

# **Rural Insights into the Precarity of Older Voluntarism During COVID-19**

**Project Report**

**July 2023**

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## **Introduction**

### **Project Overview**

Because of their pivotal role in supporting vulnerable older people in underserved communities, there is an urgent need to understand how volunteer-based programs and volunteers are coping with the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports have shown that social distancing measures, for instance, have created often insurmountable challenges for older people and for volunteers themselves. The impacts on volunteering are especially pressing in small towns and rural communities where most volunteers are older residents. Very little is known about this emergent phenomenon of 'older voluntarism' nor its implications for older people, volunteer-based programs and community development in aging rural communities.

*Rural Insights into the Precarity of Older Voluntarism During COVID-19* addresses this timely yet neglected dimension of rural aging with the aim of informing scholarly and community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project builds on an exploratory pilot study in one of Canada's most rapidly aging rural regions (Peterborough County, Ontario) on researching older voluntarism during COVID-19 (Colibaba et al., 2021). With a novel adaption of new scholarship on voluntarism in rural communities, older volunteers and precarity in later life, the study expands the theoretical and empirical scope of this new area of research to address key gaps in knowledge about the interdependence of older people's experiences, volunteer program dynamics and rural community responses.

### **Goal and Objectives**

The goal of the study is to develop new insights into older voluntarism, and the role of older volunteers in particular during COVID-19, as a means of creating positive outcomes for aging in place and community development in Canada's aging rural communities. The specific objectives are to:

- 1) Examine rural older adult experiences of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 2) Identify the challenges facing volunteer-based programs supporting older rural residents during the COVID-19 pandemic;

- 3) Understand how rural community responses to the needs of older residents during the COVID-19 pandemic are influenced by volunteer experiences and program challenges; and
- 4) Inform the development of immediate and longer-term (post-pandemic) strategies for older volunteers, volunteer-based programs and community development in rural Canada.

### **Project Timeline**

*Rural Insights into the Precarity of Older Volunteering During COVID-19* is a SSHRC funded, three-year study (April 1, 2021 – March 31, 2024), with an approved one-year extension to March 31, 2025 (see Table 1). The study is organized into three iterative phases:

- Phase 1 (March 2021 – May 2022) established the *contextual and community-based collaborative foundations* for accomplishing the research objectives.
- Phase 2 (July 2022 – December 2023) will involve the *collection of qualitative data* through interviews, focus group discussions and biographies with older volunteers and program administrators/staff to identify, discuss and assess the implications of older volunteering for aging in place in general and during the COVID-19 pandemic in particular.
- Phase 3 (January 2024 – March 2025) will involve the synthesis of research results to develop new knowledge about the interdependence of older volunteers and aging communities and to inform the dissemination of promising strategies for supporting older volunteers, volunteer-based programs and community development during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1. Project Timeline**

Tasks	2021												2022												2023												2024												2025		
	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M															
Grant approval	█																																																		
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Phase 2																																																			
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Administrator interviews																			█			█			█			█																							
Volunteer focus group discussions																						█	█	█	█	█																									
Volunteer biographies																													█	█	█	█																			
Phase 3																																																			
Analysis																																																			
Academic dissemination																																									█	█									
Community dissemination																																									█	█									
Funding ends																																										█									

## Context

### Older Voluntarism in Aging Rural Communities

The project will help fill a gap in knowledge about Canada's aging rural communities (Keating et al., 2011), which are disproportionately older with more than 20% of the rural population over 65 as compared with the national average of 16% (Statistics Canada, 2017), and increasingly reliant on volunteers and volunteer-based programs to support older residents and sustain rural services (Halseth & Ryser, 2006, 2007; Ryser & Halseth, 2014). This situation is complicated by the 21<sup>st</sup> century demographic reality that most volunteers in rural areas are older residents themselves (Cook & Speevak Sladowski, 2013; Davies et al., 2018), contributing to an emergent phenomenon known as 'older voluntarism' (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019). Older voluntarism refers to the activities of older volunteers and voluntary organizations that involve an older volunteer base and/or provide services and supports to older residents. Increasingly prevalent in rural areas, this phenomenon presents challenges to older residents, organizations and communities alike, including age-related barriers to participation, absenteeism and burn-out (Wiersma & Koster, 2013; Winterton & Warburton, 2014). As established by Colibaba and Skinner (2019) and Colibaba, Skinner and McCrillis (2021), the growing emphasis on *older voluntarism in aging rural communities* raises critical questions about the uncertain capacity and resilience of aging rural volunteers, the volunteer-based programs they support and, more generally, the communities where they live. Older residents have been particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, given unprecedented barriers to participation and inclusion due to social distancing and self-isolation public health measures (Angel & Mudrazija, 2020; Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Henning-Smith, 2020; Morrow-Howell et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). This vulnerability raises questions about the implications for older voluntarism and what it means for rural residents, programs and communities (Colibaba et al., 2021). Local, national and international media, for instance, are raising awareness about the need to maintain social connections with isolated rural older adults and to replace older volunteers unable to participate in their communities during the pandemic (e.g., Hill, 2020; Ireland, 2020; Muscedere, 2020), while researchers are identifying gaps in understanding the pandemic's health and wellbeing impacts for those living in underserved rural areas (Glasgow & Doeblner,

2021) and areas vulnerable to disasters (Carroll & Walker, 2021). Taken together, these emergent findings demonstrate that new knowledge about how volunteer-based programs and volunteers in aging rural communities are coping with and responding to the impacts of COVID-19 will be an important and timely contribution.

## **Methodology**

### **Overview**

The project involves a qualitative case study of three volunteer-based programs in Peterborough County, Ontario. Interviews, focus group discussions, and biographies with older volunteers and program administrators/staff will elicit information about the experiences of volunteering, dynamics of voluntary sector programs and rural community responses across a range of volunteer-based initiatives in diverse rural contexts, such a culture and heritage (Lang Pioneer Village Museum), recreation (Buckhorn Community Centre) and community support (New Canadians Centre).

### **Case Study Descriptions**

#### *Buckhorn Community Centre*

The Buckhorn Community Centre (BCC) is a not-for-profit organization offering activities, events and programs to meet the recreational, social and cultural needs of the community of Buckhorn. 436 volunteers play roles such as members of the Board of Directors, administrative support, special events coordination, and program delivery.

#### *Lang Pioneer Village Museum*

Located in Keene, ON, the Lang Pioneer Village Museum (Lang) seeks to preserve, promote and authentically recreate the history of Peterborough County. Lang's 170 volunteers take on roles such as building interpreter, historical tradesperson, musician, researcher, sewer/costumer, and general special events helper.

#### *New Canadians Centre*

Located in the City of Peterborough, the New Canadians Centre (NCC) is a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to supporting immigrants, refugees and other newcomers in

the Peterborough and Northumberland regions. The NCC's over 230 volunteers assist the organization by acting as tutors, supporting special events, and having roles in refugee support teams.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Participant recruitment began with initial introductory meetings with the key administrative staff at each case study site (e.g., manager, volunteer coordinator). These meetings were designed to introduce the project goals and objectives to the staff, to discuss project design and to encourage case study participation and support. Following the introductory meetings, administrative staff were invited to participate in individual interviews through email. At that time, staff were also asked to support the recruitment of volunteers for focus group discussions by sending out an invitation (created by the research team) via email to the organization's volunteer Listserv. Interested volunteers reached out directly to the research coordinator to express interest in participating and to sign up for a focus group discussion.

### **Data Collection Summary**

A total of 50 participants (administrators  $n=8$ , volunteers  $n=42$ ) participated in the study. Administrator participants (BCC  $n=4$ , Lang  $n=2$ , NCC  $n=2$ ) included managers, supervisors and/or volunteer coordinators from each case study site. Volunteer participants (BCC  $n=21$ , Lang  $n=18$ , NCC  $n=3$ ) included board members and role-specific volunteers from each case study site. A total of 8 administrator interviews and 15 volunteer focus group discussions were conducted between November 2022 and June 2023. Data collection was conducted in private rooms at BCC and Lang, as well as the Trent Centre for Aging & Society Meeting Room at Trent University.

Table 2 provides an overview of key participant demographics. Administrator participants were an average age of 49 years and were primarily female (75%). Volunteer participants were an average age of 70 years, and also primarily female (71%). Administrators had been involved with their respective organizations for an average of 9 years, and volunteers had been volunteering at their organization for an average of 12 years. Additionally, both administrators and volunteers were also active members in their community, with 76% of participants indicating they volunteered elsewhere in their community, including local schools, churches, service clubs, and community groups.



**Table 2. Key Participant Demographics**

	Administrators	Volunteers
Age (average)	49 years	70 years
Gender	Female – 6 (75%) Male – 1 Other – 1	Female – 30 (71%) Male – 12
Length of time with organization (average)	9 years	12 years

**Preliminary Findings**

Following completion of administrator interviews and volunteer focus group discussions, a very preliminary analysis was conducted by the research coordinator and research assistant to provide a general overview of emergent key themes (see Table 3). Themes are organized according to 1) experiences of older volunteers, 2) challenges for volunteer organizations, 3) strategies for success post-pandemic and 4) COVID-19 as a catalyst for change.

**Table 3. Preliminary Findings**

Experiences of Older Volunteers	
Aging through COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Changes in ability/mobility</li> <li>● Growing older during COVID</li> <li>● Personal sustainability</li> </ul>
Resiliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Determination to volunteer despite age/risk/family concerns</li> <li>● COVID not a deterrent to return</li> <li>● Adaptation to “new normal”</li> </ul>
Volition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Choice of how to engage with volunteering that matches personal level of comfort/safety</li> <li>● Choose venue for volunteering that matches skills/interests</li> <li>● Ability to walk away at any time</li> <li>● Flexibility from program to meet personal needs</li> <li>● Confidence in safety measures in place</li> </ul>
Sense of ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ownership over the program and its results</li> <li>● Conflict with bureaucracy</li> <li>● Conflict with other “outsiders”; new volunteers/staff</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Perception of being essential to program but unheard at an operational level</li> </ul>
Social connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Engagement with the community</li> <li>● Meeting others</li> <li>● Intergenerational connections</li> <li>● Preventing isolation</li> <li>● Break from family</li> <li>● Mental health benefits</li> </ul>
Legacy & Meaningful Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Passing on skills and knowledge to future generations</li> <li>● Sustaining the program and its goals</li> <li>● Carrying on ethos or heritage (BCC/NCC founders, LV local history)</li> <li>● Making a mark</li> <li>● Giving back</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges for Volunteer Organization</b>	
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Maintaining volunteers</li> <li>● Motivating volunteers long-term (retention)</li> <li>● Recruitment of younger volunteers</li> <li>● Succession planning</li> </ul>
Meeting Community Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● General ability to meet community's needs - ex: Are immigrant families being appropriately supported if NCC program can only implement x level of language teaching via untrained volunteers?</li> <li>● Capacity</li> <li>● Awareness of needs</li> </ul>
Reliance on Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of funding</li> <li>● Lack of staff capacity</li> <li>● Need for appropriate training</li> </ul>
<b>Strategies for Success</b>	
Building/maintaining relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Between volunteers and staff, and among volunteers</li> <li>● Opportunity for organic relationship development (sitting down for coffee vs. formal team building events).</li> <li>● Volunteer appreciation</li> <li>● Genuine connection</li> </ul>

Communication with volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Clarity of expectations and roles</li> <li>● Communication of schedules and program needs</li> <li>● Method of communication (email, phone, check-ins)</li> <li>● Communication of policies and reasoning for them (onboarding, COVID policies, adherence to County rules)</li> </ul>
Succession planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Deliberate opportunities for older volunteers to mentor new/younger volunteers</li> <li>● Documentation of protocols and programming</li> <li>● Take advantage of volunteer knowledge and skills via training, planning</li> <li>● Create awareness of need and encourage new cohort of volunteer “leaders”</li> <li>● Build connections between new/older volunteers</li> <li>● Targeted recruitment of younger volunteers</li> </ul>
<b>COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Change</b>	
Changes in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Migration to/from the community from other areas (urban, international)</li> <li>● Changes in demographics of community served, influx of young families</li> <li>● Changes in demographics of volunteers</li> <li>● Types of business and supports within the community</li> </ul>
Personal changes in volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shifting priorities</li> <li>● Time to think and reflect on volunteering</li> <li>● Changes in personal life circumstances; family home/not home, mobility, loss of spouse/older parent</li> <li>● Changes in social life</li> </ul>
Operational changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● New health and safety policies</li> <li>● Shift to digital spaces; social media, remote programming</li> <li>● Transitioning volunteer responsibilities to paid staff positions</li> <li>● Changes in capacity - funding, staffing/volunteer, physical spaces</li> </ul>

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