

CONNECTING VOLUNTEERS WITH COMMUNITY:

A Research Project for Volunteer Victoria



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Executive Summary

Volunteering can be an effective strategy for easing isolation. However, for volunteering to be successful for people experiencing isolation, there needs to be support available throughout the process.

This research project, carried out for Volunteer Victoria, involved the participation of twenty-one community agencies and organizations. Fourteen individual interviews were conducted with professionals; two focus groups with service providers took place. The second part of the project consisted of interviews with nine individuals who have experienced isolation first-hand.

In this project, information about the experience of isolation was gathered from the diverse interview and focus group participants. Three groups of people who tend to experience isolation are seniors, those with language barriers, and people with social barriers. People in these groups, and others experiencing isolation, often have barriers to reaching out, including fear, a lack of support and information, shame, transportation issues, and poverty issues. Ways to help to ease isolation include having access to meaningful personal connections, the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the community and access to respectful services. Volunteering is one strategy that can be effective in easing isolation.

The first step in the volunteer placement process is to reach isolated individuals to share information about volunteering as a way to reconnect with the community. This can be a challenge because of the nature of isolation itself. Therefore, information needs to be made accessible through sensitive and diverse strategies. These strategies can include information-sharing with professionals and community members, clear and accessible pamphlets and posters and local information sessions.

It is important to recognize that while some people experiencing isolation may be ready to volunteer, others may not be ready for this step and may need further support to gain the motivation and stability necessary to maintain a volunteer placement. For those individuals that are ready to volunteer, support is important in the process of connecting with an appropriate volunteer placement. Once volunteering, on-the-job support is crucial to ensure the success of the placement. This support can include providing a welcoming atmosphere, compassionate and respectful communication, flexibility in volunteer task assignments, support from another volunteer or job coach, incentives, and recognition and encouragement.

With adequate, ongoing support, volunteering can be a very effective option for easing isolation. It can lead to a decrease in barriers, and an increase in skills. Volunteering can be one strategy for ensuring that more members of our community are participating and feeling valued and connected.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Isolation is a widespread experience in our communities. Many diverse groups of people experience isolation at some point during their lives. This experience can be particularly difficult for people who have barriers to reaching out. As one interview participant commented, “even if you have all of your strengths and resources, at times, it is difficult to connect with people. But the more complex your situation is, the harder it is. It’s such a paradox, you can feel very alone, even if you’re surrounded by people.”

We need diverse strategies to address the challenges of isolation and to move toward the goal of everyone feeling connected and supported in our communities. Volunteering is one option for easing isolation for certain individuals. It can be an effective way to connect with and contribute to the community. Volunteering can increase self esteem and social skills, as well as improve skills for future paid employment. However, for volunteering to be successful for isolated populations, there needs to be careful support throughout the process.

This research project, carried out for Volunteer Victoria, looks at some of the considerations in this process of connecting individuals experiencing isolation with volunteer placements. The goals of this research project are:

1. to gather information about the experience of isolation
2. to find ways to reach individuals who are experiencing isolation
3. to determine strategies to connect isolated people with volunteer opportunities
4. to find ways to provide ongoing support to people in volunteer placements

Each of these categories is described in detail in this research report.

II. METHODOLOGY

Throughout the research project, there has been an attempt to maintain a participatory, and collaborative process. The knowledge of people who have experienced the situation of isolation first-hand has been particularly appreciated and valued.

The first part of the research process involved the participation of service professionals who work with groups of people who experience isolation. Twenty-one community agencies and organizations were represented in the process. Fourteen individual interviews were conducted with professionals. Two dynamic focus groups took place. The interviews and focus groups were audio-taped or recorded by note-taking depending on the preference of the research participants.

The second part of the project involved interviews with individuals who have experienced isolation first-hand. Many of these individuals were referred by professionals who participated in the first stage of the research process. Nine individuals who are experiencing, or who have recently experienced, isolation participated in open-ended,

one-on-one interviews. Their participation provided valuable insight into the experience of isolation and useful ideas about strategies that might be successful.

The data from the interviews and focus groups was transcribed and analyzed for commonalities and themes, which are described in this research report. Unfortunately, not all of the rich and diverse information gathered was able to be included in the report. Some of the quotes included were edited slightly for clarity.

III. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

INTRODUCTION

This report describes the information gathered from the participants in this research project. The data has been organized into sections providing suggestions for effective strategies for each part of the process of volunteering.

The first section of this report shares information about the experience of isolation, to provide a context for understanding. Then, ideas for outreach strategies for connecting with people in isolation will be discussed, followed by considerations in the volunteer placement process. Section Four looks at ways to provide support to volunteers throughout this process.

SECTION ONE: INFORMATION ABOUT EXPERIENCES OF ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

In order to provide support to individuals experiencing isolation, it is important to gain some understanding about the experience of isolation, including which groups of people tend to experience isolation, and the barriers they face. This knowledge provides an important context for understanding why volunteering can be a useful strategy to connect with the community, thereby helping to ease isolation.

This section describes the themes that arose in the interviews. These generalizations are important for understanding, but it is important to recognize that each individual's situation is unique. There are common threads in these experiences of isolation, such as a sense of disconnection, separation, a sense of lacking support and loss of confidence. But, each person's context and experience is distinct.

A. WHO EXPERIENCES ISOLATION?

The range of individuals who experience isolation is wide. Most people experience some degree of loneliness or isolation at some point in their lives. However, there are people who are more at-risk for on-going isolation because of certain life situations. In this project, the initial focus was three broad categories of people who tend to experience

isolation: seniors, those with language barriers, and people with social barriers. Throughout the research process, the definition was expanded to include many other groups of people.

In this section of the report, the experiences of isolation of the initial three broad groups are described briefly. Another group that experiences isolation, people on parole, is also described in some detail. At the end of this section is a list of many other situations which tend to lead to isolation.

i. Seniors

Seniors are vulnerable to isolation. As one contributor commented, “As you get older [the issues] become more cumulative, isolation becomes more of a problem”. In this life stage, some of the factors that may contribute to a sense of isolation include:

- declining physical and/or mental health
- reduced mobility (i.e. no longer able to drive or access bus service)
- loss of peers
- death of spouse
- depression as a result of the losses
- moving to a new community, and the inability to connect readily

One research participant made the following comment about seniors experiencing isolation:

I'd say a lot of older adults do, at times, experience isolation. Many of them have retired to Victoria, left their family elsewhere, come out for the good life, and are left with having to make new friends. Isolation is a big issue, I would think, for just about everybody, at some point or other, whether they're grieving and can't make that step to leave their home, or they may be active during the day, but in the evenings, they may feel alone.

ii. People with Social Barriers

Some people find it difficult to connect with others and the wider community because of social barriers. There is a wide range of people who experience social barriers, either temporarily or on an ongoing basis. Temporary barriers can include depression, high degrees of anxiety, grief or low self esteem. These situations can be temporary to varying degrees for different people.

Ongoing barriers can include a lack of social skills or the inability to connect which, in some cases, may be connected to mental illness, a history of dysfunction or a cognitive disability. All of these barriers to connecting can result in a sense of disconnection and loneliness.

As one participant noted:

I think there's a number of groups of people who experience isolation here. One is people who live with high levels of anxiety. It can be really hard for them to come here or socialize, or be part of a program that's here.

iii. People with Language Barriers

People who are new to Victoria and Canada can find it difficult to connect with the community initially, particularly if language is a barrier. Often, but not always, the experience of isolation is time-limited, overcome with increased familiarity with and connection to the community. This experience of isolation often involves cultural and language barriers, and at times, the barriers of unwelcoming attitudes or racism. The following quote highlights the multiple barriers faced by new Canadians:

The majority of people we work with, our clients being landed immigrants, refugees, refugee claimants, people that are new to the Victoria area from another country, are isolated in some way ... they experience isolation due to language barriers, due to cultural barriers, not understanding the cultural system here in Victoria. Those types of things are huge barriers.

For people who arrive in Victoria as a family, there can be a sense of connection within the family, but the family as a whole can be isolated from the larger community. As this quote indicates "often, they are intact as a family ... they are not isolated at home, but isolated from neighbours, and less connected to the community."

iv. People on Parole returning to the community

People returning to the community after being in prison for some time period often experience difficulty reconnecting to the community. One of the very difficult issues for these individuals is facing social stigma. Also, there is often a high level of fear as these individuals "are coming back to a world that has changed, with the internet, for example. . . It's a daunting task, the fast-paced life of the city can be terrifying."

v. Other groups of People who experience isolation

There are many other groups of people who experience isolation. The following is a list of some of the groups of people that may experience isolation, compiled from the focus groups. However, it is important to remember that the situation of each individual is unique, and impacted by many other conditions in their lives. Also, individuals can fall into many of these categories simultaneously, which increases their vulnerability to isolation.

- people with disabilities, including:
 - > people with hearing impairment or tinnitus
 - > people who are visually impaired

- > people with mobility issues
- newcomers to a community
- those with a temporary illness
- new moms/ stay at home parents
- women or men who have experienced abuse
- people unable to access transportation
- individuals who do not have knowledge of what's available in the community
- victims of bullying
- individuals who experience family breakup
- people with substance use issues
- people facing racism or discrimination
- individuals with diverse sexual orientations
- people who are transgendered
- youth
- people who have literacy issues

B. BARRIERS FACED BY PEOPLE EXPERIENCING ISOLATION

People in a situation of isolation or loneliness often experience barriers to reaching out. The following barriers arose as common themes in the interviews.

i. Fear

Many people experience a strong sense of fear when they are in a situation of isolation. The fear and accompanying sense of vulnerability can become difficult barriers to reaching out, making it very challenging to step towards increased connection. Some people fear being ostracized or rejected if they do reach out. Another difficult aspect of isolation can be limited self-confidence, or a sense that one has little to contribute. One research participant commented on the centrality of fear in situations of isolation. "Overwhelmingly, fear is an issue. Fear of social situations, fear of being rejected or mistreated. This keeps people living in isolation."

One individual commented that in her own experience of isolation, she experienced fear and a sense of "missing out":

[It feels] frustrating, and scary. It feels like you're missing opportunities, like you're missing out on good stuff . . . knowing that other people are out having fun while you're not.

The barrier of fear can begin to be addressed with clear information, and ongoing reassurance. Fear is a difficult emotion that may be quieted somewhat by a sense of genuine and continual support.

ii. Lack of Support

For many people experiencing isolation, there is inadequate support available to help them to begin to reconnect with the community. One research participant commented that “for some people, [a barrier is] a lack of feeling supported. I think to encourage people to be a part of their communities, we need positive role models, people who work closely with individuals as mentors.” Other ways to provide support will be discussed further in Section Four of this report.

iii. Lack of information

Another barrier to reaching out can be a lack of information about the resources available in the community, as well as how to access them. If individuals do not have the knowledge of what services and community involvement opportunities exist, they obviously cannot take advantage of these resources. With creative strategies to share information, in accessible ways, and adequate support, this barrier can be overcome. It is important that information is accessible to people who have barriers. Some of the groups of people to consider include those with limited literacy skills, people with visual impairment, those with hearing impairment, and those with limited skills in English.

iv. Shame

For some people, reaching out may be difficult because of a sense of shame about being less connected to the community, in addition to other barriers. One research participant commented that “people might feel ashamed or embarrassed about reaching out for support. People don’t want to identify themselves as needing something.” Also, there is a strong value on independence in our culture rather than the recognition of our interdependence on each other; this contributes to reluctance to reach out and ask for help.

There are ways to address this barrier. Recognizing that shame can be a barrier is important, as well as taking steps to ensure that environments and attitudes are welcoming, and supportive.

v. Grief and loss

Grief can be a barrier to reaching out. Grief is often accompanied by depression, and a lack of interest in connecting with others. This barrier can be partially addressed with support, but it may also take a period of time for individuals to feel ready to connect; it is important to respect this. Seniors are at a life stage where they often experience multiple losses, including a loss of friends, perhaps a loss of their partner and often other significant losses, such as a loss of physical or mental health. Respect of the unique grieving process of the individual is an important consideration when attempting to assist the person in connecting with the community.

vi. Transportation Issues

If people live in more isolated areas, where bus services are limited, or non-existent, connecting can be more difficult. Even when bus service is available, some people experience barriers to using it well. Also, transportation can be a significant barrier for seniors who are no longer able to drive, and must adjust to different modes of transportation.

Transportation is an important consideration when matching people with volunteer placements. Positions that are within walking distance can be a good option for some people. Other options may be providing bus tickets as an incentive for volunteering, or possibly arranging for volunteer drivers to and from the placement. With this situation, there is also a possibility of the volunteer driver providing peer support for the volunteer stepping out of isolation.

vii. Poverty

As one research participant mentioned, “it can cost money to be socially connected”. Other aspects of poverty, such as fear about meeting basic needs for oneself and one’s family and concerns about the future can contribute to a sense of isolation. Poverty issues need to be addressed on a wider social level. However, in terms of volunteering, people with limited finances can be supported by not having to pay money to volunteer. For example, providing bus tickets, or not expecting people to bring something to a volunteer potluck can encourage people with limited incomes to participate in volunteering. Also, small incentives like coffee, cookies or a free lunch can be important for those with limited incomes.

viii. Language and Cultural Barriers

Language and cultural barriers can contribute to isolation for newcomers to Canada and Victoria. These barriers can make it much more difficult to connect with the community, as well as to access information about services available. These barriers can be addressed with increased openness to diversity, and different levels of English ability at volunteer placement agencies. Connections between various cultural communities help to increase understanding and are a way to share information. Also, making information accessible for individuals with limited language skills is a way of supporting those experiencing isolation.

ix. Systems of Helping Services

One of the research participants commented on the impact of systems of helping on individuals, and how these systems can create further barriers to connecting to the community:

People get entrenched in systems, like the mental health system, or social service systems. It’s disempowering to people, and oppressive to people; I think that

really lends to the isolation . . . I know one of things that happens with a lot of people who are experiencing mental illness is that they get connected with mental health services, and those are very helpful, but it's almost like it builds a dependency, and people feel like it's the only system that can support them, which then lends more power to that system. Whereas, if we had more supports in less institutional systems in our communities, then people could rely more on them, and be more empowered by that . . . There just needs to be a more well-rounded kind of support system for people.

C. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISOLATION AND CHOOSING TO BE ALONE

There is a question in the interview schedule about the distinction between isolation and choosing to be alone. This is an important distinction to understand the qualitative difference between time alone and a problematic sense of loneliness or isolation. Although the behaviour of being alone may look similar among different individuals, there are many different motivations and factors that contribute to the healthiness or unhealthiness of a particular situation of aloneness. Some of the complexities around this distinction are described below.

i. The Element of Choice

The element of choice is a key distinction between aloneness and isolation. As one research participant commented, "I think being alone is more of a personal choice, whereas loneliness may not be a personal choice. There might be some barriers involved in getting connected to people in the community." Another individual pointed to the importance of the motivation for aloneness. "Isolation is not a choice, because it is driven by fear, and it is usually not healthy. Choosing to be alone can be a healthy choice."

ii. Isolation involves Barriers

With a situation of isolation, there are barriers present that make it difficult to connect with the community, decreasing the element of choice. One research participant commented on the barriers that some people experience:

Isolation is problematic when it's not chosen, when it's a physical or mental condition that's preventing someone from integrating into the community or being involved in things.

Another participant described the distinction between isolation and choosing to be alone in terms of the inability or ability to reach out:

Those who choose to be alone still have the resources to reach out to get help when they need it, and they have the capacity to help themselves. Isolated individuals often don't have the resources to maintain their quality of life.

An interview respondent highlighted the negative consequences of isolation, which make it a problematic situation:

I suppose if it's having a real impact on other areas of their health, physical, mental or emotional health, then I see isolation as being problematic. . . if it's creating more poverty, more anxiety, more illness, then that's when we would really want to be encouraging people to get involved in something.

iii. Choosing to be Alone can be a Personality Trait

Some people, as part of their way of being, enjoy a great deal of time alone. One participant commented on the personality trait of tending toward solitary activities:

People who choose to be alone are not the people who tend to be depressed. They are people that like their own company. Perhaps they're used to being alone . . . they don't have a difficult time filling their day with finding constructive things to do. They like solitary activities. That's when it's not a problem.

It is important to recognize and value diverse ways of being, including an individual's particular level of comfort and desire to connect with the community.

D. WHAT HELPS TO EASE ISOLATION?

How can we help to ease the difficulty of isolation? This is a challenging question to contemplate, since isolation is a very widespread and complex issue. Because experiences of isolation are diverse, responses also need to be diverse. Basically, easing isolation involves becoming more connected. Aspects of feeling connected include personal, one-on-one connections, and also connectedness on a wider community level. Another strategy for easing isolation is to provide support through respectful services in the community. Each of these areas is described below.

i. Personal Connections

Meaningful connections with others, including peers, friends, acquaintances, and work or volunteer colleagues, are essential for feeling connected and supported. One interview participant commented on the importance of interpersonal connections. "Anything that brings them into contact with people with heart, with good listening skills [could help to ease isolation]."

A frequently mentioned strategy for providing this one-to-one connection is matching people with a peer, or support from another person who has experienced a similar situation. One interview respondent described the importance of these connections.

That one-on-one connection is key. In groups we've matched people up to encourage people to come and to stay coming. . . [they] check in with each other, and there's more accountability, and social connection.

Another participant commented on this strategy. "I would say having that peer-supported, role-modelling, one-to-one kind of support [is a good strategy]."

ii. Connections with the Community: The Opportunity to Participate and Contribute

A significant part of isolation is feeling disconnected from the wider community. A way of feeling more connected to the community is having the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the community in significant ways. There are many possibilities for participation and contribution, including recreational, social, volunteer and work opportunities. As one participant commented, "a volunteer job could be the first step; the social contact helps to rebuild self-esteem." The feeling of making a contribution is an important aspect of connection. "[The people we work with] want to be active. To feel as though they are contributing would go a long way to easing the isolation."

It is also important to make environments more welcoming for everyone's involvement. In some situations, extra support is necessary to facilitate this participation. One participant commented on the importance of the participation of all members of the community in creating an inclusive, welcoming and supportive community:

[Community connection involves] a willingness for neighbours to take notice of people that appear to be on their own, and don't have company. Speak to them, invite them to participate in an activity in the community. . . reach out instead of being self-focused. Realize that we're all part of a community. . . Everyone deserves to feel that they belong somewhere.

iii. Respectful Services

Having access to support through kind and respectful services can help to ease the difficulty of isolation. With adequate support, individuals feel less alone, and more connected. One participant commented on the quality of successful services, from her perspective. "Services that have been successful [in easing isolation] have been groups where there has been a lot of empathy, people have shared experiences . . . people reaching out who have been in the same situation."

Another individual commented on the importance of decreasing barriers to people accessing the services at her agency:

Providing a safe place, being respectful and sensitive to their needs, having an open door policy, and informed and educated staff, [help] to decrease the barriers to [individuals] coming here.

Another participant commented on some of the services which may decrease isolation, including, “information and education, therapy and counseling, and [help in the process of] rebuilding of self-esteem.”

Respectful and supportive services can be one of many diverse strategies for helping to ease isolation.

SECTION TWO: STRATEGIES TO REACH PEOPLE EXPERIENCING ISOLATION

This project is focused specifically on one effective method for helping to ease isolation: volunteering. There are many important aspects of this process. A key part is developing diverse outreach strategies to let people experiencing isolation know that volunteering is an option, as a way of beginning to reconnect with the community. This section of the report describes this important part of the process: reaching and communicating with individuals who are isolated.

A. WAYS TO REACH ISOLATED INDIVIDUALS

Reaching isolated individuals to share information about volunteering can be a challenge because of the nature of isolation itself. People who are less connected to the community, and face barriers to connecting, are less likely to be easily reached through conventional means of advertising volunteering opportunities. Rather, information needs to be made accessible, through sensitive and diverse strategies.

Also, it is important to recognize that while the information is a starting point, individuals need to have personal motivation and interest in volunteering to make this step. It is important, even in the dissemination of information, to respect this element of personal choice. One individual interviewed who is experiencing isolation, stated that “a lot of people on their own don’t want to be intruded upon”. He suggested to “present yourself where people are, and let people decide for themselves . . . people on their own will notice the information there. They’ll go home and think, they may not approach [you] at first, it’ll take time.” Open and respectful offering of information is key to the outreach process. “You can’t push it in their face, leave it up to them, at their own pace”.

The following strategies were suggested in the interviews, as ways to connect with groups of people experiencing isolation.

i. Information- Sharing with Service Providers

Many people who are experiencing isolation are in contact with some sort of helping professional. If these service providers are made aware of volunteering as an option for reconnecting with the community, they can suggest this option to the individuals they

work with. One research participant commented that contact with helping professionals is a common experience for many individuals experiencing isolation:

The people that I see [who are living with mental illness], even if they are living in isolation, generally, they are seeing some kind of clinical professional, whether it's a psychiatrist, or a case manager, or some kind of therapist. If that's the only kind of contact that people are having them we need those people to be informed about the benefits of volunteering and how to encourage people to do that and the kind of support available.

The following service providers may be potential contacts for individuals experiencing isolation:

- Provincial Government Ministries
- Best Babies programs
- Outreach workers
- Home support workers
- Meal delivery agency workers
- Medical office staff

ii. Information-Sharing with Contacts in the Community

Another potential strategy is educating the wider community about volunteering as an option for individuals experiencing isolation. Isolated individuals often have contact with non-professional people in the community who could suggest volunteering, if they had the information. These “community contacts” could involve bank tellers, grocery store clerks, thrift store personnel or library staff. Collaboration with other programs that are connecting with members of the community would be useful.

One example of such a program is the Victoria Gatekeeper Program, which provides training to citizens who come into contact with vulnerable seniors in the community. This training assists the community members in recognizing that a senior may need assistance, and provides information on giving referrals to community services. There may be an opportunity to collaborate with such a program to include information about volunteering in training sessions like these.

One research participant commented on the importance of relationships in sharing information about volunteering:

You can't be going and imposing. . . saying 'oh you're isolated, do you want to volunteer?' There has to be a relationship there. That relationship is going to come from either a family member, or neighbor, or an organization. . . Therefore, public education is really important.

iii. Pamphlets and Posters

One strategy for raising awareness of volunteering as an option is clear, accessible literature, including pamphlets and posters. Some individuals may gather new information from posters and pamphlets, available in a variety of locations. This is a way to increase awareness of volunteering as a way to ease isolation. One participant emphasized the importance of “create inviting, easy to read literature that’s simple, not threatening.” Another respondent describes how pamphlets and posters can be a gentle way of providing information by “giving people the option of getting info without committing.” Another important aspect of written information is ensuring that it is widely available. As one respondent commented, “put flyers everywhere!”

One individual experiencing isolation suggested a few specific locations where “people would respond to a poster: shopping centres, the library, government places, the Ministry of Human Resources, restaurants, coffee shops, apartment buildings, churches, grocery stores and bingo halls”. Another participant, who has experienced isolation, suggested putting posters at “the Mustard Seed, the Upper Room, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, and thrift stores”.

A common suggestion for reaching people experiencing isolation was reaching people where they live. Placing information on bulletin boards in apartment buildings could reach those people who live in this type of rental housing. As one participant commented, “you’re likely to run into that person who’s isolated in the elevator or laundry room.”

One individual mentioned that the visual content of the poster is important. “If people with disabilities saw other people with disabilities volunteering, they would be encouraged.” Possible ways to convey the value of volunteer work through poster content are described in Section B below.

It is also important to recognize the limitation of pamphlets and posters. Most bulletin boards are continually full of information, which can be overwhelming for many people. Also not everyone has the literacy or language skills to absorb written information. Literature is a strategy that may be helpful for reaching many people, but it is only one part of a diverse set of outreach strategies.

iv. Information Sessions

Information sessions are another strategy for reaching people. In this way, people can gain awareness of volunteering as an option, as well as the support that is available. Volunteering can be presented as a non-threatening option with many benefits. In the interviews, it became evident that the sessions ideally would be local, in people’s own neighbourhood. As one participant commented, “I think the more local it is, the closer it is to them, the more likely they are to access it.”

Suggestions for locations included community centres and neighbourhood houses, places that may be less threatening, and somewhat familiar for people who are experiencing

isolation. One participant suggested having volunteer information available “on the spot”, through a laptop with access to the volunteer database. This way the individual would not have to come downtown to an office setting to find out more specific information:

Provide easier access, by having a person [in community settings] once a week . . . a movable live body volunteer station at different locations. Get people out in their own community.

Another idea for information sessions is to have individuals who have experienced isolation themselves, and are now volunteering, share their experiences and provide encouragement. One research participant, currently volunteering, said “Let volunteers speak for themselves . . . I would talk to the group, especially if it was a smaller group, about volunteering. . . It’s given me a lot of satisfaction, giving back to the community.”

Having people speak from their own experience would be very valuable. These individuals who have experienced isolation in the past may also be interested in providing peer support later in the volunteer process. Other considerations for information sessions include offering free food as a way of encouraging people to come to the session, and keeping the group size small.

These are ways to make information sessions less threatening and more accessible to groups of people experiencing isolation. One idea is to consider the group process dynamics within the information session, making it less threatening by allowing people to participate fully or to remain silent and listen, according to their comfort level. Again, this strategy will not work for all individuals.

v. Other Ideas

Other suggestions for outreach strategies included booths at grocery stores or malls, to provide information in an accessible way. One research participant suggested utilizing the media to reach individuals, through “newspaper, TV, or radio spots.” Another suggestion was to include visual and verbal information on the Volunteer Victoria website, specifically targeting isolated individuals. One participant described the importance of images of people with disabilities volunteering. He mentioned that “if you see others with disabilities volunteering, you might say ‘oh I might give that a try.’”

B. CONVEYING THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEER WORK

In the interview process, participants suggested ideas of how to convey the value of volunteer work to individuals experiencing isolation. The following ideas arose as themes to include in literature, posters, or to convey at information sessions.

One participant commented on the overall benefits of volunteering:

People who volunteer by and large live longer, healthier and happier lives. It feels better to give than to receive, and there's always someone who's more disadvantaged than you are. And you may have skills that you're not aware of.

i. The opportunity to gain job skills

Volunteering can be an excellent way to gain skills for a resume. Volunteering can provide the opportunity to learn, practice and develop new skills that may be useful in future paid employment. One participant commented that “when I’m hiring I’m looking to see if they’ve done any volunteer work. [It provides a] job search advantage. Also, volunteer positions sometimes turn into jobs.” For people new to Canada, “a huge benefit of volunteering is gaining Canadian work experience. It helps them break out of their isolation.”

ii. The opportunity to connect with, participate in and contribute to the community

An important benefit of volunteering is connecting with one’s community, and being part of the community by contributing in some way. This is very valuable for people who are experiencing isolation and somewhat lacking this community connection:

It’s the best way to connect with the community. It makes you feel good to be able to help. It’s a great feeling to share a skill, or teach a skill. . . or sharpen up your skills.

One participant described the value of the social aspects of volunteering, so crucial for beginning to ease isolation:

It’s about socializing and giving back to the community. Some people want to give back to the community because the community has really been helpful for them, and embraced them.

iii. The opportunity to gain language skills and experience

Volunteering can be an excellent way to practice English as a second language in a variety of contexts. This can contribute to decreasing language barriers. To reach out to individuals who speak languages other than English, one interview participant suggested that a poster or pamphlet could include “different languages that would catch their eye. That is a tool for the specific population you’re targeting to volunteer. . . even the word ‘volunteer’ in different languages.”

All of these benefits of volunteering can be highlighted in various volunteer outreach strategies.

SECTION THREE: THE VOLUNTEER PLACEMENT PROCESS

Once an individual is aware of volunteering as an option, and expresses interest in participating, the next step is the process of connecting the individual with a volunteer placement. In this section, different aspects of this process will be described, with suggestions from the interviews and focus groups to make the process as effective and empowering as possible. Volunteer readiness, and barriers to volunteering will be addressed, followed by a discussion of different aspects of the process of connecting volunteers with placements. At the end of this section considerations for volunteer placement agencies are outlined.

A. VOLUNTEER “READINESS”

Volunteering can be a life-changing experience for some individuals experiencing isolation; it can be an effective way to make connections and contribute to the community. However, it is clear that volunteering is not a useful strategy for every individual in a situation of isolation. The following section helps to clarify some of the considerations in looking at an individual’s readiness to volunteer. Most important, of course, is an individual’s own desire and motivation to volunteer. Sometimes the individual may need some encouragement to see volunteering as a possibility. Adaptation of the volunteer tasks and support are possible in a variety of creative ways; this can help to facilitate volunteering for people in a wide variety of situations.

For some people, barriers in their lives may make it difficult to volunteer. There are some individuals experiencing isolation who may not be ready to volunteer at the present time. They may need further support to gain the stability necessary to maintain a volunteer placement. In addition, it is important to remember that each person’s situation is highly unique, and needs to be considered in a wider context, including the person’s particular situation and context, as well as the potential volunteer placement and supports available.

i. Motivation

Primarily, the individual must be interested in volunteering, and feel ready to take this step. One participant commented that “I think it’s the mindset, if they’re ready, then they’ll move forward.” However, it is also important that the individual is aware of the support that is available for them throughout the process, when they are determining their own readiness to try volunteering.

Respectful encouragement can be a way to help to increase motivation. Discussing the benefits of volunteering described in the previous section, such as gaining job skills, connecting with the community, making a contribution, and gaining language skills, can help to increase one’s motivation to volunteer. However, it is also important to respect the fine line between encouraging someone and pushing them. One way of working with this distinction is by leaving the ultimate decision up to the individual, recognizing that it is essential that they have the personal willingness to take this step.

ii. Stability

Some level of stability in one's life is an important prerequisite to volunteering. Volunteer placements involve a consistent commitment of time and energy, and without relatively stable housing, income and support systems, it may be hard to follow through with this commitment. One interview participant commented on the importance of being out of "survival mode":

In order to want to volunteer you have to be able to think about the future. As long as you are in survival mode, you can't do that. [You] need to have the self-confidence to walk out and face the world.

Another participant commented on the importance of stability with mental health issues people may be living with:

I think [volunteering is] for people who have stabilized to some degree. They have established some level of support, with a doctor or case manager. People who are at a stage of wellness where they have insight into their needs may be ready to volunteer.

On the flip side, if an individual is living in a highly unstable situation, or is experiencing a crisis in their lives, other supports are necessary before considering volunteering. In the case of mental illness, one participant made the following comment:

I think one thing that is fairly clear is if someone is experiencing a breakdown, or is in the height of their illness, or in a crisis, really acutely ill, it really isn't a time to be volunteering.

iii. Other Factors

Other factors can be important considerations in determining readiness to volunteer. The following two examples, substance use and challenging behaviours may or may not be barriers to volunteering. In the right environment, with the right support, volunteering may be possible for individuals in these situations.

(a) Substance Use?

There were different perspectives around the issue of substance use and volunteering. Certainly it is highly dependent on the individual situation, including the volunteer placement, the volunteer agency and supervisor, the vulnerability of the client group served by the agency, and the supports available. Substance use may be a barrier to one's ability to follow through with a commitment to volunteering, and may lead to challenging behaviours, such as those described in the section below.

However, one research participant commented that “volunteering can be a positive aspect of the lives [of substance users].” She described a situation where a person with an addiction to alcohol was able to maintain a volunteer job in a kitchen. This situation worked because of a very supportive volunteer supervisor who worked along side of the volunteer, and the nature of the agency, a place with a harm reduction approach, where there is tolerance for the reality of people’s substance use issues. Because of the support available, volunteering helped to improve this volunteer’s self-esteem and skill development. The success of such a placement is highly dependent on the unique situation.

(b) Challenging Behaviours

Pam Terry of the Volunteer Access program at Volunteer Victoria has developed a handout for individuals interested in volunteering, with some practical examples of behaviours that may make it difficult to find and maintain a volunteer placement. These examples provide some boundaries around unacceptable behaviours for potential volunteers.

1. Poor hygiene- dirty clothes, unwashed hair, bad body odour
2. Interrupting people when they are speaking
3. Outbursts of anger or swearing at people
4. Not being able to focus on job activities
5. Not being able to understand directions
6. Lack of motivation in helping others

Each of these considerations, motivation, stability, and the other factors described above, are ideas for discussion with an individual when determining current suitability for volunteering. It is also important to remember that creativity is possible in terms of volunteer placements, tasks, and support. Even if an individual appears not to be ready volunteer, there may be a way of accommodating him or her creatively.

B. CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CONNECTING VOLUNTEERS WITH PLACEMENTS

Once an individual experiencing isolation has determined that they are ready to volunteer, the next step is to consider different volunteer placement opportunities. In the interviews and focus groups, some ideas were suggested for making this process as supportive and empowering as possible.

i. Support the Individual throughout the Process

It is essential for there to be adequate support available when an individual experiencing isolation begins to look for a volunteer placement. This support needs to be available throughout the entire process. The individual working with the potential volunteer needs to be sensitive to the issues of people experiencing isolation, and to act with gentleness

and compassion. Also, it is important that they are open to the uniqueness of the situation each individual, and ask the individual what kind of support they would prefer in each specific situation.

The support can include giving plenty of accessible information about the process and what to expect. An interview participant commented that “we’ll walk them through the process, so they know what to expect. . . [we’ll] explain the different types of experiences they’ll go through in gaining a volunteer position, even doing a role play, so that people might feel more comfortable.”

ii. Focus on the Individual’s Interests, Skills and Choice

When helping an individual find a volunteer placement, it is important for the person working with the individual (eg the Volunteering Advisor) to focus on the interests of the individual experiencing isolation, and to provide choices and encouragement. It is important to provide space for the individual to express their power and decision-making ability. Also important is the process of helping an individual to explore their skills and talents, including the ones that they may be less aware of. This can be encouraging and helpful, as a way to recognize the abilities that are already present for the individual.

One research participant described the importance of supporting and encouraging people by providing choices:

Having options and choices, and knowing [those] options and choices [is important]. And, being encouraged to take risks. I guess there’s a fine line between encouraging someone, and pushing someone, but, I really feel strongly that there needs to be encouragement through support, that this is something that is achievable. What happens once someone steps into that, it can be astounding, to their own sense of self-worth, their ability to care for themselves.

One interview participant, who has experienced isolation, commented on the importance of having options when choosing a volunteer placement: “everybody likes different jobs. It has to be up to that person which job they like.”

Another research participant, who has recently stepped out of isolation, suggested minimizing the power dynamic between the professional and client by “let[ting] the client come up with ideas themselves. The client may be able to come up with solutions.”

iii. Consider Practical Details

In the process of connecting an individual with volunteer work, it is important to consider the practical details of volunteering on a regular basis. The easier it is to volunteer, the more likely the volunteer position will be sustainable. The following practical details arose in the research process as important initial considerations.

- location
- transportation
- frequency/ timing of volunteer shifts

iv. Consider the Type of Volunteer Work: Look for the “the Right Fit”

It is important to ensure that the volunteer is matched with a volunteer position that is the “right fit”. The particular situation of the individual, and their interests, as well as the characteristics of the agency, should be considered in selecting a placement. With the “right fit”, the volunteer, the agency and the community can all benefit. The importance of this concept was emphasized by one interview participant:

Making sure it’s a fit [is important] because you don’t want people to become discouraged. Volunteer work can bring people who are feeling down, up, it gives them another perspective. I think it’s critical to get the good fit that works well. Everybody benefits.

A research participant, who is currently in a situation of isolation, commented on the consequences of the “wrong fit” between volunteer and placement:

There’s nothing worse than sticking someone with a job they don’t like or [where they’re] around the wrong kind of people. They would be no better off, and would end up back in isolation.

v. Considerations Specific to Particular Groups

There are specific points to consider for the different groups of people who experience isolation. It is important to remember that these are generalizations, and do not pertain to all of the individuals who belong to these groups. Again, I emphasize the importance of individual context. However, the following ideas may be useful in working with individuals from the groups identified below.

(a) People on parole:

For people who are on parole, some of the specific considerations in finding the “right fit” between the volunteer and volunteer placement, include the following:

- i. gaining an understanding of the individual’s background (parole workers have access to this information, and respecting confidentiality, can share pertinent information)
- ii. looking at the client base at the agency (ensuring that they are not vulnerable populations)
- iii. considering at the individual’s skills and interests (ensuring that they are ready to volunteer: have completed correctional programming, have taken responsibility for their previous behaviour)
- iv. considering the appropriateness of the nature of the volunteer work itself

Volunteer work can be a successful experience for volunteers on parole and for placement agencies. In the right situation, volunteering can be an excellent way for people on parole, who experience a great deal of marginalization, to connect, contribute and reintegrate into the community.

(b) People with language barriers

There are some important considerations when matching someone who is learning English with a volunteer placement.

It is important to recognize that “speaking with an accent does not mean that the individual is not proficient in English.” To find a good match for a volunteer position, it is essential to look carefully at the language needs required by the volunteer position, and also to recognize the skills the person does possess. Comparing the language needs of the position and the skills of the individual will help to ascertain the appropriateness of the match. If the “fit” between volunteer and placement is not right, it is important to clearly suggest other options.

Also, applying for a volunteer job may be an intimidating experience for an individual with limited English skills, partly because of a lack of familiarity with the process. It is important to recognize this unfamiliarity, to explain the process with clarity, and to support the individual however possible.

One coordinator of volunteers emphasized the importance of not making an assessment of an individual’s language skills based solely on their phone presentation:

I would say to volunteer coordinators that although a lot of us screen by phone, it’s important to try to give the benefit of the doubt to people who are ESL learners for over the phone screening. You don’t get the body language over the phone. It’s one of the scariest things for ESL learners to use the phone.

(c) People living with mental illness

When matching people living with mental illness with a volunteer position, it is important to recognize the uniqueness of the individual’s situation. General considerations for supporting people with mental illness include the following ideas:

- one-to-one peer support can work well
- a well-established routine, that is task-oriented, is important. As one participant said, “the idea of each day coming to your volunteer job and not being sure what to expect is really anxiety-producing.”
- afternoon can be a better time to volunteer because medication can make it difficult for people to get up in the morning
- a fairly calm environment, because loud music or lots of activity can be too overwhelming for some people
- flexibility and accommodation on the job, and around taking leaves if necessary

One research participant who works with people living with mental illness commented on the importance of accommodation when a volunteer needs to take a leave of absence:

What can happen [for people living with mental illness] is that they might be volunteering and then get sick [as part of a cyclical illness]. It helps if people are told “I understand you need to take a little leave, and this will be here for you when you come back”. My experience shows that if people know they have something to come back to, they bounce back so much quicker, than if everything around them just crumbles and slips away.

The same participant commented on the importance of support for people living with mental illness to have success with volunteering:

A lot of people don't have trouble getting a volunteer job, but the problem can be maintaining it. They need someone to be there to support them, to maybe provide a bit of advocacy for them, or to help their volunteer supervisor understand what it is they are going through.

(d) Seniors

There are some important considerations in connecting seniors experiencing isolation with volunteer placements. Transportation can be an issue. Therefore, the location of the volunteer placement and how to get there are important considerations to be worked with. Accommodation around location is possible in a variety of creative ways; working from home is one possibility. For example, at Seniors Serving Seniors, there is a group of volunteers called “Seniors in Stitches”, who knit items for children. The group meets once per month; otherwise the volunteer work is done from home. At West Shore Community Resources, one volunteer contributes by folding pamphlets from home.

Social aspects of volunteering can be important for seniors, particularly those experiencing isolation. Matching with a mentor or peer may be a way to encourage relationship-building and connection. Other considerations when matching seniors with volunteer positions include recognition of generational culture. Some people may be happy to make intergenerational connections, while others may prefer to connect with people with similar histories, or similar age groups. Newly retired people may have highly developed skills to share; they may be an excellent source for highly skilled tasks. On the other hand, they may want to explore undeveloped interests. Again, the situation for each individual is unique.

C. AGENCY CONSIDERATIONS

It is important that agencies providing a volunteer placement for an individual emerging from isolation have awareness and sensitivity around the issues of isolation, including the barriers individuals face, and the difficulty of stepping out. At times, extra support will be

necessary for these individuals, so coordinators of volunteers should be willing to provide some extra support, or to create a situation where the support is provided by others. This additional effort is very worthwhile, because it can greatly contribute to the easing of an individual's sense of isolation, through increasing their sense of connection to the community. Therefore, providing support for one individual is a way of helping to address the wider social problem of isolation.

i. Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Isolation

It is important for agencies taking on volunteers who are emerging from isolation to have an understanding of the courage needed for the volunteer to take this step. There also needs to be compassion for the vulnerability of the individual, taking a significant risk, as well as an understanding of the issues and barriers around isolation.

ii. If it's not the "Right Fit", Provide Referrals to Other Potential Volunteer Placements

If it becomes apparent that the fit is not right between the volunteer and the placement, it is important to provide other alternatives for the individual, so they do not become discouraged about volunteering in general. The following comments aptly describe the significance of this:

People get discouraged easily, and they don't want to volunteer after that. . . If a volunteer comes to see you and you feel they're [not right] for that position, provide alternatives for them. People are too quick to shut the door.

I think it's important to provide some alternative solutions, even if it's not in their agency, to another agency that may have positions that may better suit them. . . I don't want them to leave with a bad taste about volunteering. They may not be right for us here, but they may be right to contribute somewhere else. We have a lot of power, to allow this person to volunteer or not. It could change their life, their job prospects. Who are we to say you shouldn't be volunteering?

iii. Provide Some Extra Support and Care

The importance of a supportive and nurturing volunteer environment was emphasized throughout this research project. As one participant noted:

A good environment, a welcoming place that provides good support, and clarity about what they're looking for, helps to support an individual stepping out of isolation. Because I think if someone goes to volunteer and has a displeasing experience, it can compromise their desire to reach out and try again.

Section Four below describes many ideas and possibilities for supporting volunteers.

iv. Ask for Help if you need it

If, as a volunteer coordinator, you are unsure about some aspect of supporting people who are stepping out of isolation in volunteering, ask for help. Volunteer Victoria is available to provide more information, or provide referrals to other information sources, about supporting volunteers or handling difficult situations that may arise.

SECTION FOUR: SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS ON THE JOB

In this section, ideas for providing support for volunteers will be discussed. On-the-job support is crucial to ensure the success of the placement. As one research participant commented, “these folks have amazing gifts to share, they just need some support and reassurance and nurturance to share them.”

A. INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

Every individual’s situation is unique. Although they may share some common experiences with others in similar situations, it is crucial to ask the individual how they would like to be supported, and to tailor the support to their individual situation.

One interview participant suggested that “it’s not words. It’s not telling someone we support them, it’s supporting them”

B. A WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE

Creating an atmosphere that is welcoming and comfortable is supportive for all volunteers, and particularly for more vulnerable ones. A welcoming atmosphere includes welcoming attitudes and behaviours from agency staff, including warmth, understanding, openness to diversity, and flexibility. Also, an accessible physical environment contributes to a welcoming atmosphere. For people who use wheelchairs, people who are accompanied by a guide dog, or who have specific barriers such as hearing impairment, or visual impairment, this accessibility is crucial for their volunteer participation.

C. COMPASSIONATE AND RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

It is important to support volunteers by communicating with clarity and respect. Some aspects of this include providing “clear instructions and follow up” and “good feedback and recognition”. It is also crucial for the volunteer to clearly understand who they should go to in case of a problem or difficulty. Also, checking in on a regular basis helps volunteers to feel supported. One research participant commented on the importance of communication. “Clear information-sharing seems pretty key. Information helps to ease fear and unknowns.”

The following comments were made by research participants who have experienced isolation. They highlight the individuality of support needs:

I wouldn't have wanted a lot of overt support, I'm pretty independent, but gentle, open, and clear information would be nice. . . . It's pretty scary making that step, so a lot of warmth would help, but not in a condescending way.

[Perhaps] a person could go out once a week to see how they're doing, and to see if they have any problems.

Another consideration is clear and ongoing training for volunteer tasks. As one participant commented, "explain the jobs really well."

D. VOLUNTEER TASKS: FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY

Flexibility with volunteer tasks can greatly contribute to a volunteer's success with the placement. Designing tasks with consideration of an individual's strengths and needs is very supportive for the individual. Certainly one must also recognize the agency's needs and limits, yet with creativity, the needs of both the volunteer and the agency can be well met. Some of the ideas shared in the research process for activities for individuals emerging from a situation of isolation include:

- activities with a social element
- activities with concrete outcome
- low key activities
- not too structured/ low pressure
- volunteering at home for some individuals
- being part of a team: a group with empathy

E. SUPPORT FROM ANOTHER VOLUNTEER OR JOB COACH

Initial on-the-job support, with someone working along side of the individual, helps to ease the fear of starting a new volunteer job in a new environment. As one research participant commented, "there are different options: another volunteer, a job coach, or a mentor [who may have had] common experiences and is further along the path."

Another research participant commented on the value of one-to-one support:

Consistent one-to-one support [helps]. If someone wants to get involved in volunteering, and if there is consistently one volunteer mentor, it gives them an opportunity to build a trusting relationship with that person.

F. RECOGNITION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

It is important to provide ongoing recognition and encouragement to volunteers. One research participant commented on the significance of encouragement:

Some people just need someone to connect with on a regular basis, to encourage them, and tell them that they're doing a great job. People are often worried that they're doing something wrong.

One interview respondent described some of the simple ways of providing an atmosphere of recognition, which values the contribution of volunteers:

Recognition is a big one. . . verbal 'thank-you's, telling people what a difference they're making, . . . you're building a relationship with them—team-building.

G. INCENTIVES

Incentives can help to encourage individuals to continue volunteering, and contribute to a feeling of being appreciated for their work. A research respondent commented on the value of some sort of incentive:

Certainly some kind of incentive is huge, whether it's a free lunch, or a volunteer driver to get you there. . . Incentives make a difference. It makes them feel like they are appreciated for what they are doing. In the ideal world we all get paid handsomely for what we're doing, but there does need to be both internal motivation and the external incentive.

All of these aspects of providing support for individuals will help to ensure success in the placement for both the volunteer and the agency.

IV. CONCLUSION

Volunteering can be an effective option for easing isolation for certain individuals. It can be a way to reduce barriers, and increase skills. However, for volunteering to be successful for isolated populations, there needs to be extensive support throughout the process. The volunteer placement process involves outreach strategies, exploring volunteer placement options and ongoing on-the-job support.

This support needs to come from a variety of individuals in the process, including community members and service providers who may suggest volunteering as an option, volunteer advisors who may help match individuals with placements, and coordinators of volunteers at placement agencies. It must be a collaborative community effort with communication among all of these groups of people.

This effort is crucial and deeply meaningful, in order to support the more vulnerable members of our community who are experiencing isolation. With this support, people experiencing isolation will have the opportunity to become more involved in the community, make a contribution to the community, and also to gain skills which may lead to employment. The individuals and agencies involved, as well as the wider community, can all benefit.

Appendix I: List of Contributors

Thank you to the following individuals who generously shared their time and ideas in this research process. Also greatly appreciated are the contributions of those people who have chosen to remain anonymous. A special thanks to the individuals who shared their personal experiences of isolation.

Amarjit Bhalla, Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre
Denise Bocsik, Volunteer Victoria
Judith Cameron, Fairfield New Horizons
Catriona Campbell, James Bay Community Project
Lori Ferguson, REES Network
Kathe Freebury, VILR Website (www.vilr.info)
Joan Halvorsen, Oak Bay Volunteer Services
Leni Hoover, Downtown Blanshard Advisory Committee- Blanshard Community Centre
Honora Johannesen, Coordinator of Volunteers, Victoria Parole
Eileen Leddy, Peninsula Community Services
Winnie Lee, Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria
JoAnn Murray, Victoria Gatekeeper Program
Kathleen Reed, VILR website (www.vilr.info)
Jane Schaeff, Seniors Serving Seniors
Kelly Sprackett, West Shore Community Resources
Frances Strauss, BC Society for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse (BCSMSSA)
Pam Terry, Volunteer Victoria
Tracey Thompson, NEED Crisis & Information Line
Jack Vaughn, Esquimalt Neighbourhood House Thrift Store
Karina Wolf, Capital City Volunteers
Susan Zerb, Saanich Volunteer Services Society

Appendix II: Questions for Professionals

1. What groups of people experience social isolation? Of the people you work with (or who are affiliated with your group), who seems to experience isolation?
2. Is there more appropriate language than “isolation and loneliness” to describe this situation?
3. What is the distinction between isolation and choosing to be alone? When does isolation become problematic?
4. What barriers (to reaching out) are faced by people experiencing isolation?
5. What may have contributed to their sense of isolation?
6. What may help to ease isolation? What services does your agency provide that help to ease isolation?
7. Could volunteer work in the community ease isolation for some people experiencing isolation?
8. For which people experiencing isolation might volunteering be an appropriate option? Why?
9. Who might not yet be ready to volunteer and why?
10. What approaches may be useful to reach isolated populations, to suggest volunteer work as an option? How could the value of volunteer work be conveyed?
11. What considerations would be important in connecting isolated individuals with suitable volunteer options?
12. What kind of support would be helpful on the volunteer job?
13. Do you know any individuals who are currently isolated or who have recently experienced isolation who may be interested in being interviewed for this project?
14. Do you have any other comments or ideas?

Appendix III: Questions for Individuals

Three Areas to cover, very open-ended

Area One: Experience of Isolation/ Stepping out of isolation

IF CURRENTLY VOLUNTEERING

1. How has volunteering made an impact on your life?
2. Why did you start volunteering?
3. Why do you continue to volunteer?

EXPERIENCE OF ISOLATION—before volunteering perhaps?

4. Tell me about a time when you felt isolated or lonely/ bored/ less connected to your community.
5. What was most difficult for you? What barriers did you face? What stopped you from reaching out?
6. How did you recognize that the feeling of isolation was different from just wanting to be alone?
7. How did you decide to make the step to become more connected/ volunteer?
8. How did you decide where to volunteer?

Area Two: Ways to Reach Isolated Folks

9. Do you have ideas about how we could reach people who are currently isolated?
 - During the time you felt isolated, where would you go?
 - Would you have responded to a poster?
 - Would you have called or come down to Volunteer Victoria?
 - Would you have come to a meeting close to where you live?
 - Would you have responded to something you heard on the radio or TV?
 - Would you have been interested if someone you knew suggested volunteering?

Area Three: Support during the Process

10. What support could be helpful for isolated people to find a suitable volunteer job?
11. What support could be helpful in starting the volunteer job?
12. What kinds of ongoing support might work? What wouldn't work?

15. Do you have any other ideas or comments?

Appendix IV: Informed Consent Form for Professionals

Volunteer Victoria Research Project: “Connecting Volunteers with Community” INFORMED CONSENT FORM

This research project aims to develop strategies for connecting individuals experiencing isolation with the community through volunteering. The goals of this project are:

1. to gather information about the experience of isolation
 2. to find ways to reach individuals who are experiencing isolation
 3. to determine strategies to connect isolated people with volunteer opportunities
 4. to find ways to provide ongoing support to people in volunteer placements
- I understand that participation in this project involves a focus group or an individual interview with the researcher. I can choose to have the focus group or interview recorded by audiotape or by note-taking. This data will be partially transcribed and used for compiling the research report and for no other purposes.
- The audiotapes will be erased within one month of completion of the final report.
- I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time without explanation.
- Upon withdrawal, I may request to have the information I have shared excluded from the final report, as well as having my data erased.
- I understand that all information gathered is confidential, and my name and any identifying data will not be included in the research report.
- If I give my permission, my name will be included in the report as a contributor, in the “Acknowledgements” section. (check one)

δ I would rather not have my name included as a contributor.

δ I give permission for my name to be included as a contributor (as follows).

Name: _____ Agency/ Group: _____

Please feel free to ask questions throughout the research process. If you have any questions or comments after this session, please contact: Wendy Barbulak, Phone: 388-9689

I agree to participate in this research project.

Name(Printed) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix V: Informed Consent Form for Individuals

Volunteer Victoria Research Project: “Connecting Volunteers with Community” INFORMED CONSENT FORM

This research project is looking at ways to connect people experiencing isolation with the community through volunteering.

The goals of this project are:

1. gathering information about the experience of isolation
 2. finding ways to reach individuals who are isolated
 3. looking at how to connect isolated people with volunteer opportunities
 4. finding ways to support people in volunteer placements
-
- I understand that participation in this project involves a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be about one hour in length. Coffee/ tea and a snack will be provided
 - I understand that participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time, without explanation.
 - If I withdraw, I may ask to have the information I have shared excluded from the final report.
 - I can choose to have the interview recorded by audiotape or by note-taking. This information will be partially transcribed and used to create the research report and for no other purposes.
 - The tapes will be erased within one month of completing the final report.
 - I understand that all information gathered is confidential, and my name and any identifying data will not be included in the report.

Please feel free to ask questions throughout the research process. If you have any questions or comments after this session, please contact: Wendy Barbulak, Phone: 388-9689

I agree to participate in this research project.

Name(Printed) _____

Signature _____

Date _____