

“Strength Under Stress: A Portrait of Calgary’s Volunteer Sector”

Calgary has a new treasured source of support to the voluntary sector, the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations. Their mission is to “strengthen Calgary’s voluntary sector and provide leadership on policy matters impacting the sector as a whole. The Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations has recently released a research paper by analyst, Kristina Cherneski on “Strength Under Stress: A Portrait of Calgary’s Voluntary Sector.

The contribution of the voluntary sector to the social and economic well-being of society is just beginning to be recognized and measured in Canada. This study explores the strengths and challenges of voluntary sector organizations in Calgary, and provides a snapshot of their capacity to address the issues and contribute to the quality of life in the community. It is a complement to other studies at the national level and provides information specific to the voluntary sector in Calgary.

Organizations in Calgary have many strengths which allow them to enhance the quality of life of everyone in the community. Organizations rely on committed and talented staff and volunteers to help them deliver on their missions. They have been resilient and innovative in the way they work, often in difficult circumstances. They strengthen our community by encouraging us to be more creative, to connect with each other, to get more active or to give to others less fortunate than ourselves. Despite these strengths, the sector in Calgary faces significant challenges.

The study found that organizations in Calgary experience many of the same difficulties faced by organizations across the country:

1. A lack of sustainable funding, including difficulties in obtaining core funding; a lack of funding available for administration and overhead; a lack of independence and autonomy with regard to budget decisions and the need for constant fundraising.
2. Human resources concerns, largely as a result of the nature of the funding they receive. These include difficulty recruiting and retaining staff as a result of an inability to pay competitive wages, high stress and workload, and a climate of uncertainty in organizations; low morale and a lack of training and advancement opportunities; and a lack of human resources expertise.
3. Difficulty in finding resources to manage relationships and partnerships, with other organizations and with funders and the community.
4. Inability to make long term decisions and implement strategic plans due to funding uncertainty.
5. Challenges monitoring and managing information technology and maintaining physical infrastructure, due to a lack of expertise, the inability to plan and allot funds beyond the short term and the limited and uncertain nature of the available funding.

This study also suggests that the voluntary sector in Calgary displays some unique characteristics that distinguish organizations from their counterparts across the country. These include:

- **Lower expectations** for increased government support. Participants in this study were less likely than those in national level studies to believe that they could secure more government funding to alleviate their financial concerns. Organizations in Calgary were also more likely to explore ways to earn income rather than look to funders to extend their support.
- **Strategic planning** is more actively pursued and treated as a required aspect of operating for Calgary organizations. It is important to note, however, that while all the organizations in this study were active in some form of strategic planning for their organization, implementation can often be a challenge, because they do not have the financial stability to make long term decisions and commitments that are often the intent of strategic plans.
- **Employees, not volunteers**, are the area of greatest concern for organizations in Calgary. Issues surrounding paid staff were emphasized over those with volunteers for participants in this study. This could be due to the competitive job market as a result of the robust economy in combination with the strong volunteer spirit in Calgary.
- **As Calgary continues to grow at a rapid rate**, the voluntary sector is a fundamental part of the City’s continued vitality and high quality of life. We need to continue to develop our understanding of the sector in Calgary as well as nationally, so the challenges that organizations face can be identified and addressed.

This study begins the process of building a complete picture of the sector in Calgary, which will allow us to better understand, appreciate and support the work of voluntary organizations in the community. It highlights widespread issues and will influence CCVO's work on a broad range of issues that are impacting the capacity of organizations and the sustainability of the sector as a whole. Next steps include expanding the reach of this type of study, especially to include organizations that are run entirely by volunteers.

Full report available on website at www.calgarycvo.org

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