Best Practices for Volunteer-Run Social Programs: Final Report to the New Canadian Centre Peterborough

Includes:

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a collaborative community-based research project conducted by students in GDST 4873 in partnership with the New Canadian Centre (NCC) and the Trent University Community Research Centre. The study's primary objective was to identify best practices for volunteer-run social programs so that the NCC could make informed decisions on designing and continuing them. The study addresses the research question: What are the best practices for volunteer-run social programs for newcomers?

Our study process was organized as a literature review with a thematic analysis encompassing academic and grey literature. In total, we reviewed 15 materials, consisting of 11 pieces of academic literature and four pieces of grey literature. Although the project's sample size was limited due to the unavailability of relevant resources, the insights gained from our thematic literature review offer a solid foundation for framing best practices for volunteer-run social programs and provide a strong basis for our recommendations to the NCC.

The key findings from our study highlight the need to implement cultural humility training for volunteers and staff, the value of deep cultural engagement, and the inclusion of settled newcomers as volunteers. Our findings led us to propose three strong and feasible recommendations to the NCC: comprehensive cultural humility training, fostering self-determination, and hosting happenstance events.

Introduction

This study was conducted in collaboration with the New Canadian Centre (NCC) and the Trent University Community Research Centre as a community-based research project which aimed to gather and analyze literature to help the New Canadians Centre (NCC) make informed decisions on the structure of their volunteer-run social programs. Specifically, this study addresses the research question: What are the best practices for volunteer-run social programs for newcomers? Our study aims to analyze existing newcomer service programs that have proven

efficacy, identify the practices that contribute to successful programs, and, in turn, add them to NCC. With this aim in mind, we reviewed programs with positive results. We have highlighted the notable practices that are both practical and contribute to NCC's overarching goal of meaningfully cultivating networks of inclusion in Peterborough.

Research Methodology

For our project, we conducted a literature review to answer the following research question: What are the best practices for volunteer-run social programs for newcomers? A literature review for a project such as this one consists of conducting a survey and critical analysis of academic literature and scholarly works, such as peer-reviewed journal articles or academic books and of non-academic works, what we refer to as grey literature includes materials like government or non-governmental organization reports or news articles. A literature review helps us as researchers create an in-depth report on the data and experiences that already exist on our research question, identifies gaps in the literature, and helps to integrate our findings into clear recommendations that build off the NCC's core values and strategic priorities.

The methodology for selecting and evaluating literature for our project was conducted as a snowball, or citation chaining, literature review. A snowballing literature review means we started with a base of core articles and resources. We searched the reference sections or the "cite by" feature of our literature to trace where it got its information from and the future discussions it sparked. As a comprehensive review of every relevant volunteer-run social program for newcomers was not possible due to the time limitations of the project, we focused on searching for academic and non-academic sources (grey literature) that dealt with volunteer-run social programs in areas with populations or demographics similar to Peterborough. For academic literature, we searched through the Trent Library database and Google Scholar using the search terms "newcomer," "settlement," "immigrants," "refugees," "volunteer programs," "newcomer social program," "best practices," and "Canada," restricting articles dates from January 1st, 2015.

For grey literature, we looked into organizational reports and government reports of organizations mentioned in our academic literature and the New Canadian Centre's website. Additionally, we conducted broad-based Google searches for relevant grey literature using the same key search terms as the academic literature search. The inclusion criteria were articles written in English, published or updated in the last nine years, giving preference to articles written in the past three years that focused on volunteer-run social programs for newcomers. We excluded any articles that did not meet our inclusion criteria.

Results

In our literature review we analyzed a total of 15 materials, with 11 academic studies and 4 pieces of grey literature to gather information on the best practices for volunteer-run social programs. It should be noted that the small material sample size is because there is currently limited literature that deals with best-practices for volunteer-run social programs and even less that deals with best-practices for volunteer-run social programs in places with similar demographics and population size to Peterborough. Our research led to three key findings that were consistent across the academic and grey material:

1. *The Implementation of Cultural Humility*

   Volunteer-run social programs require a significant amount of training for their volunteers in order to deliver effective, high-quality programs. In particular, programs that had a form of cultural humility training, or a dedication to upholding cultural humility in their organization had high retention rates for newcomers accessing the services (Dhungana, 2024) Many volunteers and newcomers reported feeling more at ease in new social program environments when this training was adopted (Dashwood et al., 2023).

2. Integrating Settled Newcomers as Volunteers

Incorporating previously settled newcomers as volunteers who ran or co-ran social programs consistently had high newcomer retention rates, better attendance and the consensus from newcomer participant surveys was that this was effective for their communities. This suggests that incorporating previously settled-volunteers is a strong candidate for a best practice when designing social programs as it consistently produced superior results to programs that did not include previously settled-volunteers in their volunteer program design and implementation.

3. Deep Cultural Engagement

Programs that focused on or encouraged deep forms of cultural engagement such as intergenerational storytelling and an ongoing dialogue as opposed to exclusively shallow cultural engagement such as sharing traditional food, clothing, and dance consistently had better attendance and higher newcomer retention rates. Our findings suggest that volunteer-run social programs are most effective when lived experience is prioritized within an organization's core framework.

Our results demonstrate that while there is limited research focused on volunteer-run social programs, there are still clear patterns and best practices that can guide future program development. Together, our key findings provide valuable insights for the NCC to build impactful, inclusive and sustainable volunteer-run social programs.

Discussion

The Implementation of Cultural Humility

Programs with comprehensive volunteer training on *Cultural Humility* and the organization's mandates had the best results for newcomer engagement, social connectedness and success in community engagement. This finding has several important implications. Firstly, it highlights the role of well-prepared volunteers in fostering meaningful and sustainable

relationships with newcomers (Keyel, 2021). Specifically, this finding suggests that training emphasizing cultural humility enabled volunteers to engage more effectively with newcomers from diverse backgrounds (Keyel, 2021). Notably, this also suggests that newcomer engagement is not singularly dependent on the availability of services but also the quality of the interpersonal relationships built within those services. Finally, training that includes explicit instruction on the organization's values and mandates ensures that volunteers align with the institution's goals and beliefs. This mutual understanding can contribute to more consistent volunteer program delivery and a stronger organizational culture, facilitating trust with newcomers (Keyel, 2021). Altogether, these findings suggest that when organizations invest in comprehensive training, they can create more programs that foster impactful and helpful long-term community engagement.

Incorporating Settled Newcomers as Volunteers

Programs that incorporate previously settled newcomers as volunteers tend to be more successful in encouraging continued engagement with organizational services and the community. Newcomers often feel more comfortable and connected when interacting with volunteers who have shared similar resettlement experiences. These volunteer-led initiatives enhance community engagement and improve retention rates by fostering meaningful, reciprocal relationships between newcomers and volunteers. Volunteer-run programs can help to bridge barriers by both encouraging newcomers to spearhead social initiatives and guiding attendees to engage in their new communities actively (Sveen et al., 2023). This mutual exchange between volunteers and newcomers nurtures positive socialization grounded in empathy. Newcomers benefit from connecting with someone with firsthand experience settling in the same city, while volunteer newcomers gain valuable skills that enhance their resumes and employability (Wilson-Forsberg & Sethi, 2015; Pfeiffer, 2024; Dhungana, 2024) Ultimately, involving newcomers as volunteers supports the core goals of social programming by fostering lasting community connections and a sense of belonging.

Deep Cultural Engagement

Programs focusing on deep cultural engagement for newcomers and volunteers had high success rates, with newcomers feeling welcome and like they were part of a larger community. This was achieved by engaging past shallow levels of culture, such as food and dress, and into deeper cultural exchanges, including the sharing of norms and values. This highlights how reciprocal and sustained engagement can create a more inclusive environment with deeper social networks. One method to embracing deeper engagement is introducing volunteers to the perspectives and the unique difficulties newcomers face and focusing programs around addressing these issues. An example is working to better support women who want to come to social programs but also have to care for young children. This can be a uniquely isolating experience for newcomers with children—it requires volunteers and organizations to engage with different cultures and structural barriers by creating programs that address the busy lives of newcomers with children. Childcare has a direct impact on the ability of these individuals to participate in programs and by addressing these barriers in meaningful ways while respecting their culture, organizations can improve their confidence while they are navigating an unfamiliar new cultural environment in Peterborough (Thompson & Nasimi, 2020).

Recommendations

Cultural Humility Training

Our findings suggest that the NCC would benefit from including the principles of Cultural Humility in volunteer training by teaching institutional accountability and power systems while encouraging continuous self-reflection and learning to address the constantly evolving needs of a diverse newcomer and volunteer community. To implement cultural humility training effectively the NCC should develop ongoing reflective learning opportunities which encourage staff and volunteers to examine their own cultural identities, biases and assumptions. A good starting activity is the *Power of Flower Reflection.* Ideally, training would include

interactive sessions that focus on self-awareness, identifying systemic inequalities, and lessons on how power and privilege can shape both personal and institutional practices. When staff and volunteers are equipped to address the complex challenges newcomers face, not by assuming they understand the challenges, but by being cognizant that everyone faces a many complicated and compounding challenges based on their individual identities and experiences the NCC will be better equipped to serve newcomers to the Peterborough community.

In addition to implementing individual reflective learning opportunities the NCC should demonstrate a commitment to institutional accountability by ensuring the responsibility to acknowledge and address systemic issues, power imbalances and historical injustices are enshrined in their institutional policies, practices and culture. This could look like conducting regular *Equity Audits,* creating dedicated roles within the organization that are focused on ensuring anti-oppression practices are the baseline for NCC programs and activities. By embedding Cultural Humility into volunteer and staff training and institutional practices the NCC can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment and overall enhance its capacity to support the diverse newcomer community in Peterborough.

Fostering Self Determination

Our findings suggest that programming results at NCC would benefit from implementing Self-Determination Theory (SDT) into their practices by working with the newcomers to develop, implement and assess the programs offered at the NCC. We recommend a two-step integration process of SDT to first educate the volunteers about the framework and second collaborate with the newcomers to embrace and structurally implement the practice of SDT. Firstly, volunteer training should include SDT education to highlight the pathways and principles that support and enrich newcomer's resettlement experiences. For example, the training should outline the importance of balancing and maintaining the development of each pillar while

interacting with newcomers. Once volunteers grasp the importance of SDT then they can effectively apply and promote each principle and weave them into their individual practice.

Second, SDT should be implemented and practiced while designing and evaluating programs. For example, working with newcomers to develop and participate in clubs, sports teams, music groups or other gatherings that engage in shared activities can satisfy all three pillars of SDT. This collaboration and implementation of these programs promotes relatedness through the engagement of shared activities; competence by engaging in a skill; and autonomy in allowing newcomers to decide the programming offered. Ultimately, NCC should comprehensively implement the SDT framework into the training of volunteers and in the design of the programs offered to holistically implement and promote newcomer well-being.

Hosting Happenstance Events

Results indicate that breaking down formalities and hosting informal *happenstance* volunteer events are an effective method for volunteer-run social programs. Including space in programming for informal, free-flowing events can help create a level of comfortability for newcomers that might be missing from more traditional programs with a more linear agenda and rigid start time. Many newcomers lose a significant part of their immediate social network when they come to a new country. According to Kale (2019), there should be a focus on tracing the people-place connections that are often lost for newcomers who were displaced and the value in rebuilding those connections in a new place. This can counter negative feelings and instead cultivate casual networks of social support and community engagement.

One study suggests that structured activities can actually create an opposite effect for newcomers where their ability to socialize is interrupted by the event that was running itself. Some participants felt like interruptions in conversations from organizers to relay information to the group led to the social aspect of the activity feeling disjointed. Furthermore, when it came to socializing, newcomers generally preferred the informal, active participation that a "buddy

programs" represented over a more passive language learning class (Lanza, 2022). When it came to language programs, our research found that the most successful programs used personal stories of reflection between volunteers and newcomers. Authentic connections occurred when individuals were able to relate to each other in this environment (Dashwood et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This community-based research project analyzed best practices for newcomer-run social programs, focusing on the distinct needs of newcomers in the city of Peterborough, Ontario. Using a thematic literature review, we concluded that the most effective volunteer-run programming approach was to prioritize cultural humility in volunteer training, recruit previously settled newcomers to volunteer with the organization and further utilize deep forms of cultural engagement through ongoing shared cultural conversations.

Despite the limited available literature, our research provides the NCC with tangible next steps to increase the effectiveness, quality of engagement and retainment of its volunteer members and newcomers to volunteer-run programs. This can be achieved through several methods, including incorporating cultural humility training into the initial volunteer onboarding phase, using SDT to ensure programs are valued by newcomers and that their suggestions are heard and adopting programs that prioritize the conditions for happenstance events for individuals wanting a more informal way to meaningfully engage with each other.

As diversity in Peterborough and the surrounding areas continues to expand, research and organizations like the NCC will continue to adapt to the growing changes and issues that newcomers face. We hope that our community-based research helps the NCC work towards its strategic goals of creating an inclusive and empowering environment for newcomers to the region (NCC, 2023).

Glossary

Best Practices

Best practices are methods or techniques that are generally accepted as being effective and efficient ways to achieve a desired result in a particular field. Best practices provide a link between research, theory and concrete programming. Best practices are not static, but a loop of continuous improvement in which programs are developed, implemented and evaluated, and the lessons learned from the evaluation are used to improve the program, and to develop future programs (Sahay & Glover, 2005).

Cultural Humility

Cultural Humility is a term coined by Dr. Melanie Tervalon and Dr. Jann Murray-Garcia that developed based on their experiences as medical practitioners. Cultural Humility The cultural humility approach is based on three core tenants: institutional and individual accountability; lifelong learning and critical reflection; and mitigating power imbalances (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015).

Individual and institutional accountability means a commitment to self-reflection on positionality, power dynamics and privilege that is active and responsible ((Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). This involves being aware of one's own biases and how those biases can impact interactions and decision-making. The next element, ongoing learning and critical reflection, requires that individuals continuously engage with education on different cultures, social norms and histories while critically reflecting on their own practices and assumptions (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Finally, mitigating power imbalances involves acknowledging and addressing the power dynamics inherent in relationships between individuals and institutions (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). This means actively working to reduce disparities and promote equity by ensuring all voices, particularly marginalized voices, are heard and valued in all spaces across the organization.

Equity Audit

An Equity Audit is a study of the fairness of an institution's policies, programs and practices (Hauk & Kaser, 2024). Generally, Equity Audits can be wide or narrow scopes, but they aim to analyze policies, programs and practices in terms of how they directly or indirectly impact various groups, particularly how they affect marginalized communities such as people of colour, newcomers or gendered people (Hauk & Kaser, 2024).

Happenstance Events

In terms of volunteer-run social programs, happenstance events are chance encounters two or more individuals might have where they realize they have a common connection through cultural similarities, values or lived experiences. These events can happen by coincidence and can be the starting point to a deeper connection between the people involved. By focusing on programs that rely on creating genuine connections and allow for long periods of casual conversation where individuals can share their stories, happenstance events can occur naturally instead of attempting to manufacture these moments through less organic pathways or programs that have fewer chances to freely and actively engage (Kale, 2019).

Power of Flower Reflection

The Power of Flower Reflection is a tool developed by Canadian social change educators which aims to illustrate an individual's social identities, including the ways in which one can experience power, privilege and oppression in society in interconnected and intersecting ways. Within the exercise each petal of the flower represents a category of social identity (i.e. gender, race or economic status). Each petal has an inner and outer section, the outer petal represents the dominant or privileged identity within the category while the inner petal represents the individual's identity within the category.

Self Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory is a psychological theory of motivation and offers a theoretical explanation to improve well-being. Within this theory there are three basic needs that need to be equally satisfied to maintain positive and sustainable well-being: autonomy, relatedness and competence. Specifically, autonomy refers to the feeling of being in control of one's own life; relatedness puts forward the feeling of being connected with others; and competence refers to the feeling of being good at something (Albers et al., 2021).

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