



# AN ANTI-RACIST APPROACH TO VOLUNTEERING

Dr. Moyo Mutamba  
and  
Janet Rock

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### LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge that Indigenous peoples are the traditional guardians of this land that we call Canada.

We believe that acknowledging the land we are fortunate to live and work on, and the people who came before us, is an important step toward reconciliation. We encourage everyone to educate themselves on land acknowledgments, Canada's history with Indigenous peoples and the 94 calls to action in the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's Report.

## CONTEXT

Volunteering plays a significant role in meeting the needs of Calgarians. Calgary is home to more than 6,000 volunteer-engaging organizations and over 700,000 volunteers annually. The volunteer sector provides an opportunity for citizens to contribute to community socially and economically as well learn important skills. However, like other sectors built on white supremacy culture, the volunteer sector is racist and colonial (MAVA, 2020). To ensure that everyone can participate in and benefit from volunteering in Calgary it is essential that volunteer organizations, funders, managers, and citizens reckon with the racism that is embedded in our practices and structures.

For five years, we at the Volunteer Centre of Calgary have been working with an anti-racism coach to understand the ways in which racism and colonial practices are embedded in volunteerism structures. Along our learning journey, we realized that there was a data gap on race and volunteerism in Calgary and in Canada as a whole. We can assume that asking racialized people to interact with the police to request a police check could be triggering, but we would be remiss in not understanding more about this experience. How many people are affected by this potentially harmful practice and what other barriers do BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) volunteers face in the sector?

We knew that to get a clear picture of these issues in our sector, we needed concrete data from volunteers.

## PURPOSE

The objectives of our research and capacity building initiative are:

1. To generate preliminary Calgary-specific data on the experiences of racialized volunteers.
2. To analyze the collected data for the purpose of understanding the intersections of racism and volunteerism.
3. To share our findings with the City of Calgary, CCVO, and Volunteer Alberta to produce guidelines for improved practice and advocate together for changes that move towards anti-racist volunteerism in Calgary.
4. To share our findings with other researchers and continue research on a national level.
5. To facilitate capacity-building initiatives with volunteer engagers and sector leaders to widen the network for our advocacy efforts.

## METHODOLOGY

Data was collected through an open online survey that captured both quantitative and qualitative elements. The survey was distributed to a mailing list of Calgary volunteers, available on our platform the VolunteerConnector, and promoted on Google Ads. In total, more 154 of the participants were Calgaryans 69 completed the whole survey, while 85 partially completed. 65% of participants were BIPOC while 30.7% of Calgary's population is BIPOC. The survey consisted of seven questions framed through an appreciative and trauma-informed lens. The appreciative lens was intended to understand what is good in the volunteer system and how we can build on it. While the trauma-informed approach considered minimizing re-traumatization of racialized communities as they engaged with the survey. The data from these 154 Calgaryans was collated, analyzed, and organized into the following themes:

### Defining Volunteering

113 responses

Participants defined volunteering in diverse ways. Most definitions spoke to important relational values such as love, care, helping, community, and giving back among others. Many of these definitions connected volunteering to joy and happiness. Creating the spaces for participants to write their own words allowed them to fully express their view of volunteering. Important to note is that not many participants used the word "service". This was particularly interesting because the roots of volunteering are in military service and it's often the most popular synonym for volunteering in Christian organizations. This demonstrates that participants' definitions are adapted to personal belief systems and may be a better representation of what volunteerism is rather than the traditional definitions in Canada.

Some of the keywords in the definitions are:

- Give, giving back
- Help others
- Contribute to something
- Experience for myself
- Care
- Support
- Joy/happiness
- Needs fulfilled
- Without pay
- Abilities/skills to share
- Privilege combined with responsibility
- My community

### DEFINITIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

"Giving"

"Volunteering means committing your time and effort to make a difference in the lives of individuals or your community without being paid"

"I enjoy helping people and volunteering means being able to help people who need it"

"Volunteering means a lot to me. It serves as a way I contribute to the building of the community and connection within and around the community. It also gives me the opportunity to serve."

## Barriers to Volunteering

People across racial identities experience barriers to volunteering. BIPOC participants reported facing more barriers across every single category. There is not a single step in the volunteer screening practice that does not impose significant barriers for BIPOC participants. The biggest barrier for BIPOC participants was personal references. There are many possible reasons for this, but it does highlight the white western influence of volunteering towards a capitalist and institutional HR experience. The next biggest barrier is in police checks, which likely correlates to BIPOC individuals' previous experiences with police in Canada.

BARRIER	RESPONSE: "YES"	RACIAL IDENTITY
<i>General Barriers</i>	33 (21.4% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 81.8% BIPOC</li> <li>• 18.2% White</li> </ul>
<i>Police Checks</i>	85 (55% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 65% BIPOC</li> <li>• 35% White</li> </ul>
<i>Alcohol Certification</i>	41 (26.6% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% BIPOC</li> <li>• 25% White</li> </ul>
<i>Personal References</i>	74 (48% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 86.5% BIPOC</li> <li>• 13.5% White</li> </ul>
<i>First Aid</i>	61 (49% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 68% BIPOC</li> <li>• 32% White</li> </ul>
<i>Intervention Record Check</i>	68 (44% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 59% BIPOC</li> <li>• 41% White</li> </ul>
<i>CPR</i>	59 (38% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 66.2% BIPOC</li> <li>• 33.8% White</li> </ul>
<i>Personal Vehicle</i>	55 (35.7% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 56.4% BIPOC</li> <li>• 43.6% White</li> </ul>
<i>Vulnerable Sector Check</i>	67 (43.5% overall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 57% BIPOC</li> <li>• 43% White</li> </ul>

Figure 1: *Categories of barriers and responses across racial Identity*

## Volunteer Training, Supporting, and Supervision

74 responses

Most participants included requests for training, support, and supervision. When it came to training, participants needed clarity of roles and expectations. Some indicated a preference for online training, which is consistent with the current Covid trends. Most participants requested expressions of trust and value.

Themes from participants:

- Clearer expectations of how much time are required
- More trust in volunteers
- Treat me like my time is valuable
- More happiness/enthusiasm
- No change to what I experience
- Online training would be easier
- Lots of casual check-ins

### PARTICIPANT'S DIRECT WORDS

"Clear understanding of what needs to be accomplished so my time is well spent, and I can provide value"

"Establish why this organization needs volunteers. Training is at your own pace. Support personnel is responsible and available to help. Supervision for the initial stages until the volunteer is comfortable."

"More guidance, but less supervision."

"I would prefer to be trained or supported through online or virtual means."

## Volunteer Acknowledgment and Recognition

74 responses

It was surprising that many people reported they had never been thanked, even though this is the most important expression of acknowledgment to everyone. Participants also requested more parties. This request departs from previous research and might stem from isolation due to the pandemic.

Some of the responses include:

- Thanked in a simple, meaningful way
- Small things
- Don't spend a lot of money as this defeats the purpose
- More information about how I specifically made a difference
- Fewer rules
- No references
- More parties

## The Intrinsic Value of Volunteering

69 Responses

All participants found intrinsic value in having the opportunity to volunteer. All responses were overwhelmingly positive.

Themes:

- Volunteering makes me better
- Volunteering supports my mental health
- Boosted self-confidence
- Connected with others
- Feels good
- Experience

### PARTICIPANT'S VIEWS

"Volunteering has broadened my perspectives to the lives of people and my community in general"

"Sense of purpose, confidence, connect with society"

"I'm not aspiring as a superhuman but for me being human is super."

"It has allowed me to remember that help comes in different ways, and often they all are important and needed. It has also allowed me to reflect on where I know my skills will be better utilized, so on one hand I have learned to value myself better, and on the other hand, I am able to step aside for someone else who would do a better job than me and is deserving of the position."

## Changing the Volunteer Sector

69 Responses

Volunteering is viewed as such a positive and joyful opportunity, but that joy doesn't translate to the individual's experience when volunteering.

Themes:

- More volunteering online
- Lots of calls for change. More thanks. More joy. More celebrating.
- Volunteering free of barriers
- 8 respondents said volunteering should stay the same (6/8 of these respondents identified as white)
- Experiences have been widely varied. People see a future where volunteering is encouraged but better
- A diverse and inclusive volunteering base
- Spirit of volunteering encouraged
- More choices
- Better use of skills
- Smaller time commitments

## PARTICIPANT'S THOUGHTS

*"The spirit of volunteerism should be encouraged - a resource of the city should be set aside to develop programs of volunteerism most especially the youth. Reach out to immigrants who might want to volunteer but are just shy or don't have connections on how to start to volunteer. Identify volunteer opportunities that will fit especially those who want to volunteer but are in a stage where they have to take 2 jobs to survive or have limited time but want to be part of the volunteer community."*

*"Sometimes in a few places we are not completely safe to volunteer. I would change that into a completely safe environment, and I would try my best to make everyone I am working with or supervising feel safe."*

*"Let people see the fruit."*

*"I would like more virtual volunteering options to be created."*

*"Some organizations are asking way too much for unpaid work. I've seen some predatory postings that look more like job descriptions."*

*"The only way I would want volunteering to change is in the area of valuing and supporting the volunteer when the need arises."*

## IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS ANTI-RACIST AND DECOLONIAL PRACTICES

### Barriers

The main objective of this initiative was to understand the experiences of BIPOC volunteers in the sector, and the ways in which volunteerism is structurally colonial and racist. What we learned is that BIPOC participants overwhelmingly experience barriers and more so than white volunteers. This demonstrates a need for deeper conversations around changing structural aspects of the volunteer process in recruitment, training, supervision, and support.

And more importantly, the data shows the experience of BIPOC participants in institutionalized and mainstream volunteering. What this data does not tell us is how BIPOC participants do work in their own communities where it may not be recognized as volunteering. Framed differently, the data tells us that the definition of volunteering itself excludes the work that BIPOC people do in their communities. What if this work is recognized and acknowledged? Additionally, would these experiences and contexts be learning sites for mainstream volunteerism?

The barriers the research highlights affect non-BIPOC volunteers as well. Meaning that if we remove these barriers, we are not only benefiting BIPOC communities but all people who are interested in volunteering. Addressing racism and colonial structures has universal benefits across the volunteer sector.



## Reflective Value

Volunteering and having your effort recognized gives participants a sense of belonging. When people feel valued, that value is reflected in the way they make meaning of their lives. This is important for personal growth and self-worth. Many participants indicate that volunteering is important for their mental health, and we need to consider the effects of removing these opportunities. When these opportunities are not available because of barriers, we are denying people the personal benefits that come from volunteering.

## Inclusive Volunteer Environments

While BIPOC participants experience barriers to accessing volunteer opportunities, we must also examine their experiences while in volunteer institutions. A few participants highlighted the need for more inclusive volunteering spaces, signifying that volunteer opportunities can be sites for oppression and marginalization. The need for inclusive volunteer environments indicates that there is work to be done around creating anti-racist and inclusive practices that will allow everyone to belong. Volunteer organizations need to look inwards and examine their policies, practices, and personnel before they invite marginalized people to join them. The intention for anti-racist and inclusive change needs to be demonstrated internally. To signal that they are changing, many might seek to diversify, yet this can be harmful if the internal conditions do not create belonging.

# NEXT STEPS

## More Research

The data we gathered showed us that more research needs to be funded. A larger and disaggregated data set will give us better insight into the experiences of racism and colonization in the volunteer sector. A larger data set would benefit from reaching across Canada.

## Knowledge Sharing Initiatives

What we have learned is very relevant for the volunteer sector in Calgary and Canada. It is important that we share this knowledge with all stakeholders. This work requires funding and support from foundations, all levels of government, and advocacy groups. The volunteer sector as a system will benefit greatly from these insights. More importantly, marginalized communities will benefit from a culture shift in the volunteer sector.

## Community Strategizing

Anti-racist and decolonial change is possible when communities of care work collaboratively. Acknowledging that there is so much wisdom in the community, this collective wisdom could support the sector as a whole. The knowledge-sharing initiatives could work as spaces where stakeholders can share ideas on shifting to anti-racist and decolonial structures and practices.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND CONTACTS

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Thank you to the over 2.5 million volunteers who visit the VolunteerConnector every year. We are grateful to you for the time you give, especially for completing this survey.

The VolunteerConnector team works with Dr. Moyo Rainos Mutamba on our ongoing journey of anti-racism and he is the author of this document. We would be nowhere at all without his patience, support, and kindness.

### Anti-Racist Coaching

For Anti-Racist Practices, Consulting and Coaching contact:

Dr Moyo Rainos Mutamba  
Bloom Consulting  
<https://www.bloomworld.org/>

### VolunteerConnector

Want to bring the VolunteerConnector to your community? Want to connect for research partnership opportunities? Contact us:

[info@volunteerconnector.org](mailto:info@volunteerconnector.org)

Support the work with your donation here:

<https://www.volunteerconnector.org/who-we-are>