Selwyn Public Library Volunteers and Rural Community Sustainability Project

Community Report

AMBER COLIBABA, M.A.

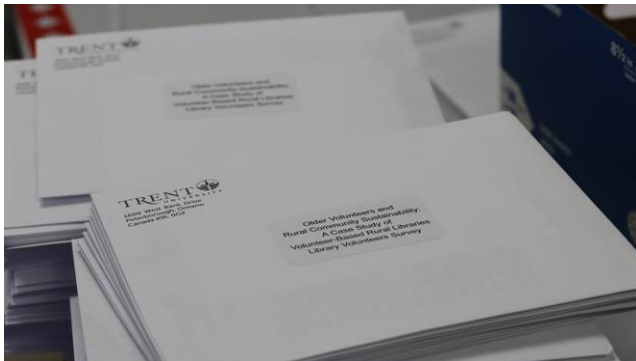**Trent Centre for Aging & Society, Trent University**

June, 2018

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Acknowledgements

For More Information

If you would like to learn more about the *Older Voluntarism and Rural Community Sustainability: A Case Study of a Volunteer-based Rural Library* project, copies of the thesis are available in the following formats.

Electronically
Copies are available to read online at Theses Canada Portal www.bac lac.gc.ca/eng/services/theses) and the Trent Centre for Aging & Society website (www.trentu.ca/aging).

Paper Copy
A copy will be available at Trent University, Bata Library and a copy will be delivered to each of the Selwyn Public Library branches.

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Conclusion

> *"It's not just about books. It's everything else that we give to the community."*
>
> Selwyn Public Library Volunteer

With the help and engagement of the research participants, the *Selwyn Public Library Volunteers and Rural Community Sustainability* project contributes to understanding the experiences of older library volunteers, the challenges of sustaining a rural library volunteer program and the contributions of older library volunteers and the library volunteer program in the sustainability of aging rural communities.

In addition, the project has produced eight recommendations for the Selwyn Public Library to ensure the sustainability of the library and the volunteer program, as well as an M.A. thesis for the Sustainability Studies graduate program at Trent University. It is the first published thesis in the Collaborative Specialization in Aging Studies program at Trent.

The findings from the project will be presented at the International Federation on Ageing's Global Conference (www.ifa2018.com) in Toronto, Ontario in August 2018.

The Project

A Case Study of the Selwyn Public Library
As part of an ongoing partnership between the Selwyn Public Library and Trent University, this project featured a case study of the library's volunteers.

Goal and Objectives
The goal of the project is to explore how older voluntarism contributes to the sustainability of aging rural communities.

Objectives:
1) To understand the experiences of older library volunteers
2) To examine the challenges of sustaining a rural library volunteer program
3) To explore how older library volunteers and library volunteer programs contribute to rural community sustainability

Data Collection

Surveys
Surveys from 87 respondents were used to create a demographic profile of the current Selwyn Public Library volunteers.

Interviews
Interviews with 48 Selwyn Public Library volunteers, staff, board members and township stakeholders to discuss experiences, challenges and contributions.
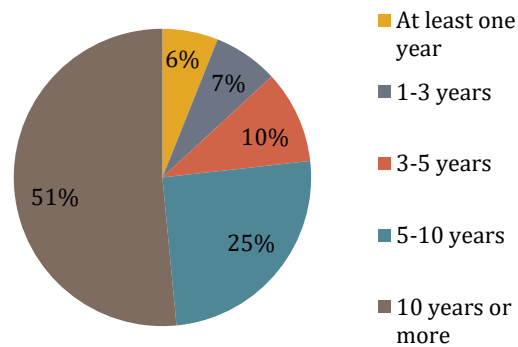
Focus Groups
Six focus groups with Selwyn Public Library volunteers, staff board members to validate interview findings.

Selwyn Public Library Volunteers

Gender

11%

89%

■ Female ■ Male

Age

1%

11%   10%

35%   40%

■ Under 44 ■ 45-64 ■ 65-74
■ 75-84 ■ 85-94
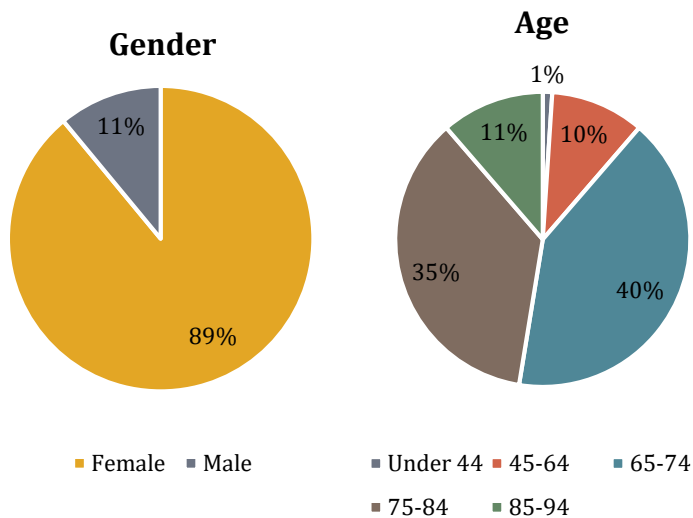
Length of time volunteering at Selwyn Public Library

6%
7%
10%
25%
51%

■ At least one year
■ 1-3 years
■ 3-5 years
■ 5-10 years
■ 10 years or more

Recommendations

5. Standardizing policies and procedures across all branches

To ensure consistency of customer service and volunteer training across library branches.

6. Clarity of connection between thrift stores and library

To ensure mutual respect and understanding of both volunteering roles. This can be continued through the recognition of both sets of volunteers at the annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner.

7. Accreditation with the Ontario Public Library Guidelines

Using the guidelines to audit the governance, policy development, operations and services the library provides, the Selwyn Public Library could become an accredited public library. This will ensure consistency of services with public libraries across Ontario and will allow the library to become aware of changes needed to be made and appropriate development plans to be implemented.

8. Create a full-time volunteer coordinator position

Creating a full-time volunteer coordinator position (volunteer or paid staff) allows the preceding recommendations to be addressed.

Recommendations

The following actions are recommended for changes to the library volunteer program on how to sustain the program and to ensure the success of both the program and the library.

1. Continue the positive interaction with library volunteers

Positive interactions in the form of ongoing technology training and workshops as well as volunteer recognition. Ensuring these positive interactions increases the comfort level of volunteers and ensures they feel valued.

2. Enhancing communication between board/staff and volunteers

A formal mode of communication allows for open communication regarding comments, concerns and feedback. Suggestions include an anonymous suggestion box located at each branch, and regular check-in meetings between branch librarian and individual volunteers.

3. Creating a more unified library system

To combat the polarization felt between branches and to increase usership across the township and the movement of volunteers.

4. Revise volunteer model to increase flexibility

The volunteer model needs to adapt to meet the changing needs of the volunteers. A more flexible volunteer model will allow for volunteers to choose a more committed role, or a shorter-term role within the library, such as reading programs or book sales.

Experiences of Older Library Volunteers

> *"I'm proud to say I'm a volunteer at the library."*
>
> Selwyn Public Library Volunteer

The experiences of older library volunteers can be categorized into three lived experiences; emotions, relationships and health and well-being.

Emotions
The burden of care and frustration were emotions felt by the volunteers. Burden of care refers to the responsibility to commit to the library and frustration refers to the challenge of keeping up with technology.

Relationships
The relationships the volunteers create presented themselves as community relationships between themselves, the library and community residents, as well as relationships within the library between all library personnel.

Health and Well-being
The health and well-being of volunteers was impacted through the social opportunities volunteering at the Selwyn Public Library provides. In addition, through volunteering at the Selwyn Public Library, volunteers experienced feelings of burnout and boredom due to increased commitment to other personal responsibilities and the monotony of some tasks performed at the library.

Challenges of Sustaining the Library Volunteer Program

> *"Our volunteers are aging. They are going to eventually age out of doing these jobs that we rely on them to do...It's hard to say what's going to happen for us in the future."*
>
> Selwyn Public Library staff member

The challenges of sustaining the volunteer program at the Selwyn Public Library are categorized into interpersonal, operational and structural challenges.

Interpersonal Challenges
Interpersonal challenges to the sustainability of the volunteer program is the aging demographic of the volunteer base, as the individual's willingness and ability to volunteer may begin to decrease with age. In addition, there is a lack of a relationship and mutual understanding between the thrift store volunteers and the library volunteers.

Operational Challenges
Recruitment of new volunteers and training for new and seasoned volunteers pose operational challenges to the sustainability of the volunteer program. Issues such as the word of mouth recruitment method in place and the lack of training consistency were raised.

Structural Challenges
Structural challenges include the relationship between the thrift stores and Community Care Peterborough and the policy implemented within the libraries.

Contributions to Rural Community Sustainability

> *"This is how our volunteer model works and it does work, but I'm not sure how sustainable that is in the long term."*
>
> Selwyn Public Library board member

The contributions of the volunteers can be classified under the four pillars of sustainability; cultural, social, economic and environmental.

Cultural Sustainability
There is concern regarding the lack of diversity within the library volunteers and the library programs offered. Increasing the diversity will allow the library to be representative of the township.

Social Sustainability
Volunteers work for many other voluntary organizations in order to provide services to the community. Other organizations include Community Care Peterborough, the Lakefield Community Food Bank, and the Ennismore and District Horticultural Society.

Economic Sustainability
The commitment of the volunteers provides an economically feasible way to meet the needs of the community.

Environmental Sustainability
The thrift stores contribute to the environmental sustainability of Selwyn Township by providing a location for residents to recycle their used clothing and household items.