

International Year of the Volunteer

It's official - the United Nations has declared 2001 The International Year of Volunteers. As one of the first countries to begin preparations, Canada is displaying its commitment to celebrating the millions of volunteers worldwide and to encouraging participation. 1999 - the UN International Year of Older Persons - brought attention to the importance of an inclusive and all-ages society. This year provides the opportunity for older people to get involved with their communities through volunteerism. Indeed, the final quarter of 2001 is specifically focussed on the older volunteer.

What is volunteering? Volunteering is simply an extension of being a "good neighbour". Volunteers donate their time and skills to help meet the goals of an organization - usually from the non-profit or public sector. Volunteering can take on many forms from fundraising or administrative support to building houses, serving meals or providing transportation. This helps organizations and individuals, but it is also a great way to improve your community. There are also direct benefits to the volunteer: volunteering provides a rewarding outlet, improves self-esteem, helps the volunteer gain and use skills, and can be a great way to meet new people with similar interests.

In Canada, women are more likely than men to volunteer, and the likelihood of volunteering increases with education and income levels. A full 25% of working-age Canadians contribute some volunteer time - an average of 3.7 hours per week, and at 23%, volunteer rates for people over the age of 65 fall just under the national average.

If you think you might like to volunteer, begin by asking yourself what your personal goals are. Perhaps you have a specific issue in mind, or maybe you want to meet new people. What kind of time commitment can you make? Would you prefer to work at home or in the organization, and do you enjoy working by yourself or with others? If you wish to stay at home, consider "virtual volunteering" - volunteering that can be done via the Internet. You could virtually visit a homebound person using your computer. Finally, consider what specific skills you have to offer. Remember, time is often more important than money to volunteer organizations.

Once you have an organization in mind, find out about their mission, what your duties might be, what time commitment is required, and if there are any related expenses. If you are going to be using your car for volunteer activities, make sure you are properly insured. If the driving is infrequent and you are not being compensated financially, you will probably be covered without a premium increase, but consult your broker about your specific situation. Having the answers to these questions will ensure that you are fully informed and prepared to undertake the activity.

For a complete listing of volunteer centres in your area, call Volunteer Canada at 1-800-670-0401, or check out the IYV website at <http://www.iyv2001.org/>.