

Use of Internet Technology for Communication Among Volunteer Groups in Rural Canada: The Case of Springhill, NS

What role does the Internet play in building the capacity and effectiveness of volunteer groups? What are the difficulties volunteer groups face in using the Internet?

In general, volunteer groups in Canada face a number of challenges including declining membership numbers, an aging population, limited social support from communities, lack of adequate funding, and the inability to access new information and technology quickly.

The New Rural Project conducted a study of communication uses by volunteer groups, based on interviews done with 28 volunteer groups in four towns (Mackenzie, BC; Wood River, SK; Tweed, ON; and Springhill, NS), and specific case study of Springhill based on five in-depth interviews specifically on Internet use issues.

Looking at the 28 groups in the four communities, the study found that most volunteer groups generally do not have their own website. Fewer than 30% of volunteer groups indicated that they regularly communicate

with members of their group through websites. Furthermore, half of the volunteer groups have members who communicate through e-mail. Only 20% of volunteer groups said they communicated with funders through the Internet.

Furthermore, 42% of the groups acknowledged the importance of adopting new technologies to better meet the needs of their organization, but no formal plan exists for the development of enhancing on-line communication. For example, fewer than 20% of the groups believed that adopting new technologies would help them to recruit new members.

Volunteer groups which have experience with using the Internet indicated some success. Approximately half (52%) the volunteer groups which use the Internet said that the Internet had improved their access to information they need. Fewer groups (43%) felt the Internet had improved their access to government information. However only 17% of volunteer groups believe the Internet has had a positive impact on their relationship with the people in the community they serve.

The detailed interviews with five organizations in Springhill confirm the limited use and impact. Volunteer groups in



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Springhill mostly use the Internet to find government funding information or to get in contact with similar groups in different communities. Also, in general, there are one or two individuals within each group who use the Internet and then bring the information back to their group. Representatives of the groups also noted that they did not have a formal plan in place for Internet use or for training their members on how to use the Internet. Indeed, most groups had not even considered the potential role that their local Community Access

Centre (CAP Site) might play in this regard.

Collectively, the findings suggest that there is potential for volunteer groups to benefit from learning how to effectively use the Internet as a group, rather than as unconnected individuals learning on their own. The impact of group learning can be much higher in terms of building capacity within an organization. This may lead to enhanced social cohesion within their organizations and potential for increased community development as a result of their community efforts.

Volunteer groups must make better use of the resources which are available to them, especially those at their local CAP sites. They should also develop strategies to: educate all members of their group about the potential of the Internet; implement a training program for their members; and, communicate with members, clients, funders, and the community using the Internet.

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