



# More Than Willing Hands

**A Report on voluntarism at Museums**

**2001**

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## Introduction

The following report contains observations and recommendations arising from a study of the role and impact of voluntarism at museums. The study responds to two factors. First, Statistics Canada reports a substantial drop in the number of museum volunteers between 1996 and 1999 – between 10 and 18% depending upon the estimates used. This is a significant figure for a community so heavily reliant upon volunteers for much of its day-to-day work. Inevitably, questions arise. Does this signal a trend or is it a short-term phenomenon? Why is it happening? What does it actually mean in terms of the impact upon museum activities?

Secondly, the CMA routinely receives anecdotal information from individuals and institutions raising concerns about voluntarism. Those concerns range from recruitment difficulties to training, employment practices and morale among paid and volunteer staff alike. Although provinces have variously studied the issue, there has not been an attempt for many years to investigate such concerns from a national perspective. In this International Year of the Volunteer, it is timely and only appropriate to focus our attention on this most important facet of our community.

Accordingly, with help from the Museums Assistance Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the CMA launched a national study in 2000, in partnership with the following organizations.

*Association of Manitoba Museums*  
*Association Museums New Brunswick*  
*British Columbia Museums Association*  
*Canadian Federation of Friends of Museums*  
*Canadian Museum of Civilization*  
*Museums Alberta*

*Museum Association of Newfoundland and Labrador*  
*Museums Association of Saskatchewan*  
*Ontario Association of Art Galleries*  
*Ontario Museums Association*  
*Société des musées québécois*  
*Volunteer Canada*

There are several caveats. First, the volunteer cadre is very large and diverse. conditions and priorities vary greatly among regions and institutions. In this setting, it would be impractical to address in detail, within a single document, the full array of factors bearing on voluntarism. This report, therefore, should be considered a mere start of what will hopefully become a continuing and concentrated effort by the community to come to grips with a broad array of challenges.

Secondly, nothing here is meant to diminish the good work already done in this field by museums throughout Canada. Various institutions have both studied the issue and developed programs specifically aimed at enhancing their volunteer programs. However, there is little consistency around the country in relation to employment practices, operational capacity and standards pertaining to volunteers. Furthermore, as will be seen, the most serious impact of a decline in voluntarism is felt by small, rural institutions lacking the resources to achieve a quick turn-around.

Thirdly, the recommendations here are necessarily broad. Ultimately, particular solutions to the challenges will have to be devised by those on the ground in light of local variations in capacity, needs and priorities. What is portrayed here is essentially a sketch of the national planning horizon that is intended to provide a focus for more detailed planning by those in the field.



## Scope

The scope is limited to volunteers working at museum sites on a regular basis as an integral part of the museum staff. Trustees are not included as they are subjects of a separate but related project to commence in 2001. There is, of course, the much broader network of volunteer support for museums including local and national Friends organizations, historical societies and similar heritage organizations and community service organizations. That network will receive further study in the coming months.

## Methodology

The study consisted of three parts:

- A survey of institutions by an independent consultant to determine the general range of activities in which volunteers engage and uncover key management issues.
- A background examination of developments in the larger voluntarism sector to identify key emerging trends.
- A series of discussion groups across Canada, involving paid and volunteer staff, in a frank exchange in relation to themes contained in a discussion paper on the subject (attached – Appendix A).

An advisory committee was established early to oversee the project. Members of the group were: Lise Mignault, Canadian Museum of Civilization; Paddy Bowen, Executive Director, Volunteer Canada; Suzanne Stohn, National Director, Canadian Federation of Friends of Museums (CFFM); Doris Smith, Independent Consultant and long-time member of the CFFM; Sylvia Priestley-Brown, Director, Association of Museums of New Brunswick; Charles Allain, Province of New Brunswick; and Jean-Claude Racine, Department of Canadian Heritage.

## Background

### Voluntarism – A Canadian Tradition

The volunteer spirit is deeply rooted in Canadian tradition. Since Canada's beginning, volunteers have contributed to the work of every critical sector of Canadian society, from health care and education, to public safety, defence, social services and disaster relief. It is estimated that today about 7.5 million Canadians volunteer each year.

The Canadian experience with voluntarism reflects the circumstances of our early development. In the absence of local government through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, community-minded citizens in Canada led the movement to establish schools, hospitals, orphanages and even military units for local defence. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and twentieth centuries, volunteers led the fight for social programs aimed at improving the lot of workers and families, especially children. Those efforts were eventually translated into legislation that today forms the core of Canada's social safety net.

Governments have only picked up the reins when the sheer scale and complexity of such endeavours have exceeded the volunteers' capacity. Even now, however, the volunteer remains a vital component in the delivery of critical social services, health, education and cultural programs.

Recognizing this, the federal government has joined with the voluntary sector, through the National Volunteer Initiative, to develop a coherent partnership strategy. This is more than a symbolic gesture. Over \$90 million has been earmarked for initiatives aimed at boosting the capacity of the sector and enhancing its relationship with governments and the communities they serve.

### Volunteers at Museums

Volunteers have always been indispensable to Canada's museum community. Indeed, the emergence of a paid professional cadre on the national scale is a relatively recent phenomenon of museum development. Close to half of museums today owe their existence to the initiative and energy of their early volunteer founders.

Statistics Canada reports that for the year 1997/98, there were some 46,400 volunteers directly engaged in museums and related heritage institutions. This represents about 65 % of the museum workforce on a national basis, including full-time and part-time paid workers. This does not include the vast network of related organizations, such as local Friends of Museums societies, historical societies and community service organizations, all of which contribute greatly to the work of their museums.

Volunteers contribute to virtually all facets of museum operations, from facility maintenance, to administration, collections management, events management and public programming. The distribution of volunteers varies greatly across the country. For example, they represent over 95 % of the work force at museums in one province.

More than simply willing hands, volunteers are a vital day-to-day connection between the museum and the local community. In this sense, the ebb and flow of volunteers may be seen as a barometer of the museum's success in engaging the community it serves. As well, they represent a diverse pool of



talent and expertise in areas where museums are currently feeling their greatest need, for example, in the area of information technology. The museum's fortune, therefore, is often dependent upon its location. For example, those within or close to a large urban centre clearly have a larger base of talent to draw upon than those in rural areas.

## Discussion

### Overview

This report should be considered a mere starting point for what will hopefully become a concerted and continuing effort by the museum community to come to grips with an array of important issues bearing upon voluntarism. To attempt more would be impossible given the sheer magnitude and diversity of the volunteer cadre, with all of the variations in local needs and priorities among some 2500 institutions.

If it reveals few surprises to those who have closely followed the issue, the study confirms certain trends suggested by the anecdotal evidence gathered over the years. As well, it reflects a solid consensus among the focus groups throughout Canada in identifying a number of common themes.

Briefly, the numbers are declining; this trend will continue as volunteers retire in greater numbers over the next several years; and the greatest impact is being felt among the smaller institutions (budgets of \$500,000 or less). While people worry naturally about the loss of practical knowledge and experience, they also fear the weakening of traditional bonds between the museum and the local community.

Ultimately, the story of the volunteer is very much tied to the larger socio-economic picture. Rural depopulation due to economic factors, the growing diversity of Canadian society and continuing financial uncertainty challenge museums and the volunteer community. The solutions lie in better and more stable funding; constructive dialogue between management, paid staff and volunteers; greater access by volunteers to training and developmental opportunities; close collaboration between museums and the broader voluntary sector; and museum strategies reflecting the changing demographic and cultural character of the communities they serve.

### Information Needed

Provincial associations have studied voluntarism in relation to regional conditions; however, apart from the Statistics Canada cultural surveys, there has been no systematic effort to gather and analyse such information from a national perspective. The Stats Can figures are helpful to a point but they serve, at best, as rough indicators of trends needing further investigation.

This study, therefore, was constrained from the outset by a lack of objective data on national trends in relation to key issues such as recruitment, retention, employment practices, training and administration of volunteers throughout the spectrum of heritage institutions across Canada. Such data would be important to detect issues affecting the development of national policies and programs intended to benefit the museum community. For example, while it is important to know that the average number of volunteers is declining across the country, it would be more helpful to understand precisely the local patterns of attrition, the main contributing factors and their collective impact on recruitment, training and funding priorities.

**Comment:** *While the administration of volunteer programs is best handled close to the ground, there is a need to regularly gather, analyse and disseminate information to the community on national trends in voluntarism in relation to the broader voluntary sector. The CMA, working in partnership with the provincial and territorial associations, could play an important role in this regard.*

**Recommendation 1:** That the CMA, in partnership with provincial and territorial associations, regularly monitor and report upon current and emerging issues bearing upon voluntarism. The CMA Voluntarism Network has a crucial role to play in this regard. Working through that Network, such a program should include:

- forging closer ties with the broader voluntary sector through national bodies such as the sector roundtables and their provincial/territorial equivalents;
- reporting regularly through CMA publications on the status of voluntarism and related issues;
- conducting regular surveys focussed specifically upon the numbers and disposition of volunteers from a regional and institutional perspective;
- establishing an Internet forum for information exchange and consultation around the issue of voluntarism; and
- issuing a report upon the status of voluntarism as a standing item of the Association's Annual Report.

### Why the Loss?

This decline in numbers is ascribed mainly to the following factors:

**Aging Volunteers:** Canada experienced a major expansion of museums through the late 60's and 70's, an expansion often inspired and led by volunteers. A cyclical "bulge" in attrition aggravates the current trend as many founding volunteers simply retire with advancing age.

**Rural depopulation:** Many small centres in rural Canada are experiencing a major shift of population to larger centres. Overall, less than 20% of Canadians now live outside what are classified as urban centres — the handful of large municipalities scattered across the country. Rural depopulation is expected to continue, especially in regions where communities suffer declining prospects in traditional industries such as agriculture and the fishery.

**Competition:** The study's participants expressed concern that museums may be competing for recruits with other components of the voluntary sector. That is, as governments have slashed funding for vital social programs such as education and health care, the prospective volunteer may consider the museum less important to their core social concerns than struggling schools and hospitals.

**Morale:** Some observers point to volunteer fatigue as a cause for declining numbers. They suggest that many volunteers are weary and discouraged after years of funding cutbacks and they have developed a general sense of abandonment by governments at all levels.



**Selective Volunteers:** There is evidence that people are increasingly selective in their choice of volunteer service. Within a great array of opportunities, prospective volunteers may choose those that have a tangible benefit in terms of their own professional and social priorities. For example, young people may choose to volunteer in areas directly related to job prospects. The non-profit cultural sector may not seem especially attractive from the standpoint of acquiring experience and credentials for future employment.

*Comment: Attrition by retirement is considered the single greatest factor contributing to the present decline. Other factors noted above probably play a part; however, there is insufficient evidence that would clearly demonstrate their relative impact. Many institutions do not routinely interview departing or former volunteers to ascertain and record the reasons for leaving. Some argue that the cause is self-evident in the case of aging volunteers and that to attempt to gather such information would be simply impractical for small, struggling institutions. This may be true in some instances; nevertheless, the lack of objective data on volunteer departures hinders the development of appropriate retention and recruitment strategies.*

**Recommendation 2:** That the CMA and provincial and territorial museum associations establish feedback mechanisms designed to monitor attrition factors, test assumptions and develop appropriate retention and recruitment strategies. This could be done, for example, by periodically sampling departing volunteers in a given region through interviews, surveys or regular consultations with selected museums and volunteers groups.

### Numbers Don't Tell the Whole Tale

Whatever the main cause of declining numbers, raw statistics don't tell the whole tale. Small "community" museums are feeling the greatest impact, especially in rural areas. Here, many museums are entirely staffed by volunteers. At others, tiny paid staffs rely heavily upon volunteers for key operations including public programming, collections management, retail sales and special events management. In some cases, the shrinking volunteer base threatens the very survival of such institutions and their collections.

Furthermore, many long-serving volunteers have literally grown up with the institution and the surrounding community so that they represent much of the social context within which the museum operates. They provide continuity between the generations and authenticate much of what the museum has to say by virtue of their personal experience.

*Comment: In addition to the loss of practical skill and knowledge, the departure of long-serving volunteers weakens the close connection with the community that is vital to the museum's purposes. Replacing such vital assets is a major challenge. It is more than a matter of finding willing hands and providing training. It is a matter of finding the "right" person - someone with the attitude, commitment and understanding of the current social context to sustain that close link with the community.*

This is at once an opportunity and a challenge. For example, the 1998 National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), the most recent comprehensive survey of how Canadians support one another and their communities, highlights a broad spectrum of volunteer support across the country, while concluding that Canadians care about and are involved in the lives of their fellow citizens. Key indicators are outlined further:

- almost one in three Canadians volunteered their time;
- almost three in four Canadians help people directly, by doing housework, driving someone to appointments or providing some other assistance;
- one in two Canadians are members of community organizations;
- the volunteer participation rate has grown from 26.8 per cent in 1987 to 31.4 per cent;
- although the volunteer rate was either quite stable or increased slightly for most age groups over the past ten years, the rate among Canadian youth (15 to 24 years) has almost doubled.

Furthermore, opinion polls continue to show significant public interest in cultural heritage. As the population ages, therefore, we can expect a growing number of informed and culturally sensitive retirees with disposable time to volunteer at museums.

Along with this “good news”, however, are some cautionary factors. First, the growing concentration of Canadians in large cities, combined with the massive “downloading” of financial responsibility to municipalities, has prompted the amalgamation of communities for greater efficiency. The demographic character of many rural communities caught up in this trend is changing markedly as they increasingly become home to large numbers of urban residents.

Secondly, although the influx of residents expands the potential recruiting base and increases the range of needed talent, the newcomers may not always share the same cultural origins and traditions as the founders. They may not view the museum with the same loyalty and affection as the founders. Their social and business focus is often “downtown” and the general time pressures of contemporary urban lifestyle may limit the opportunity for voluntary work.

*Comment: In one sense, the problem of attracting new volunteers speaks to the greater need for museums to develop inclusive programs that reflect the emerging demographic character of their communities. This principle applies in particular to recruitment strategies. Traditional methods of attracting volunteers (e.g., word-of-mouth through the volunteer network combined with occasional advertising at the site) will be less effective when the numbers are declining or public programs are not perceived as immediately relevant to the cultural interests of the current population. This problem is exacerbated by the prospect of continuing attrition brought about by the retirement of large numbers of aging volunteers.*

**Recommendation 3:** That museums review their communications, public programs and employment strategies to ensure that they reflect the evolving cultural make-up of their communities. To this end, they should consider methods such as: joint ventures with other cultural organizations, community associations and service clubs, including coordinated volunteer recruitment drives; engaging such organizations directly in the development of museum plans and programs; and regular communications directed at all segments of the surrounding community.

Ironically, however, increasing their investment in public programming and aggressive recruitment will only add to the burden of many cash-strapped institutions, especially those in the rural areas. *This raises the larger issue of inadequate funding that underpins so many of the problems confronting museums.*



**Comment:** *There are no easy answers. Ultimately, funding agencies and the museum community must acknowledge the attrition challenge and give a high priority to volunteer recruitment when allocating resources. To achieve this, it is important to quantify the need by developing a forecast of workforce requirements reflecting local circumstances over the coming several years. This would involve supplementary research and analysis by museum associations in conjunction with the concerned funding agencies.*

**Recommendation 4:** That the CMA, in collaboration with provincial and territorial associations and concerned funding agencies, complete a strategic assessment of volunteer workforce requirements in 2002, as a basis for obtaining appropriate funding.

Thirdly, better prospects for museums in large centres will not alleviate the difficulty confronting rural museums in attracting and retaining volunteers. In fact, the continuing exodus to the cities, especially among young people, foreshadows a growing disparity in fortunes between the rural and urban museum.

**Comment:** *Collectively speaking, museums comprise a national system of interdependent parts. Each contributes in some way to our understanding of Canada's evolving cultural heritage. We cannot afford a division within that system between the "haves" and the "have-nots". This raises the spectre of disparate standards that will only put at risk collections that are important not only to a community's identity, but to the Canada's collective heritage as a whole. It will also fuel the sense of community alienation that is a growing concern for many, especially those in rural areas.*

### Training and Development are Key

The prospect of attrition only aggravates the daunting challenge of providing suitable volunteer training and development opportunities. There are several factors to consider.

**Basic Skills:** We should anticipate an increase in demand through the coming five years for entry-level training of replacement volunteers. *Small museums, which comprise the majority of the community, will endure the most in meeting the training need in all facets of museum operations.*

**Keeping Current:** Operational and administrative demands upon museums are constantly evolving, especially with the accelerating pace of technological change and its related impact on work requirements. *Beyond providing basic training, then, it is increasingly important to invest in continuing programs aimed at updating and enhancing skills among volunteers employed in key positions.*

**Leadership Development:** Volunteers at smaller museums are often involved in important facets of museum management including, at times, directing the entire institution. The demands placed upon them, in terms of understanding and applying contemporary requirements of institutional leadership, are onerous. *If we are to ensure a consistent and high standard of managerial competence throughout the community, it is important that volunteer leaders and managers have access to suitable developmental opportunities enabling them to plan, communicate and act appropriately upon the major issues of the day. The need for leadership development among volunteers will increase markedly in the coming years as the current crop of volunteer-leaders departs.*

Training and development needs for museum workers are currently addressed through a variety of means. Provincial and territorial museum associations provide skill-oriented training to museum staff in basic aspects of museum operation. Some universities and community colleges across Canada provide dedicated museum studies programs focused on the professional requirements of museum administration and management. In addition, some offer programs in specialized fields such as the conservation of cultural properties.

The CMA, with assistance from the Department of Canadian Heritage, administers a national bursary program distributing about \$100,000 annually to assist museum workers in upgrading their skills. In addition, museum associations and related heritage institutions regularly host conferences and seminars addressing various aspects of professional development.

With all of this, however, tight budgets in all quarters, combined with practical obstacles such as sheer time and distance, render such opportunities inaccessible to most volunteers. Provincial and territorial associations, for example, are hard-pressed to simply cope with the basic training demands of full-time paid staff.

**Comment:** *Failure to provide the requisite training for volunteers carries a potential liability risk for museums. It has a direct and adverse impact on the institution's ability to adequately care for important collections while providing high-quality public programming. Furthermore, it undermines staff morale and operational efficiency.*

*The demand for training will only increase in coming years with the recruitment of volunteers lacking the practical experience and corporate memory of their predecessors. Areas of particular concern include the use of computers and related software such as collections management systems, preservation techniques, exhibit design, planning, administration and fund-raising.*

**Recommendation 5:** That museum associations, in collaboration with related educational institutions and funding agencies, urgently complete a strategic forecast of volunteer training and development requirements and that they seek appropriate funding on that basis.

Coordination is essential among the various components of the training system, in order to ensure that content and program delivery mechanisms are fully responsive to local priorities. For example, it would be important to ensure that the curriculums for post-secondary museum studies programs are compatible with those of the various provincial and territorial museum associations. It would also be important to develop enrollment targets in line with the forecast demand.

It is equally important that requirements and priorities be developed in close consultation with federal and provincial funding agencies. (Ironically, in one province where volunteers comprise the majority, the provincial association was advised by federal representatives to limit training vacancies for volunteers to 25% of the total available dollars!)

**Comment:** *At present, there is no established means whereby the various players might regularly consult and collaborate on a national basis around common training and development issues. A national training and development forum would be important to informing the development of policies and programs seeking a consistent standard of competence throughout the community.*



**Recommendation 6:** That a national forum on training and development be established joining training, educational and funding agencies in a continuing process of jointly designing and delivering appropriate training and development standards and programs for volunteers.

### Volunteers Need Recognition

By definition, volunteers work with no expectation of pay. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made for compensation in relation to certain personal expenses such as parking fees, gas mileage and meals when incurred in the course of authorized museum business.

*Comment: This concern is common to all volunteer organizations and is the subject of continuing efforts by the CMA to obtain tax relief for expenses incurred by volunteers in the course of their duties.*

**Recommendation 7:** That the CMA, in conjunction with provincial and territorial museum associations and the broader voluntary sector, intensify efforts to achieve tax relief for volunteers in respect of expenses routinely incurred in the course of their duties.

**Recommendation 8:** That museums review their expense policies with a view to providing reasonable compensation to volunteers for expenses incurred in carrying out their assignments.

*From the volunteer perspective, however, personal recognition is the most important form of compensation. Recognition today tends to be in the form of letters, award ceremonies, and profiling the volunteer in local publications. Such programs are most important and appreciated; however, engaging volunteers directly in the development of plans and programs that affect their work is the most substantial and effective kind of recognition.*

In this regard, the museum's size and location often affects attitudes toward voluntarism. Large urban institutions tend to regard volunteers as auxiliaries of their paid complement (albeit important ones). Where funds are available, such institutions employ coordinators or managers devoted specifically to developing and maintaining the volunteer complement. In many cases, however, the volunteers themselves have little voice, other than through their coordinator, in determining institutional policies and priorities.

In contrast, museums in smaller centres depend heavily on volunteers and, perforce, include them more routinely in planning and decision-making. This tends to produce a greater sense of identification with the institution among the volunteer cadre, thus promoting high morale and productivity.

*Comment: There is a general view by volunteers that they must and should have a meaningful say in the development and direction of policies and programs that affect their responsibilities. This is more than a matter of mere form. It is recognition of the volunteer's value to the organization. As well, it opens a door to valuable ideas and insights from the front line of community contact, thereby helping to ensure a relevant public message.*

**Recommendation 9:** That museums review their planning processes with a view to ensuring a prominent voice for volunteers when developing local plans and priorities. Further, that museums promote regular and constructive dialogue between paid and volunteer staff on matters of common concern.

### Workplace Worries

There is evidence that some paid staff (certainly not all) view volunteers with a certain discomfort. Some, for example, argue that increasing reliance upon volunteers diminishes the perceived worth of the professional's credentials and keeps compensation at an artificially low level. Others, typically at small institutions where volunteers form the majority of the work force, contend that the volunteers exert *too* much influence on decisions affecting day-to-day operations while the paid staff must deal with the consequences when things go wrong as a result. Left unresolved, such concerns undermine morale and productivity on both sides.

**Comment:** *The volunteer has always played a key role in the development of museums and this is not likely to change. Indeed, many museums would not exist today were it not for the early efforts of the volunteer community. Nevertheless, museums must take account of such concerns in the development of employment policies and practices.*

**Recommendation 10:** That museums recognize the potential for strained relations between paid and unpaid staff and take the necessary steps to foster good will. Those steps might include any or all of the following:

- Formalizing position statements to clearly delineate the responsibilities of paid and volunteer staff;
- Organizing regular meetings between paid staff and volunteers to discuss issues affecting their relationship;
- Pairing volunteers with paid staff in tasks designed to increase communication and awareness of their respective responsibilities; and
- Providing training to staff in the management of volunteer programs.

### Liability and Insurance

Museums may be exposed to liability associated with the work of volunteers. For example, typical duties for volunteers at small institutions include building and installing exhibits and caring for the collection. Another is the repair and maintenance of facilities where there is a risk of injury to the staff or the public (e.g., construction or restoration work within public areas). At the same time, volunteers may themselves be exposed to risk associated with the operation of, or proximity to, hazardous materials and equipment.

Currently, institutions and their employees may be protected to some degree through various forms of insurance. Volunteers, however, are not always deemed “employees” for this purpose and they may not have access to appropriate coverage.

**Comment:** *It is incumbent on the museum to ensure that all staff, paid and volunteer alike, are adequately protected against injury and liability for matters arising from their official duties. Furthermore, where volunteers are not covered by health and safety-related insurance, it is important that their duties be reviewed in relation to health risks and that steps be taken to minimize that risk and the institution's resultant liability.*



**Recommendation 11:** That institutions review their occupational health and safety programs and risk management policies with a view to ensuring:

- a) that volunteers receive appropriate protection against claims of civil liability arising from the performance of their duties; and
- b) that volunteers receive appropriate protection against injury and other health hazards associated with their work.

## Conclusion

If there ever was a time when the museum volunteer was taken for granted, that time is surely past. More than simply a pair of willing hands - a mere appendage - the volunteer is, and will remain, indispensable to the museum's success in preserving and explaining Canada's heritage.

Today, the community faces a growing challenge in attracting and retaining suitably skilled volunteers in sufficient numbers to sustain our core purposes. Prompt action is needed to resolve a number of pressing issues. That action will require cooperation between governments at all levels, provincial and national museum associations and the broader voluntary sector, through a long-term remedial strategy.

That strategy must be based upon a substantial increase of resources throughout the system focussed on volunteer issues; better and more stable funding for museums; employment policies and systems enabling constructive dialogue between management, paid staff and volunteers; greater access by volunteers to training and developmental opportunities; close collaboration between museums and the broader voluntary sector; and museum strategies reflecting the changing demographic character of our communities.

While the current decline in volunteer strength is cause for concern, it is more a symptom than a cause of the many voluntarism issues confronting the community. Issues related to training, compensation, staff relations and the like, have been around for a long time and they will not be resolved until firm action is taken on a broad front.

There is no panacea. The nature of voluntarism is dynamic and highly complex. What works for a large institution in central Canada with a full-time volunteer coordinator will seldom work for a struggling rural institution in Saskatchewan or Newfoundland being run entirely by volunteers. One thing is certain: failure to act quickly to resolve the issues puts at risk our national collection and threatens our ability to fully engage Canadians in understanding and celebrating their own heritage. This study will hopefully serve as a starting point for the considerable work yet to be done.