

Rural Older Voluntarism During the COVID-19 Pandemic

PROJECT REPORT

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As Trent University researchers, we respectfully acknowledge that this project was undertaken on the treaty and traditional territory of the Mississauga Anishnaabeg. We offer our gratitude to the First Nations for their care for, and teachings about, our earth and our relations. May we honour those teachings.



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BACKGROUND

Trent's Rural Aging Research Program

Based out of Trent University's Trent Centre for Aging & Society, in Peterborough, Ontario, one of Canada's most rapidly aging rural regions, the **Rural Aging Research Program** works toward building new knowledge, collaborations and capacity aimed at better understanding and informing how rural communities are responding to population aging.

Featuring collaborative, community-based research projects across Canada and internationally, Dr. Mark Skinner, Dr. Elizabeth Russell and their team are looking to uncover how older residents, volunteers, service providers, community leaders and policymakers are adapting, often in innovative ways, to the challenges and opportunities of aging in rural communities.

Trent's Rural Aging Research Program carries out projects related to rural aging, aging rural communities, rural age-friendly sustainability, social inclusion and voluntarism, intergenerational experiential learning, rural planning and policy, and interdisciplinary aging studies. Project funders include the Canada Research Chairs Program, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Rural Ontario Institute, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Trent University's Office of Research & Innovation.

The Rural Aging Research Program was awarded Trent University's inaugural 2021 Research Impact Award for its work stewarding original and impactful research that makes a significant contribution to society. The program was initiated in 2016 as part of Dr. Mark Skinner's Canada Research Chair in Rural Aging, Health and Social Care. It continues to be expanded by the co-leadership of Dr. Elizabeth Russell who was awarded a 2022 Early Career Researcher Award and the 2023 Symons Award for Excellence in Teaching.

The Research Team



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ABOUT THE STUDY

Research shows that volunteers and volunteer-based programs play an essential role in the livability and sustainability of rural communities. Volunteers are especially important in supporting vulnerable older people in underserved rural areas and in facilitating aging in place and age-friendly community development. COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges facing rural volunteers, many of whom are older themselves, and there is an urgent need to understand how volunteer-based programs and older volunteers who support aging communities ('older voluntarism') are coping with the changes brought on during and following the pandemic.

In order to address this need, Trent's Rural Aging Research Program undertook a case study of older voluntarism during the COVID-19 pandemic, featuring interviews and focus groups with administrators and volunteers at three volunteer-based programs in Peterborough County to understand and learn from their experiences.

The three-year study (2021-2024) was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and received approval from the Trent University Research Ethics Board.

Findings from the case study provide new insights and recommendations for rural community leaders, volunteer-based programs and older volunteers as they seek to develop future-proofing strategies for coping with unprecedented changes. The impacts on volunteering, such as burnout and unsustainability, are especially pressing in small towns and villages where most volunteers are themselves older. Learning how the pandemic impacted older people, volunteer-based programs, and aging rural communities alike is increasingly important

to understanding how we can best support rural older voluntarism, which will in turn strengthen our ability to support and sustain older people and aging places in Peterborough County, across Canada and internationally.



GOAL

To develop new insights into older voluntarism, and the role of older volunteers in particular during COVID-19, as a means of creating positive outcomes for aging in place and community development in Canada's aging rural communities.



OBJECTIVES

- Examine rural older adults' **experiences** of volunteering during the pandemic;
- Identify the **challenges** facing volunteer-based programs supporting older rural residents during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Understand how rural community **responses** to the needs of older residents during the pandemic were **influenced** by volunteer experiences and program challenges; and
- Inform the development of immediate and longer-term (post-pandemic) **strategies** for older volunteers, volunteer-based programs and community development in rural Canada for post-pandemic sustainability.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Peterborough County Case Study

To study the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural older voluntarism, a case study was undertaken between 2021-2024 in Peterborough County, Ontario, Canada.

Peterborough County (pop. 148,000) is located on the traditional and treaty territory of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and is comprised of small towns (pop. <10,000), dispersed agricultural (farming) and rural-recreational (cottage country) settlements, and rural-urban adjacent suburbs in eight rural townships that are typical of the different contexts of rural aging in Canada. It also includes Curve Lake First Nation and Hiawatha First Nation.

We conducted the case study through partnerships established with three volunteer-based programs that represent typical programs in rural and small town Canada that involve older volunteers: recreational, heritage and community support. Two of the volunteer-based programs are situated in rural townships of the County, with the third program located in the City of Peterborough, taking a regional approach to program implementation.



Buckhorn Community Centre (BCC) is in the township of Trent Lakes, which has a population of 6,439 (32% of which is over 65 years) who live in a rural-recreational (cottage country) setting. It is a volunteer-based, non-profit community centre offering activities, events and programs to meet the recreational, social and cultural needs of the community of Buckhorn. The BCC offers programming such as sports and fitness activities, card tournaments and luncheons, as well as special events such as an arts festival, seasonal craft shows and dinner theatres. Over 400 volunteers play crucial roles at the community centre, including sitting on the board of directors, providing administrative support, special events coordination and program delivery.



400+ **Volunteers at Buckhorn Community Centre**



Lang Pioneer Village Museum is in the township of Otonabee-South Monaghan, which has a population of 7,087 (24% of which are over 65 years) who live in small town and agricultural (farming) settings. It is an outdoor museum that seeks to preserve, promote and authentically recreate the history of Peterborough County. It features over 30 restored and furnished historical village buildings for touring, children's programming and community events. Over 100 volunteers at the museum take on roles such as building interpreter, historical tradesperson, musician, researcher, sewer/costumer, and general special events helper.

100+

**Volunteers at Lang
Pioneer Village Museum**



New Canadians Centre Peterborough (NCC)

is located in the City of Peterborough, which has a population of 83,651 (24% of which is over 65 year). The NCC implements immigrant integration programming regionally across Peterborough County. The NCC is a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to supporting immigrants, refugees and other newcomers to the Peterborough region. Individuals and families can use the NCC to seek support with employment and housing, English learning, immigration and settlement and accessing various community services. Over 200 volunteers assist the NCC by acting as tutors for varying subjects, supporting special events, and having roles on refugee support teams.

200+

**Volunteers at the
New Canadians Centre
Peterborough**

Data Collection: Listening to Administrators and Volunteers

A total of six administrator interviews and 20 volunteer focus group discussions were conducted between September 2022 and November 2023.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with the administrators (e.g., managers, volunteer coordinators) were 60-90 minutes in length and held in private meeting spaces at each of the volunteer-based programs. Interviews covered topics ranging from program overviews, working alongside volunteers, how the program is supported by volunteers, and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the program and its volunteers.

Focus Groups

Focus group discussions with volunteers were approximately 90 minutes long and held at either private meeting spaces at each case study site or at Trent University. Focus group discussions covered topics such as the experience of volunteering with their volunteer program, the implications of the pandemic on the participants as individuals and as volunteers, and what they see as the future of volunteering at their respective programs.

Participants

Participants were 56 administrators and volunteers (six administrators, 50 volunteers) across the three volunteer-based programs (25 from BCC, 20 from Lang Pioneer Village Museum, and 11 from NCC). Participants ranged in age from 30 years old to 92 years old, with an average age of 67 years. 42 participants identified as female (75%), 13 identified as male (23%), and one identified as genderqueer (0.02%). Participants had been associated with their respective volunteer-based program for an average of 12 years (shortest – 1 year, longest – 56 years). These characteristics are consistent with demographic trends of older rural Canadian volunteers.

Data Analysis

With participants' informed consent, interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Following an iterative collaborative qualitative analysis process, the transcripts were reviewed and holistically analyzed for emergent themes that speak to age, disconnect and perspective. This analysis formed the evidence from which the study's key findings and Promising Practices developed.



CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

3

Volunteer programs

6

Administrator participants

50

Volunteer participants

67

Average age of volunteer participants

12

Average years of participants' volunteer service



WHAT WE LEARNED

Three key themes emerged during analysis: **impact on aging**, as it relates to the accelerated aging felt by older volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic, **challenges of social disconnect** from both volunteering and the community due to the pandemic's effects on volunteer program operations, and **changing perspective**, which described the ways volunteers and program administrators used the time away from their programs as a period of reflection and reassessment of individual and program needs.

Impact on Aging

Volunteers described how, due to their feelings of accelerated aging and the fear of the COVID-19 virus, their sense of personal sustainability became precarious during the pandemic. Participants indicated that “three years is a long time when you’re in the later part of your life” and described how certain aspects of their volunteer roles such as long days standing, use of their hands, and driving to nighttime or winter events had become more challenging due to age because “our bodies aren’t quite as agile as they used to be.”

For some volunteers, the shift to more virtual means of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

was difficult. Administrators and older volunteers alike identified technological literacy as a challenge faced by their respective programs and felt that switching to remote activities held on platforms like Zoom “alienated” older volunteers, and presented challenges to program sustainability.

Fear of contracting COVID-19 was a bigger concern for some volunteers than others, but most participants acknowledged a heightened sense of risk for older volunteers, whether that pertained to their own feelings of vulnerability, fear of exposing others, or concerned family members telling them “you can’t volunteer anymore because it’s too dangerous.”

“We got older, you know? During COVID, I had a couple of mini strokes which affected my balance. So, I didn’t dare set tables [for dinner theatre] ... I didn’t want to fall into the dishes. I imagine other people have experienced aging in that lull of time.”

Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer

Challenges of Social Disconnect

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs were forced to halt their programming to comply with government-mandated health measures, leading to isolation and feelings of disconnect for many older volunteers. Many participants described a sense of disconnect from volunteering during the pandemic, explaining that they felt removed from their purpose as a volunteer during that time. This was especially true of volunteers at the NCC, who used words like “bereft,” “upsetting,” and “guilty”

to describe how the inability to connect in person inhibited their ability to form relationships with the newcomers they supported.

For BCC volunteers, COVID-19 represented a time of disconnection from old friends and communities as many relocated to Buckhorn from urban metropolitan areas such as Toronto. For these participants, volunteering at the BCC was a “great introduction to the community:” a chance to meet others, contribute, and put down roots in their new home.

“The pandemic cut you off from part of your life. When you’re retired, [volunteering] becomes everything to you. If you know that every Tuesday, you’re going to be at [the pioneer village] volunteering, for a lot of retired people... that’s their life.”

Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer





Changing Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic gave both individuals and programs alike perspective on their experience and role as volunteers, and on the purpose of the volunteer program. While programming was paused, administrators had time to catch up on behind-the-scenes work such as maintenance and organization that they would not otherwise have the capacity for, and to examine the future sustainability of their program. During the time of reassessment, participants described how program sustainability became an important focus. Most agreed that in order to sustain the programs, the programs themselves would have to change and evolve, and in most cases, were in the process of changing via increases in paid staff, new program offerings, and increased promotion efforts.

Volunteers themselves used the pandemic as time to reconsider their volunteer roles. For many, this meant reflecting on their personal future of volunteering, how much they would continue to take on, and whether it was time to “let someone younger step into the job.” While many volunteers expressed renewed feelings of passion and energy post-pandemic, having perspective also underscored their ability to “pick and choose” the nature of their volunteer involvement: “There’s no hesitation for seniors, if they don’t like something they’re not going to do it.”

“It’s limited what I could enjoy taking and it’s limited what I’ve been able to give. So both the give and the take has been limited by COVID.”

New Canadians Centre Peterborough Volunteer

PROMISING PRACTICES

Impact on aging, challenges of social disconnect, and changing perspective were the main themes that connected the experiences of older rural voluntarism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these themes speaks to both the prospect and precarity of older rural voluntarism during the pandemic and can help inform the ways volunteer-based programs respond to future crises and sustain their work in a post-pandemic world.

Based on what we learned from talking with administrators and volunteers, this report highlights six initial Promising Practices that can help volunteer-based programs support and sustain rural older voluntarism during the pandemic and beyond.



COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

1

Communicating While Apart

Keeping the channels of communication open, explicit, and transparent was found to be a key practice to keep volunteers engaged with the program during the pandemic and beyond. Participants indicated that programs used a variety of outlets such as **social media, email updates, telephone check-ins and physical postings on doors and windows** kept them in the loop regarding safety measures, COVID-risk, and program operations through the uncertainty of the pandemic. Having this knowledge fostered trust between volunteers and program administrators, encouraged volunteers to stay connected, and empowered volunteers to make decisions that suited their health needs.

Along with communicating necessary information around the changing risk and health measures during the pandemic, it was important for the volunteer programs to maintain personal connections to volunteers during the time of crisis. For example, participants described how staff organized **Zoom check-ins** throughout the different pandemic phases (full lockdowns, remote program delivery), or **made a point to call and speak with them over the phone**. Participants felt that these efforts made a positive impact on their involvement with the program by making them feel valued and providing the opportunity to feel connected with the program, its staff, and other volunteers who were also unable to participate.

"They followed the health unit, they kept us up to date by email in terms of what was going on with the vaccinations clinics that they held here and the mask mandates and they kept us all informed. And I think that because of that, I personally felt very safe coming back."

Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer

2

Empowering Volunteer Autonomy Amid Health Concerns

Participants described the value of being able to make their own choices regarding a return to volunteering since COVID-19, informed by the risk of the volunteer role and their own comfort level. **Transparency about the requirements of the volunteer role** (e.g., time commitment, physical requirements, indoor vs. outdoor), **options for outdoor or remote volunteer opportunities, and masking/cleaning protocols** were all identified as ways programs could promote volunteer autonomy. At New Canadians Centre Peterborough for example, administrators provided volunteers on their refugee-support teams with the option to be matched with a family based on COVID-19 vaccination status:

"They can make the choice and know [they're] going to be matched with somebody who is vaccinated, unvaccinated, vaccinated. In terms of having that security for their own health that's worked well. It's not an unknown, they like to make that choice and set their own boundaries" (New Canadians Centre Peterborough Administrator).

Participants described how having options for participation allowed them to rejoin volunteering at their own pace. In some cases, this meant feeling safe enough to join outdoor gatherings. In other cases, being aware of the program's masking requirements allowed volunteers to choose to return. In general, participants felt that **being in control of how they volunteered throughout the pandemic** was a positive practice that fostered continued engagement.



"I don't feel like I'm stuck with a lot of people here and I feel like I have a choice as to where I'm going to work so I feel like my comfort level is covered here."

Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer

POST-PANDEMIC SUSTAINABILITY

3

Succession Planning

Succession planning was a prevalent discussion among participants from all three case study programs, as accelerated aging, disconnection, and perspective shifts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted them to take a critical look at the future of their programs and consider who would continue in their footsteps. Key succession planning practices identified were **documenting processes**, **mentoring new and upcoming staff/volunteers**, and **proactively seeking replacements for key personnel who could be trained over time**.

Many participants feared that when key staff and volunteer leaders eventually moved on, their knowledge and expertise would be lost, however, **recruiting new volunteers**, **increasing engagement of current underutilized volunteers**, and **ensuring that volunteer knowledge was passed on** were the foundations for successful succession planning post-pandemic. Promising practices for volunteer recruitment included “bring a friend” days, making in-depth information and training resources available online to introduce potential volunteers to the program, and formalizing recruitment at programs/ events.

Volunteers and administrators alike emphasized the value of leveraging volunteers’ wealth of knowledge through mentorship, developing and distributing resources like **tip sheets and guides**, and **facilitating discussions for knowledge exchange**: “From teams like ours that are working well, they could get some people who are willing to spend a day or afternoon or evening with a team that’s struggling to help them sort themselves out” (New Canadians Centre Peterborough Volunteer).

“The challenge personally is to say no and figure out how to build succession. How do you pass your knowledge and skills on because that’s changing. We take so much for granted [...] it’s all up here [in my head]. So volunteerism isn’t just [doing]... it’s making sure that you prepare the next people too.”

Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer

4

Making Use of New Volunteers

Many participants expressed that although the volunteer corps of their program was large, **most work often fell to the same experienced volunteers who had been with the program the longest.**

Participants indicated that newer volunteers were often underutilized, either because they “don’t know that [the program] needs somebody to take the lead” (Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer), or because leaders were “just picking people that you know you can count on” (Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer).

Increasing awareness of who was being called upon first and most often to volunteer was vital to making use of new volunteers, which could contribute to program sustainability. To make the most out of new volunteers, participants suggested providing opportunities for new volunteers to **role shadow** more experienced peers, to prioritize a **healthy ratio of new vs. experienced volunteers** for events, and to **be transparent about the roles available to everyone.**

Along with planning for the eventual retirement of key volunteers/administrators, engaging newer volunteers can help set volunteer-based programs up for success, and contribute to their resilience in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

“At the beginning of the year you should say ‘We would like to do these activities, but we need somebody to take the lead on this, this, and this and part of that is being a team leader and we’ll train you on it.’”

Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer

5

Providing Opportunities for Personal Growth

The pandemic provided time for many volunteers to reconsider their volunteer commitments and reassess their engagement with their volunteer-based program. Providing opportunities for volunteers to **learn new skills, try out new roles, and build on their interests** was found to be a key motivator for continued service through the pandemic and beyond. Most participants felt that their respective programs provided them with “a chance to move into new jobs and experiences” (Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer) and explore their interests in a way that was mutually beneficial for themselves and the program; for example, through the **creation of new roles, developing skills via workshops/training, or matching them to a role that interested them**. As this volunteer said: “If I have an interest and it’s something that could be beneficial, then they’re happy to let us run with it” (Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer).

Some volunteers enjoyed using past career experience in their volunteer roles and not have their skillset “just wash away somewhere” (Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer). At the outdoor museum, volunteers with agricultural, sewing, printing, and trade skills were particularly sought-after, administrative and financial skills

were in demand at the community centre, and the NCC identified retired teachers and educators as ideal volunteer candidates. This need for certain skills often contributed to the roles volunteers were assigned to. **However, both administrators and volunteers cautioned that being “typecast” according to their skillset risked leading to burnout or a lack of motivation among volunteers.**

Being flexible and **facilitating role rotation** among volunteers often came up as a recommendation for keeping volunteers engaged and motivated. At the museum, participants went out of their way to acknowledge administrators for doing just that:

“They also say ‘You’ve been here for quite a while. Is there somewhere else in the village you’d like to try and learn about?’ I think that is quite unusual. They are prepared to manipulate the situation in a nice way, to organize it. So you can get a variety of experiences with a variety of people” (Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer).

Looking to the declining rates of voluntarism throughout COVID-19, volunteer engagement is a key issue to the sustainability of volunteer-based programs as we navigate the post-pandemic era. Providing opportunities for volunteers to grow with the program can have a positive impact on fostering volunteers who are committed, engaged, and motivated to supporting the program.

“As an accountant, you’re continually being asked “Will you be the treasurer? It’s not very much work!” But I was sick of that. After doing numbers all day long, I didn’t want to do numbers.”

New Canadians Centre Peterborough Volunteer



6

Making Volunteers Feel Heard and Appreciated

Finally, creating an environment where volunteers **feel valued, appreciated, and heard** as contributing members of their program can help to combat feelings of disconnect many felt because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteers who felt their contributions were appreciated were encouraged to return to volunteering once pandemic restrictions lifted. For many participants, this was as simple as **sharing a meal after an event** or being provided with **coffee and snacks**. In addition to tangible acts of recognition (e.g., meal-sharing, volunteer appreciation events), volunteers often spoke of having their time respected: “There seems to be a

real focus on giving the volunteer sufficient notice of events and opportunities” (Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer), and their boundaries honoured.

Participants felt that fostering connections between volunteers, staff, and the program itself would improve their experiences as volunteers, ultimately increasing their personal sustainability. Participants pointed to **volunteer biographies/showcases in newsletters** and **opportunities to connect** with other volunteers, staff, and co-op students as practices they would like to see incorporated in their programs to promote the work volunteers do.



"The people are very friendly. I don't complain a lot, but if I do complain, they listen to me. They understand if I have to say 'sorry, I can't do this or that. I'm not available to volunteer'. They're always appreciative of when I do volunteer."

Lang Pioneer Village Museum Volunteer

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Trent University's Rural Aging Research Program case study on older voluntarism examined the experiences of volunteer-based program administrators and older volunteers at the Buckhorn Community Centre, Lang Pioneer Village Museum and New Canadians Centre Peterborough during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews and focus group discussions with 56 participants revealed the ways the pandemic had impacts on aging for volunteers, created and exacerbated challenges of social connection and changed perspectives on voluntarism for volunteers and administrators. Key findings shed light on the ways in which the three volunteer-based programs successfully supported and work to sustain older voluntarism in Peterborough County during the pandemic and in a post-pandemic era.



Learning from the experiences of administrators and volunteers led to the identification of six promising practices and recommendations on how other volunteer-based programs in aging rural communities across Canada and internationally can develop strategies to future-proof their volunteers, programs and communities for unprecedented changes.

1

Communicating During Times of Change

- Use social media, email and/or posters to highlight key info like program updates and health & safety guidelines
- Check in with volunteers over phone, Zoom, and email to foster strong connections
- Develop and communicate clear protocols to address challenges during time of crisis



2

Empowering Volunteer Autonomy

- Build flexibility into volunteer roles to encourage engagement
- Acknowledge differences and encourage volunteers to make choices that fit their needs
- Be transparent about volunteer roles and tasks (e.g., physical strain, level of responsibility)



3

Succession Planning

- Formally document tasks, planning and processes
- Be creative and proactive with recruitment (e.g., volunteer "bring a friend" days)
- Create mentorship opportunities to build succession
- Plan ahead, and talk about who will step in when key personnel retire



4

Making Use of New Volunteers

- Be aware of who is called on first and who may be forgotten
- Encourage newer volunteers to take on leadership roles; be prepared to advocate for them
- Prioritize balancing new/longtime volunteers during event planning



5

Providing Opportunities for Personal Growth

- Organize workshop/training opportunities for volunteers to develop knowledge and skills
- Encourage volunteers to bring their interests and experience to the role
- Let volunteers try new things – do not “typecast” based on career experience



6

Making Volunteers Feel Heard and Appreciated

- Create opportunities for volunteer feedback and ideas
- Thank volunteers with light refreshments
- Provide sufficient notice of scheduling and events; respect volunteers' time/availability
- Create opportunities to connect and socialize with staff and other volunteers
- Showcase volunteer contributions in newsletters and emails (e.g., volunteer profiles)





To continue the exploration into rural older voluntarism beyond Peterborough County, further research into the diversity of perspectives and experiences of older volunteers, volunteer-based programs and aging rural communities is needed. Future projects could focus on the spectrum of voluntary sector initiatives in rural communities – such as agriculture, arts and culture, emergency services, environment, health care, housing,

humanitarian, religious, political, sports and recreation. With over 50 volunteer-based programs in Peterborough County, for example, expanding research to incorporate other sectors, but also programs in other rural townships and locales will continue to shed light on the unique experiences of older volunteers, volunteer-based programs and aging rural communities.

“There is an energy to coming back [after the pandemic]. Especially as an old person. I feel enthusiastic, and you don’t burn out when you’re enthusiastic and you don’t burn out when you feel passionate about something.”

Buckhorn Community Centre Volunteer



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For more information, please visit Trent University's Rural Aging Research Program's website at **www.trentu.ca/ruralaging** or contact **ruralaging@trentu.ca**