



# Participation of Urban Aboriginal People In Volunteerism in Alberta

Report



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**Report Summary**

“Participation of Urban Aboriginal People in Volunteerism in Alberta” examines the involvement of primarily urban Aboriginal people in the voluntary sector through a series of telephone interviews conducted with a cross-section of Aboriginal people in Aboriginal organizations, government, and volunteer programs in Alberta. The consultation explores community engagement – what is working, what isn’t working, and what opportunities exist to improve.

The report identifies steps to be taken to ensure Aboriginal people are included in the voluntary sector and looks at the assets the Aboriginal community can build on to increase community engagement through volunteerism. It also highlights the demographics of Aboriginal people in Alberta, their history and some of the challenges they are working to overcome.

### **Aboriginal People Historically, and the “Volunteer” Role**

In every era of developing Canada, Aboriginal people indigenous to Canada have played a significant role. Although not well documented, as aboriginal history is largely shared through oral storytelling, Aboriginal people have been adopting the role of the volunteer throughout their history.

When European explorers arrived in the New World, Aboriginal people taught survival skills and provided language interpreters among various tribes. They led the fur trade era as trappers and guides, and fought for Canada in World Wars I & II. Over the past 20 years, despite social, economic and political obstacles, Aboriginal people are active participants in mainstream economies, educational institutes and government.

## The Demographics of Aboriginal People in Canada

In the Constitution Act, **Aboriginal people** are defined as Indian, Métis or Inuit. Indian also refers to Status or Non-status, off- or on-reserve.

- The population of Aboriginal people in Canada living in non-reserve areas is 713,000  
Aboriginal Origin: 1,319,890  
Registered Indian: 558,175 (six out of 10 living off reserve)  
Aboriginal Identity: 976,305  
Band Membership: 554,860  
(Source: StatsCan 2001 Census)
- Nearly half of the non-reserve Aboriginal population is under the age of 25.  
(Source: StatsCan 2001 Census)
- Registered Indians are affiliated with one of 612 culturally distinct, federally recognized bands across Canada, speaking more than 54 languages.
- One-third of Aboriginal people over the age of five is able to have a conversation in an Aboriginal language. In the Northwest Territories, Aboriginal languages are recognized as official languages.  
(Source: 2001 Census Consultation Guide)
- Higher unemployment rates exist among Aboriginal people than that of most other Canadians. Higher still are unemployment rates on reserves, compared to Aboriginal people living in cities.
- The number of Aboriginal youth graduating from high school is below the Canadian average. However, Aboriginal people living in urban centers have a higher success rate than those living on reserves.
- In recent years, a greater number of Aboriginal people have been graduating from university and college.

## Demographics of Aboriginal People in Alberta

- Aboriginal people not living on reserves, make up four per cent of the total population in Alberta. There are 46 First Nation bands with designated reserve lands, a total of 56,328 people.
- Alberta has the largest Métis population in Canada at twenty-two per cent. Métis people reside in Métis settlements or within urban and rural areas. This province has eight Métis settlements with 5,146 people.

## Aboriginal People as Volunteers

Interview participants indicated they had served the volunteer sector in the following volunteer roles:

- Toastmasters Leader
- Community Leader
- President, Youth Organization
- Aboriginal Headstart Parent Committee
- Board of Directors
- President of a University Native Centre
- Tutors
- Elders
- Personal coach/councilor
- Presenter
- Meditation Leadership
- Volunteer organizer
- Ice-breaker & Circle Leader
- Community Investment & Partnership

## Assets Aboriginal Volunteers Offer

In consultation with Aboriginal interviewees across Alberta, the following assets Aboriginal people contribute to the voluntary sector were identified:

### **Workforce**

Aboriginal youth are a future workforce in Alberta, at a time when concerns are rising regarding a declining workforce in Alberta. Volunteer opportunities help young Aboriginals enhance their skills and experience.

### **Networking and Sphere of Influence**

Individuals involved in Aboriginal business, mainstream business, professional associations, government and community initiatives can offer new contacts and the ability to address issues from new angles.

### **Knowledge and Information**

Aboriginal volunteers can offer information and knowledge in many areas such as technology, communications, the land, the environment, and community. The Aboriginal community is an available resource of knowledge both from life experience and tradition. Aboriginal people welcome all people. Aboriginal people have made a long-term commitment to make change happen.

### **Culture**

The unique aspects of Aboriginal cultures bring new perspectives and awareness. Aboriginal cultures are rich with teachings, strength, faith, and wisdom.

### **Adaptability and Perseverance**

The history of the Aboriginal peoples and individual life experiences have strongly shaped Aboriginal people to foster qualities of adaptability and perseverance, both of which are of incredible value to many volunteer roles.

## Current Goals and trends in Urban Aboriginal Volunteerism

Current trends identified by interviewees with regard to urban Aboriginal volunteerism include:

- Volunteer organizations serve all urban Aboriginal people, with many programs specifically targeted to Aboriginal women, youth, children and students. Initiatives predominantly support increasing access to opportunities in business, education, employment, literacy, personal empowerment, and mentoring for Aboriginal people in urban centres.
- Many organizations and their members use methods of bringing community together through communications and networking. They employ practical methods of sharing information and resources, and provide a forum to advertise current initiatives and upcoming events.
- Community organizations are partnering with businesses to increase access to employment for Aboriginal people. These partnerships deliver business and management skill development for Aboriginal volunteers. Other partnerships focus on outreach programs, mentorship, and skill development.
- “Working together” was a common theme throughout the interview process. Working together and sharing information is beginning to demonstrate results for many groups, and an accumulation of useful resources in organizations is starting to become apparent.
- Programs specifically designed for Aboriginal women focused on a variety of areas, including overcoming systemic barriers in accessing work opportunities.

Goals for volunteers cited by the Aboriginal interviewees included:

- Training for management skills
- Balance between workplace and school for health of daily lives
- Student outreach programs and referrals to the food bank and other resources required. Many Aboriginal students live in poverty and waiting for funding is often subject to systemic processes, which can affect the wellbeing of participants. The term “walking wounded” was used to describe this struggle.
- Increase dialogue to support building better relationships between Aboriginal and mainstream people.
- Reduce racism and create unity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people through grassroots initiatives.

Many Aboriginal volunteer initiatives and programs had common elements such as working with youth, the need to partner and share resources, and, most importantly, working together.

## Challenges in Volunteerism

Although many Aboriginal people volunteer, capacity is an issue and many more are needed to fill the gaps. Throughout the interviews, challenges were identified as barriers to participation in volunteer opportunities. They included:

- Lack of transportation and poor economic conditions.
- Isolation of individual volunteers at times, as they were put in lead roles without the support and skill sets needed to lead.
- Systemic barriers and lack of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This challenge has left a negative historical view ingrained in the minds of many non-Aboriginal people in Canada. For example, in large urban environments, Aboriginal people already marginalized are often viewed with a “beads and feathers” philosophy rather than a contemporary modern-day perspective.
- Mainstream hierarchy titles conflict with community values.
- Labels given to Aboriginal people in lead roles by non-Aboriginal people become problematic. Words such as, ‘chief,’ designated for use in a community for elected or appointed leaders, becomes derogatory when used in a casual form to label a volunteer in leadership.
- The need to assist clients and potential volunteers to overcome lack of self-esteem and develop a perspective of purpose.
- Discomfort with hierarchical infrastructure. It would be helpful to support potential volunteers by finding ways to open the door (to the infrastructure systems) and show them how they work.
- Family and extended family crises, such as poverty and incarceration. This can result in an inability to provide basic family needs or to obtain a security clearance for a job.

## Considerations for Involving Aboriginal Volunteers

Certain attributes or characteristics are required for working with different cultures. Most Aboriginal volunteer initiatives require relationship building with Aboriginal people. The following are considered important qualities or attributes required when volunteering with Aboriginal people, communities and organizations:

- Empathy, openness, humility, humbleness
- Receptivity to Aboriginal culture
- Willingness to share
- Sense of humour
- Working together
- Openness to learning
- Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Patience
- Good listening
- Respectfulness
- Accepting that leaders have faith in building capacity
- Being respectful of where people are “at” when working with them
- Setting aside prejudices
- Knowledge of the issues
- Knowledge of organization and non-profit
- Knowledge of opportunities
- Knowing the aboriginal community (in your heart first)
- Willingness to be proactive on advocacy on behalf of Aboriginal people
- Willingness to speak out, especially when things are not done right

## Communication

Communication with Aboriginal people is most effectively accomplished by word of mouth. Other effective mainstream methods include Internet, email, and Aboriginal and mainstream media such as newspapers and television. In addition, informal processes such as the “Native Information Exchange” bring Aboriginal organizations and individuals together to share information.

## Community Engagement

Establishing a common ground to address issues is important to people and participation increases when the initiative directly affects the lives of Aboriginal peoples or the lives of their children. Aboriginal people are not interested in just use of resources, but also a less materialistic approach to sharing and having fun. Efforts to create interactive methods of community engagement work well for Aboriginal people.

Culturally relevant activities and processes that included social gathering were the most important methods of bringing Aboriginal people together for community engagement. Sharing a meal is an important part of that process. For example, for Aboriginal people getting to know each other “starts with a cup of tea and bannock.” Aboriginal people come together in an understanding of spiritual connectedness and celebration. Food is a critical method of engagement.

During some events, organizers find they can call on people when they need them. For example, at large gatherings such as children’s Christmas parties, Aboriginal people help when asked to assist in setup and serving Elders, and provide any help required during the event. Project success, however, generally increases when committees and task groups involved in action work engage people from beginning to end.

## Supporting Aboriginal Culture

Aboriginal people often use the term “walking two worlds.” The phrase refers to living in both the mainstream and their community, where traditional practices are very different. Some organizations have access to self-development tools that involve different indigenous teachings. For example, the Medicine Wheel, a common tool for teaching self-development, focuses on balancing a person’s spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional needs.

### **Respecting Cultural Differences**

In many communities, traditional decision-making processes take place differently from western methods. It may be difficult to involve cultural components of decision-making in a committee structure of mainstream initiatives. The structure is dependent on the practices and beliefs of a community, and this requires transfer of rights similar to mainstream processes. For example, university degrees are received in the form of a document of verification to the rest of mainstream society. This occurs after years of discipline in specific training and learning from many qualified teachers. Aboriginal people also have long-term processes for transferring indigenous knowledge and rites.

### **Paying Attention to Protocols**

Though relationship building between the mainstream and Aboriginal people is growing, an “interface” between them is needed. Some organizations have tried to include Aboriginal cultural protocols and methods in all aspects of program design and delivery. Doing this has presented an opportunity to get to know more about aboriginal people and their culture.

Certain protocols are common to indigenous practices. Efforts are made to involve the local traditional community geographically and culturally, especially by involving Elders. Protocols to involve Elders for providing prayers as a method to open and close meetings were common in several Aboriginal volunteer organizations and groups.

The need for Aboriginal cultural teachings and knowledge is important to many Aboriginal people. At the same time, traditional systems and authorities are critical. In parallel to a resume, a “watchdog” approach is established through relationships.

Traditional Elders who have the teachings and authorities and are known, assist in this process. Cultural needs are also individual needs and require a one-on-one relationship. However information is used, it is important that community members are consulted to ensure inclusion and respect for cultural protocols and ceremonies.

## **Cultural Support for Urban Aboriginal People**

The first step is to acknowledge that cultural differences exist. In urban settings, Aboriginal people are diverse and have different belief systems and protocols. For support, it is best to contact an Aboriginal organization or an Aboriginal community before assuming any protocols. They will help you learn what protocols are necessary. This applies to all Aboriginal cultural events you are invited to.

Inclusion of traditional teachings is achieved by knowing who you are, what your background is, and by observance. Assumptions on cultural rights can be an issue, as Aboriginal people are different. Aboriginal people consider cultural teachings to be a foundation for life.

To support Aboriginal culture in volunteer activities, interviewees recommended:

- Provide access to cultural teachings through community support
- Support Aboriginal people through promoting learning in oral communications, such as storytelling in a circle forum. This, combined with written tools, provides two- world support.
- Create a handbook on protocols for volunteers in Aboriginal organizations, to benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.
- Change the structural approach of the volunteer organization to be more inclusive. For example, the process of obtaining buy-in from the organization and understanding is a different model of governance. Most boards are structured with the policy or advisory approach.
- Provide opportunity for a learning exchange between mainstream society and Aboriginal people and communities. Mainstream has a focus on materialism and Aboriginal people are less materialistic and look at life by sharing their resources.
- Be willing to accept others.
- Respect opinions.
- Emphasize bringing people together for the common good or a common goal.

## **Recruitment and Retention of Aboriginal Volunteers**

**Recruitment of volunteers** requires ongoing volunteer appreciation and the acknowledgement or recognition of volunteer commitment. Building trust through positive processes is also important to Aboriginal volunteers. Economic barriers often prevent Aboriginal people from volunteering, particularly in the urban environment where transportation costs money. Other recruitment challenges are security clearances and an urban transient population. The need to build capacity and develop the qualifications and skills of Aboriginal volunteers is one method of overcoming recruitment issues. Volunteers, overall, felt there was a “core” group providing the current capacity and burn-out was a factor. When looking to recruit Aboriginal volunteers, ensure volunteer programs include at least some of the following elements:

### **Purpose**

The Aboriginal community gathers together for common good, for interaction, and for sharing between people. Therefore, the reason or purpose of an initiative is a critical factor in recruitment of Aboriginal volunteers. Defining the roles and responsibilities of volunteer opportunities and developing language that translates to “which volunteer piece can I do?” are also helpful.

### **Support**

Providing support and training in helping Aboriginal people to gain confidence and skills is critical. Leadership skills are also critical and need to be enhanced.

### **Access to Language and Cultural Heritage**

Ensure access to language and cultural heritage is available. Many urban Aboriginal people had no exposure to their cultural heritage but through various programs/services, are now learning more about their cultural heritage and regaining their pride.

### **Overcoming Stereotypes**

Aboriginal people are demonstrating to mainstream society that they are more than the stereotypes of beads and feathers. Aboriginal organizations provide a level of acceptance not necessarily felt in mainstream society.

### **Recognition**

Recognizing people for what they do is increasing. This showcases positive role modeling for all Aboriginal people.

### **Recruitment Recommendations**

- Encourage students and youth to volunteer to gain work experience. Promote volunteering in areas of educational discipline.
- Ensure the recruiter of Aboriginal volunteers knows the community. Most volunteers will be attracted to organizations where they know the people, they know their past track records and where a level of trust already exists.
- Use word-of-mouth to promote and advocate new programs and services
- Encourage volunteers by demonstrating the skill sets they will develop.
- Make it possible for all people to volunteer by providing transportation, bus tickets, and food, for example, if these needed have been identified.
- Promote networking opportunities.
- Clarify what the volunteering benefits are for the individual and the organization.

### **Retention**

Retaining volunteers can be a challenge for any organization. For many Aboriginal organizations

the same issues exist. Other considerations that impact retention are:

- If leadership is lacking, people usually quit volunteering and drop off the committee.
- Lack of strategies for dealing with member turnover.
- Letting new leaders come in and champion.
- More structure in organizations is needed.
- Aboriginal people tend to be migratory, going back to reserves during summer (pow wow time).
- Avoid the “gossip game.”
- Overcoming inclusion issues.
- Focusing on the role rather than control.
- Ensuring feedback processes are in place.
- Retention is not a problem if people know they will get something out of the experience.

### **Celebrating Success**

Success stories or stories of accomplishment in a mainstream sense usually involve measuring something. Success for Aboriginal people is measured differently. Even if only two people benefit from a program, it is still viewed as a success.

Success for some is finishing a program and gaining new skills. For example, one Aboriginal organization views success as when a homeless client manages to participate through 75 per cent of a program. With the knowledge gained the hope is that maybe next time, the person will make it through the whole program.

#### **SUCCESS is:**

- Creator, at the end of the day, I can say I helped.
- I would do it again. I feel happy and thankful.

## Next Steps

Volunteerism presents Aboriginal people with a means to overcome challenges and create opportunities. It is a bridge to improve knowledge and skill level transferable to the mainstream work environment. Volunteerism is also rewarding and provides a level of self-esteem and pride, a sense of giving back to the community. For Aboriginal people, volunteerism is built into their cultural values. Sharing and giving back is an important part of Aboriginal cultural values.

Increasing access to volunteer opportunities, in culturally sensitive ways, is needed for Aboriginal people. The following are some guidelines for next steps:

- Build the Aboriginal volunteer network into the Alberta Network – Canada Volunteerism Initiative.
- Build respect of cultural differences into an Aboriginal volunteer network. The Aboriginal community is diverse in language and belief systems, and outlooks vary. In addition, the needs of an Aboriginal person vary by age, region and location in Canada.
- Conduct further consultation with aboriginal people using a larger gathering process. Start with a social gathering such as a meal.
- Empower Aboriginal people through volunteerism. Involving Aboriginal people in development and design of volunteer initiatives for their community is important. Aboriginal people want to feel part of the plan, the process, and the solution.
- Promote the benefits of volunteering to individuals to attract more aboriginal volunteers.

The opportunity is here for everyone to work together and create a better community for all Canadians. Continuing to seek partnerships and ensure resources are shared is paramount to achieving this. Follow-up is also critical in keeping communications flowing both informally and formally.