struggling with declining capacity. This is one area where many rural municipalities are already working with volunteer organizations, helping to identify and apply for relevant provincial grants. However, a more coherent vision for granting programs, and especially a central, easy-to-use database that lists all provincial grants available to volunteer associations, posted with sufficient lead time to allow often overburdened groups to build an application, would be a significant help. Reducing the paperwork required of volunteer organizations when applying for basic grants would similarly lighten the load for these groups in important ways.



A second common idea to emerge was to have the provincial government take the lead with board governance support for volunteer organizations with enhanced training opportunities for local volunteers to increase “governance literacy,” perhaps through in-person or online sessions in conjunction with the creation of a board governance “toolkit.” Increasing education in this area is already something selected entities are already doing, including some municipal governments and other volunteer support organizations like Volunteer Alberta or the Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies. There remains a place, we think, for tailored training opportunities that organizations like this can provide although it also makes a good deal of sense that the province could utilize its more abundant resources to take a lead on this and develop some overarching educational opportunities and toolkits that under-resourced organizations or municipalities could use. That said, this is an area that requires some caution – many experienced volunteers who participated in this project noted that, in some ways, the last thing we need to be putting on the shoulders of already overburdened volunteers, are more “requirements” like mandatory board governance sessions.

Finally, another innovative idea that was shared with us that would require relatively few resources was having the provincial government take the lead in developing a type of “plug and play” website development tool wherein volunteer organizations across the province, and especially those lacking members with technical savvy, could essentially “create” their own basic website for free by simply entering a few details about themselves and having the tool generate a basic one-page site wherein a description of the group, their key activities/ events, and some contact information would be easily posted online and shared throughout the community. Being able to have volunteer members easily update event schedules or list ongoing volunteering opportunities on the site would also be helpful in terms of broadening these groups’ ability to communicate with their communities and beyond.

Adequately Fund Municipalities to Account for the Rising Costs Associated with Declining Volunteerism

In the subsections above we argued that the Government of Alberta ought to do more to promote volunteerism and work to reduce the burden on volunteer organizations. We stand by these points while simultaneously admitting that they are, in certain ways, short-term fixes that will, most likely, only temporarily alleviate some pressure points highlighted in this report. Given the structural, value, and demographic changes that have taken place across much of the Western world the last several decades that are leading to declining volunteer numbers across multiple countries, it is important to acknowledge that it is highly unlikely the action of a single provincial government (or municipality or volunteer organization) are likely to stem the overwhelming tide that is declining volunteerism. Thus, it behooves governments at all levels to remain realistic in the face of these trends and do more to fully prepare for the implications that these trends point to.

In the case of rural Alberta, the significant and persistent decline in volunteerism is already requiring rural municipalities to respond with increasing levels of resources to support these fledgling volunteer groups and take-over maintenance responsibilities they can no longer fulfill. And, importantly, this seems to only be the tip of the iceberg – the interviews for this project made clear that all rural municipalities anticipate significantly rising costs, in addition to a necessary reduction in services or programming, in their communities in the near future as the capacity of volunteer organizations continues to decline. Thus, it is incumbent on the provincial government to provide adequate fiscal resources to assist municipalities in meeting these growing challenges. To choose not to is to jeopardize the programs and services that form a central pillar of the quality of life of rural citizens in Alberta.

The Rural Municipalities of Alberta have already been raising the issue of declining provincial transfers to Alberta Municipalities, and the subsequent fiscal strain this is putting on rural communities, in a variety of forums.³² In addition, just one year ago, we issued a similar call in response to our study that documented the increasing challenges FCSS offices were facing across rural Alberta.³³ Thus, to suggest that the Government of Alberta ought to increase transfers to municipalities is not an original demand. That does not, however, diminish the importance of this issue or the implications for rural communities throughout the province should the Government of Alberta fail to respond to this call. The reasons behind the declining rates of volunteerism across rural Alberta (and much of the Western World!), cannot be attributed to the provincial government, nor is it fair to expect them to be able to fully reverse these trends here in Alberta. But, the Government of Alberta is in a position to meaningfully assist rural municipalities who are having to respond directly to the many negative implications a declining volunteerism rate poses for rural communities in terms of declining services and programs for rural citizens, and the gradual deterioration of the recreational facilities that sit at the heart of their communities. We call here for the provincial government to respond positively to this request for fiscal support for rural municipalities.

³² "Municipal finances." *Rural Municipalities of Alberta* 22, no. 1, 2023 <https://rmalberta.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Municipal-Finances-Position-Statements.pdf>. See also Lindsay Morey, "Decreasing Municipal Funding by Province Highlighted at RMA Convention." *The Sherwood Park Strathcona County News*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.sherwoodparknews.com/news/local-news/decreasing-municipal-funding-by-province-highlighted-at-rma-convention>. See also Anchan, "Rural Municipalities Call for more Funding."

³³ Clark Banack and Laticia Chapman, "Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Faced by FCSS Programs in Rural Alberta." *Rural Municipalities of Alberta*, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://rmalberta.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RMA-Report-on-Family-and-Community-Support-Services-FINAL.pdf>

Bibliography

- "American Volunteer Rates are on the Decline." *Vision Monday*, Updated March 19, 2024, <https://www.visionmonday.com/business/research-and-stats/article/american-volunteer-rates-are-on-the-decline/>
- Anchan, Mrinali. "Rural Alberta Municipalities Call for more Infrastructure Funding." *CBC News*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/rural-alberta-municipalities-call-for-more-infrastructure-funding-1.7188557>
- Banack, Clark and Laticia Chapman. "Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Faced by FCSS Programs in Rural Alberta." *Rural Municipalities of Alberta*, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://rmalberta.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RMA-Report-on-Family-and-Community-Support-Services-FINAL.pdf>
- "Band-aid Solutions Fall Short: Oil and Gas Companies Continue to Ignore Property Taxes as Regulator sits on Hands." *Rural Municipalities of Alberta*, February 27, 2024 <https://rmalberta.com/news/band-aid-solutions-fall-short-some-oil-and-gas-companies-continue-to-ignore-property-taxes-as-regulator-sits-on-hands/>
- Bruce, David and Paul Jordan and Greg Halseth. "The Role of Voluntary Organizations in Rural Canada: Impacts of Changing Availability of Operational and Program Funding." *Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation: New Rural Economy Project*, 1999
- Burger, Eric. "Microvolunteering: What is it? How can Volunteer Programs Benefit from it?" *Volunteer Hub*, May 04, 2022, <https://volunteerhub.com/blog/micro-volunteering>
- "Camrose & District Family & Community Support Services." *FCSS: Family and Community Support Services*. Accessed 15 June, 2024, <https://camrosecfss.ca/camrose-and-district-support-services/#:~:text=CDFCSS%20provides%20preventive%20social%20programs,crisis%20situations%20should%20they%20arise>
- "Canadian Survey on Business Conditions, Fourth Quarter 2022." *Statistics Canada*, 25 November 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/221125/dq221125b-eng.pdf?st=xs-x7ArG>
- Colibaba, Amber, Mark W. Skinner, and Elizabeth Russell. "Rural Aging during COVID-19: A Case Study of Older Voluntarism." *Canadian Journal on Aging* 40 (4), 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0714980821000386>.
- "Community Hall Strategy." *County of Barrhead*, 2023, <https://www.countybarrhead.ab.ca/p/community-halls-1>
- "Community Pubs: A Better Form of Business." *Plunkett Foundation*, Accessed June 15 2024
- "Critical Lack of Volunteers putting Canadian Non-Profit at Services at Risk: *Volunteer Canada*." *CBC News*, 24 January 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/volunteer-shortage-caanada-1.6723348>
- Conway, Megan and Miki Stricker-Talbot, "Opinion: Expanding Volunteering Vital to Alberta's Social Fabric," *Edmonton Journal*, April 15, 2023, <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-expanding-volunteering-vital-to-albertas-social-fabric>
- "Critical Lack of Volunteers putting Canadian Non-Profit at Services at Risk: *Volunteer Canada*," *CBC News*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/volunteer-shortage-caanada-1.6723348>
- Dietz, Nathan and Robert T Grimm Jr, "A Less Charitable Nation: The Decline of Volunteering and Giving in the United States," *Explaining Declines in Volunteering and Giving*, (2020), https://cphp.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Grimm-Robert-Dietz-and-Grimm_A-Less-Charitable-Nation_March-2019-USC-Conference-Paper.pdf
- Fatehi, K, J.L Priestley, and G. Taasobshirazi. "The Expanded View of Individualism and Collectivism: One, Two, or Four Dimensions?" *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 20 (1), 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595820913077>
- Heley, Jesse, Sophie Yarker and Laura Jones, "Volunteering in the bath? The Rise of Micro-Volunteering and Implications for Policy," *Policy Studies* 43, no.7 (2022): 76-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1645324>
- Humphrey, Ashley and Ana-Maria Bliuc, "Western Individualism and the Psychological Wellbeing of Young People: A Systematic Review of Their Associations," *Youth* 1, no. 2 2022, <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-995X/2/1/1>
- MacLeod, Ann, Mark W. Skinner, Fay Wilkinson, and Heather Reid. "Connecting Socially Isolated Older Rural Adults with Older Volunteers through Expressive Arts." *Canadian Journal on Aging* 35 (1), 2016, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26934547/>
- McRae, Don. "Volunteer-Supporting Charities are Closing at Alarming Rates." *Panl Perspectives Carleton University*, August 22 2023, <https://carleton.ca/panl/2023/volunteer-charities-close-at-alarming-rates/>
- Morey, Lindsay. "Decreasing Municipal Funding by Province Highlighted at RMA Convention." *The Sherwood Park Strathcona County News*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.sherwoodparknews.com/news/local-news/decreasing-municipal-funding-by-province-highlighted-at-rma-convention>.
- "Municipal finances." *Rural Municipalities of Alberta* 22, no. 1, 2023 <https://rmalberta.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Municipal-Finances-Position-Statements.pdf>.
- "New Data and Resources on Volunteers." *National Council of Nonprofits*, Updated April 12, 2023. <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/new-data-and-resources-volunteers>.
- Ocejo, Richard. "When Gentrification Comes to Small Towns." *Time*, July 02 2024, <https://time.com/6992970/gentrification-small-towns-essay/>
- O'Leary, Amy Silver. "New Data and Resources on Volunteers." *National Council of Nonprofits*, <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/new-data-and-resources-volunteers>
- "Opinion: Expanding Volunteering Vital to Alberta's Social Fabric." *Edmonton Journal*, April 15, 2023, <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-expanding-volunteering-vital-to-albertas-social-fabric>
- Paarlberg, Laurie E., Rebecca Nesbit, Su Young Choi, and Ryan Moss. "The Rural/Urban Volunteering Divide." *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 33 (1), 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00401-2>
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- Schweyer, Allan, Ashley Whillians and Tesa E Leonce. "The Inevitable Rise in Dual Income Households and the Intertemporal Effects on the Labour Market." *Compensation & Benefits Review*, vol 52, no 2, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886368719900032>
- "Volunteer Action Strategy." *Volunteer Canada*, Accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.volunteerstrategy.ca/>
- Twenge, Jean M. *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, New York: Free Press, 2010.
- "Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention." *Volunteer Alberta*, May 15, 2010
- "Volunteering in Western Canada." *Co-operative Innovation Project*, September 2015. <https://coopinnovation.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/volunteer-crisis-final.pdf>
- "Volunteerism: In Crisis or at a Crossroads?" *The Philanthropist Journal*, March 14, 2023, <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2023/03/volunteerism-in-crisis-or-at-a-crossroads/>
- Zimmerman, Chris. "Shortage of Volunteers Threatens Non-Profit Sector: *Volunteer Canada*." *The Wellington Advisor*, April 19 2023, <https://www.wellingtonadvertiser.com/shortage-of-volunteers-threatens-non-profit-sector-volunteer-canada/>



RMA
RURAL MUNICIPALITIES
of ALBERTA