

# Volunteering during the COVID-19 Pandemic



InterGroup

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, InterGroup recognized the unique and timely opportunity to use our skills and expertise to support local non-profits. Many non-profits have been facing funding cutbacks and reduction in their face-to-face volunteer network. InterGroup explored avenues to 'adopt a non-profit' in need by providing engagement, outreach, and research as needed by the organization.

InterGroup approached Volunteer Manitoba to gain knowledge about Manitoba non-profit organizations, their needs in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and if services offered by InterGroup would be useful to a specific organization. Through discussion, the concept of exploring the question "What does it look like to service non-profits now and post pandemic?" as a facilitated discussion with several non-profits evolved. Volunteer managers across all sectors (social services, recreation/sports, environment, arts and culture, education, healthcare, and settlement services/immigration) regularly provide support to one another through sharing strategies and lessons learned. Volunteer managers know what the sector looked like pre-pandemic, have identified the issues and gaps over the last few months, and are looking for strategies to move forward. It was decided that there would be great value in a coordinated discussion with volunteer managers across all non-profit organizations as opposed to supporting a single non-profit. The following sections describe the desktop research prepared to support the three facilitated conversations.

To support each of these discussions, InterGroup provided three memos reporting on completed research. The three memos were:

1. Non-profit success in the current environment: what does volunteering currently look like during the COVID-19 pandemic,
2. Challenges returning to volunteer positions: perspectives from volunteers on returning to in-person volunteering, and
3. Non-profit programs thriving during COVID-19: global examples of non-profit organizations thriving during the COVID-19 pandemic through creative adaptations.

Detailed research for each of these memos can be found below.

## 2.0 NON-PROFIT SUCCESS IN THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

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### 2.1 WHAT DOES VOLUNTEERING CURRENTLY LOOK LIKE?

As COVID-19 health and safety precautions were implemented in Manitoba, volunteering practices, the majority of which were face-to-face, were required to adjust. During the initial stages of physical and social distancing, many volunteer opportunities in Manitoba were suspended to comply with provincially mandated guidelines. Distancing protocols have affected how people are able to physically attend volunteer locations. In response to the April 2020 declaration of essential services, non-profits such as Winnipeg Harvest, began allowing in-person volunteering to occur with guidelines on who could volunteer and how many people could be on site at any one time (e.g., 25 people gathering to prepare hampers) (Winnipeg Harvest Inc. 2020).

Other organizations like 1JustCity continued to serve food with take-out meals for those housed yet experiencing food insecurity and sit-in meals for those facing homelessness. Sleep spaces with increased sanitation methods and distancing were also made available. 1JustCity also outsourced local sewers to make masks that people could wear to keep safe. Coordinating mask production allowed people to continue to volunteer and help from home. Clients have been able to obtain masks and access care kits through donations (1JustCity 2020).

### 2.2 VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING

Virtual volunteering is conducted using devices, such as computers, tablets, and phones. Virtual volunteering can be done off-site as a one-time occurrence or on a short-term or ongoing basis. This form of volunteering is largely conducted over the internet but can also be accomplished over the phone. Commonly, virtual volunteering is achieved through programs including telephone reassurance volunteerism, writing for online blogs, and providing social media services. Virtual volunteering is often conducted to increase cost effectiveness, diversify workforce, increase accessibility, increase capacity and impact, and most recently due to distancing protocols to minimize the spread of COVID-19 (Volunteer Canada 2020; Sterling Volunteers 2020).

In Canada, various virtual volunteering opportunities are available nationally. Volunteer Canada is a valuable resource to support people looking for virtual volunteering opportunities (Volunteer Canada 2020). At present, no virtual volunteering opportunities are currently listed for Manitoba on the Volunteer Canada website; however, opportunities are available through sites like Help Next Door (Help Next Door MB), which allows people to volunteer both physically and virtually. While Help Next Door MB focuses on physical volunteering, including grocery pick up for vulnerable individuals and lawn care assistance, it also allows volunteers to provide reassurance conversations with those in need via video or phone call.

Other forms of virtual volunteering in Canada include the Canadian National Institute for the Blind Foundation (CNIB Foundation) and Kids Help Phone. The CNIB Foundation adapted their Vision Mate program, a program to connect partially sighted or blind with a volunteer for one-on-one

sighted assistance, to a Virtual Vision Mate program providing the same connection either by phone or online. This shift is intended to reduce the negative ramifications isolation can have on participants now that COVID-19 pandemic restrictions are in place (CNIB Foundation 2020).

Kids Help Phone, which was already largely a virtual volunteering platform, has seen an increase in needs for their services. While originally focusing on children and young adults, the service has seen an increase in adults wishing to use the service, which led to a call for more volunteers (Ireland 2020).

### 2.3 PROVINCIAALLY PHASED REOPENING AND IT'S EFFECT ON VOLUNTEERING

Many countries are experiencing the relaxing of COVID-19 physical distancing protocols and the associated reopening of industry, public spaces, and in-person social connection. With this also comes a desire for many to return to volunteering efforts. Being ahead globally in the efforts to contain COVID-19, Singapore has been a front runner for reopening and creatively navigating the new reality for volunteerism. Upon reopening, the Singapore Government released guidelines for volunteer management (Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth 2020) with an emphasis on at-home virtual volunteering where possible. Guidelines indicate that volunteer programs are required to have a risk assessment conducted to determine whether the volunteering opportunity is low, moderate, or high risk to the volunteers. At this time, programs assessed as high risk will not proceed. Volunteer groups planning on conducting activities that are considered moderate risk are asked to check in with their region before conducting efforts; they are required to follow regional advisories to keep volunteers and clients safe.

Due to a decrease in funding during the COVID-19 outbreak, non-profits in Singapore found it difficult to maintain services for their clients. Despite this, they felt the need to increase services as much as possible, serving their clients within the given restrictions. Free Food for All (Singapore) is a volunteer organization that has successfully increased client service despite reduced funding. Originally distributing food to 100 homes a month, they have since increased their reach to 600 homes a month by rallying together volunteers from their client base (Loh 2020). Some volunteer ventures, such as Food from the Heart, which distributes food to those in need through various processes, including donated surplus food from bakeries, have been deemed an essential service by the Singapore Government and allowed to continue in a safe manner but are in need of more volunteers (Food from the Heart 2020; Hee 2020).

Virtual volunteering methods have also been used in Singapore during the pandemic. Volunteer organizations such as 6<sup>th</sup> Sense use applications like WhatsApp to pass along information to clients. Other organizations, such as SG Cares, are contacting clients to see how they are and connect them to other resources and services they may need (Loh 2020; SG Cares 2020).

Other organizations in Singapore have cancelled and continue to cancel services due to pandemic restrictions, both in volunteers and funding. An example of this is the one-on-one therapy services Children's Wishing Well conduct. Due to people living in close quarters, clients are not able to have enough privacy and as a result volunteers prefer to meet up with clients face-to-face. Pandemic conditions currently make this impossible (Loh 2020).

## 2.4 SUMMARY

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues in Manitoba and around the world, many places are beginning to open to volunteer opportunities. With the pandemic comes an opportunity to creatively adjust how volunteer efforts will be focused. Some volunteer efforts have switched to a virtual method, as indicated by the CNIB Foundation's Virtual Vision Mate program, while other volunteer efforts, such as Winnipeg Harvest, have begun to continue previous efforts at a reduced capacity. In places where volunteer efforts have now been allowed to adapt to reduced physical distancing restrictions, such as Singapore, volunteer restrictions have been put in place for community health protection. Virtual volunteer efforts and reduced capacity at in-person locations are encouraged as compared to larger group gatherings. Volunteer efforts will continue to adapt as time goes on with various locations possibly able to return to an approximation of earlier efforts and virtual volunteering continuing to increase.

## 3.0 CHALLENGES RETURNING TO VOLUNTEER POSITIONS

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### 3.1 WHAT IS THE CURRENT VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE?

As social distancing measures were put in place, many non-profits saw a reduction in volunteers. One organization noting a marked drop in volunteers is IKWE Safe Rides in Winnipeg. The group, which provides safe rides for women in Winnipeg, dropped from 55 to 3 volunteers. This was largely due to volunteers staying home to adhere to physical distancing rules at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteers have also been hesitant to volunteer due to competing responsibilities, including increased responsibilities for childcare and schooling, and concerns about contracting COVID-19 (Lasby 2020). Despite the reduced number of volunteers, due to the type of service provided, IKWE Safe Rides has been allowed to continue to operate by the City of Winnipeg (Gonzalez 2020).

Other programs allowed to continue during the pandemic include Meals on Wheels. Although this organisation has noted an increase in new volunteers due to the flexible nature of many working from home, they have still faced an overall decrease in their volunteer network (Alam 2020). 1JustCity, which prepares and distributes food and masks to those in need, has continued to provide volunteer-based services to their clients throughout the COVID-19 pandemic however with limited capacity.

The Canadian Red Cross has also continued reduced programming during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have assisted in supporting communities through government and community partnerships. Activities continued or adapted by the Canadian Red Cross include assisting Indigenous communities with preparations to respond to COVID-19, operating a call centre in Toronto to ensure individuals have access to food, increasing outreach to isolated seniors in Saskatchewan through the Friendly Phone Program, and providing supplies like cots and blankets to support vulnerable populations (Canadian Red Cross 2020).

The province of Alberta has produced a document outlining how volunteer organizations are to conduct their services while navigating COVID-19 protocols. The document outlines that while “organizations may have more than 15 volunteers and/or employees in one location” they should work at a distance of 2 meters or greater. If close contact is unavoidable, they may work together spaced less than 2 meters apart. Programs that involve direct contact with individuals that are high-risk, including transporting the elderly and ill, were to be discontinued (Government of Alberta 2020).

Singapore and several boroughs in the United Kingdom have produced similar documents outlining safe volunteering guidelines and requirements for volunteer projects to continue. However, it should be noted that many non-profits have switched from regular volunteer activities to active COVID-19 support, even going as far as offering online support instead of face-to-face activities (Kingston Voluntary Action 2020).

Social distancing measures have also led to an increase in young people volunteering. Many volunteers pre-pandemic were retired and seniors. As senior citizens typically made up a large portion of the volunteer force but are considered high-risk for COVID-19, there has been an increase in younger people accepting volunteer positions while seniors are self-isolating (Bergen 2020). Despite the increase in young people volunteering, it has not been enough to offset the loss of the senior volunteers. Many people now requesting support from non-profit programs, including assistance with groceries and chatting on the phone, are senior who were previously volunteers (Alam 2020).

### **3.2 CHALLENGES IN VOLUNTEERING WITHIN A COVID-19 LANDSCAPE**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers face challenges. Due to the pandemic restrictions, many organizations have cancelled in person and one-on-one activities, meetings, and events. This, in turn, has reduced many opportunities for volunteers and clients. Some organizations have closed their offices and require volunteers and staff to work remotely from home, while other activities that involve travel have been cancelled (Lasby 2020).

Organizations that have managed to keep some semblance of face-to-face interactions have taken mitigation measures to protect their clients and volunteers. Many locations have reduced client access to their facilities and have increased cleaning and disinfection through hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes. Physical distancing protocols have been implemented and personal protective equipment distributed to staff (Lasby 2020). Most volunteer programs request volunteers to abstain from participating in person if they are sick or have been in contact with someone who has been unwell (Volunteer Manitoba 2020).

#### **Safety precautions**

Some safety precautions implemented for volunteers include sanitizing all surfaces after working with a client. For example, the IKWE Safe Rides program requires drivers to sanitize the back seat, door handles, windows, and seat belts of their vehicles after taking a client to their destination. Volunteers and clients are also required to wear masks during the ride (Gonzalez 2020). Other groups, such as Winnipeg Harvest have specific protocols for volunteering. Volunteers are required to wash their hands upon entry along with frequent handwashing during their time at the warehouse. Volunteers are also required to stand six feet apart while making hampers. Volunteer shifts have been limited to 25 people in the warehouse at a time and clients are asked to confirm a pick-up time through phone or e-mail (Winnipeg Harvest 2020).

#### **Virtual volunteering**

While virtual volunteering has increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it does not work in every situation. Depending on the nature of the volunteer program, volunteering often needs to be conducted in person. Food hamper preparation still requires in person volunteer efforts (Winnipeg Harvest), while the CNIB Foundation's Vision Mate has been able to transition to virtual volunteering, becoming the Virtual Vision Mate program.

In some cases, non-profits including Kids Help Phone and the Canadian Red Cross, have increasingly relied on virtual volunteering. Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM) has also been able to transition to virtual volunteering for various outreach efforts. Virtual homework assistance, remote case management, and the newcomer literacy initiative are some of the virtual programs run by IRCOM (2020).

The United Nations also offers various virtual volunteering opportunities during the pandemic including an outline of how long the volunteer activity is likely to take. Currently there are 105 opportunities available (UN Volunteers 2020).

Organizations that have not been able to rely on virtual volunteering and remote work have noted difficulty in providing adequate supports for those wishing to volunteer at this time (Lasby 2020).

### **3.3 SUMMARY**

As volunteers are beginning to return across Manitoba and Canada, they are returning to positions that may have been largely vacant during the pandemic after social distancing was implemented. In the case of programs that have been allowed to operate during the pandemic, many have been operating with skeleton crews (e.g., IKWE Safe Ride and Meals on Wheels) and are looking for new volunteers. Programs that have been able to continue operating have been using many safety measures, including social distancing, sanitizing, and wearing masks and gloves. Some programs have been able to shift to virtual volunteering, establishing methods to support clients in need. However, barriers remain with this virtual method of outreach. Many volunteer programs do not have the funding or the type of work suitable for virtual outreach. These organizations continue to rely heavily on face-to-face programming.

## 4.0 NON-PROFIT PROGRAMS THRIVING DURING COVID-19

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To develop strategies to adapt to the COVID-19 landscape, it was important to look at how other non-profit organizations throughout the world have been successful in adapting their existing services as well as shifting their attention towards new emergency services. Section 4.1 outlines a summary of how Manitoba volunteer concerns have been addressed by several non-profit volunteer programs in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Sections 4.2 - 4.5 provide a high-level description of how international organizations have persevered and thrived despite COVID-19 pandemic conditions.

### 4.1 MANITOBA VOLUNTEER PERSPECTIVES AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

Discussions with Manitoba volunteers uncovered common themes in volunteer concerns. These included the importance of in-person activities for both a perceived increase in effectiveness as well as the benefit of social interaction, the value of consistent communication, personal safety, and the importance of innovative problem-solving to support new processes for outreach.

#### Modification of in person activities

To maximize effectiveness, efforts are being made to bridge the gap between in person and online volunteer efforts. For example:

- The Metropolitan Family Service (Oregon) normally runs in person tax preparation out of their center, without that being possible, they have trained volunteers to prepare the taxes online themselves. In preparation for this effort, they have increased their telephone system to be capable to handle the new call volume expected.
- With many large fundraising events being cancelled, some non-profits have thought of ways to continue to hold them (e.g., volunteers participating in an at-home marathon using their own treadmills).
- Friends of Children typically work with children in-person and moving to online outreach presented challenges as not all families had access to devices or internet. Reaching out to Apple, Friends of Children was able to secure over 100 iPads to provide to families to continue their work.

These are examples of existing non-profit efforts that would address the challenges or maintain valuable social aspects noted as extremely important to Manitoba volunteers.

#### Communication

Volunteers noted that consistent communication was very important to them as COVID-19 precautions and distancing protocols are changing quickly. Efforts to address this concern were noted through Hope for Youth's (Minneapolis) establishing a phone tree to keep volunteers

connected as well as routinely featuring one of their members on their social media accounts in place of their volunteer recognition breakfast. These are easy ways to keep groups of people connected and to mobilize volunteers if necessary. Friends of Children (United States) has also focused on connecting with volunteers more often and trying to make those connections fun.

### **Personal safety**

The levels at which people feel comfortable in public during the pandemic varies widely and as a result, volunteers have suggested that it would be helpful if opportunities were flexible to reflect this variability. An example of a non-profit working flexibly with their volunteers is the individual workplans Friends of the Children (Nationwide United States) have developed with each of their volunteers. By working with their members to identify comfort levels, they can better identify positions that can be filled with a compatible volunteer.

### **Creativity with new outreach processes**

Volunteers have expressed that social distancing is difficult to maintain during certain tasks associated with their volunteer position requiring innovative problem-solving. Many non-profits have found ways to continue to offer services to their clients. The John H. Boner Community Center (Indianapolis) is holding prayer and bingo through a teleconferencing service. The Metropolitan Family Service (Oregon) is trying out video storytelling through the schools' distance learning system. These examples provide starting points for many Manitoba organizations to adapt in supporting various volunteer tasks.

## **4.2 CANADA**

Imagine Canada, a National charitable organization, has championed for relief measures for charities, non-profits, and social enterprises, which resulted in their inclusion in programs such as the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and Emergency Community Support Fund. Currently, Imagine Canada is working on the Sector Resilience Grant Program, which would provide financing for operating costs and support for organizations not eligible for the CEWS program. Their website lists and regularly updates the Federal Government COVID-19 measures for charities and non-profits.

## **4.3 UNITED STATES**

- Hope for Youth (Minneapolis, Minnesota)
  - Found ways to keep volunteers engaged:
    - Shares volunteer testimonials and highlights a weekly volunteer on their social media in place of their volunteer recognition breakfast
    - Established a phone tree to coordinate mask-making by volunteers
    - 5K race scheduled for June was moved online to racers' treadmills
- Metropolitan Family Service (Oregon)

- Provides several social services to low income families including running a tax preparation centre
  - With the tax filing season extended, they have converted their centre to file taxes virtually
  - Tax preparers are now filling out tax forms directly, so they required additional training
  - Upgraded their phone system to handle higher call volumes
- Adapting a reading mentorship program
  - Story-time videos offered through the school system's distance learning program
- John H. Boner Community Center (Indianapolis, Indiana)
  - Buddy programs for the elderly offering bingo or prayer via videoconference
- Friends of the Children (United States)
  - Built individual work plans with each volunteer specific to their individual circumstances
  - Working to ensure they are frequently connecting with volunteers and in fun ways
  - Closely following and applying for national and local funds available for non-profits
  - Asking funders to be flexible with grant conditions and payment advances
  - Looking for donated devices from technology companies for families without devices or consistent internet access so they can carry on with services they offer to children and youth

#### 4.4 EUROPE

- The World Health Organization (WHO) now estimates the COVID-19 related needs for 2020 at \$1.7 billion, and has launched the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund
  - The United Nations Foundation and Swiss Philanthropy Foundation will receive support funds for this initiative
- France has seen a combined group effort collecting donations to fund research and support local non-profit organizations working with vulnerable members of society
- Spain has dispersed emergency services and assisted with getting donations to non-profit groups working with vulnerable populations
- The Charities Aid Foundation in the United Kingdom has a dedicated location on their website on how to donate both locally and nationally to non-profit organizations, and ways people can help

#### 4.5 GLOBAL

- There have been many shared Google Docs/Forms named "Mutual Aid" used for people to sign up to pick up groceries and medications for vulnerable people staying home

- o With the large number of the Mutual Aid sheets created, some organizers have begun to compile them, with one for example having over 140 mutual aid groups throughout the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Germany

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