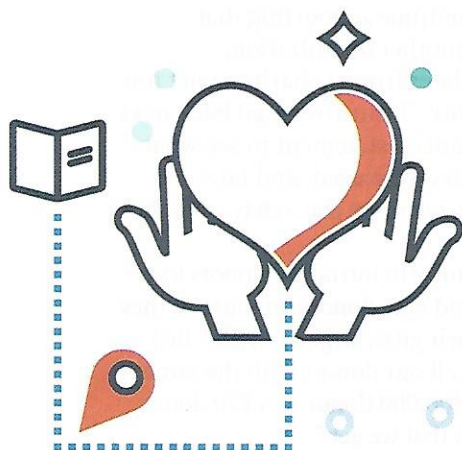




Volunteers *Needed!*

Volunteers make life better for others—and for themselves

By Marijke Vroomen Durning



Almost 13 million people in Canada provide a valuable resource to Canadian society: their time. Altogether, they contribute more than two billion hours to their communities. Younger adults tend to volunteer in larger numbers than those over 55, but older

volunteers give more of their time. Kevin Ryan, who lives in Coquitlam, BC, falls into the latter category.

Ryan retired earlier than anticipated, but he wanted to keep busy. “I hadn’t planned what I was going to do,” he says. “I’d done some thinking about it, but there was nothing definite.”

Ryan found his passion when he began volunteering at Mossom Creek Hatchery in Port Moody, BC, where he does both hands-on and administrative work.

“The hatchery burned just before I retired and I remembered the articles in the paper,” he explains. “I thought it would be cool if I could go and help out.” It didn’t take long for Ryan to move from providing carpentry skills to helping with the hatchery itself. He then realized his business experience could add even more value. “I could see they needed some help in guiding where the hatchery was going.

Photo: iStock/fstop123

I used my business skills, and after the first year and a half, they asked me if I would be the president.”

Falling Into Volunteering

Sometimes the volunteering comes to you, instead of you to it. That’s what happened to Donna Deskin, the founder and adoption coordinator of The League of Extraordinary Greyhounds, in Montreal. “I adopted a greyhound through an established group and wanted to help them. They didn’t seem to want my help, so I found another resource and started our own group,” Deskin says.

It started slowly, though. Deskin began by helping out at a kennel in Vermont in 2006 and gradually took on more responsibilities before making the jump to coordinating adoptions in the Montreal area. While she didn’t see herself running her own group, “It’s 2019,” Deskin says, “and I’m still doing it.”

Finding the Right Role

There are different ways to find the right volunteer job. “For people looking for formal volunteer opportunities in their community, the best resource is the local volunteer centre,” says Paula Speevak, the president and CEO of Volunteer Canada. There are about 220 local volunteer centres across the country, with searchable databases.

You can also reach out to organizations on your own. In Kevin Ryan’s role as hatchery president, he is constantly looking for other volunteers. “There are many community organizations that are desperately looking for people,” he says. Deskin agrees. She uses volunteers for both longer-term tasks, such as fostering dogs, and short-term ones, such as meet-and-greets, so passersby can see and learn about the greyhounds.

Informal Volunteers

More than 80 per cent of volunteers work through organizations or groups, but others prefer more casual opportunities.

“We’re noticing that there’s really more of an expanded notion of volunteering now and of ways people can get involved,” Speevak says. “At Volunteer Canada, we support formal volunteering, but we’re also raising awareness of other ways people can volunteer.” Broadening the limits allows people to find their place in their neighbourhoods, so that they can really shape the quality of life in the community, she adds.

Informal volunteers might shovel neighbours’ driveways, drive people to appointments, or help organize block parties. Speevak points out that there are even less obvious ways people can become involved in

their community: “That can be participating in a neighbourhood association or showing up at a city council, social service, or transportation committee to let people know how a new route affects people with limited mobility, and so on. These things are really important.”

Out and About or at Home

Most people are aware of the obvious volunteer opportunities, such as helping out at a hospital and raising funds for a good cause, but not everyone is comfortable working with the public or reaching out to strangers. And not everyone is able to commit to being somewhere on a regular basis. So if you’re homebound or you would rather volunteer when some free time pops up, there are ways you can help. “There are so many volunteer tasks that you can do on your own or from home,” Speevak says. “Some people call it virtual volunteering.”

Examples include writing newsletters or policy briefs, or even moderating an online group.

The Right Fit

Finding the right volunteer role is not unlike finding the right job. Many groups interview potential volunteers to ensure the role suits both parties.

“Like any good relationship, it has to meet everybody’s needs,” Speevak says. “What is the cause that you really care about? And what’s your personality? Do you like working on your own? Do you like working with people? Do you like using technology? Do you like physical stuff?”

You also need to think about your own goals, Speevak says. “People used to feel reluctant to identify or even talk about goals, because they thought, Well, if I talk about my own needs, then I’m not being altruistic. But the common thinking really is that volunteering is a two-way street. And when you go to your interview, you talk about those goals, as well.”

Identifying your own goals also helps reduce the risk of finding yourself in a role that doesn’t make you happy or offer you satisfaction.

But if you do find yourself in a situation that doesn’t satisfy you, that’s okay. It happens, and organizations that use volunteers know it and want their volunteers to be happy. “I like to tell people to try it if they seem interested,” Deskin says. “The only thing it’s going to cost you is your time. If you don’t like it, you can try another venue. Volunteers are greatly needed everywhere.”

“Older adults have a lot of life experience and personal experience in terms of employment,” Speevak says. “For us to miss out on that wisdom would be tragic.”