

Rural volunteering under threat

Volunteer organizations are essential to the fabric of the community. They are glue that holds together many disparate parts

Volunteering is a gauge of rural community cohesion. The more volunteering exists, the more likely it is that people have formed strong bonds. Volunteers are rewarded with immediate, positive feedback from those they help and most groups provide direct services that would not exist otherwise, such as fire protection and youth programs.

Interviews with 71 volunteer groups in nine rural communities revealed two major problems. First, it is difficult to recruit and keep volunteers. As membership shrinks, the remaining volunteers struggle to maintain services, leaving no time to boost membership. Second, funding operations, programs and special projects are a challenge.

Funding from provincial government agencies is by far the most sought-after source, and many groups rely on the province for operating costs. Municipalities are easier to approach, and may offer office space or publicity, but haven't the dollars. Federal programs seem too far out of reach, and much of their assistance is limited to short-term employment programs.

While close to two-thirds of the volunteer groups had received provincial funding in the past, few secured long-term arrangements. Complex applications for yearly funding are a huge drain on time and energy of volunteers and staff. This limits future planning. Even successful applications can be discouraging. Instead of earning unfettered money for proven programs, groups are often hampered by strings attached to cash. Many are forced to modify their goals. Groups with unsuccessful applications often didn't know why they were refused, or even the criteria upon which their application was judged.

What would help? Volunteer groups need information on how to increase membership. Governments must resist the temptation to rely on the Internet until it is more available to rural citizens. They also need to be more open about what makes an application successful.

It would help if all government departments used the same application forms. Even better, government agencies should consider the benefits of committing to long-term funding, and remove unnecessary strictures from grants.

These insights are based on 3 reports prepared with the assistance of the Canadian Rural Partnerships Program of the Federal Government. Copies of the reports can be found via the NRE web site. A guidebook for rural communities is available.

40 percent of groups that apply for provincial funding are successful.



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