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Immigrants face many barriers to volunteering

Study finds them less likely to give their time than native-born Canadians

By Carmela Fragomeni
The Hamilton Spectator
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When Anna Chen was searching for a new volunteer opportunity in Hamilton, she thought immediately of the Red Cross, an organization familiar to her from her days growing up in China and Hong Kong.

Now a disaster services volunteer, Chen, 67, is often on the front lines helping and comforting fire victims forced from their homes.

"I believe as part of humanity, we all need to help each other," says Chen, who came to Canada in 1978. A retired United Church minister, she has also volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and other groups.

There is a ready pool of volunteers from immigrant communities, but not all move as easily as Chen into broader based organizations like the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity.

It's an issue highlighted this week by a national study that says volunteer rates are lower among immigrants than among Canadians in general.

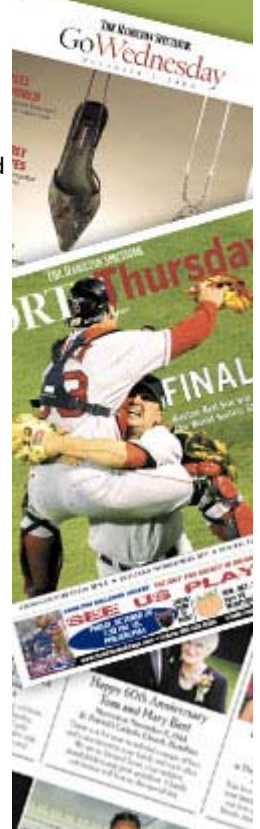
The report from the Canadian Council on Social Development said almost 30 per cent of immigrants volunteered for nonprofit or charitable organizations, about 5 per cent fewer than among the Canadian-born.

It said immigrants tend to give generously of their time but are less involved than people born here because they are busy adjusting to their new country. But "the desire to contribute is there," the report says.

For recent immigrants, volunteering isn't just about doing good. It's a way to get more integrated into their new country and get valuable experience.

Morteza Jafarpour, executive director of Settlement and Immigration Services Organization (SISO), says newcomers often volunteer first with cultural or religious events and festivals in their own communities. Many also volunteer in areas of their own professional background -- volunteering in a hospital if they once worked in health, for example.

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Newcomers are also attracted to international organizations like the Red Cross. Marianne Skerl, volunteer co-ordinator at the Hamilton Red Cross, said about half the people offering to volunteer are immigrants.

Jafarpour says struggles with a new way of life and a new language are not the only barriers that discourage volunteering.

He recalls how one man, eager to learn about Canadian culture and practise his English, volunteered in an organization that wound up isolating him because they had him in a kitchen peeling potatoes.

"The volunteer sector needs to work on how to best use newcomers as volunteers."

Christopher Cutler, executive director of Volunteer Hamilton, is working on ways to attract newcomer volunteers.

"They give a lot. New Canadians are very generous in their own communities (but) we have failed to engage them."

Ines Rios, executive director of St. Joseph Immigrant Women's Centre, says many immigrants volunteer in Hamilton.

Many see it as an opportunity to improve their English, and learn about Canada and their new country, she says. Her organization encourages immigrant women to volunteer and almost all of them do -- many with seniors in nursing homes.

At SISO, 800 people a year apply to volunteer, 90 per cent of them newcomers and immigrants. "This is more than we can handle," says Jafarpour.

The report, Making Connections: Social and Civic Engagement among Canadian Immigrants, found immigrants donated more than 98 million hours of volunteer time in 2000, which is equivalent to 50,000 full-time jobs.

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