

# **Report of the Roundtable on Voluntary Sector Issues**

**Conducted by:**

**The Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our  
Place in Canada**

**6 February 2003**

**Prepared by:**

Community Services Council  
Newfoundland and Labrador  
Suite 201, Virginia Park Plaza  
St. John's, NL A1A 3E9  
tel: (709) 753-9860 fax: (709) 753-6112  
email: [csc@csc.nf.net](mailto:csc@csc.nf.net) website: [www.csc.nf.net](http://www.csc.nf.net)

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Purpose of the Commission .....	2
Roundtable Themes .....	3
The Role of the Voluntary, Community-Based Sector in Society .....	3
Out-migration and Volunteer Burnout.....	3
Funding and Accountability.....	4
Relationship between Government and the Voluntary Sector.....	4
Volunteerism in Newfoundland and Labrador .....	5
Youth.....	5
The Strategic Social Plan and the Voluntary Sector .....	6
Newfoundland and Labrador and its Relationship to Canada.....	6
Conclusions.....	6

## **Introduction**

On 6 February 2003, the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada held a roundtable on voluntary sector issues at the Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador in St. John's. In addition to the three commissioners, Mr. Vic Young, Sister Mary Elizabeth Davis, and Judge James Igloliorte, eighteen representatives of voluntary, community-based organizations were present to discuss sector concerns.

## **Purpose of the Commission**

The commission was set up in June 2002 to consult with the public on the subject of renewing and strengthening Newfoundland and Labrador's place in Canada through a variety of means: public consultations, roundtables, a program of research, 200 written submissions, and meetings with federal and provincial bureaucrats. In 1949, Newfoundland and Labrador brought enormous riches into Canada (ex. fishery, hydro, iron ore, forestry, culture, people, oceans, offshore oil, minerals), which begs the question, why isn't the province more prosperous? Newfoundland and Labrador has the highest unemployment rate in Canada, the highest rate of out-migration, the lowest per capita income, and the highest per capita debt. It is at the bottom of the Canadian ladder and the commission's task is to explore the reasons for this and to suggest ways of improving the province's situation.

The Commission has conducted a series of public consultations around the province – 25 in total, 20 in Newfoundland and 5 in Labrador. Many issues were raised, including the fact that some areas of the province want to look at their place in Newfoundland and Labrador before looking at the province's place in Canada. This was especially true in Labrador but also in rural areas. Yet this is not really within the terms of reference of the commission.

Meetings have also been held with business and women's groups, with aboriginal leaders and in the schools. A number of perspectives have been presented and some are very broad, making it a challenge for the commissioners to pull it all together. During the public meetings, volunteerism came up frequently in the context of the struggles resulting from out-migration and other social stresses facing communities in Newfoundland and Labrador. This roundtable was organized and hosted by the Community Services Council in order to give representatives of the province's voluntary, community-based sector an opportunity to discuss their specific concerns with the commissioners. Dominant themes emerging from the roundtable discussion are highlighted below.

## **Roundtable Themes**

### The Role of the Voluntary, Community-Based Sector in Society

Roundtable participants noted that the voluntary, community-based sector (VCBS) plays a huge role in service delivery, enrichment activities (ex. sports, recreation), and in identifying community needs, with one person suggesting that if volunteers were to suddenly stop volunteering in Newfoundland and Labrador, the province would collapse. In fact, many are now coming to see the sector as one of the three pillars of society, along with the private and public sectors, and people are beginning to understand the merit of the sector as a whole.

It was also pointed out that voluntary, community-based organizations (VCBOs) serve as early warning signals, highlighting issues that may have a detrimental effect on society if not adequately addressed. In addition to responding to newly recognized needs, VCBOs also respond to needs that have previously been met by government and many have moved into the vacuum created by the removal of public funds. Roundtable participants, however, voiced concern that the VCBS's ability to meet such needs in future is being jeopardized by limited capacities and a diminishing volunteer base.

### Out-migration and Volunteer Burnout

As one of the commissioners noted, many of the stresses facing the voluntary sector in Newfoundland and Labrador reflect those affecting rural communities due to out-migration and a troubled economy. Yet, as one participant pointed out, the province's population loss does not mean there is less need for services and programs but rather a greater need.

Participants also noted that the loss of young people through out-migration is placing a great deal of strain on older volunteers who must continue to volunteer because there is no one to replace them. It was suggested that many of those who leave are the 'movers and shakers' who would normally take on volunteer and leadership roles in their communities. As a result, those who stay must compensate by assuming additional roles and responsibilities. (One person reported that he sits on 15 different committees, not because he is "hogging" but because there is "no one else who will do it.") At the same time, however, another participant argued that there was too much focus on the people who leave and that there should be more attention paid to those who stay.

There are also new issues facing the sector, such as liability, which are a cause for concern, especially for older volunteer who may be less able to cope. Furthermore, many volunteers do not get reimbursed for expenses incurred while volunteering (ex. travel) and members of volunteer boards get exhausted because they are unable to meet expectations due to lack of funding.

## Funding and Accountability

The lack of core funding to sustain VCBOs, especially for community development work, was cited as a major issue for the sector. And organizations often find themselves competing for the same money. Several participants argued that there should be a strategic investment fund for community organizations that meet basic needs. Another suggested measuring and quantifying the sector's contributions to society would help demonstrate its value to funders.

The nature of federal funding programs was particularly troublesome to participants as most are directed towards new, innovative projects which, even if successful, cannot get their funding renewed because they are no longer new. As a result, the provincial government is often left to support essential programs when federal funding stops. And when programs end due to lack of funding, not only do the clients lose but so, too, do the organizations, which lose capacity, staff and volunteers gained while running the program.

The amount of money being spent to evaluate programs adds to the frustration of those in the sector. Due to a growing emphasis on accountability, more funders are requesting program evaluations, often before the programs are even finished. This is especially true of the federal government. Furthermore, federal accountability structures may be more onerous for VCBOs in Newfoundland and Labrador as there appears to be a greater reliance on federal funding than in other provinces. Accountability requirements are placing other demands on organizations as well. For example, at least one economic development association, which is incorporated, has been asked to handle the payrolls and finances of local voluntary organizations that are not incorporated.

## Relationship between Government and the Voluntary Sector

Participants lamented government's failure to listen to their concerns, suggesting that Ottawa tries to apply policies developed for urban areas in central Canada to Newfoundland and Labrador. But local VCBOs have their own way of doing things, they are much more individualized and client-focused than they are in other provinces.

It was also argued that the federal civil service in Ottawa tends to distinguish between 'national' and 'regional' organizations. Those considered to be national get funded first and regional organizations get what's left over. (Yet, as one participant pointed out, VCBOs in rural Newfoundland and Labrador feel the same way about St. John's as St. John's organizations feel about Ottawa.)

Finally, one participant expressed his concern that government bureaucracy discourages volunteering because it increases volunteer workloads.

## Volunteerism in Newfoundland and Labrador

StatsCan data suggests Newfoundland and Labrador is 6<sup>th</sup> in terms of the number of people who volunteer but is first in the average hours contributed by volunteers.

Newfoundland and Labrador is different from many other parts of Canada in that many municipal councilors and bodies such as school and hospital boards do not provide honoraria to members.

In order to support and encourage volunteerism, several participants commented that there needs to be coordination, someone has to take the lead to good, well managed programs.

Viable communities foster volunteerism and volunteers are essential to a democratic society. The VCBS, it was argued, plays a vital role in community development and building social capital but needs to be resourced. Furthermore, people in the VCBS are among the most dynamic and innovative in the province, they can make something out of nothing. Therefore, the VCBS should be seen as a partner and be supported through an innovation fund, regional resource sharing, and youth engagement.

## Youth

Significant concern was expressed that the number of youth who volunteer in this province appears to be low. Participants suggested a number of explanations for the problem:

- Many young people have adopted a “mainland attitude” and don’t care about their communities and neighbours.
- Youth are turned off volunteering by seeing the demands placed on older volunteers.
- Many young people face large student debts and working to pay off their loans must be their priority.
- Young volunteers are often not taken seriously by older volunteers.
- Globalization may be having an effect on youth. They may see themselves as members of “communities of interest” and may be more interested in global issues.
- The culture is more materialistic. People are less concerned about one another.
- Young people want to volunteer in different ways (i.e., short-term events, fun activities like sports).

Others suggested possible courses of action for recruiting more young people:

- Perhaps volunteerism could be encouraged by offering courses in high school.

- Youth need to take ownership of and to invest in their communities. This might be accomplished by instilling the benefits and rewards of volunteering in youth.

### The Strategic Social Plan and the Voluntary Sector

It was suggested that the province's Strategic Social Plan recognizes the importance of volunteering and has the capacity to link communities with the provincial government but that grassroots organizations do not know how to link into the SSP. One participant suggested that the SSP be enlisted to address the challenges facing the voluntary sector (i.e., burnout, lack of funding, etc.) but others pointed out that it needs to be better resourced and coordinated.

### Newfoundland and Labrador and its Relationship to Canada

The SSP is visionary and innovative and, if it works, is something we can offer the rest of Canada.

## **Conclusions**

At the end of the discussion, roundtable participants were each asked to state what they would like to see in the commission's report. Many of their suggestions dealt with ways to address issues facing the voluntary, community-based sector. These included:

- The celebration of successes to provide inspiration to other communities and organizations.
- Greater regionalization (i.e., combining town councils, fire departments, etc.) was frequently mentioned as a way of making the most of limited resources.
- Fostering civic engagement (volunteering, voting, keeping informed, attending meetings, etc.) to strengthen local democracy.
- The VCBS is a dynamic and innovative group when it comes to finding solutions to difficult problems and should be viewed as an important partner in local social and economic development. Therefore, it should be supported through an innovation fund, sharing regional resources, engaging youth, etc.
- Rural areas and organizations face different problems, in particular out-migration and loss of youth, which place greater strain on older volunteers in rural communities. Sitting on a volunteer board and having to make decisions that may not be popular is also difficult in a small community. Viable communities must foster volunteerism requiring sustainable funding.
- Rural communities must be valued.

- Policies need to be developed locally to better use federal funds and there should be more revenue sharing.
- The province's economic troubles need to be addressed in order to create employment to encourage people to stay.
- There needs to be more investment in young people who must be taught the importance of involvement, supporting each other and a sense of community.