

# Volunteer Engagement Survey

## Provincial Report

March 2023



Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario  
Association des centres pour aînés de l'Ontario

**OACAO**

The Voice of Older Adult Centres  
La voix des centres pour aînés



Funding provided by:



## **About the OACAO**

This report has been prepared by the Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario (OACAO). We are a non-profit provincial organization, and registered charity, that is a recognized leader in the development of quality services, resources and supports for our network of 230+ community-based older adult centres, seniors' clubs/seniors' councils and associate members. We continue to share a strong commitment to ongoing liaison and advocacy with the Government of Ontario and other provincial associations in matters which affect older adult centres, Seniors Active Living Centres (SALCs) and older adults.

## **Land Acknowledgment**

We recognize that the work of the OACAO and our members takes place on traditional territories of many Indigenous peoples who have lived here and cared for this land for thousands of years. We acknowledge the importance of the lands, and we do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to enhancing relationships between nations and to improving our understanding of local indigenous peoples and their cultures.

We honour and respect Indigenous heritage and the long-lasting history of the land and strive to protect the land, water, plants and animals that have inhabited this land for centuries, and for the generations to come.

We acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work and live on this land, and by doing so, we give our respect to its first inhabitants.

## **Acknowledgments**

This report would not have been possible without the support of past, current and potential volunteers from across the province who were generous in sharing their experiences with the OACAO. Thank you.

We would also like to extend a big thank you to staff members and others who reached out to share the opportunity to complete this survey with their past, current and potential volunteers. We truly value your dedication to growing and strengthening the volunteer base that is so crucial to serving older adults in Ontario. Finally, we recognize and thank the team that contributed to this report: Sue Hesjedahl, Pat Spadafora, Christine Sheppard and Sarah Feeney-Martin.

## Executive Summary

Seniors Active Living Centres (SALCs) and other older adult centres are vital community assets that support thousands of older adults in their communities. Among other benefits offered by centres, they provided an antidote to the loneliness and/or social isolation that disproportionately impacted older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Centres were closed for in-person programming for many months between March 2020 and July 2022. As we emerge from the height of the pandemic, centres have been re-opening for in-person activities, but the impact of the pandemic lingers.

This lingering effect can be seen in the reduction of the number of volunteers at the centres. In 2020, there were 16,773 volunteers; in 2022, that number shrunk to 8,420. The total number of volunteer hours reported in 2020 was 1,143,537; in 2022, it was 482,617.<sup>1</sup>

This downward trend extends beyond SALCs. The not-for-profit sector, as a whole, relies heavily on volunteers to deliver programs and services. As a result of pandemic disruptions, in 2022, **65%** of not-for-profits in Canada reported a shortage of new volunteers and **50%** reported difficulties with volunteer retention.<sup>2</sup>

It is within this societal context that the OACAO created a volunteer engagement survey to learn more about how the pandemic impacted the experiences of past, current and potential volunteers. Survey distribution was affected by the pandemic, impacting the ability of staff members to easily identify, communicate with and share the survey with potential respondents. In the end, there was a total of **1,661** completed surveys: 1,243 survey responses (current volunteers), 317 survey responses (past volunteers) and 101 survey responses (potential volunteers), a response rate that provided meaningful and thought-provoking insights.

The results of the survey have provided a window into volunteer needs, interests and challenges; they have been generous in sharing ways in which their volunteer experience can be enhanced. Among other survey results, we learned more about the benefits volunteers experienced as a result of their roles as well as their overall satisfaction with their volunteer roles.

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<sup>1</sup> Source. OACAO 2022 Profile Survey Report. Exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Seniors Active Living Centres and other OACAO members across Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. Table 33-10-0603-01. "Business or organization obstacles over the next three months, fourth quarter of 2022".

Volunteering is clearly perceived as rewarding with **85.4%** of current volunteers reporting that they are satisfied or very satisfied with the experience.

Drawing on the survey results, the OACAO and the centres have a timely opportunity to create new and/or revitalize existing volunteer roles that reflect shifting realities in hybrid program environments, develop and/or adapt recruitment strategies and design onboarding processes and ongoing training and support to enhance volunteer retention.

## Method

**The OACAO conducted a province-wide survey of past, current and potential volunteers affiliated with OACAO members and non-member Seniors Active Living Centres (SALCs) to learn more about the impact of the pandemic on the volunteer experience.**

### **About the Survey:**

The survey included a number of questions that explored:

- 1) Benefits of volunteering
- 2) Volunteer satisfaction
- 3) Impact of COVID-19 on volunteering
- 4) Factors involved in making the decision to volunteer
- 5) Centre Activities of interest to volunteers

### **About the Participants:**

Survey participants included:

- OACAO Members – Older Adult Centres
- OACAO Members – Seniors Active Living Centres
- Non-Member - Seniors Active Living Centres

Each member/SALC was invited to share the survey with past, current and potential volunteers to complete the survey.

The term “centre” will be used throughout this report, as respondents include both a mix of SALC and non-SALC funded organizations.

### **Data Collection:**

The survey was available on SurveyMonkey from February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023 through March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

The survey was set up and distributed by OACAO Regions and available in both English and French.

**A total of 1661 completed surveys were submitted.**

Surveys were received from **97** organizations, representing **128** different SALC Programs / OACAO member centres, including surveys from **13** Francophone centres.

## Data at a Glance

### Current Volunteers

The majority of respondents volunteer at their centres once a week (**42.1%**) (Chart 1); the most frequently reported length of time in terms of years served is 3-5 years (**23.6%**) (Chart 2); and the most frequent number of hours served is 1-5 hours per week (**61.5%**). It is noteworthy that **23.7%** of respondents have been volunteering for 10+ years, a testimony to the rewards of their volunteer experiences.

Chart 1

Frequency of volunteering

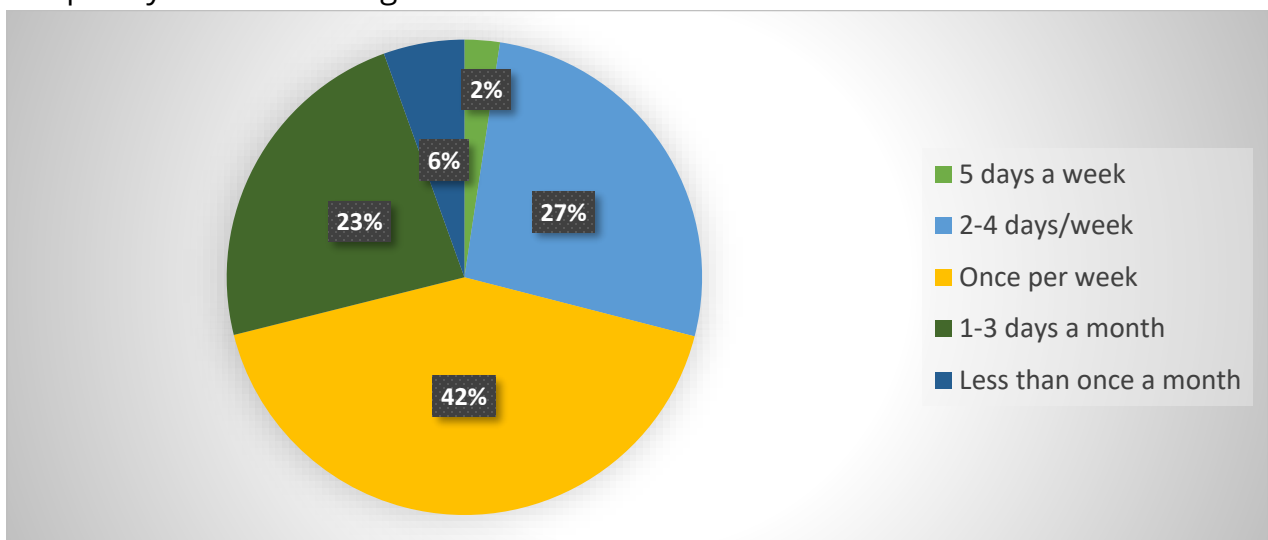
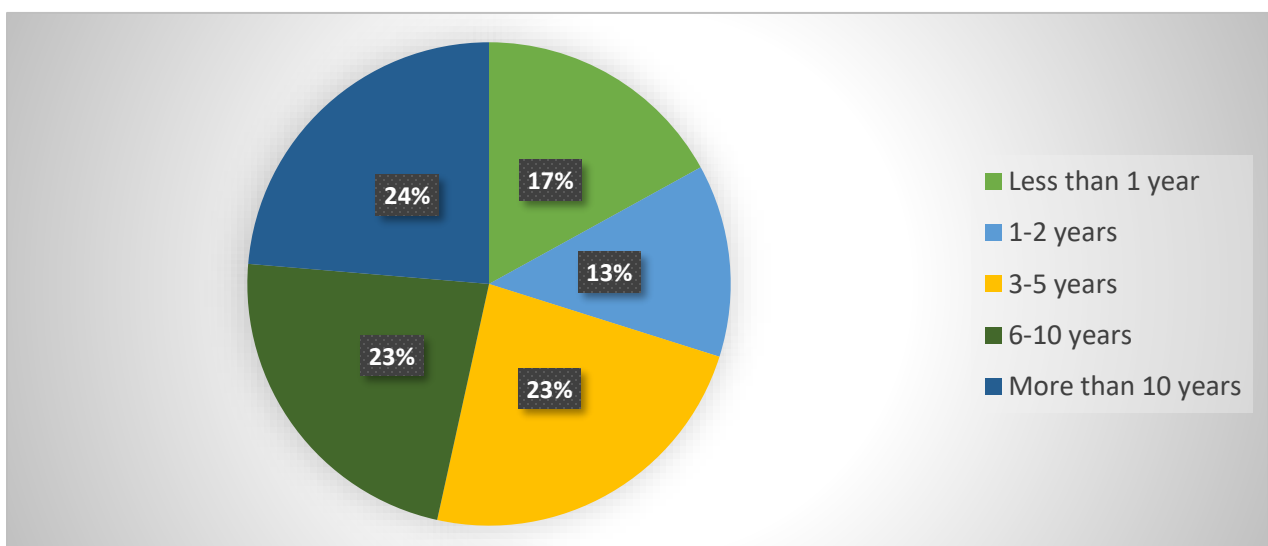


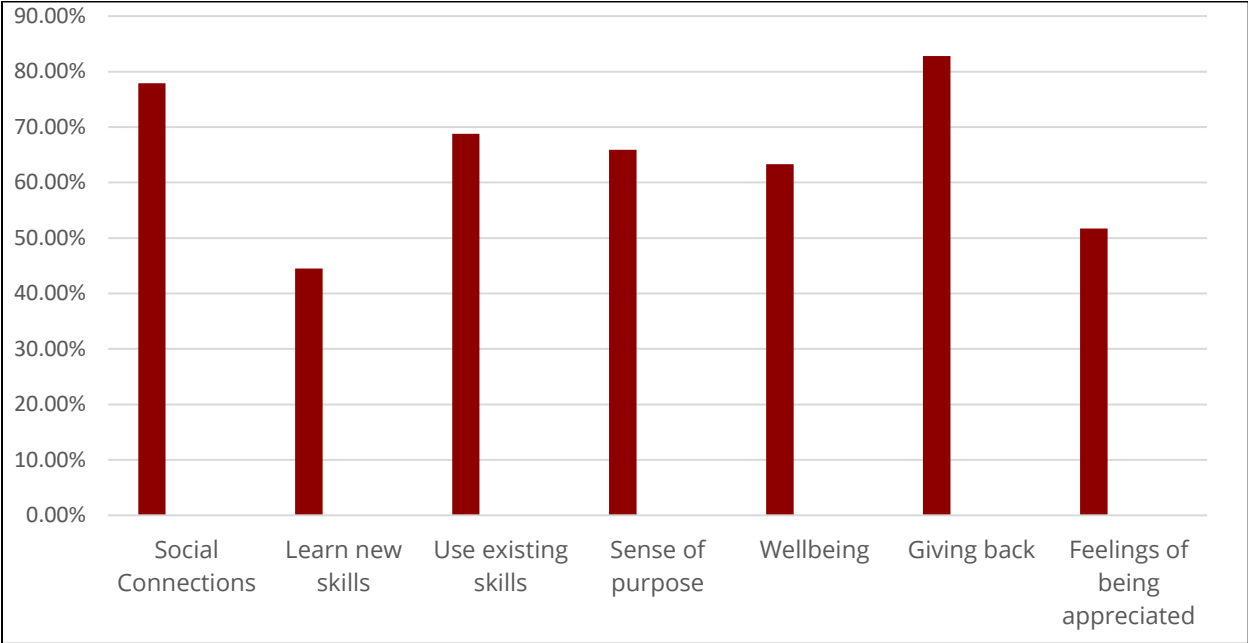
Chart 2

Number of years volunteering



Survey respondents were invited to share benefits they have experienced as volunteers, checking all options that applied. Chart 3 shows the percentage of respondents that reported benefits in the areas described.

Chart 3  
Benefits of Volunteering (current volunteers)



**Giving back to one’s community** and the **opportunity for social connections** were two of the most significant benefits experienced by volunteers, both provincially and regionally. As one volunteer wrote:

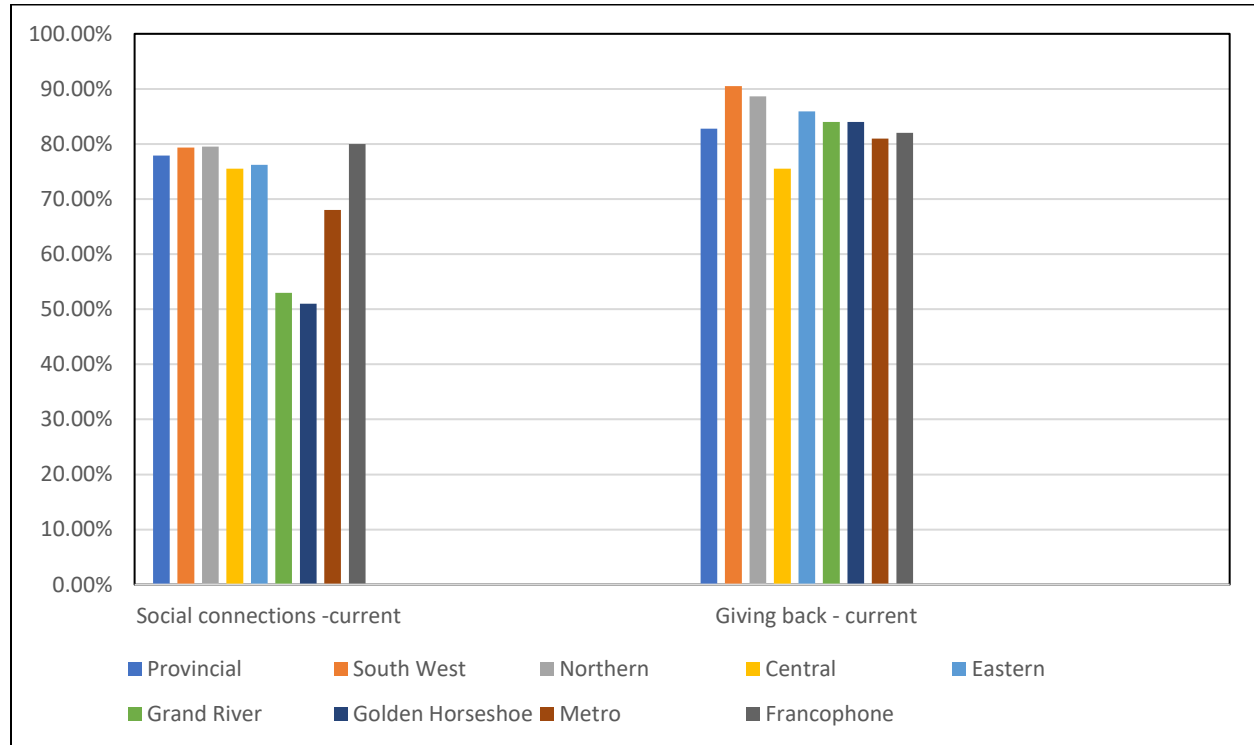
***“I feel it is important to stay connected and giving back within your community. It has benefits that are not always tangible”***



Chart 4 shows a provincial and regional comparison of the top two benefits of volunteering for **current** volunteers.

Chart 4

Benefits of Volunteering (current volunteers): Provincial and regional comparison



The impact of COVID-19 is pervasive in our society and has altered the world as we know it. One of the objectives of the survey was to explore how the pandemic affected the ways in which individuals volunteer at their centres.

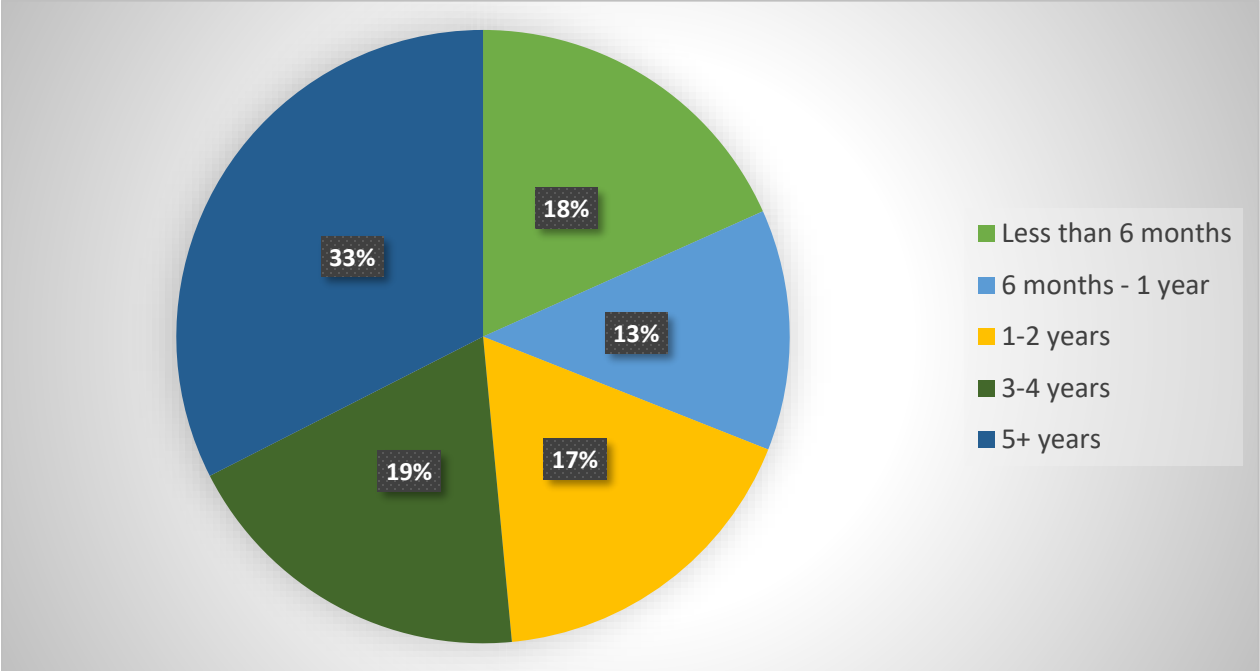
**47.7%** of the survey respondents said they had volunteered less during the pandemic but that they were back to pre-COVID levels. It is important to note that **22.2%** of respondents indicated that they had volunteered less during the pandemic and that they continue to volunteer less. Knowing this may provide an opportunity to explore the reasons for this continued reduction and to create ways to potentially re-engage this cohort. For **22.5%**, the pandemic did not affect their volunteering; they continued to volunteer the same amount.



## Survey responses from individuals who volunteered at a centre in the past but who are not currently volunteering (past volunteers)

Similar to current volunteers, the majority (63.6%) of past volunteers indicated that they used to volunteer between 1-5 hours a week. The length of time individuals volunteered prior to stopping (Chart 5) varied but the fact that 32.5% volunteered for 5+ years is significant. An additional 36.5% volunteered between 1-4 years. These past volunteers may represent an untapped resource as centres introduce volunteer re-engagement strategies.

Chart 5  
Years volunteering prior to stopping



Past volunteers reported many of the same benefits as current volunteers (Chart 3). Giving back and the opportunity for social connections were the two most frequently cited benefits for both groups. The data for current volunteers is included in Chart 6 for ease of comparison.



Chart 6

Benefits of volunteering (past and current volunteers)

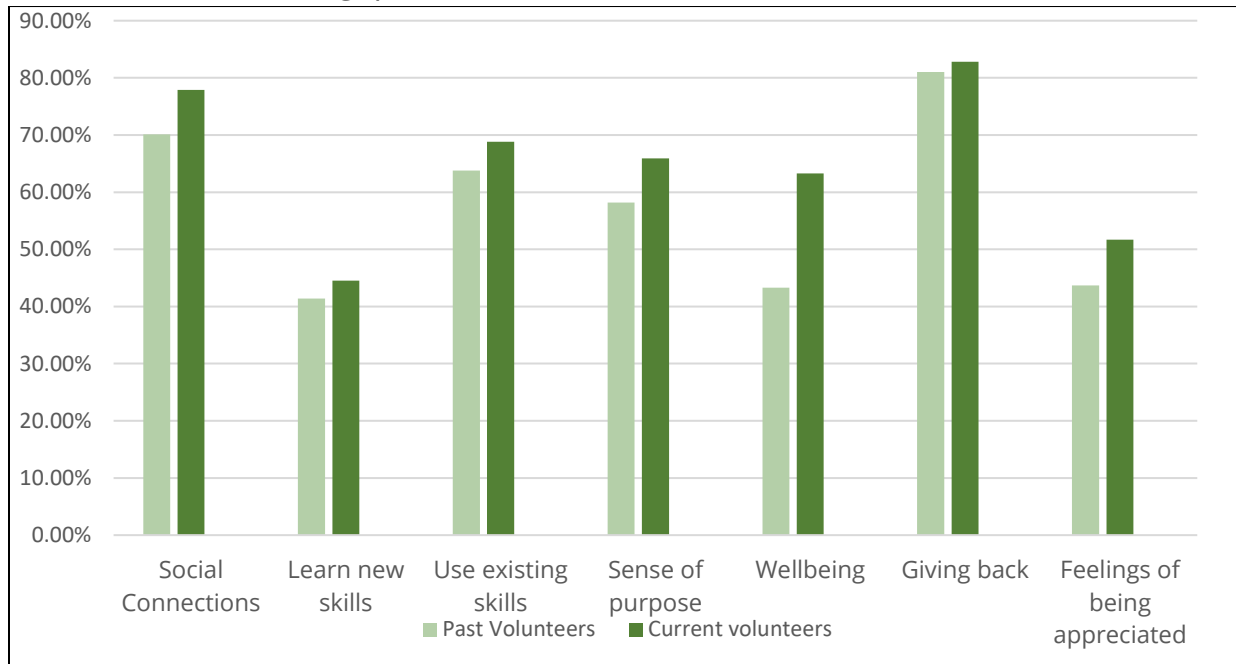
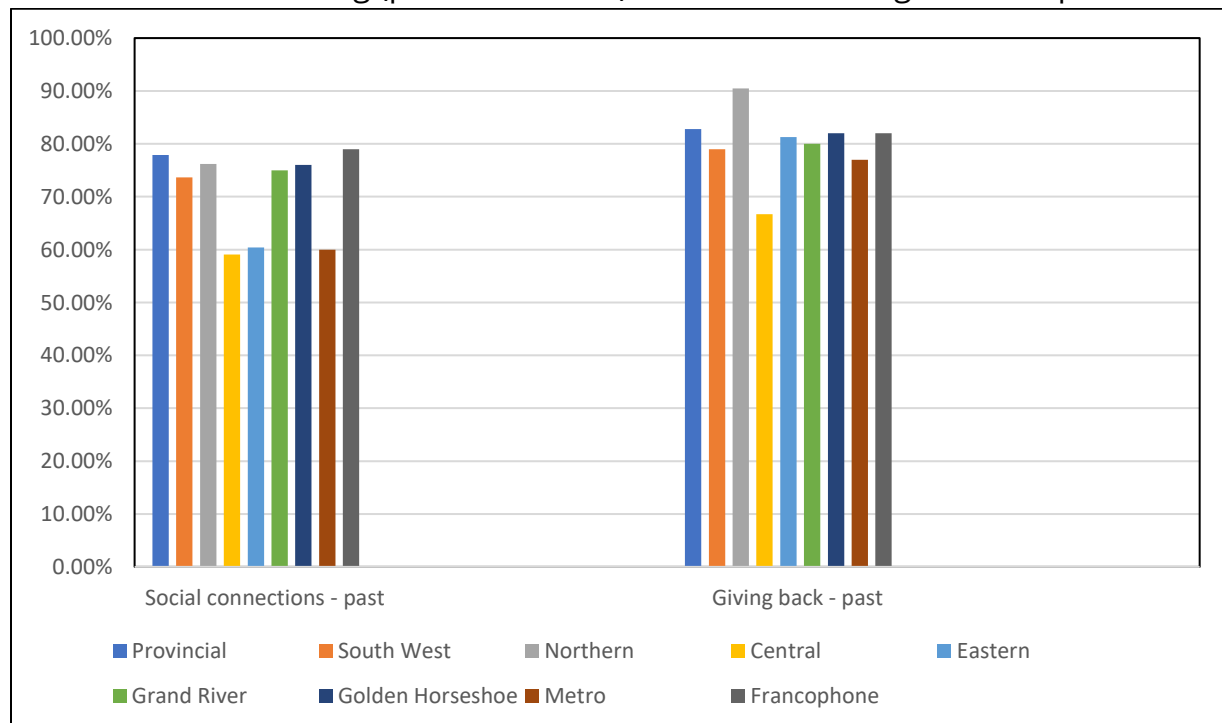


Chart 7 shows a provincial and regional comparison of social connection and giving back benefits of volunteering reported by **past** volunteers.

Chart 7

Benefits of Volunteering (past volunteers): Provincial and regional comparison

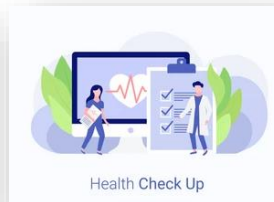


Despite the benefits of volunteering, there are many **reasons behind an individual's decision to stop volunteering**. Factors reported by survey respondents include the following:

Moved away	Transportation challenges	Scheduling conflicts with work	Caregiving responsibility
4.3%	6.2%	9%	12.8%



Volunteering elsewhere	Volunteer role changed/eliminated	Change in health status	COVID-19 concerns
16.1%	21.3%	26.1%	<b>40.3%</b>



COVID-19 hesitancy was a major consideration in the decision to stop volunteering. There were a number of comments related to what would make a past volunteer consider resuming a volunteer role.

*'May decide when the fear of COVID is more stable'*

*'COVID has to be totally over'*

*'The possibility of contracting COVID is deemed to be significantly reduced'*

*'Improved health'*

*'The right fit with my skills and experience'*

It was encouraging to note that the majority (**89.1%**) of past volunteers would volunteer again **or** might volunteer again.

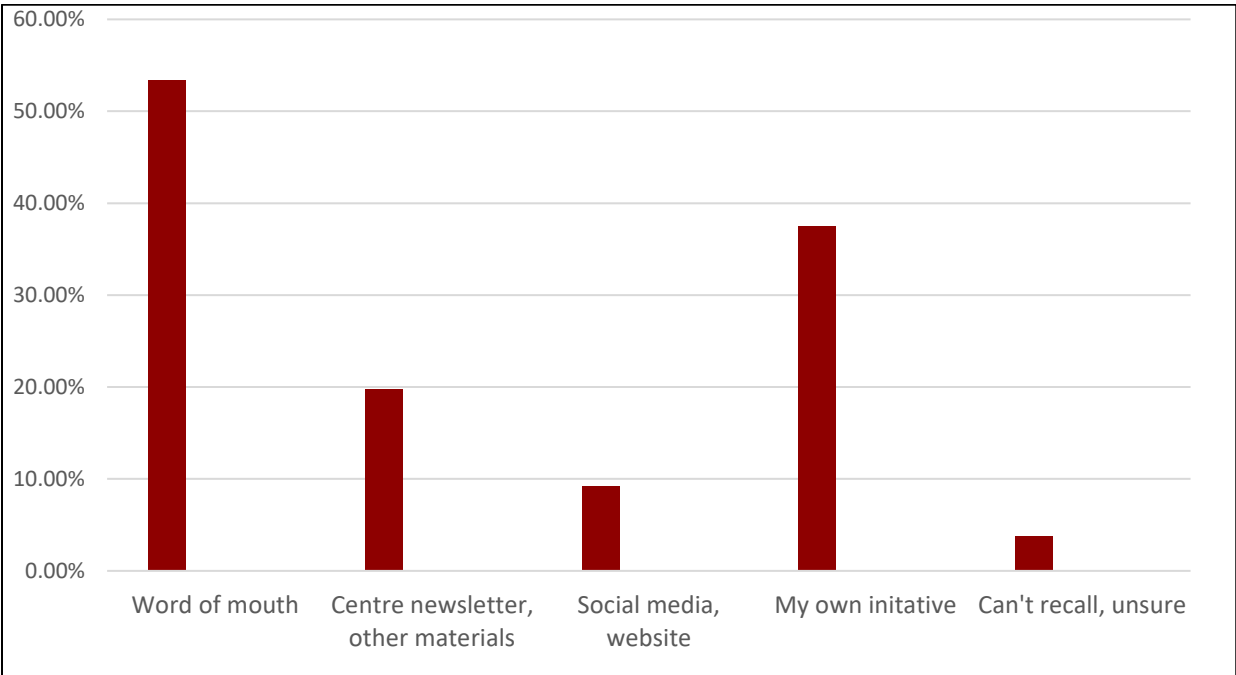
Responses when past volunteers were asked:  
*Would you like to start volunteering again at your centre?*



### All Volunteers

There were a number of survey questions that invited past, current, and potential volunteers to share their perspectives about volunteering at the centres. Their responses will be instrumental in creating the way forward, a blueprint for centres when communicating with volunteers, matching volunteers with roles and considering volunteer preferences (ways to volunteer, preferred time commitment), factors impacting decisions to volunteer, challenges faced with volunteering and ways to recognize volunteers. In terms of learning about the opportunity to volunteer at a centre, this is what respondents had to say (Chart 8).

Chart 8  
How individuals hear about volunteer opportunities at the centres



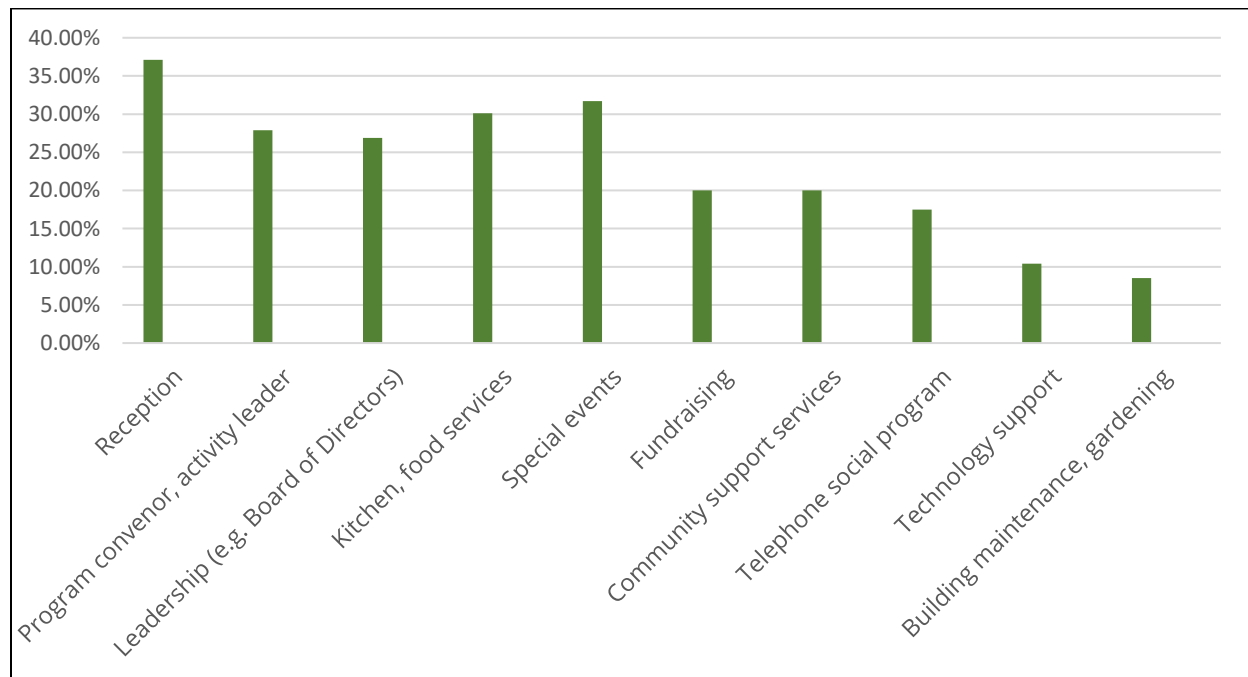
Looking at these numbers, one can't overestimate the power of **word of mouth (53.4%)** and **taking initiative to seek volunteer opportunities** at centres **(37.5%)** when planning ways to recruit, support and retain new volunteers and/or to re-engage past volunteers.

Another factor to consider in recruitment is the interest volunteers have in working evenings or weekends. Of the survey respondents, **34.3%** said they were not willing to volunteer on evenings or weekends. However, **24.9%** responded **YES** and **40.9%** responded **MAYBE**. Those numbers open the door to explore different time commitment opportunities with volunteers and to further investigate what it would take to convert the 'maybe' cohort to the 'yes' group.

Just as important as knowing that there are individuals willing to commit to being available on evenings and weekends is knowing the kinds of activities people are willing to support at the centres (Chart 9). This knowledge will assist centres when matching people with activities.

Chart 9

Centre activities/roles of interest to volunteers



The majority of respondents (**90.8%**) reported a preference for volunteering in person (Chart 10). In addition, **13.9%** preferred virtual (e.g. Zoom), **12.9%** preferred telephone and **7%** said they had no preference.

Further, survey respondents indicated the following preferences in structuring their volunteer time commitments (Chart 11) with **58.4%** reporting a preference for on-going or regular volunteering (long-term, weekly), **22%** for episodic volunteering (short-term, event or project based) and **19.6%** expressing no preference.

Chart 10  
Preference for ways to volunteer

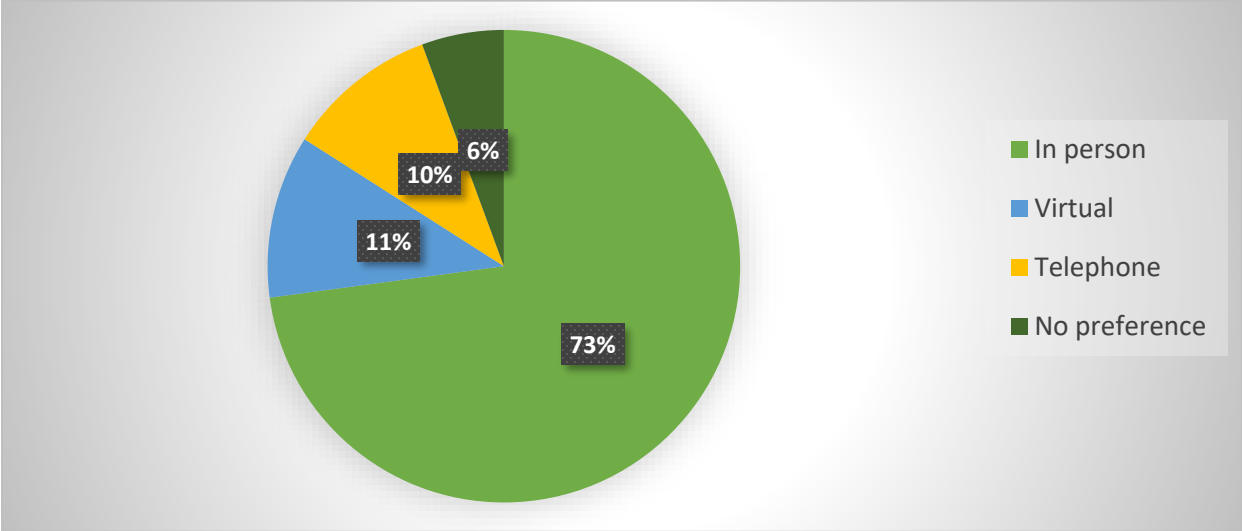
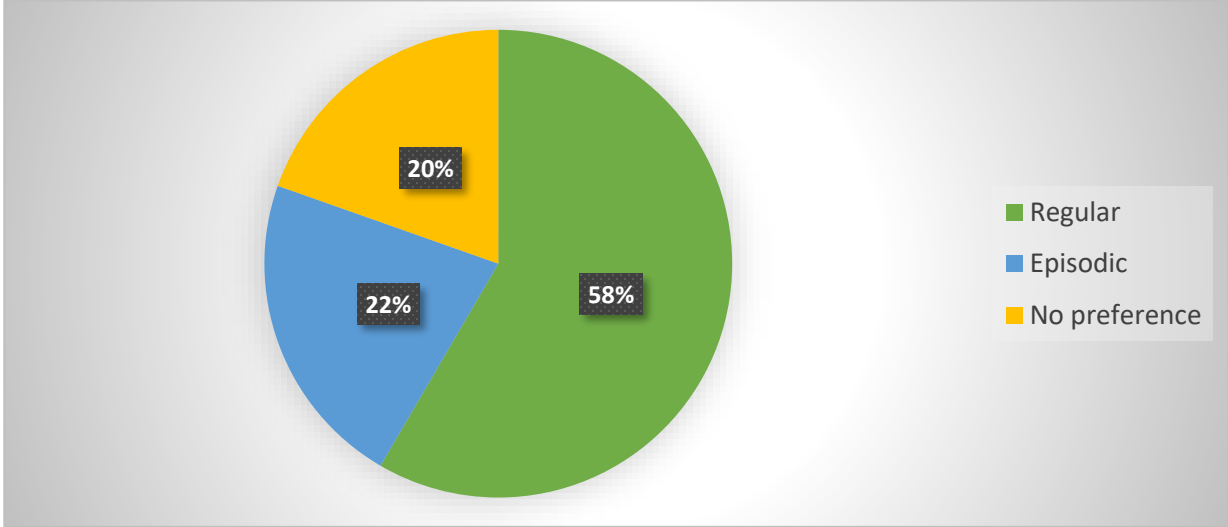
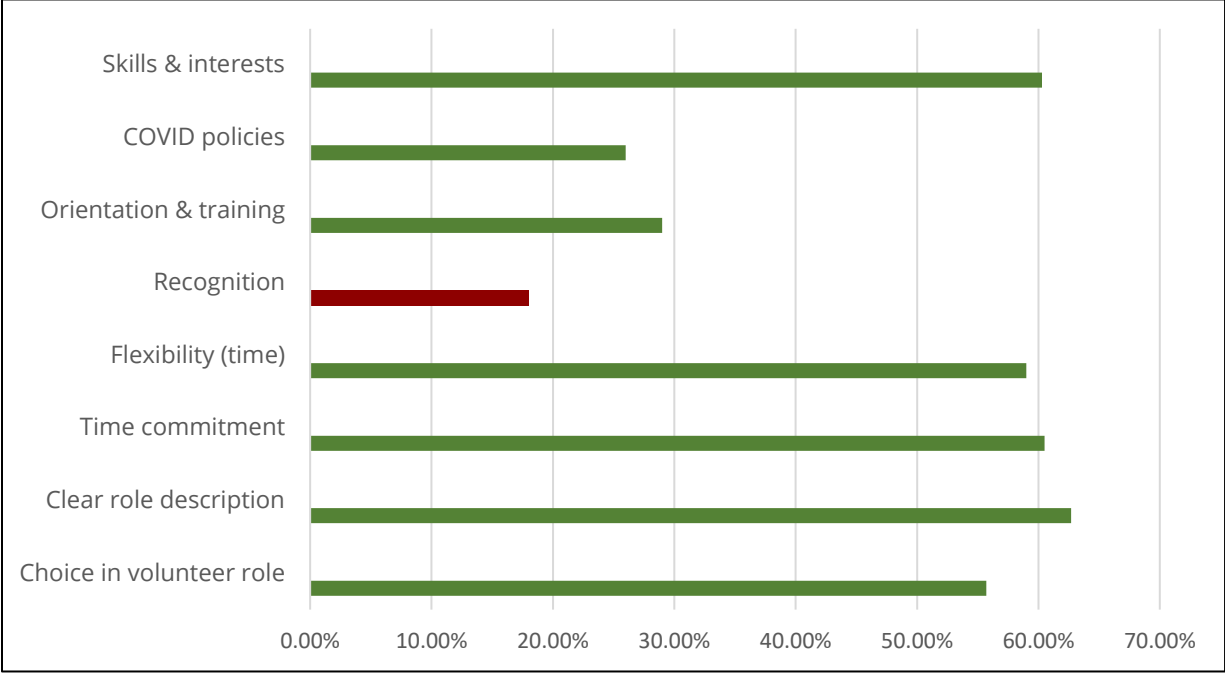


Chart 11  
Preference for structure of volunteer time



Many factors are taken into account when deciding to volunteer (Chart 12). Volunteers shared what was important to them when they make a decision to volunteer.

Chart 12  
Factors that are important when deciding to volunteer



It is important to highlight the fact that, among all the considerations one thinks about when making a decision to volunteer, for many, **recognition is the least important.**



Being aware that recognition may not be top of mind for many volunteers, nevertheless, respondents did share their preferred methods of recognition. (Table 1). (Note: The survey did acknowledge that not all methods of recognition may be available at all centres)

Table 1  
Suggested ways to recognize volunteers.

Volunteer appreciation events	<b>34.6%</b>
Small gifts	8.2%
Certificate of recognition	10.8%
Milestone recognition	16.5%
Out of pocket expenses covered	11.6%
Honorarium	2.8%
Shout out on social media	3.6%
Informal appreciation (thank you)	<b>39.5%</b>
Centres perks (free coffee)	14.8%
Discounted programs	14.6%
No recognition needed	<b>46.6%</b>



While volunteering has many documented benefits, there are still challenges that intervene. As reported in the survey, these include:

- ✓ Lack of time to volunteer **(43.2%)**
- ✓ Declining health, physical health limitations, chronic condition **(25.5%)**
- ✓ Caregiving responsibilities **(22.3%)**
- ✓ Transportation **(19.7%)**
- ✓ Lack of confidence or previous experience **(8.2%)**
- ✓ Language or cultural barriers **(7.5%)**
- ✓ Technology challenges **(6.4%)**
- ✓ Financial challenges **(5.1%)**



Additional comments about the volunteer experience were as varied and unique as the individuals who submitted them. The following example/themes highlight the invaluable contributions made by thousands of committed past and current volunteers. We are in good hands.

*'I lead a class in Irish Ceili dancing and have done so for about 15 years. I very much enjoy seeing the enthusiasm of the people in my class and seeing the improvement in their dancing, physical abilities, and confidence'*

*'It is a joy to participate both as a volunteer and a program participant'*

*'Every time I volunteer, I receive a multitude of benefits and, hopefully, I make a difference'*

*'I didn't have a plan for retirement and joining the centre saved my life'*

**The power of purpose.** In addition to numerous inspiring comments about the volunteer experience, some common themes that emerged included:

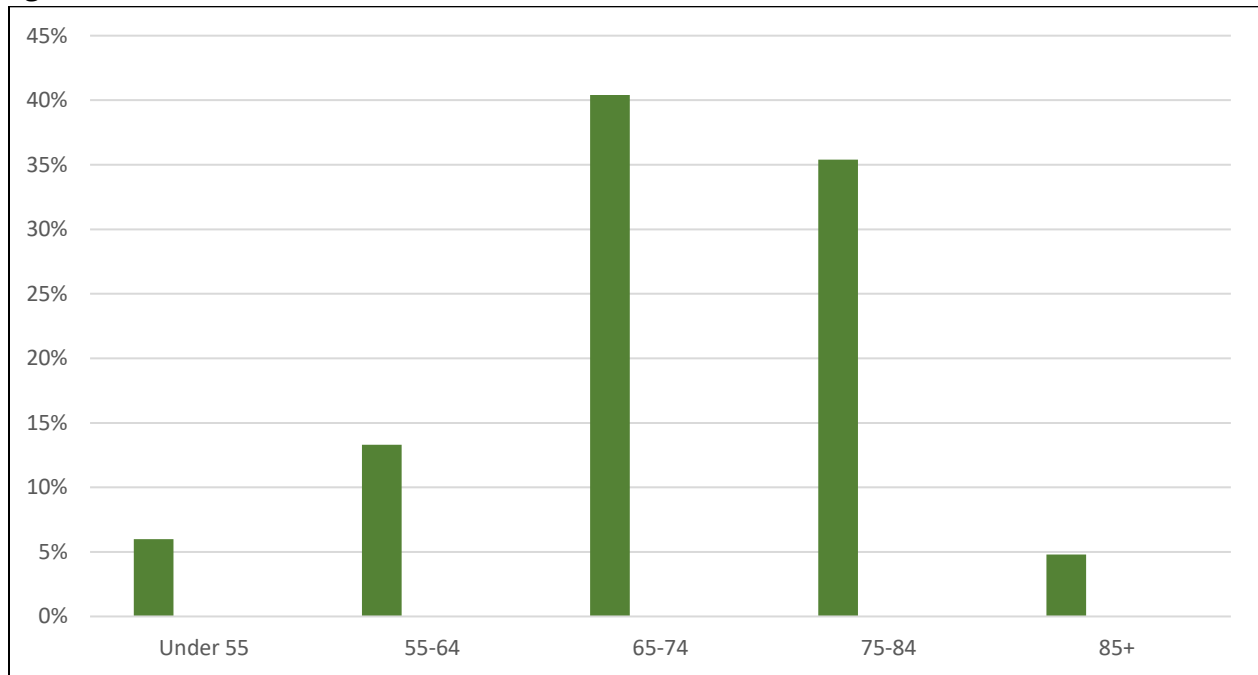
- Sense of inclusion and purpose
- Feeling useful and contributing to my community
- Love of helping and meeting people
- Feeling welcome and appreciated
- Sheer enjoyment!

## Volunteer characteristics

Survey respondents were invited to share their age, gender and ethnic background. Chart 9 highlights the age range with the majority of individuals being 65-74.

Chart 13

### Age



### Gender

In reporting gender, **22.1%** of respondents identified as male, **77%** as female and **.9%** preferred to self-identify.

### Ethnic background

The majority of respondents to the volunteer survey identified as white (e.g. North American, European et cetera). In addition, there were responses for West Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Mètis, Latin American, Inuit, First Nation, East Asian Black. While these numbers were small in this survey sample, they represent an opportunity for centres that want to increase diversity among volunteers at their centres. Some volunteers, who identified as other than white, may speak a second language and therefore help the centres to engage more diverse participants, could act as interpreters, or lead programs in other languages.

## Summary and the way forward

As cited in the OACAO 2022 Member Profile Survey report, **68%** of centres reported that recruiting and retaining volunteers was one of their top challenges in need of support.

Circling back to the purpose of the volunteer engagement survey (exploring the impact of the pandemic on the volunteer experience and to learn more about what past, current and potential volunteers are looking for in volunteer roles), a few considerations and opportunities stand out for centres to consider.

Survey results showed that **31.7%** of past volunteers are interested in volunteering in the future and **57.4%** of past volunteers may be interested. In addition, many respondents submitted comments saying that they are interested in increasing their volunteer hours. These figures represent untapped human resource potential for centres.

### What are some highlights of factors that both past and current volunteers look for?

- Clear volunteer role or position descriptions (**62.7%**)
- Flexibility in terms of when to volunteer. It is encouraging that **24.9%** of respondents indicated they would be willing to work weekends or evenings and **40.9%** said 'maybe'.
- The majority of volunteers (**58.4%**) prefer a regular schedule
- Length of volunteer shifts
- COVID-19 safety measures in place
- Volunteer roles that match their skills, experiences and interests
- Some respondents expressed an interest in more opportunities to volunteer from home
- Transportation assistance

## Additional thoughts for centres to consider

- Many respondents referenced the need for their health to improve in order for them to resume volunteer work. Recognizing that the vast majority of volunteers are in the **65-84-year-old** age range, centres may want to reflect on how best to support these volunteers while considering succession planning.
- While individual centres may have volunteer roles not included among the options in this survey (Chart 9), it should be noted that there was interest expressed for each volunteer role with **reception, special events and kitchen/food services** representing the **top 3 choices**. Centres may want to create ways to encourage interest in all available roles as they build their volunteer capacity. They might want to probe a little deeper into what it is that draws volunteers to particular roles.
- Word-of-mouth (**53.4%**) is a primary way that volunteers learn about opportunities to volunteer at the centres. Centres may want to think about how they can leverage this in their outreach and recruitment strategies.
- Taking one's own initiative (**37.5%**) to learn about volunteer opportunities at centres was another important way identified by respondents.
- The majority of survey respondents were female (**77%**) and the most frequently cited ethnic background was white (**83.1%**). Centres may want to factor in ways to recruit more male volunteers and to increase diversity among volunteers.

## Role of the Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario (OACAO)

The results of the survey provide a timely capacity building opportunity for the OACAO to develop volunteer management resources, tools and training for centres as they rebuild and plan for the recruitment, re-engagement and ongoing support of volunteers.



# Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario (OACAO)



## Questions and Information:

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