



SENIOR VOLUNTEERING PROJECT:

The Impact of COVID
and Pandemic Precautions
on Senior Volunteers



Funding for this project was provided by: The Government of Canada New Horizons for Seniors Program, Employment and Social Development Canada

Volunteer Victoria

602-620 View Street

Victoria BC V8W 1J6

www.volunteervictoria.bc.ca

Tel: 250.386.2269

E-Mail: volvic@volunteervictoria.bc.ca

Volunteer Victoria Senior Volunteering Project: The Impact of COVID and Pandemic Precautions on Senior Volunteers is a snapshot study of volunteerism in Greater Victoria between April 2021 and March 2022. We hope the information included in this document will inspire volunteers and volunteer-led organizations to rebound from the pandemic with certainty and commitment to creating safe spaces and strong boundaries for volunteers and volunteerism to thrive.

Permission is granted to share the material in this publication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

We live, work, and volunteer as uninvited guests in the traditional territory of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and Wsáneć Nations. To the Lekwungen Peoples, who are our leaders, neighbours, and fellow volunteers Volunteer Victoria offers gratitude and respect. Huy tseep q'u. Thank you.

We would also like to acknowledge and recognize the following individuals for their tremendous curiosity, comradery, and leadership:

Deborah Austin

Madelaine Bakker

Howard Brunt

Moira Cameron

Sue Hanley

Roy Leaman

Gail Miller

Carol Sherwood

Mary Horton

Katrina Pavlovsky

Vicki McNaulty

This dedicated team, with support from Volunteer Victoria team members Mary Ann Snowden and Lisa Mort-Putland, exhibited the qualities that define great community projects. They led and managed this project with passion, integrity, and intention. As engaged volunteers they contributed time, skills, knowledge, and a commitment to create spaces where other volunteers could safely share their experiences, accomplishments, and concerns, and the volunteer management community could learn and grow from their input.

Our thanks to our project partner the Cook Street Activity Centre and to Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary, Soap for Hope Canada, Silver Threads, James Bay New Horizons, and the 240+ individual volunteers who shared stories of volunteering and ideas about how we can strengthen volunteerism post pandemic.

We also wish to thank the staff and volunteers at the Inter-cultural Association of Greater Victoria, the Victoria Disability Resource Centre, and the Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre for sharing more about their experiences during the pandemic.



INTRODUCTION

Volunteer Victoria was interested in learning about the impacts of COVID on seniors who volunteer in Greater Victoria and the supports that could make volunteer experiences easier, safer, and better as the pandemic continues to affect our lives.

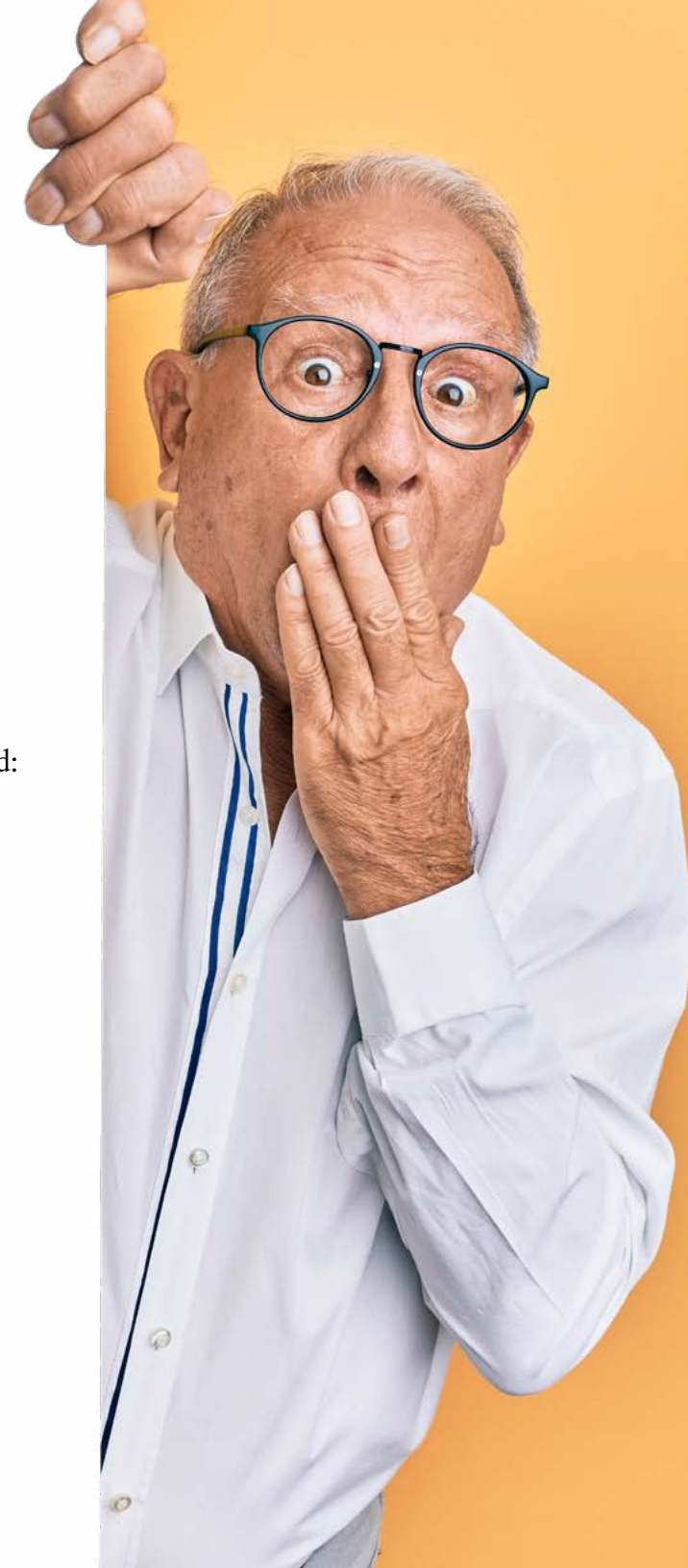
We invited volunteers, and people who had never volunteered before, to complete a short survey or to connect with our team of skilled volunteers to request a phone, online, or in-person interview.

Definitions: For the purposes of our project, we defined:

“Seniors” as anyone 55 years or older

“Volunteers” as people who complete activities for others for free

“Volunteer activity” as any action in partnership with formal organizations (such as a charity), with informal groups (such as with groups of neighbours), or as individuals acting alone (such as helping a friend with shopping).





WHO ARE THE PROJECT PARTICIPANTS?

240 unique individuals from Greater Victoria completed an online survey between September 2021 and March 2022. Our volunteer team also interviewed close to 40 individual volunteers about their experiences. The respondents were recruited by placing ads in the newspaper, putting requests on websites, newsletters, and social media outlets, through our partner agencies, and through direct asks to over 180 volunteer managers in Greater Victoria. The respondents were:

- Female – 81.17%
- Male – 17.15%
- No answer – 1.26%
- Aged 55 to 65 – 20.17%
- Aged 66 to 75 – 52.52%
- Aged 76 to 85 – 25.63%
- Aged 86 and over – 0.42%
- No answer – 1.26%

We were surprised by two things – the low rate of male responses, and the high rate of respondents over the age of 76! This suggests that **older volunteers who were previously connected to existing volunteer positions appear to be looking for new opportunities to engage.**

17.15%

81.17%

25.63%

52.52%

20.17%

While every volunteer is unique, the spirit and resiliency of volunteers at this time were captured in the following quotes:

“Senior volunteers want to be understood and valued.”

“We are a lot more assertive than you think!”

“We didn’t live this long by being stupid.”

“I’m not a paid employee and you are not my boss!”

“One size does not fit for all volunteers and task at hand.”

“I am impressed how organizations were so understanding about the importance of protecting volunteers and so delighted when any of us returned after more measures taken.”

“Those recruiting volunteers must know that potential volunteers are not looking for a salary but for the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution and to have their sense of purpose acknowledged – otherwise I might as well sit at home and read a book.”

CONCERNS ABOUT COVID CONTINUE

We know that in any group of volunteers there will be different risk tolerances. We wondered how concerned volunteers were about the risk of either getting or transmitting COVID-19 while volunteering?

51.67% were somewhat concerned

23.75% were not at all concerned

14.17% were very concerned

7.92% were extremely concerned



More than two years since the beginning of the pandemic, 22% of respondents remain very or extremely concerned about getting or transmitting COVID. This suggests that **volunteer managers should continue to talk about and prioritize volunteer physical safety and mental health.** Respondents shared that:

“Organizations must provide N95 masks. Many seniors have limited resources and the masks aren’t cheap. Volunteers don’t want to rock the boat by asking for them.”

“Volunteers must be given an orientation and COVID protocols must be in place for all opportunities and positions.”

“I just wish they did not leave volunteers in limbo. Direct and clear communication would be appreciated”

“Without volunteering I have lost my feelings of self.”

“The isolation was hard mentally and physically. Both suffered.”

“I think it is important that we know that everyone is vaccinated or; at least, who is not vaccinated so we can make our own decisions about being in that space.”

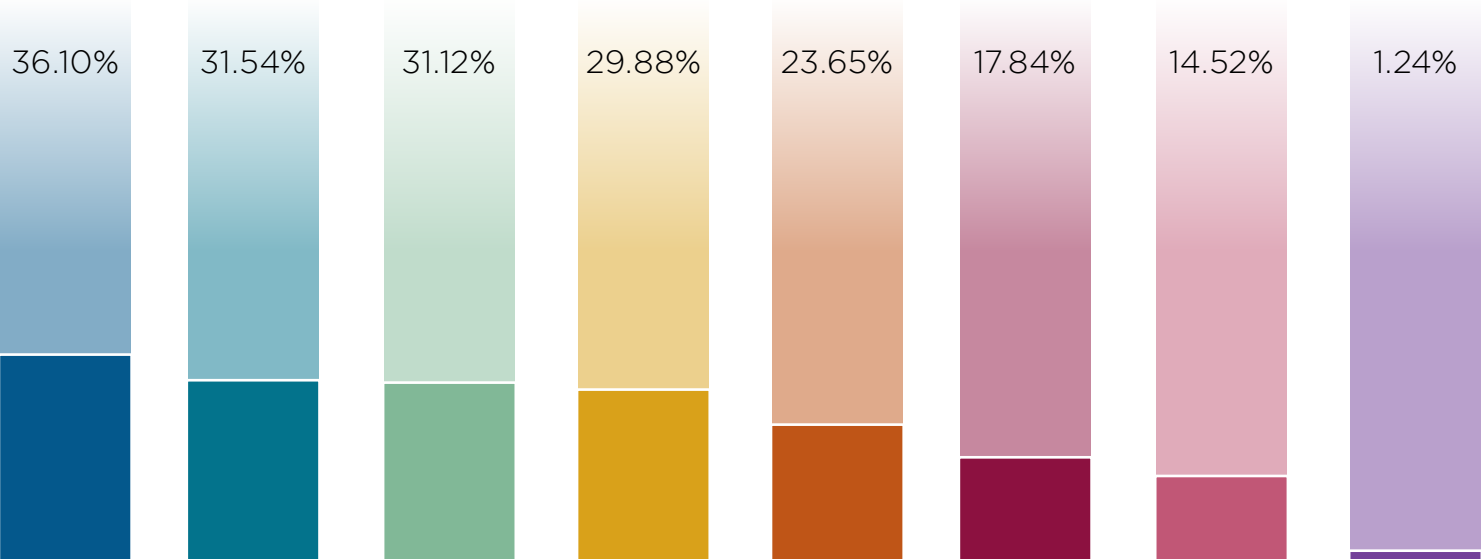
“My volunteer role is my life – it consumes me. COVID has made the job harder. I need support, I need a safe space to talk about the pressures.”



SHIFTS IN VOLUNTEERING

We wanted to get a better sense of how many volunteers increased, slowed, or stopped volunteering during the pandemic, and how the pandemic might have impacted volunteering habits:

- 36.10% continued volunteer activities but in a different format (i.e. Zoom)
- 31.54% began some new volunteering activities
- 31.12% reduced some of volunteering activities
- 29.88% continued volunteer activities much the same as before
- 23.65% restarted some previous volunteering activities that had stopped
- 17.84% are currently looking for new volunteering opportunities
- 14.52% stopped all volunteering activities
- 1.24% were neither volunteering nor were they seeking to volunteer when the pandemic started



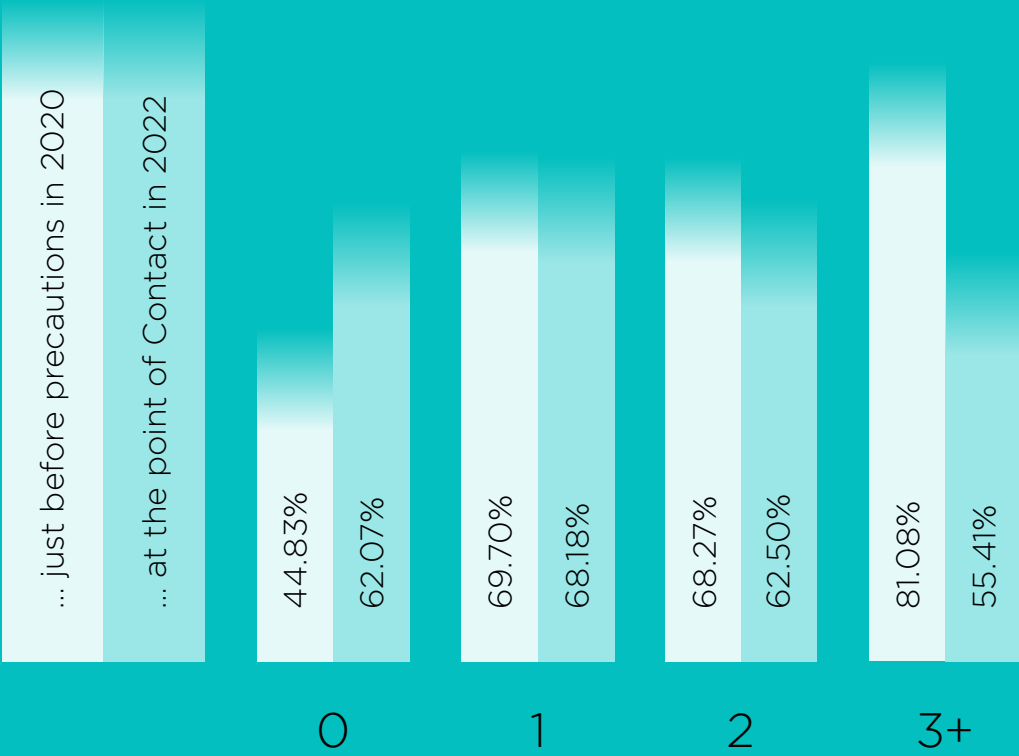
We were not surprised that about 22% of respondents stopped volunteering all together during the pandemic.



Older volunteers consistently give the highest number of volunteering hours each year and often volunteer in multiple positions and with multiple organizations. We wanted to know how this might have changed over the course of the pandemic.

Stopped volunteering all together during the pandemic

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERING POSITIONS



We were very interested to learn that 26% of volunteers who previously connected with 3 or more volunteering positions reduced their volunteering roles. This led us to wonder if older volunteers have re-evaluated and changed their priorities and vision for volunteering in the future? While many respondents are fully committed to volunteerism, we also heard many volunteers share messages about re-evaluating their needs:

“This 3rd wave has scared people away from volunteering. There is nervousness but there is also loneliness out there.”

“If volunteering is not valuable, I can stay home and read a book.”

“I have stopped doing many things during COVID and will have to rethink where to put time when things re-open.”

“I retired from full time paid work just after the pandemic hit, which freed me up to take on volunteer roles.”

“COVID has afforded the opportunity to rethink what is important in our lives. I only have 5 to 10 years of really productive time left.”



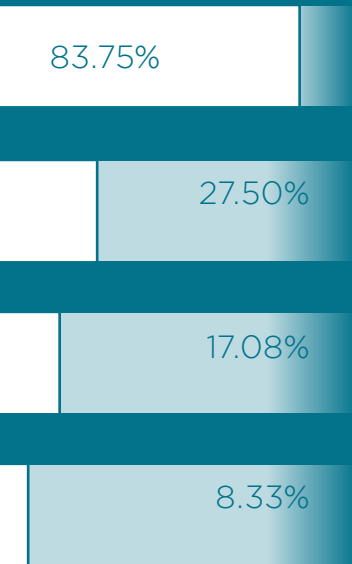
“People stayed volunteering out of habit – now we have reflected on our needs.”

LOCAL VOLUNTEERING TRENDS

National surveys from Volunteer Canada and Volunteer Victoria's own local studies in 2021 suggests that some volunteer programs closed altogether in the early months of the pandemic. Over time, others shifted their program design, grew their existing volunteering programs, or added new volunteer programs. We wondered what impact these shifts had on volunteers.

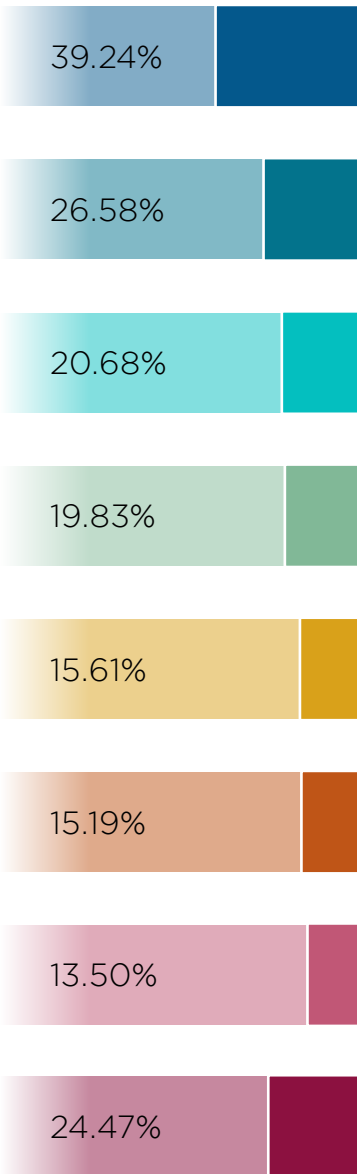
Since the pandemic precautions began in March 2020, respondents volunteered in the following ways:

- 83.75% volunteered through a formally organised agency, charity, group, organisation, or club
- 27.50% volunteered as a private individual not associated with either a formal or informal group
- 17.08% volunteered through an informal group set up by people in your local area or neighbourhood to support and help others in your local community
- 8.33% had not volunteered since the precautions began



We asked respondents to share the types of organizations, groups, clubs, or charities where they currently volunteer:

- 39.24% provide social, emotional support, and other basic needs (such as food, counseling housing etc.)
- 26.58% contribute to environmental organizations (such as gardening, recycling, invasive species removal etc.)
- 20.68% volunteer with arts, culture, and entertainment (such as a museum, theatre group etc.)
- 19.83% volunteer with Health and healthcare, including long term care (such as medical driving, visitation etc.)
- 15.61% volunteer with an enterprise or business society (such as charity thrift stores, business associations etc.)
- 15.19% volunteer with recreation or education (such as coaching, tutoring etc.)
- 13.50% volunteered as an individual and did not partner with a formal or informal organization
- 24.47% other types of groups.



Emerging trends: Respondents shared stories of volunteering in their residences, strata councils, training and fostering animals, and connecting with neighbours as forms of volunteering. We do not know yet if volunteers will choose to go back to formal volunteering in the same ways as pre-pandemic. We do know that volunteers are making informed choices about volunteering:

“I am a very dedicated volunteer – if nothing is obvious, I will create my own role.”

“Because I don’t receive any pay for the work I do I am committed to the difference I make and the experience I have. The work has to enrich my life, or I won’t do it.”

“We are 2nd WW survivors – we know how to help!”

Some types of volunteer positions were hard-hit during the pandemic. Interest in other types of roles initially grew and then decreased over time to the point where they are now lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Volunteer positions involving the environment, gardening, or nature have remained very popular and interest in these types of roles either grew or stayed at pre-pandemic levels.

Interest Rose or Stayed About the Same as 2020 Levels	Interest Decreased Since 2020 Levels
Assisting with outdoors or environmental organizations	Down 35% Assisting organizations with fund-raising and special events
Providing administrative or clerical support (e.g. – telephone, office, on-line, etc.)	Down 15% Supporting with trades, technical, computer, IT services and guidance, teaching or tutoring
Board and Committee work	Down 8% Personal assistance with independent living (e.g. shopping, household tasks, transportation to appointments, etc.) Down 7% Providing support through social service organizations (e.g. food banks, helping people who face challenges such as poverty, disability, homelessness, etc.)

“I used to be out in the community a lot. This time (during pandemic) has been very hard. I don’t like to feel useless.”

*“I want to enjoy what I do,
I won’t be treated with disrespect.”*

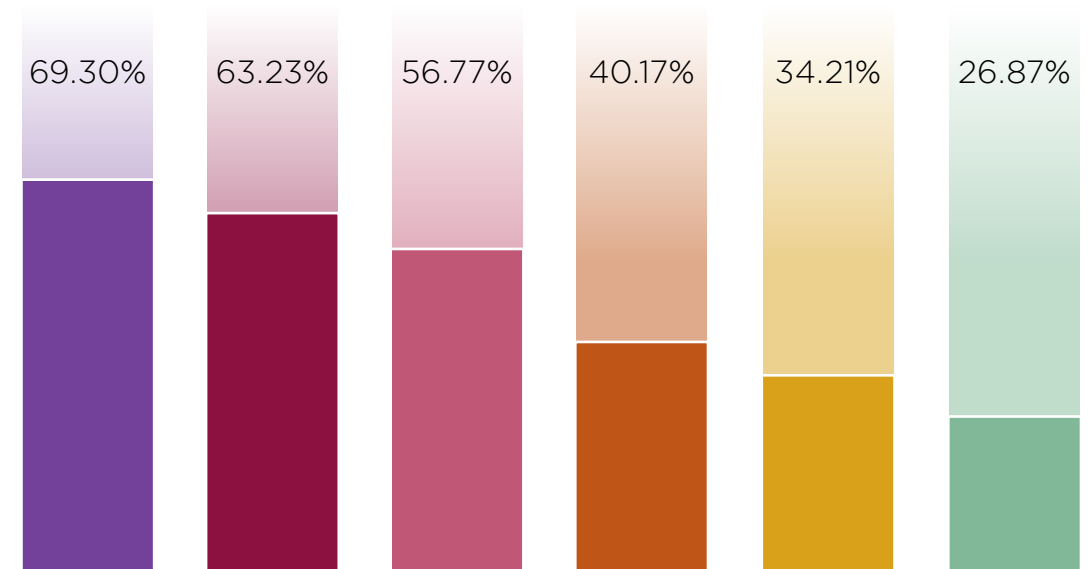


*“I have special accommodation needs but
I am skilled, dedicated and resourceful.”*

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

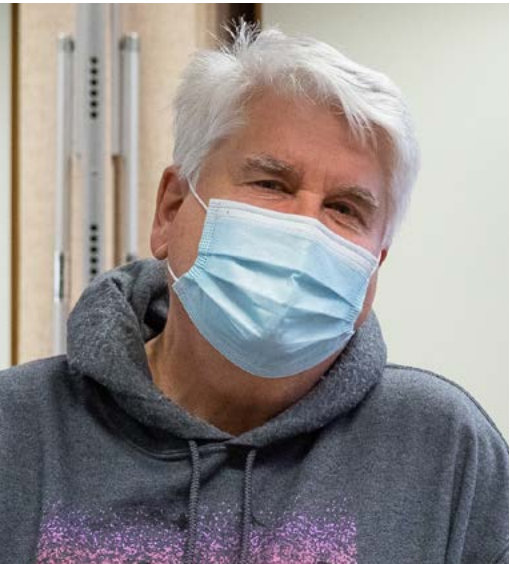
Volunteer managers are always interested in learning more about what volunteers think:

- 69.30% of volunteers told us that their commitment to volunteering did not change
- 63.23% of volunteer told us that their value to the organization where they volunteer did not change
- 56.77% of volunteers told us that direct contact with others while volunteering decreased
- 40.17% of volunteers told us that the time they spent volunteering decreased
- 34.21% of volunteers told us that their number of volunteer roles increased, while 35.53% told us that they decreased
- 26.87% of volunteers told us that the satisfaction they get from volunteering decreased.



Interviewees shared that:

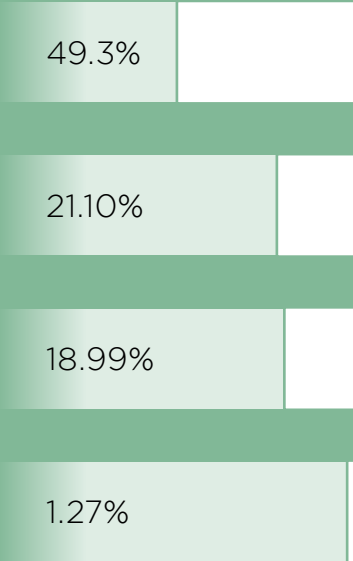
- Motivation comes from life experiences that have included difficulty and challenge. Senior volunteers make time for volunteering, but they are not interested in wasting time in meaningless activities.
- Be creative and use my skills. Come to me with ideas, don't make me come to you. I probably won't.
- Treat me with respect, trust me to do the right thing, be honest, be flexible. Meet me halfway.
- I do what I have a passion for
- Recognize the amount of passion people have for a cause
- Utilize volunteers' unique skills
- Recognize the responsibilities we have had as professionals
- I have a lot of skills so put me to use wherever I am needed
- Do not confuse non-techiness with stupidity
- I was a manager for 30 years. How will I fit into volunteering now?
- I am used to being the boss – not the volunteer
- We are experiencing changing demographic needs



WHY VOLUNTEERS STOP VOLUNTEERING

In 2017, Volunteer Victoria surveyed over 500 senior volunteers. At that time, we asked volunteers why they stopped volunteering. Caring for loved ones, illness, and moving were the top contributing factors to the decision to stop volunteering. While we still heard about personal barriers to continued volunteer engagement, respondents told us that other influences now played a role in ending a volunteering relationship:

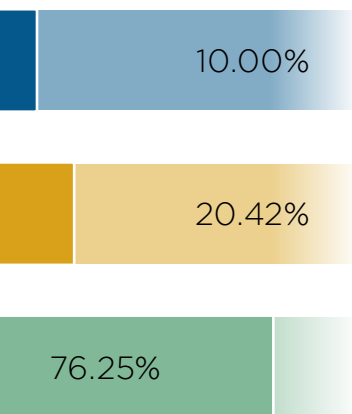
- 49.3% shared that an organization had closed or greatly reduced its programs
- 21.10% shared that the volunteer activities they had been doing changed
- 18.99% shared that their volunteer activities ended
- 1.27% wanted a clean break from volunteering



“I think the organization not allowing volunteers back is being ridiculous and I likely won't return even when I can.”

“It was important for me to volunteer because it made me feel useful.”

SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS IN THE FUTURE



We asked senior volunteers to share their views on volunteerism in the future.

This is what they told us:

- 10.00% want no contact volunteer positions (e.g. volunteer online, over the phone, or in a position where I volunteer alone)
- 20.42% want low contact volunteer positions (a position where other people are present but there is very limited contact e.g. outdoors)
- 76.25% want regular contact volunteering positions (working with safety protocols, but in a team environment where face to face interactions will happen)

“Zoom has been a lifesaver, but the lack of casual in-person interaction has been isolating”

“I feel changed. I am witness to a profound change in humanity; I am much less rushed, much less multitasking, much more present. That our organization can find a way to do the work it deems of value. Our clients see us as their community. They will always be there to support us.”

As organizations move forward, volunteers want:

	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not Important
Volunteers must comply with all pandemic precautions	92.21%	7.36%	0.00%	0.43%
Clear guidelines and expectations about pandemic precautions and safety for volunteers, staff, and clients	90.52%	8.62%	0.43%	0.43%
Organizations make role expectations clear and show how roles fit into the mission of the organization	81.03%	15.95%	2.16%	0.86%
Volunteering is easily scheduled and flexible	75.00%	22.81%	1.75%	0.44%
Organizations have someone to support volunteers, provide regular and meaningful communication, and two-way check-ins	71.00%	25.54%	2.60%	0.87%
Careful matching of my skills, experience, and interests to volunteer opportunities	53.10%	38.50%	5.75%	2.65%
Comprehensive orientation and ongoing training for volunteers including cell phone and computer training	48.65%	35.59%	8.56%	7.21%
Opportunities to meet and socialize with other volunteers	32.89%	34.21%	25.00%	7.89%
Chances to try out different roles over time to help me develop my volunteering skills	27.56%	37.33%	20.00%	15.11%



FINAL THOUGHTS FROM VOLUNTEERS

We heard a lot of wisdom from the volunteers who participated in this project. Here is a summary of their advice to volunteer-led organizations.

A. Tasks/responsibilities that recognize skills and life/work experience

1. Volunteers do what they have a passion for. Recognize amount of passion people have for a cause.
2. Utilize volunteers' unique skills and knowledge.
3. Recognize the responsibilities we have had as professionals.

B. Training and Support – volunteers want to grow and develop

1. Volunteers are capable. They can learn. They can work by themselves.
2. Mentoring and educational opportunities are also required.
3. Volunteers do the work because they are interested in learning and growing.
4. Give volunteers equipment when needed, help them to work as a team, support them.
5. Volunteers are involved in a path of continuous learning.

C. Volunteers Need to Feel Valued, Appreciated and Acknowledged

1. People who give their time want to be appreciated. They bring passion and knowledge.
2. Volunteers don't want to be a slave to the program; they want to receive benefits and work in a safe environment.
3. Recognize that a volunteer is a person who is working for the benefit of others, not themselves. Altruism is a large part of the motivation. The feeling of being under utilized is rampant.

4. Volunteers want to learn and be appreciated and to feel their contribution is valued and useful to achieving the agency mission and goals.
5. Acknowledge volunteers with a gift card and home baking – really appreciated.
6. Volunteer recognition needs to be something tangible – lunch, social event.
7. Know me better.
8. Volunteer managers must take time to get to know volunteers.

D. Responsible and clear leadership from the organization

1. Recognize that a volunteer is not an employee and that you are not their boss. A volunteer is a person who is working for the benefit of others, not themselves. Altruism is a large part of the motivation. The feeling of being under utilized is rampant.
2. Talk to your volunteers and see how they feel. The volunteer may be carrying on for the mental and social stimulation but that doesn't mean they are happy with the situation.
3. Work out the financial benefit to the agency of having volunteers.
4. Stay in touch with previous/present volunteers, keep them apprised of what is happening vis a vis Covid.
5. Not all managers are able to manage the volunteer who is not an employee.
6. Recruitment – ask your volunteers if they know of someone who would be a great volunteer and then get the name and follow up.





7. Those recruiting volunteers must know the potential volunteer is not looking for a salary but for the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution and to have their sense of purpose acknowledged otherwise the volunteer might as well sit at home and read a book!
8. Volunteers are willing to commit, to share and to learn anew – but they should not be treated like entry level workers. Perhaps volunteer management in some agencies is responsible for this feeling.
9. A website should have very specific COVID info clearly displayed so there are no questions for the volunteers about policy.
10. Articulate your value proposition to a volunteer. Sell the value of the work.
11. Orgs have a responsibility to understand the needs of volunteers and to find placements that work.
12. It's not about covering shifts – its about meeting mutual needs.
13. Volunteers “on hold” are worried about clients.
14. Dial it down, pay attention, be present.

E. Safety Needs are Addressed

1. Set up safety guides and orient volunteers. Use senior volunteers to support others. They are dedicated and eager to help.
2. We are worried.
3. Insist that everyone follow safety guidelines.
4. Observed reticence (by others) to be around people due to COVID, made people fearful, some volunteers longer feel comfortable.
5. Insist that everyone follows safety guidelines.



 @volunteervictoriabc

 @volunteervictoria

 @volvicbc

www.volunteervictoria.bc.ca

Tel: 250.386.2269

E-mail: volvic@volunteervictoria.bc.ca

602-620 View Street, Victoria BC V8W 1J6

