

The Value of Volunteering

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*“Not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted, counts.” -
Albert Einstein*

In 1988, a French observer to the Calgary Olympics was impressed with the huge effort, commitment and contribution of volunteers to the games. He said the 1992 Albertville games would also use volunteers. How would he recruit them, he was asked. “We’ll pay them,” he said.

What is a volunteer? What is the value of volunteering? Is volunteering about money? Should we measure it that way? Most people would say no. Volunteering is not about money. Volunteering is about giving, contributing, and helping other individuals and the community at large. It is working with others to make a meaningful contribution to a better community.

People volunteer for an endless variety of reasons. Many people want to gain experience, acquire new skills, meet new people, or expand their network of contacts as a way to get a new job or start a career. Others just want to give back to their community, to help a friend or promote a worthwhile activity. They do it because it makes them feel good. It gives them what current Chair of Volunteer Calgary, Dan O’Grady describes as a “private smile.”

This is the intrinsic value of volunteering. It is not about money. And volunteering should not be measured that way. Ever. We can add up the hours but not a dollar value. Others would like to do so. The federal government, for example, would like to add up the billions of hours of volunteer time in Canada, multiply by an hourly rate and determine the economic value of volunteering. This is simplistic and dangerous. First, it assumes that only economic measurements are valuable and second, that volunteer time is free labor.

This is a slippery slope. It infers that volunteer work is replacing paid labor. It infers that if work is not paid for, it is not valuable. It reduces volunteerism to hours worked instead of contribution made. It ignores the value of volunteers in creating a vibrant civil society - dynamic, engaged and self-reliant.

To attempt to put a dollar figure on the value of volunteerism cheapens and undermines the basic concept. Volunteering is rich and diverse. Volunteering is not just about organizing hundreds or thousands of volunteers for large events like the Olympics, the World Petroleum Congress or The Stampede, of which Calgary is justly proud. It is thousands of volunteers in minor league sports, shelters for the homeless, giving aid to seniors, holding hands in a hospice or cleaning up a local stream bed. It is spontaneous acts of kindness like helping a neighbor shovel their walk, coming to the aid of a stranded motorist or helping an elderly person cross a busy street. These large and small acts, given freely, are what bind communities together. Volunteering is *helping*, not hiring; *giving*, not taking; *contributing*, not counting.

Some believe putting a dollar amount on volunteering does no harm. This is wrong. It insidiously undermines the true value of volunteerism. Like the term “mandatory volunteerism,” it distorts the meaning and spirit of volunteering. We want motivated, not mandatory volunteers. We want willing, not “paid” volunteers. Add up the hours if you must but do not be blinded by the numbers. The value of volunteering is much deeper, much more fulfilling and much more important in contributing to a healthy and vibrant community than money can ever measure. In the end, we cannot and should not put a dollar value on volunteering. How can we put a monetary value on ordinary people doing extraordinary things?