

Strategies for Revitalizing the Humanitarian Workforce Program

by

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Abstract

The Canadian Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) program, funded by Public Safety Canada, plays a vital role in national disaster response. However, barriers such as lack of awareness, time constraints, and inclusivity challenge hinder volunteer engagement. This study utilized mixed-methods research, including a survey of 120 participants and two focus groups, to explore these challenges. Survey findings revealed significant organizational inefficiencies, rigid policies, and financial burdens that exacerbate barriers of volunteer engagement. Focus group participants emphasized the need for improved outreach, inclusivity, and community collaboration. Recommendations include enhancing targeted outreach, offering flexible roles, increasing training accessibility, simplifying human resource policies, and developing tiered incentive structures. Additionally, a longitudinal evaluation is proposed to assess the program's long-term success beyond its current funding expiration in March 2026. These evidence-based strategies aim to sustain volunteer engagement, foster community resilience, and strengthen Canada's disaster response capacity.

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E Mente Confusio Fundit



From the mind pours confusion

(Chartrand et al., 2024)

Strategies for Revitalizing the Humanitarian Workforce Program.

The escalating costs of natural and human-caused hazards, such as floods, wildfires, and industrial accidents, are a significant concern in disaster management for all levels of government in Canada. The past decade has witnessed a surge in the scale, cost, and impact of these disasters on communities (Haigh & Wahl, 2019; Samuel, 2019). Despite the impact of these hazards, Volunteer Canada (2023a, p. 14) reports a 65% decrease in volunteer participation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who respond to these disasters.

This research seeks to identify and address the barriers to volunteer participation within NGOs that are part of the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) program funded through Public Safety Canada (2022, 2024b). Sundeen et al. (2007) suggest that barriers to affiliated volunteering include anything that prevents or restricts individuals from active participation. While not exhaustive, examples can involve personal barriers such as lack of resources, systemic support from organizations, and perceived restrictive social norms within some organizations (Moghaddam et al., 2018; Pettigrew et al., 2019). Barriers to volunteering also include safety concerns and lack of support and training (Volunteer Canada, 2023b).

The distinction between affiliated and unaffiliated volunteers is relevant. Affiliated volunteers are those associated with a specific group or organization—such as first responder groups, charities, or agencies—who receive training and work under organized management (Whittaker et al., 2015, p. 360). Unaffiliated or spontaneous volunteers, on the other hand, may engage independently without appropriate training

or ties to an organization (Bartram et al., 2017; Cuny, 1999). This study focuses on potential volunteers, affiliated volunteers, and paid NGO staff members participating with NGOs involved in the HWF program.

Demands on Canada's disaster management system is growing. This study seeks ways to build a stronger volunteer base. To do this, I suggest that we must address the barriers volunteers face. This will help improve Canada's ability to respond to disasters with a well-supported, trained voluntary workforce. Currently, low volunteer engagement jeopardizes recovery efforts and community well-being. When people hesitate to volunteer, NGOs struggle to provide needed services through the HWF program (Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022).

Background

The increasing cost and impact of large-scale disasters, including the demands of the recent pandemics, prompted governments to investigate ways to improve responses to these disruptive events (Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Standing Committee on National Defence, 2022b). The *Emergency Management Act*, (SC 2007, c 15) establishes disaster and emergency response authority to rest with provinces and territories until they formally request federal assistance. This restriction on the federal government indicates a clear separation of responsibilities for emergency management response, shared between the provinces/territories and the federal government (Public Safety Canada, 2024b).

British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario are responding to the increase in disaster events through the formation of corps of disaster response volunteers by these

three provinces to meet their local needs (Government of British Columbia, 2024; Government of Nova Scotia, 2024; Government of Ontario, 2024). There are some limitations to these provincial volunteer groups. One example is for these provincial groups not being able to work easily together between provinces or nationally. As a solution to responding to disasters between provinces, the Canadian government is providing funding of national NGOs up to \$255 million over five years, from 2021 through 2026 (Haung, 2023; LeBlanc, 2022). This federal support offers stabilized funding to NGOs participating as part of the HWF program to develop and increase a national volunteer surge capacity (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). The HWF program aims to reduce provincial and territorial reliance on the Canadian Armed Forces for domestic humanitarian response (Haung, 2023).

Initially, the HWF program included four NGOs in 2021—Canadian Red Cross (CRC), St. John Ambulance Canada (SJA), The Salvation Army (SA), and the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada (SARVAC)—and has recently been expanded to include a fifth NGO—Team Rubicon Canada (TR)—in 2024 (Public Safety Canada, 2022; Thurton, 2024). These five NGOs collaborate with their volunteers through the HWF program to provide response and relief services nationwide when a request for federal assistance (RFA) is received through Public Safety Canada (2024c). In addition to providing a response capability after disasters, the HWF program requires the NGOs to train Canadians to be more resilient (Public Safety Canada, 2024b).

However, from 2013 to 2023, there was a 15% decline in volunteer engagement, including in these NGOs (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). They and other charities face

challenges in recruiting new volunteers, as an estimated 65% of pre-pandemic volunteers have yet to return (Volunteer Canada, 2023b). This decline is a serious issue requiring immediate attention for NGOs to provide services successfully through the HWF program.

Improving local resilience to emergencies and disasters is part of Public Safety Canada's (2024b) preparedness goals. This research aims to create strategies to increase resilience by identifying barriers to volunteering. Reversing the decline in volunteer engagement will revitalize NGOs in the HWF program and strengthen communities.

Purpose Statement

This study aimed to identify and address barriers to affiliated volunteer participation with NGOs in the HWF program. Employing a researcher-as-interpretive-bricoleur approach (Rogers, 2012, p. 5), this research integrated various tools, methods, and philosophical frameworks to tackle complex social research questions. The study begins with an online survey of 120 participants, followed by targeted focus groups to explore and develop deeper insights into personal experiences identified from the survey data (Creswell, 2021). Findings informed strategies to improve volunteer recruitment, retention, and the overall efficacy of the Canadian HWF program in disaster response.

Literature Review

The HWF program is vital to Canada's comprehensive disaster management strategy, leveraging a trained volunteer force from five participating NGOs to support

disaster response efforts when provincial or territorial capacities are exceeded (Public Safety Canada, 2022). This program's volunteers play an essential role, performing tasks from debris removal to medical support, and embody the backbone of disaster response efforts. However, the HWF program faces significant challenges, including volunteer attrition, limited compensation, and the impending expiration of federal funding on March 31, 2026 (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). The sustainability of volunteer readiness, essential to program effectiveness, remains uncertain without robust, ongoing support. Freudenburg's (1993) concept of recreancy highlights the risks of falling short of public trust if these critical issues for the HWF program are not adequately addressed. Ensuring volunteer retention and sustainable program support is essential to maintaining the HWF's operational success and public confidence.

Structure of the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce Program

The Canadian HWF Program is distinguished by its unique structure and operational model, designed to enhance Canada's disaster response capacity through collaboration with five approved NGOs (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). Collaborative cooperation between three of the major NGOs—CRC, SJA and SA—has existed to varying levels for over 100 years (McCeery, 2008). Currently, as indicated in Table 1, each NGO in the HWF plays a specific role, contributing its expertise to different aspects of emergency management, ranging from medical care and shelter to search and rescue operations (Friesen & Morrison, 2024; Parker, 2024; Zaidi et al., 2024). This division of responsibilities helps avoid redundancy while maximizing efficiency during crises. The collaborative framework follows Incident Command System (ICS) standards,

ensuring volunteers from all organizations are well-trained and prepared for cohesive, standardized responses during emergencies (Friesen & Morrison, 2024; Parker, 2024).

Table 1
NGOs in the HWF Program

	Total no. volunteer	HWF unit name	No. of HWF volunteer	HWF service
Canadian Red Cross (CRC)	15,000	Emergency Response Team (ERT)	2500	Providing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evacuation centre, • Reception services, • Emergency shelter, • Family reunification • Personal services, and • HWF coordination (Friesen & Morrison, 2024)
St. John Ambulance (SJA)	6200	Emergency Response Unit (ERU)	1500	Providing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical care, • Psychosocial services, • Auxiliary care and logistics support to health care centres, and other emergency facilities (Zaidi et al., 2024)
The Salvation Army (SA)	9000	Emergency Disaster Service (EDS)	3500	Providing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food and water, • Emotional care, • Donations management, and • Disaster social services. (Bignell, 2023)

Table 1
NGOs in the HWF Program

	Total no. Volunteer	HWF Unit Name	No. of HWF Volunteer	HWF Service
Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada (SARVAC)	9000	Humanitarian Workforce Team	300	Providing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search and rescue, • Recovery services, • Wellness checks, • Manage traffic and safety, • Geomatics and mapping, Communications, and • General labour. (Parker, 2024)
Team Rubicon (TR)	3000	Disaster Response Unit	330	Providing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk assessments, • Incident management, • Debris clearing, • Hazard mitigation, • Rapid home repair, and • Spontaneous volunteer management. (Riddell, 2023)

A defining feature of the program is its reliance on a performance-based funding model, which ties continued financial support to specific operational milestones, such as training a target number of volunteers annually (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). Despite the program's effective structure, the looming expiration of federal funding raises concerns about its long-term sustainability (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). Addressing this and other challenges, such as volunteer exclusion and minimal compensation, is essential for ensuring the HWF's continued success in disaster response.

Sustainability of the Funding Model

The HWF program's funding expires on March 31, 2026. While it has effectively maintained disaster response capabilities, there is no clear plan for sustaining the program post-2026 (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). If funding is not renewed, the continuity of the program is at risk. The program's reliance on time-bound federal funding creates uncertainty, and if NGOs cannot secure resources independently, this could disrupt disaster response efforts (Public Safety Canada, 2024b). Exploring potential strategies for transitioning to a more conservatively restrained financial model that allows NGOs to maintain their capabilities beyond the current funding period is crucial to meet local community disaster response needs.

Summarizing the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce Program

The Canadian HWF program enhances disaster response by coordinating volunteers from five NGOs to fill critical service gaps (Public Safety Canada, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). It operates on a performance-based funding model focusing on training and deployment, ensuring standardized responses (Public Safety Canada, 2024b).

However, challenges like volunteer exclusion, limited compensation, and funding sustainability threaten its long-term effectiveness (Freudenburg, 1993; Public Safety Canada, 2024b). Understanding these challenges is essential to address barriers that volunteers face, which can impact their participation and the program's overall resilience.

Organizational and Global Perspectives on Volunteerism

This section explores the delicate balance NGOs must strike between professionalizing volunteer management and maintaining the flexibility that volunteers often value. As organizations formalize roles to improve efficiency, they face challenges such as the risk of alienating volunteers who prefer more autonomy (Alfes et al., 2017). Additionally, with the rise in professionalization, legal concerns emerge, especially around role clarity and protections for volunteers (Braley-Rattai, 2021; Volunteer Canada, 2023a). Inclusivity also becomes a key factor, as marginalized groups face barriers such as inflexible scheduling and financial burdens (Journeay et al., 2022). Globally, volunteer models such as the U.S. CERTs and New Zealand's fire brigades offer valuable lessons, but Canada's decentralized disaster response framework presents unique challenges that require tailored solutions. Balancing structure, flexibility, and inclusivity is essential for sustaining volunteer engagement in the HWF program.

Changing Concepts of Volunteering

The evolution of volunteering, as Arai (2004) observes, has transitioned from informal community-based efforts to more structured, professionalized systems. This shift, evident with NGOs in the HWF program, reflects broader trends where volunteers

seek roles aligned with personal values and a sense of purpose. However, this professionalization also presents challenges, particularly regarding compensation and incentives to volunteer (Baxter-Tomkins, & Wallace, 2009).

Legal complications further arise as professionalization intensifies. Braley-Rattai (2021) recognize how treating volunteers like employees without providing equivalent protections exposes NGOs to legal risks. These risks are illustrated by NGOs blurring where volunteer roles and paid employment intersect as shown with *Rocha v. Pardons and Waivers of Canada* (2012). In this case, the failure to distinguish between the duties and rights of volunteers and those of employees led to legal action, emphasizing the importance of maintaining clear boundaries. When NGOs treat volunteers similarly to employees without offering the same legal protections, they may be subject to claims of unfair treatment or violations of employment standards (Braley-Rattai, 2021). For NGOs in the HWF, developing clear policies that protect volunteer roles while preserving their voluntary status is critical to minimizing such legal risks.

The professionalization of formal volunteer activities necessitates effective volunteer management. Alfes et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of formal HR practices as roles become more complex, while Bartram et al. (2017) stress balancing professionalism with flexibility. Bartram et al. (2017) discuss structured volunteer roles as the usual way of volunteering. However, this may not address how people now want to volunteer. Volunteer Canada (2023a) shows that volunteers have different reasons for helping; some want short-term or flexible roles. This change means NGOs may need to offer more types of volunteering. Mook et al. (2014) say that giving volunteers

choices, like short tasks or temporary roles, can help them stay involved longer.

The changing landscape of volunteerism presents both opportunities and challenges. While professionalization provides structure for NGOs, it risks alienating those volunteers who value flexibility. The HWF program can balance this by implementing tiered roles, clarifying distinctions between professionals and volunteers, and fostering participatory governance. Additionally, providing equivalent protections to volunteers—such as insurance or statutory coverage—could further clarify volunteer status, reducing perceived exploitation and unethical treatment, and enhancing volunteer retention and service quality (Braley-Rattai, 2021, pp. 272–273). These strategies ensure structured engagement complements, rather than replaces, volunteer contributions, promoting inclusivity and sustainability.

Organizational and Volunteer Management

Volunteer management has increasingly shifted toward formalization as NGOs aim to enhance efficiency and retention (Alfes et al., 2017). Alfes et al. (2017) highlights that structured HR strategies standardize volunteer engagement and streamline operations, promoting consistency in volunteer performance and program outcomes. Within the HWF program, formalized management practices can ensure clear expectations, standardized training, and accountability (McLennan et al., 2016). However, while formalization offers these advantages, it may also impose challenges if not carefully managed (Grant & Langer, 2021). Strict HR policies can limit the flexibility some volunteers seek, potentially impacting recruitment and retention among those who prioritize autonomy and episodic participation (Alfes et al., 2017). The focus on

professionalization underscores the need for strategic approaches that maintain organizational structure while recognizing volunteer motivations (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011)

Paid Staff and Volunteer Relations

Current trends show that making volunteer roles more professional provides structure and development but can blur the line between unpaid work and jobs (Baxter-Tomkins, & Wallace, 2009). When NGOs formalize these roles, it is important to adapt HR systems to manage volunteers and staff well (Bartram et al., 2017). If roles are unclear or support is lacking, volunteers may leave (Reamon, 2016). When NGOs consider shifting volunteer roles to a more professional role, they should pay attention to the need for flexible and supportive volunteer management (Bartram et al., 2017).

To balance the relationship between professionals and volunteers, the HWF program must clearly define volunteer roles to prevent exploitation and task overlap (Braley-Rattai, 2021; Handy et al., 2008). Structured training should prepare volunteers without displacing professionals (Handy et al., 2008). Transparent communication and participatory governance can build trust and improve retention (Braley-Rattai, 2021). Additionally, aligning recognition strategies with volunteer motivations prevents unintended demotivation (Islam et al., 2023). These measures foster ethical engagement while strengthening both operational effectiveness and volunteer satisfaction.

Volunteer Disengagement

Building solid relationships is important for keeping volunteers engaged, as

Reamon (2016) outlined. However, external factors such as burnout and conflicting commitments can still lead to disengagement (Thormar et al., 2013). Thormar et al. (2013) suggest that volunteers may step back even in supportive environments, especially in high-stress disaster situations. Shin and Kleiner (2003) point out that a professional approach to volunteer management is essential. Yet, this approach may not fit volunteers who prefer informal or short-term roles. NGOs in the HWF program could use adaptive strategies that respect varied volunteer preferences, like flexibility or shorter commitments (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011).

Freudenburg's (1993) idea of recreancy shows the danger of failing to meet public expectations. Strong volunteer programs are essential in disaster management, where public confidence is vital (Flint & Stevenson, 2010). A failure to maintain these programs can harm recruitment and the organization's reputation (Freudenburg, 1993).

Reasons for Volunteering and Civic Engagement

Volunteering is driven by various motivations, often influenced by individuals' context and personal goals (Brants, 2014). Altruism is frequently cited as a primary motivator, especially in emergency settings where individuals feel a sense of duty to support their communities (Baxter-Tomkins & Wallace, 2006). Brants' (2014) research on civic responsibility suggests that framing volunteerism as a community obligation can enhance recruitment efforts.

Looking beyond altruism, additional reasons to volunteer include personal growth, skill development, and social connections, each significantly influencing volunteer engagement (Haivas et al., 2013; McLennan, 2022a). Volunteers typically

have complex and interrelated motivations, allowing individuals to pursue altruistic goals while simultaneously attaining personal development and skill enhancement. As a volunteer myself, I experience multiple motivations working concurrently. Structured training programs and leadership opportunities attract individuals seeking self-improvement and professional growth (Brants, 2014; Lund & Eriksson, 2015). Social networks further enhance volunteer engagement, as community encouragement drives participation (Brants, 2014; Musick & Wilson, 2007). This social driver is particularly evident in rural areas, where strong community cohesion fosters a collective sense of responsibility (Landry et al., 2022). McLennan (2022a) emphasizes that rural emergency volunteers often feel compelled to contribute due to these communal bonds.

Haivas et al. (2013) found that recognition influences volunteer retention and motivation. Acknowledged volunteers are more likely to continue their engagement, although recognition strategies must be thoughtfully managed to avoid varying effects on motivation (Islam et al., 2023). Effective volunteer management practices, such as mental health support and clear communication, prevent burnout, especially in demanding disaster management roles (McLennan, 2022a).

International Approaches to a Volunteer Workforce

Research highlights the varied approaches to volunteer management worldwide. Flint and Stevenson (2010) discuss the adaptability of Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) in the U.S., where rural CERTs develop self-sufficiency, and urban teams support professional responders. Their work shows the importance of training volunteers to address specific community needs, emphasizing community-

tailored training and resource allocation (Flint & Stevenson, 2010). These lessons suggest that Canada's HWF program could benefit from developing flexible training models catering to rural and urban needs, ensuring volunteers are prepared to respond effectively within their unique contexts.

New Zealand's model emphasizes the role of formally trained volunteers in rural fire brigades, which are integrated into Fire and Emergency New Zealand (Grant & Langer, 2021). Grant and Langer (2021) found that this integration supports wildfire risk management by ensuring that volunteers are coordinated with professional responders and provided with standardized training and resources. Such integration fosters community resilience by creating a unified response system that enhances the overall capacity to manage emergencies effectively (Grant & Langer, 2021). It strengthens local preparedness and response capabilities, ensuring that professional and volunteer efforts are aligned for efficient disaster mitigation (McLennan et al., 2016).

Germany's civil protection system also provides insights. Kehl et al. (2017) outline personal fulfillment and community engagement motivations. Their findings indicate that volunteer programs benefit from balancing individual incentives with societal contributions, which could inform strategies for enhancing volunteer recruitment and retention in Canada (Kehl et al., 2017). Fathi et al. (2020) describe how Germany expands its volunteer capacities through digital volunteerism, represented by Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOST). Digital volunteers aid crisis management through real-time situational awareness (Fathi et al., 2020). These models offer the potential of integrating personal motivation and technology in Canada's HWF while considering

necessary support systems for volunteer sustainability.

Societal recognition of volunteers also presents challenges. Szczepanska (2023) describes blurred boundaries between volunteer and professional roles in Japan, showing that while structured training, credentialing, or formal role definitions can aid recruitment, they may not appeal to those prioritizing civic engagement. Wilson and Pimm (1996) similarly note resistance to formal structures limiting volunteer autonomy in the UK.

Summary of Organizational and Global Perspectives

The formalization of volunteer management provides structured systems that enhance efficiency and retention within NGOs (Alfes et al., 2017). Professionalized HR strategies ensure standardized training and consistent volunteer engagement, fostering clear roles and accountability (McLennan et al., 2016). However, rigid policies can limit flexibility, risking disengagement among volunteers who value autonomy (Alfes et al., 2017). While beneficial for operational consistency, the professionalization of volunteer roles can blur distinctions between unpaid volunteer work and paid employment, presenting ethical and legal challenges (Braley-Rattai, 2021).

Inclusivity remains a concern, particularly for marginalized groups facing barriers such as inflexible schedules and financial limitations (Journeay et al., 2022). Globally, models like the American CERTs and New Zealand's rural fire brigades highlight the importance of community-tailored training and integration with professional responders to build resilience (Flint & Stevenson, 2010; Grant & Langer, 2021). Germany's digital volunteerism and societal recognition challenges in Japan provide further insights into

balancing personal fulfillment and formalized roles (Fathi et al., 2020; Szczepanska, 2023). Lessons from these international approaches suggest that Canada's decentralized system may benefit from adaptive strategies that balance professionalism with flexibility and regional needs (Flint & Stevenson, 2010; Grant & Langer, 2021). Maintaining this balance is essential for sustaining a committed and diverse volunteer base in the HWF program.

Barriers and Challenges to Volunteer Engagement

The literature reveals that various interconnected barriers spanning personal, organizational, and societal dimensions affect volunteer engagement. Physical and emotional demands, combined with logistical issues such as inadequate travel assistance and limited resources, place significant strain on volunteers, impacting their well-being and capacity for sustained involvement (Swygard & Stafford, 2009; Thomsen & Jensen, 2020; Thormar et al., 2013). Burnout, resulting from unclear roles and heavy responsibilities, remains a persistent challenge, further complicated by administrative burdens and role overlaps between volunteers and paid staff (Forner et al., 2022; McLennan, 2022b; Mook et al., 2014; Phillips, 2020).

Social barriers, including weakened community ties and distrust in organizations, contribute to disengagement (Bekkers, 2012). Recruitment strategies focused on urban centers can alienate rural volunteers, leading to imbalances in response efforts (Journey et al., 2022). Organizational gatekeeping, driven by policies favouring operational fit, may exclude individuals with disabilities, health conditions, or those

unfamiliar with local norms, limiting inclusivity and diversity in volunteer programs (Southby et al., 2019; van Overbeeke et al., 2022).

Recognition and incentives also play a role, with symbolic acknowledgments like medals affecting volunteer motivation (Nissen & Carlton, 2023; Venzin, 2022). While such forms of recognition can validate contributions, they may not sufficiently address the personal costs volunteers incur, potentially leading to perceptions of undervaluation and decreased participation (Hunter & Ross, 2013; Overgaard, 2019).

Potential Barriers to Volunteering

Barriers to volunteering arise from a range of social, organizational, and logistical challenges that affect volunteer participation and retention (Swygard & Stafford, 2009; van Overbeeke et al., 2022). Social norms and perceptions, particularly gender-based restrictions, can limit volunteer involvement, as Moghaddam et al. (2018) found in their study on healthcare volunteering. Organizational practices, such as gatekeeping, can further restrict access by favouring some volunteer profiles over others, as Van Overbeeke et al. (2022) illustrate. Geographical differences also play a role, with urban-focused recruitment potentially sidelining rural communities' engagement (Journeay et al., 2022). Logistical constraints, including limited access to resources and inadequate travel assistance, contribute to physical and mental strain for volunteers in remote areas (Swygard & Stafford, 2009; Thormar et al., 2013). Understanding these multifaceted barriers is essential for developing strategies that promote inclusivity and support within volunteer programs.

Impact on Volunteer Well-being

The physical and emotional demands on volunteers and personal commitments significantly affect well-being and engagement (Thomsen & Jensen, 2020; Venzin, 2022). Volunteers may face long deployments and often make personal financial sacrifices, leading to increased stress and disenchantment, particularly when working alongside paid staff and professional responders (Thomsen & Jensen, 2020). This stress can undermine retention rates, threatening the sustainability of volunteer programs (Venzin, 2022).

Logistical and mental health challenges further exacerbate these issues. Swygard and Stafford (2009) note that inadequate travel assistance for volunteers and limited access to basic amenities contribute to physical and mental exhaustion. Long working hours in challenging conditions can intensify volunteer stress and fatigue (Swygard & Stafford, 2009). Thormar et al. (2013) emphasize that high expectations of NGOs from volunteers and prolonged deployments can lead to severe mental health impacts, such as anxiety.

Volunteer Canada (2023a) recommends implementing proactive measures as an essential way to mitigate these risks. Strategies such as improved recognition, appropriate compensation, and comprehensive support systems for post-deployment reintegration help maintain volunteer engagement and well-being (Volunteer Canada, 2023a).

Burnout

Burnout is a significant challenge for volunteers in disaster response, driven by

heavy responsibilities, unclear roles, and inadequate support (Swygard & Stafford, 2009; Thomsen & Jensen, 2020; Thormar et al., 2013). Forner et al. (2022) describe burnout as physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion resulting from overwhelming duties without sufficient support. Handy et al. (2008) and Mook et al. (2014) indicate that unclear role expectations and excessive demands contribute to volunteer exhaustion, emphasizing the importance of structured role definitions and support systems.

McLennan (2022b) notes that administrative and training demands impact volunteer burnout in disasters. Extensive paperwork, bureaucratic processes, and mandatory training sessions, while necessary, can feel burdensome when combined with primary responsibilities (McLennan, 2022b). These additional tasks can reduce volunteers' energy and resources, affecting their motivation and capacity for core roles (McLennan, 2022b). Mook et al. (2014) and Phillips (2020) highlight that role overlap between volunteers and paid staff may contribute to burnout, indicating the complexity of managing volunteer roles effectively. Role overlap can lead to volunteers feeling that they are performing tasks meant for paid staff without adequate recognition or support, fostering a sense of exploitation and increased stress, primarily when roles are not clearly defined (Mook et al., 2014; Phillips, 2020). These feelings are addressed later in the findings.

Forner et al. (2022) observe that some volunteers thrive under stress and find emotional fulfillment in their work, which may protect against burnout. Harris et al. (2017) note that emotional fulfillment can strengthen volunteer endurance, showcasing

differences in volunteer resilience. These findings suggest variability in how volunteers experience and respond to stress, which may influence burnout outcomes (Forner et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2017).

Disconnection from the Community

Bekkers (2012) highlights that community ties are essential for volunteer engagement, but modern urbanization has weakened these connections. This shift challenges NGOs to foster a sense of community that resonates with potential volunteers' local experiences. Bekkers (2012) also argues that trust is a prerequisite for volunteering, indicating that individuals with pre-existing trust in others are more inclined to participate. Distrust in organizations remains a notable barrier that NGOs must address through their engagement strategies (Bekkers, 2012; Volunteer Canada, 2023a).

Kreutzer and Jäger (2011) note that professionalized management practices in NGOs can sometimes clash with volunteer values by prioritizing efficiency over collaboration. Volunteer Canada (2023a) emphasizes that social disengagement can be countered through inclusive practices that rebuild trust and strengthen connections. Managerial approaches that balance structured processes with opportunities for collaboration can address issues related to social disengagement and align volunteer activities with their values (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Volunteer Canada, 2023a).

Overemphasis on Urban Recruitment

The focus on urban recruitment by the HWF NGOs, where volunteer pools are larger and more accessible, has significant implications for rural and remote communities (Friesen & Morrison, 2024; Zaidi et al., 2024). Volunteers are primarily

recruited from urban centers and may be deployed to rural areas, creating an uneven distribution of response capabilities across the country. This urban-centric recruitment strategy risks exacerbating volunteer shortages in less populated regions, as potential rural volunteers feel ignored or disenfranchised, possibly leaving underserved rural areas more vulnerable during disaster events (Flint & Stevenson, 2010). Journeay et al. (2022) note that recruitment strategies that focus on urban areas may alienate rural communities, potentially sidelining their willingness to engage with volunteer programs. The HWF program may struggle to provide equitable disaster response nationwide if recruitment efforts do not adequately address this imbalance (Volunteer Canada, 2023a, 2023b).

Excessive Rules or Policies

Hustinx et al. (2016) suggest that restrictive organizational policies can limit volunteer autonomy and contribute to disengagement. In the HWF program, balancing autonomy with accountability is essential, especially when volunteers must coordinate with other disaster response partners such as fire services, police, or NGOs (Hustinx et al., 2016). Structured policies provide clear roles and safe practices, ensuring operational effectiveness in high-stakes disaster settings (McLennan, 2022a, 2022b).

McLennan (2022a, 2022b) notes that professionalization may distance volunteers who prefer flexible roles. Dean (2015) suggests that under neoliberal influences, some volunteers may approach their roles with a focus on personal gain or benefits, such as skill development or networking, rather than community service or altruistic motives. Stefanick et al. (2020) emphasize that precarious work poses

challenges, as time poverty affects volunteer participation, even when some flexibility is offered.

Volunteering With Social Vulnerabilities

Van Overbeeke et al. (2022) identify organizational gatekeeping as a significant barrier that limits inclusivity. They argue that some organizations will prioritize operationally fit volunteers and exclude individuals with disabilities who may need accommodations (van Overbeeke et al., 2022). Van Overbeeke et al. (2022) find that this practice restricts diverse participation and hinders the integration of valuable perspectives. Newcomers face additional challenges, including language barriers and unfamiliarity with local norms, which can result in a variation of NGO gatekeeping, favouring volunteers who require less onboarding (van Overbeeke et al., 2022).

Inclusivity is particularly critical for volunteer programs addressing systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups. Journeay et al. (2022) indicate that low-income households and immigrants often encounter inflexible schedules or lack of transportation, limiting their ability to volunteer. Southby et al. (2019) examined structural barriers that impede the participation of older adults, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic minorities, emphasizing the importance of policies that support inclusion. When NGO policies assume volunteers will have advanced language proficiency or there is a policy expecting physical mobility, organizations effectively exclude these groups from volunteer opportunities (Southby et al., 2019). Day and Brodsky (1996) and Jang (2023) point out that the duty to accommodate volunteers with disabilities or medical limitations can pose practical challenges for NGOs. In fast-paced

and resource-limited disaster settings, ensuring that volunteers with disabilities have appropriate support, such as modified vehicles or accessible temporary shelters, can be difficult due to logistical and financial constraints (Day & Brodsky, 1996; Jang, 2023).

The challenges of balancing operational readiness and inclusivity raise important questions about the sustainability of the HWF program (Svensson & Larsson, 2024). At the same time, operational readiness is a legitimate goal in disaster response (Zaidi et al., 2024). The criteria that limit the volunteer participation of individuals with disabilities or medical conditions conflict with broader governmental policies aimed at promoting equity and inclusion (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2024). According to Women and Gender Equality Canada's GBA Plus training (2024), such practices can marginalize potential volunteers and overlook their unique skills and perspectives. Volunteer Canada (2023a) notes a gap in the legal protections and accommodations offered to volunteers compared to paid employees.

Hustinx (2010) and Jang (2023) explain that while legal protection ensures volunteers are safeguarded from discrimination, accommodation involves making necessary adjustments to support full participation. Individuals with vulnerabilities often seek opportunities to volunteer and contribute to their communities, but barriers related to disability, health, or social integration persist (Jang, 2023; Southby et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2023). Yang et al. (2023) explores how these barriers affect volunteers with disabilities, while adaptive policies and technology have enabled greater inclusion in some NGOs. These challenges reflect the need for programs to address structural and individual barriers to foster inclusive volunteer environments.

Incentives to Volunteer

Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace (2009) discuss the personal costs volunteers in emergency services often face, such as lost wages and time. Recognition and tangible rewards, such as vehicle licence plates, volunteer medals, thank you certificates, or celebrations, can validate volunteer contributions and help mitigate perceptions of exploitation (Venzin, 2022). Nissen and Carlton (2023) note that recognition systems emphasizing individual accolades may affect volunteer engagement by shifting focus to symbolic gestures like certificates.

Bill C-386, *An Act respecting the establishment and award of a Special Service Medal for Domestic Emergency Relief Operations*, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, House of Commons, 2024, highlights this issue by recognizing professionals such as military personnel, firefighters, and first responders, while excluding NGO volunteers. This distinction underscores differences between formal responders and volunteers participating in NGOs or provincial disaster response groups.

Jung (2011) suggests that recognition can improve retention, but the absence or excessive use of recognition may lead to dissatisfaction. Framing volunteer time as an economic resource can lead to perceptions of exploitation if efforts are inadequately recognized (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007). Recognizing the benefit of social and emotional rewards is also essential, as their absence can leave volunteers feeling overburdened and undervalued (R. Stebbins, 2013).

Volunteer Compensation as an Incentive

Stipends can improve inclusion and retention, particularly for low-income

volunteers (McBride et al., 2011). Monetary rewards, such as honorariums or gas cards, have been shown to boost short-term engagement but may not sustain long-term commitment (Lacetera et al., 2014). Kosfeld and Neckermann (2011) emphasize that relying on symbolic rewards without financial incentives can contribute to volunteer exploitation.

HWF volunteers often work in austere environments for extended periods and may need to take time off from paid employment to participate (Canadian Red Cross, 2024; The Salvation Army in Canada, n.d.). Incentives are typically limited to tax credits, service medals, or verbal recognition (Bignell, 2023; Cuplinskis, 2024; Parker, 2024; Zaidi et al., 2024). Hunter and Ross (2013) and Overgaard (2019) point out that stipends may cause volunteers to feel like low-paid workers rather than valued contributors, affecting volunteer motivation. Minimal financial incentives or the absence of tangible compensation can result in perceptions of unpaid labour, leading to decreased volunteer participation over time (De Clerck et al., 2019; Lacetera et al., 2014).

The decline in volunteer engagement poses risks to the HWF program's ability to maintain a stable and committed volunteer base (Mook et al., 2014; Venzin, 2022). This reduced participation can hinder operational capacity, impacting the program's effectiveness in emergency response and undermining long-term sustainability.

Summary of Barriers to Volunteer Engagement

Research highlights multifaceted barriers to volunteer engagement across personal, organizational, and societal levels. Volunteers face physical and emotional

demands impacting their well-being (Thomsen & Jensen, 2020; Venzin, 2022) and logistical issues like inadequate travel support (Swygard & Stafford, 2009; Thormar et al., 2013). Burnout due to heavy responsibilities and unclear roles is a serious concern (Forner et al., 2022; Mook et al., 2014), compounded by administrative burdens and role overlaps (McLennan, 2022b; Phillips, 2020).

Social barriers include community disconnection and organizational distrust (Bekkers, 2012). Urban-focused recruitment can exclude rural volunteers, creating disparities in response capabilities (Journeay et al., 2022). Organizational gatekeeping and policies favouring operational fit may exclude individuals with disabilities, health issues, or newcomers (Southby et al., 2019; van Overbeeke et al., 2022), conflicting with equity-promoting policies (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2024).

Recognition through incentives, such as certificates or medals, also impacts volunteer motivation (Nissen & Carlton, 2023; Venzin, 2022). While medals and symbolic rewards can validate contributions, they may not sufficiently address the personal costs volunteers face, leading to perceptions of undervaluation and reduced participation (Baxter-Tomkins, & Wallace, 2009; Hunter & Ross, 2013; Overgaard, 2019). This reliance on symbolic recognition without tangible support can threaten the sustainability of programs like the HWF by diminishing volunteer motivation and long-term engagement (Mook et al., 2014; Venzin, 2022).

Literature Review Summary

In conclusion, volunteers are the backbone of disaster management—but if that backbone breaks, so does the system. NGOs participating in the HWF program, integral

to Canada's disaster response, face mounting challenges in sustaining volunteer engagement. Burnout, organizational rigidity, and exclusionary policies threaten the program's effectiveness. The literature points to a critical tension: NGOs must balance the professionalization needed for operational efficiency with the flexibility that volunteers value. Professionalization within the HWF) program involves structuring volunteer roles through formal training, credentialing, and adherence to standardized policies. While this approach enhances consistency in disaster response, it may alienate volunteers who prioritize autonomy and civic engagement. The challenge lies in balancing operational efficiency with volunteer-driven motivations to sustain participation (Alfes et al., 2017; Braley-Rattai, 2021).

Excessive rules and rigid structures risk driving volunteers away, especially those seeking autonomy and episodic involvement.

Sustaining the HWF program requires balancing professionalization with flexibility and inclusivity. Clear role differentiation can prevent conflicts between paid staff and volunteers, ensuring structured training enhances rather than replaces volunteer contributions. A tiered engagement model allows varying levels of commitment while maintaining operational efficiency. Participatory decision-making fosters collaboration and trust, reducing the risk of recreancy by ensuring volunteers feel valued.

Research Design and Methods

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the HWF program. I used the researcher-as-interpretive-bricoleur method, which involves gathering information

from many sources to get a full picture (Rogers, 2012). Using a bricoleur approach, I developed a deeper understanding of affiliated volunteer participation and found actionable strategies to increase volunteer engagement (Guest, 2013). The flexibility of this approach fits the study's unique needs rather than adhering to more traditional methods (Guest, 2013).

This approach is guided by critical realism and constructivism, which means I considered people's thoughts and experiences (Moon & Blackman, 2014). A pragmatic philosophy shaped how I designed the research and interpret solutions in the real world (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

Through online interactions, including surveys and thematic focus groups, this study collected stories and experiences from volunteers and paid NGO staff to understand volunteer issues and barriers they face in the HWF program (Moon & Blackman, 2014; Rogers, 2012). Kaushik and Walsh (2019) offer that the empirical knowledge gained may contribute to developing actionable strategies by focusing on practical outcomes and real-world implications.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to find ways to improve affiliated volunteer engagement in Canadian Humanitarian Workforce program by examining the barriers volunteers face and the strategies non-governmental organizations use. The key question of this study is:

- What are the barriers to volunteer engagement in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participating in the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) program?

Furthermore, this study also asks:

- What strategies do potential or current volunteers and NGO paid staff find effective in addressing recruitment, retention, and inclusivity for the HWF program?
- How do these groups perceive the changes and opportunities in volunteer engagement with the HWF program as it evolves?

Methodological Framework

Study Participant Recruitment and Strategy

The first phase used a mix of quota and purposive sampling from a selection of panelists. This approach means choosing a diverse group of people. Focusing on a generalized cross section of panelists, a representative of the Canadian population was the goal. I used SurveyMonkey, an online survey service to identify and select a research panel.

This qualitative survey targets people aged 19 to 65 who can volunteer for the HWF. I also sampled people based on eight additional criteria generally grouped into gender, region where people live, community where respondents live, their main employment, what they use for transportation, their accommodations, the level of education and participants' household income. This empirical data assisted with understanding the different types of current HWF volunteers and those who are hesitant

or do not want to volunteer. By looking at these themes, we can learn more about the profiles of volunteers and potential volunteers. The information from this sample should be representative of the potential Canadian HWF.

In the second phase, I hosted two online focus groups with ZOOM conferencing software, to learn more from the survey findings. Participants for these two focus groups were selected from those who completed the online survey. The focus groups for this study was based on Caillaud et al.'s (2024) recommendation that it is important to have a good mix of people and interactions in focus groups. These participants held different experiences and backgrounds. For this study, focus group participants were current or past NGO volunteers, business owners, firefighter, paramedics, community leaders and interested members of the public. Meyer and Mayrhofer (2022) note that focus groups help create rich discussions. These discussions are essential for understanding different perspectives in the HWF program.

Using these methods, I gathered a wide range of views from Canadians who can volunteer for the HWF. This approach helped to better understand volunteer experiences and the barriers they face. This understanding was important for determining improvements of the HWF program and ensuring it meets volunteers' needs.

Stage One: Online Survey Process and Purpose

SurveyMonkey's online survey platform was used to notify potential participants of the survey and to screen for 120 participants and gather information in stage one of this study. The survey, included in Appendix A, consisting of 30 questions, was

estimated to take 15 minutes to complete with most surveys being completed in less than eight minutes. Most of the survey questions are closed-ended for better generalization, while seven questions are open-ended for more detailed responses.

Information from Statistics Canada (2020, 2021, 2024), Employment and Social Development Canada (2023), and Volunteer Canada (2023a) guided the selection of a panel. The recruitment process for the survey was an internal through SurveyMonkey to match panelists meeting the preset criteria. This created a representative sample of 120 Canadians who are not currently involved in volunteer roles or are reluctant to volunteer with NGOs in the HWF program. A mix of quota and purposive sampling approach was used to reach saturation for each code, as emphasized by Hennink et al. (2017). A mix of quota and purposive sampling ensures that selected participants represent the population for each theme or group. For example, by determining participants' province, I was able to group BC, AB, SK and MB into the Western region, with ON and QC designated as the Central region and NB, NS, NFLD and PEI as the Atlantic region.

Coding categorized survey participants into themes, enabling of skip logic to limit specific groups once participation quotas are met (Peterson, 2017). Codes include criteria like ages, regions, and other factors. By continually coding and analyzing data until no new themes emerge, saturation is achieved. A sample size of 120 participants was appropriate to achieve saturation (Lakens, 2022). This number covers key themes and variations in volunteer engagement, ensuring a comprehensive understanding.

To ensure a representative sample, the baseline population was divided into smaller generalized groups (Creswell, 2021). This process, known as stratification,

involved dividing the population into subgroups based on specific characteristics to ensure each subgroup is adequately represented. For instance, based on Hahmann's (2021) report, one example of a smaller sample group is with 51 women out of 120 participants encouraged to complete the survey. Another example is for regional participation limited to 49 participants from Western Canada, 38 from Central Canada, and 33 from Atlantic Canada. After target limits were met for each category, 52 additional panelists were disqualified, thanked for their interest, and their incomplete surveys were ethically disposed of through the survey software. These two examples of stratification provided a diverse representation of gender and regional representation in the survey.

Stage Two: Focus Groups Process and Purpose

In the second stage of this study, using the interview guide, included in Appendix B, two focus groups were conducted. Each focus group consisted of three participants, to gain deeper insights into the barriers to volunteering (Caillaud et al., 2024). Although the original plan proposed three focus groups with 15 participants, the final composition of six participants proved suitable for the study's objectives. The six individuals included two community leaders, three small business owners, and one first responder. Notably, 67% of the participants were current or past volunteers with one or more NGOs involved in the HWF program. Half of the participants also had extensive experience volunteering in other community-based organizations. As shown in Table 2, participants' (n=6) sociodemographic backgrounds span urban, suburban, and rural settings, include individuals with disabilities (n=4) and without disabilities (n=2), and reflect a range of

educational and employment statuses. This diverse composition ensured that the focus groups captured various perspectives, reflecting operational realities and community-specific challenges related to volunteer engagement.

Table 2
Focus Group Sociodemographic

		Total (n=6)		Without disability (n=2)		With disability (n=4)	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Gender	Male	3	50	1	17	2	33
	Female	3	50	1	17	2	33
Age	Adult	3	50	1	17	2	33
	Mature	3	50	1	17	2	33
Region	Western	1	17	1	17		
	Central	1	17			1	17
	Atlantic	4	67	1	17	3	50
Community	Urban	1	17	1	17		
	Suburban	2	33			2	33
	Rural	3	50	1	17	2	33
Accommodation	Own	6	100	2	33	4	67
Education	High School	2	33	1	17	1	17
	College/Trade	3	50	1	17	2	33
	University	1	17			1	17
Transportation	Drive	6	100	2	33	4	67

Table 2
Focus Group Sociodemographic

		Total (n=6)		Without disability (n=2)		With disability (n=4)	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Employment	F/T	4	67	1	17	3	50
	Student	1	17			1	17
	Retired	1	17	1	17		

Notes Youth ages 19-30; Adult ages 31-54; Mature ages 55-65.

Western region: BC, AB, SK, MB; Central region: ON, QC; Atlantic region: NB, NS, NL, PEI.

Education: Community College, Trade school; University: Undergraduate, Graduate, Doctoral.
% of total focus group participants.

Whole numbers were used in the representation of data, minor rounding discrepancies may occur.

Engaging a smaller participant pool arose from practical challenges such as participant availability and short-notice cancellations. Rather than diluting the depth of inquiry by introducing last-minute substitutes, I focused on a core group capable of participants providing rich, contextually grounded input.

Meyer and Mayrhofer (2022) emphasize that the quality of focus group interactions, rather than the size of the groups, determines the richness of the insights generated. Smaller groups can still facilitate meaningful dialogue, as participants may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences in a more intimate setting. Moreover, Creswell and Creswell (2023) highlight that focus groups yield nuanced, contextual insights into participant perceptions and lived experiences, complementing the broader trends identified through surveys.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected in two stages to identify recurring themes and patterns related to barriers to volunteering in the HWF program. In Stage One, responses were gathered via an online SurveyMonkey questionnaire. An electronic copy of the consent and confidentiality statement was provided at the survey outset, and participants affirmed their consent in Question 1 of Appendix A, complying with the university's ethics review board standards.

In Stage Two, two focus groups were conducted and recorded through Zoom. Written consent to record was obtained during recruitment and confirmed verbally at the start of each session. Zoom's automatic transcription feature produced verbatim transcripts, which the researcher reviewed for accuracy and shared with participants for

member checking before inclusion in the analysis.

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) systematically identified key barriers, motivations, and awareness issues across both stages—NVivo qualitative software assisted in organizing and comparing the emerging themes. Rather than quantifying responses, this process grouped data to examine how factors—such as urban versus rural residence—might influence volunteer engagement. By triangulating survey findings with focus group insights, the study arrived at a richer, context-sensitive understanding of participants' experiences. Geography and community were important considerations for thematic analysis because they influenced access to resources, opportunities, and experiences. Understanding these themes revealed how socioeconomic factors affected individuals' ability and willingness to volunteer. For instance, higher access levels often correlate with greater awareness of volunteering opportunities. In contrast, lower awareness was associated with barriers such as lack of interest or support for the HWF program. Analyzing these themes provided a nuanced exploration of how different backgrounds impacted volunteer engagement and highlighted the challenges diverse groups face within the HWF program.

Patton (2022) emphasized the need for relevant and useful data collection, and Morse (2022) advocated for a flexible and nuanced approach. NVivo software was used for systematic analysis and coding of the data. This process assisted with organizing survey responses into eighteen general coded themes to identify patterns and correlations (Friese, 2022).

Coding Strategy and Integration

Coding in bricolage research is a creative and interpretive act (Rogers, 2012). NVivo is a software used tool to assist in finding patterns and connections in the data, making the analysis richer and more detailed (Patton, 2022). Inductive and deductive coding was used. Inductive coding grouped new categories, while deductive coding will place responses into existing categories (Hennink et al., 2017). This process assisted with uncovering barriers and opportunities in the HWF program to discover meaningful findings (Morse, 2022).

Validity and Reliability in Bricolage Research

Bricolage research acknowledges validity and reliability, even when restricted to a specific process, such as initial data collection through online surveys, first analysis, follow-up data collection through focus groups, and final interpretation (Rogers, 2012). The concepts of validity and reliability can be integrated within these steps to ensure methodological rigour.

Validity

This study achieved validity through multiple strategies implemented throughout the research process. Initially, I ensured content validity by designing online survey questions that comprehensively addressed key aspects of the HWF program (Kelley et al., 2003). During the first data analysis phase, triangulation enhanced validity by comparing survey results with existing data from the literature review (Flick, 2007). The focus groups further strengthened validity by examining participants' contextual narratives and detailed perspectives. Finally, during the interpretation phase, I used

these various forms of validity to verify that the research findings were robust, comprehensive, and accurately reflected the dynamic experiences associated with the HWF program.

Reliability

During the first analysis, reliability was maintained by coding the data and comparing results for consistency and through clear documentation of coding schemes and decision-making processes (Friese, 2022). Follow-up data collection enhanced reliability by using consistent protocols, applying standardized questions and procedures for all focus groups, and facilitating sessions consistently (Morse, 2022). Final interpretation ensures reliability through an audit trail and detailed data collection and analysis process documentation to confirm that findings are grounded in the data (Morse, 2022).

Data Integrity and Privacy

Research participants were advised that data gathered through online platforms such as ZOOM and NVivo software would be saved on servers located in the United States and subject to their privacy laws. Local data was secured on encrypted password protected drives and locked in a safe when not in use. Identifying information was redacted prior to transmitting transcripts for participants' review. Recordings and related research data will be destroyed two years after this research is published.

Ethical Considerations

This study proposed to engage with human participants, so an ethical review by Royal Roads University's Research Ethics Board was obtained before data collection.

The standards of informed consent, privacy the study's scope and their rights, including the right to withdraw were adhered to throughout each stage of the study. These measures ensure that the study not only adheres to ethical norms but also respects the dignity and agency of all participants (Etkin & Timmerman, 2022). This unfunded, student-led project offered no financial incentives for participation.

Limitations

As a researcher with prior volunteer experience with a participating NGO, this insider perspective may shape how I interpret participant responses and contextualize emerging themes. Throughout the study, I engaged in reflexive journaling, recording instances where my familiarity with the NGO's culture and practices could have coloured my understanding of the data. By periodically revisiting these reflections, I remained alert to biases that might cause me to over- or underemphasize certain findings. I strived to ensure that the conclusions presented reflected the breadth of participants' perspectives rather than being driven by my preexisting knowledge or affiliations within the HWF program.

This research has inherent limitations that affect the scope and depth of its findings. The dynamic nature of the bricolage method, while adaptable and innovative, presents challenges in navigating non-traditional research pathways (Phillimore et al., 2019). The study is also constrained by time and budget, typical of student-led research. These constraints impacted the breadth of participant recruitment and the extent of subgroup analysis, notably excluding certain demographics such as First Nations and LGBTQ+ individuals. Consequently, unique barriers faced by these groups

remain unaddressed, limiting the generalizability of findings across all potential volunteer demographics.

The decision to focus on a broader, representative sample of adults aged 19 to 65 aligns with available resources but narrows the insights into more specific, potentially vulnerable volunteer subpopulations. Addressing this gap would require a more extensive, resource-intensive study that goes beyond the current research parameters.

Ben-Asher (2022) emphasizes mitigating time and budget limitations by leveraging online tools, which was incorporated into this study. However, despite these strategies, limitations in scope persist, influencing the range of qualitative insights obtained.

Another research limitation lies in the reliance on volunteers to bolster the HWF program. This dependency may shift responsibilities away from governmental and organizational bodies that should maintain primary accountability for disaster response (Freudenburg, 1993). Such dependency can challenge institutional roles and create vulnerabilities in response capabilities.

These limitations call for a balanced interpretation of findings, integrating both individual and systemic perspectives to guide realistic and inclusive recommendations for enhancing volunteer engagement and support within the HWF program.

Findings

The sustainability of community-based disaster resilience depends on how volunteer programs, such as the HWF, align organizational strategies with the needs and motivations of volunteers. The findings from this study identify critical gaps in

supporting volunteer engagement, including barriers to participation and perceptions of program efficacy that may compromise the capacity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to mobilize surge support during crises.

Findings From Survey Sociodemographics

The following 28 tables present the responses from the survey sample and focus group responses. This data will be used to contextualize the findings. Table 3 details the sociodemographic criteria for 57% of male respondents (n = 68), illustrating how specific subgroups can be examined through the data. The research gained granular insights by integrating closed-ended survey items.

Disability-related data in Table 3 emerged from responses to open-ended survey questions (Q8, Q9, Q17, Q19, Q21, and Q23). Although the survey did not include a direct question on disability, the high volume of respondents identifying disability-related barriers indicated a significant issue requiring analysis.

Table 3
Survey Sociodemographic: Male

		General population group						Visible minority group			
		Total male (n=68)		Without disability		With disability		Without disability		With disability	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Age	Youth	18	15	7	5.8	2	1.7	8	6.7	1	<1
	Adult	32	27	19	15.8	4	3.3	8	6.7	1	<1
	Mature	18	15	11	9.2	7	5.8				
Region	Western	24	20	11	9.2	5	4.2	8	6.7		
	Central	32	27	19	15.8	4	3.3	8	6.7	1	<1
	Atlantic	12	10	7	5	4	3.3			1	<1
Community	Urban	40	33	23	19	6	5	11	9.2		
	Suburban	19	15.8	10	8.3	4	3.3	4	3.3	1	<1
	Rural	9	7.5	4	3.3	3	2.5	1	<1	1	<1
Accommodation	Own	35	29	20	17	6	5	8	6.7	1	<1
	Rent	32	27	17	14	6	5	8	6.7	1	<1
	Shared	1	<1			1	<1				
Education	High School	14	12	7	5.8	5	8	2	1.7		
	College/Trade	17	14	11	9.2	1	<1	4	3.3	1	<1
	University	37	31	19	15.8	7	5.8	10	8.3	1	<1

Table 3
Survey Sociodemographic: Male

		General population group						Visible minority group			
		Total male (n=68)		Without disability		With disability		Without disability		With disability	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Transportation	Drive	49	41	26	21.6	8	6.7	14	12	1	<1
	Public	16	13.3	9	7.5	4	3.3	2	1.7	1	<1
	Active	3	2.5	2	1.7	1	<1				
Employment	Full-Time	48	40	28	23	9	7.5	10	8.3	1	<1
	Part-Time	2	1.7	1	<1			1	<1		
	Looking	7	5.8	2	1.7			5	4.2		
	Student	2	1.7	1	<1					1	<1
	Retired	9	7.5	5	4.2	4	3.3				
Income	Low	16	13.3	11	9.2	1	<1	4	3.3		
	Average	40	33	20	17	11	9.2	8	6.7	1	<1
	High	12	10	6	5	1	<1	4	6.7	1	<1

Notes Youth ages 19-30; Adult ages 31-54; Mature ages 55-65.

Western region: BC, AB, SK, MB; Central region: ON, QC; Atlantic region: NB, NS, NL, PEI.

Education: Community College, Trade school; University: Undergraduate, Graduate, Doctoral.

Low income <\$37,500; Average income between \$37,500-\$110,500; High income >\$110,500.

% of total survey respondents.

Whole numbers were used in the representation of data, so minor rounding discrepancies may occur.

The data for 43% of female respondents (n = 52), presented in Table 4, reflect their backgrounds across the same eight predefined sociodemographic criteria established during Stage One recruitment. No female respondents identified as both visible minorities and individuals with disabilities, indicating a potential gap in representation for this subgroup.

Table 4
Survey Sociodemographic: Female

		General population group				Visible minority group			
		Total female (n=52)		Without disability		With disability		Without disability	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Age	Youth	12	10	9	7.5			3	2.5
	Adult	29	24	17	14	9	7.5	3	2.5
	Mature	11	9	6	5	3	2.5	2	1.7
Region	Western	25	21	16	13.3	5	4.2	4	3.3
	Central	20	17	10	8.3	6	5	4	3.3
	Atlantic	7	5.8	6	5	1	<1		
Community	Urban	35	29	21	17.5	7	5.8	7	5.8
	Suburban	12	10	7	5.8	4	3.3	1	<1

Table 4*Survey Sociodemographic: Female*

		General population group						Visible minority group	
		Total female (n=52)		Without disability		With disability		Without disability	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
	Rural	5	4.2	4	3.3	1	<1		
Accommodation	Own	24	20	11	9	6	5	7	5.8
	Rent	24	20	17	14.1	6	5	1	<1
	Shared	4	3.3	4	3.3				
Education	High School	12	10	7	5.8	4	3.3	1	<1
	College/Trade	12	10	9	7.5	1	<1	2	1.7
	University	28	23	16	13.3	7	5.8	5	4.2
Transportation	Drive	32	27	17	14.1	7	5.8	8	6.7
	Public	12	10	7	5.8	5	4.2		
	Active	8	6.7	8	6.7				
Employment	Full-Time	22	18.3	14	12	5	3	3	2.5
	Part-Time	10	8.3	6	5	3	2.5	1	<1
	Looking	10	8.3	6	5	1	<1	3	2.5

Table 4*Survey Sociodemographic: Female*

		General population group						Visible minority group	
		Total female (n=52)		Without disability		With disability		Without disability	
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
	Retired	10	8.3	6	5	3	2.5	1	<1
Income	Low	12	10	9	7.5	1	<1	2	1.7
	Average	26	21.6	15	12.5	7	5.8	4	3.3
	High	14	12	8	6.7	4	3.3	2	1.7

Notes Youth ages 19-30; Adult ages 31-54; Mature ages 55-65.

Western region: BC, AB, SK, MB; Central region: ON, QC; Atlantic region: NB, NS, NL, PEI.

Education: Community College, Trade school; University: Undergraduate, Graduate, Doctoral.

Low income <\$37,500; Average income between \$37,500-\$110,500; High income >\$110,500.

% of total survey respondents.

Whole numbers were used in the representation of data, so minor rounding discrepancies may occur.

The combined survey data from Tables 3 and 4, presented in Table 5 reveal a broad participant pool across multiple sociodemographic categories. Male respondents 57% and female respondents 43% spanned youth 25% adult 50%, and mature 25% age groups. Most participants concentrated in urban 63% and suburban 25% areas, and a smaller portion residing in rural 12% communities. Respondents were represented across Western 41%, Central 43%,

Table 5
Combined Key Sociodemographic Survey data

		Total (n=120)	
		no.	%
Gender	Male	68	57
	Female	52	43
Age	Youth	30	25
	Adult	61	50
	Mature	29	25
Region	Western	49	41
	Central	52	43
	Atlantic	19	16
Community	Urban	75	63
	Suburban	31	25
	Rural	14	12
Education	High School	26	21
	College/Trades	29	25

Table 5
Combined Key Sociodemographic Survey data

		Total (n=120)	
		no.	%
	University	65	54
Employment	Full-Time	70	58
	Part-Time	12	10
	Looking Work	17	10
Employment	Student	2	6
	Retired	19	16
Disability	Without	93	78
	With	27	22
Visible minority		38	32

Notes

Columns from Table 3 and Table 4 added to create Table 5
% of total survey respondents.

Disability-related data was identified from open-ended responses in questions 8, 9, 17, 19, 21, and 23,

Whole numbers were used in the representation of data, so minor rounding discrepancies may occur.

and Atlantic 16% regions. Respondents hold varying education levels, from high school 21% through university 54%. The survey panellists have differing employment statuses, including full-time 58%, part-time 10%, seeking work 10%, or retired 16%.

Responses from question ten, in Appendix A, shows ten respondents in Table 6, who currently volunteer with one or more HWF NGOs. No respondents identified as having been previously employed as staff with one of these NGOs. Seventeen

respondents are not currently volunteering with any of the HWF NGOs and are interested in volunteering with all five of these NGOs. Another forty respondents are interested in volunteering with two or more of these five NGOs. Thirty-three respondents will only volunteer with one of these five NGOs but are not currently doing so. Twenty-one respondents are not interested in volunteering with any of the NGOs in the HWF program.

Table 6
Survey Respondents Relationship with HWF NGOs

	Volunteers				Staff		Potential volunteers				N/A	
	Current		Past		Current		Interested		Not interested			
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Canadian Red Cross (CRC)	4	3	9	8	1	<1	70	58	35	29	1	<1
St. John Ambulance (SJA)	4	3	3	3			48	40	64	53	1	<1
The Salvation Army (SA)	4	3	10	8			47	39	59	49		
Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada (SARVAC)	2	2	2	2			51	43	64	53	1	<1
Team Rubicon (TR)	2	2	3	3	2	2	27	22	82	68	4	3

Notes

% of total survey respondents.

Respondents may belong to more than one group.

Whole numbers were used in the representation of data, so minor rounding discrepancies may occur.

Findings From Survey Respondent Opinions

The following tables represents responses from survey their opinions on a range of HWF topics. Table 7 asks respondents what makes them want to volunteer. The question is part of Appendix A, question three. Helping others is the strongest reason for 51 males and 49 females, or 68% of respondents.

Table 7
What Makes You Want to Volunteer?

		Helping others n=100 (68%)	Meet people n=64 (53%)	Learn new skills n=53 (44%)	I want to feel needed n=36 (30%)
Gender	Male	51	37	26	21
	Female	49	27	27	15
Age	Youth	24	19	15	10
	Adult	51	34	31	15
	Mature	25	11	7	11
Region	Western	35	27	20	13
	Central	47	27	26	17
	Atlantic	18	10	7	6
Community	Urban	66	41	35	22
	Suburban	23	19	12	8
	Rural	11	4	6	6
Disability	With a disability	22	15	12	11
	Without a disability	78	49	41	25

Notes

Responses to question 3, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, 19, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

Respondents were asked how much time they preferred to volunteer in Appendix A, question four. The results are to this question are found in Table 8. The majority of respondents (n=62) prefer a single shift or a few short hours of volunteering. A minority of respondents (n=14) prefer longer, reoccurring volunteer opportunities.

Table 8
How Long Do You Prefer Volunteering For?

		Short: A few hours n=62 (52%)	Boths options n=44 (37%)	Longer term: Multiple days n=14 (12%)
Gender	Male	34	24	10
	Female	28	20	4
Age	Youth	17	6	7
	Adult	32	23	6
	Mature	13	15	1
Region	Western	31	16	2
	Central	23	18	11
	Atlantic	8	10	1
Community	Urban	39	25	11
	Suburban	16	12	3
	Rural	7	7	
Disability	With a disability	12	13	2
	Without a disability	50	31	12

Notes

Responses to question 4, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups. Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, 19, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

Table 9 illustrates respondents’ prior awareness of the HWF program, highlighting that most respondents (n=103) had not heard of the program, with awareness slightly higher among males and those in central regions.

Table 9
Have You Previously Heard of The HWF Program?

		No n=103 (86%)	Yes n=17 (14%)
Gender	Male	54	14
	Female	49	3
Age	Youth	24	6
	Adult	52	9
	Mature	27	2
Region	Western	44	5
	Central	40	12
	Atlantic	19	
Community	Urban	64	11
	Suburban	26	5
	Rural	13	1
Education	High School	22	4
	College/Trades	25	4
	University	56	9

Notes
Responses to question 6, 24, 25, 26, and 31 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

The data in Table 10 highlights respondents’ desire to help others after a disaster, with a majority either agreeing (n=49) or strongly agreeing (n=38), particularly among urban residents and adults.

Table 10*Do You Want to Volunteer to Help Others After a Disaster?*

		Strongly agree n=38 (32%)	Agree n=49 (41%)	Neither n=30 (25%)	Disagree n=1 (1%)	Strongly disagree n=2 (2%)
Gender	Male	21	25	19	1	2
	Female	17	24	11		
Age	Youth	11	14	4		1
	Adult	21	22	16	1	1
	Mature	6	13	10		
Region	Western	11	23	15		
	Central	15	24	10	1	2
	Atlantic	12	2	5		
Community	Urban	25	31	18	1	
	Suburban	8	14	7		2
	Rural	5	4	5		
Disability	With a disability	9	11	6		1
	Without a disability	29	38	24	1	1

Notes

Responses to question 7, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups. Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, 19, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

Question eight in Appendix A was an open-ended question, allowing Respondents to offer their barriers for volunteering. The findings in Table 11 show barriers limiting respondents' ability to volunteer, with time (n=31) and human resource issues (n=17) emerging as the primary constraints across most demographics.

Table 11
What are the Reasons Respondents do not Volunteer?

		Time	Human Resource	Transportation	Safety	Disability	Flexibility	Awareness
		n=31 (26%)	n=17 (14%)	n=15 (13%)	n=13 (11%)	n=12 (10%)	n=9 (8%)	n=8 (7%)
Gender	Male	17	9	8	6	5	7	2
	Female	14	8	7	7	7	2	6
Age	Youth	6	4	1	1	1	1	2
	Adult	20	10	4	10	6	5	4
	Mature	5	3	7	2	5	3	2
Region	Western	11	8	6	6	4	2	2
	Central	15	8	6	7	4	4	4
	Atlantic	5	1	3		4	3	2
Community	Urban	20	10	8	10	7	2	7
	Suburban	7	6	5	3	3	6	
	Rural	4	1	2		2	1	1
Employment	Full-Time	23	10	8	8	3	8	4
	Part-Time	3	4		1	2		2
	Looking for Work	3	2	1	3	1	1	1
	Student					1		1

Table 11
What are the Reasons Respondents do not Volunteer?

		Time n=31 (26%)	Human Resource n=17 (14%)	Transportation n=15 (13%)	Safety n=13 (11%)	Disability n=12 (10%)	Flexibility n=9 (8%)	Awarenes s n=8 (7%)
Transportation	Retired	2	1	6	1	5		
	Drive	23	10	7	9	5	7	5
	Public	5	5	6	3	7	1	1
Visible Minority Status	Active	3	2	2	1		1	2
	Visible Minority	7	1	2	6	1		1
	Non- Visible Minority	24	16	13	7	11	9	7

Notes

Responses to question 8, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.
 Replies to question 15 was used to determine respondents who self-identified as a visible minority.
 Disability-related data was identified from open-ended responses in Q8, Q9, Q17, Q19, Q21, and Q23,

Table 12 illustrates factors that would improve respondents' willingness to volunteer, emphasizing flexibility (n=15) and awareness (n=10) as key motivators, particularly among urban and adult populations. An open-ended question was used for these responses (Appendix A, Question 9).

Table 12
What Would Improve a Desire to Volunteer?

		Flexibility n=15 (13%)	Awareness n=10 (8%)	Incentives n=10 (8%)	Human Resource n=7 (6%)	Transportation n=7 (6%)
Gender	Male	9	3	10	2	1
	Female	6	7		5	6
Age	Youth	5	3	2		1
	Adult	8	6	4	6	4
	Mature	2	1	4	1	2
Region	Western	7		4	4	4
	Central	6	8	5	3	1
	Atlantic	2	2	1		2
Community	Urban	10	7	8	5	4
	Suburban	4	3	1	2	1
	Rural	1	1	1		2
Disability	With a disability	4	1	3	3	1
	Without a disability	11	9	7	4	6

Notes

Responses to question 9, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, 19, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified with a disability or medical limitation.

Nil replies (n=53) and statistically insignificant themes (n=18) are not reflected in this table.

The data in Table 13 highlights reasons preventing engagement with HWF NGOs, revealing that lacking skills (n=32) and being too busy (n=32) were the most reported barriers across regions and age groups.

Table 13
What Prevents Respondents Volunteering with HWF NGOs?

	Theme	Training	Time	Awareness	Transportation	Awareness
	Description	I don't have the skills n=32 (27%)	I'm too busy n=32 (27%)	I didn't know who to contact n=24 (20%)	Travel to volunteer is difficult n=19 (16%)	I didn't know help was needed n=13 (11%)
Gender	Male	15	19	11	12	11
	Female	17	13	13	7	2
Age	Youth	5	8	7	4	6
	Adult	16	19	11	11	4
	Mature	11	5	6	4	3
Region	Western	13	16	6	9	5
	Central	12	11	15	8	6
	Atlantic	7	5	3	2	2
Community	Urban	18	18	16	14	9
	Suburban	9	11	5	3	3
	Rural	5	3	3	2	1

Notes

Responses to question 11, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.
Total responses n=120.

Findings in Table 14 show the importance of seeing the impact of volunteering, with urban adults showing the highest agreement (n=51).

Table 14*How Important is seeing the Impact of Your Volunteering?*

		Strongly agree n=35 (29%)	Agree n=51 (43%)	Neither n=29 (24%)	Disagree or Strongly disagree n=5 (4%)
Gender	Male	15	31	18	4
	Female	20	20	11	1
Age	Youth	13	11	4	2
	Adult	17	25	16	5
	Mature	5	15	9	
Region	Western	10	19	17	3
	Central	19	24	7	2
	Atlantic	6	8	5	
Community	Urban	26	29	19	1
	Suburban	7	17	3	4
	Rural	2	5	7	

Notes

Responses to question 12, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.
Total responses n=120.

Table 15 illustrates the potential for training to increase volunteer engagement, with nearly half of respondents indicating likely (n=47) or very likely (n=33) support, particularly among urban males and adults.

Table 15
Would Training or Skills Increase Your Volunteering?

		Likely n=47 (39%)	Very likely n=33 (28%)	Neither n=32 (27%)	Unlikely n=5 (4%)	Very unlikely n=3 (3%)
Gender	Male	26	18	20	2	2
	Female	21	15	12	3	1
Age	Youth	11	9	7	1	2
	Adult	22	18	17	3	1
	Mature	14	6	8	1	
Region	Western	18	12	16	1	1
	Central	23	15	10	3	1
	Atlantic	6	6	6	1	1
Community	Urban	31	23	16	3	2
	Suburban	15	5	10		1
	Rural	1	5	6	2	
Education	High School	9	7	6	3	1
	College/Trades	12	10	6	1	
	University	26	16	20	1	2

Notes

Responses to question 13, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 31 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Total responses n=120.

The data in Table 16 highlights one-word descriptions of HWF NGOs, showing a polarization between positive (n=48) and negative (n=47) responses, with males and urban respondents more likely to express negative perceptions.

Table 16
What Word Describes the HWF NGOs by Demographics?

		Positive n=48 (40%)	Neutral n=25 (21%)	Negative n=47 (39%)
Gender	Male	25	15	28
	Female	23	10	19
Age	Youth	9	4	17
	Adult	25	15	21
	Mature	14	6	9
Region	Western	20	11	18
	Central	21	10	21
	Atlantic	7	4	8
Community	Urban	30	15	30
	Suburban	13	7	11
	Rural	5	3	6

Notes

Responses to question 13, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups. Total responses n=120.

Findings in Table 17 show perceptions of HWF NGOs by status, indicating that potential volunteers interested in the program expressed both positive (n=28) and negative (n=26) views, while past volunteers leaned negative.

Table 17
What is The Perception of HWF NGOs by Status?

		Positive n=48 (40%)	Neutral n=25 (21%)	Negative n=47 (39%)
Potential Volunteers	Interested	28	18	26
	Not interested	11	3	8
Volunteers	Current	4	2	4
	Past	4	1	8
Staff		1	1	1

Notes

Responses to question 10, and 14 were used to identify total responses n=120.

Table 18 illustrates perceptions of climate change's impact on volunteering, with most respondents reporting that it greatly (n=40) or somewhat increases (n=54) volunteer needs, particularly among females and youth.

Table 18
Is Climate Change Affecting Volunteering in DEM?

		Somewhat increasing n=54 (45%)	Greatly increasing n=40 (33%)	No change n=19 (16%)	Somewhat or Greatly decreasing n=7 (6%)
Gender	Male	36	15	12	5
	Female	18	25	7	2
Age	Youth	12	10	7	1
	Adult	29	20	7	5
	Mature	13	10	5	1
Region	Western	22	18	7	2
	Central	21	17	11	3
	Atlantic	11	5	1	2
Community	Urban	29	26	16	4
	Suburban	17	10	2	2
	Rural	8	4	1	1

Notes

Responses to question 16, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.
 Total responses n=120.

The data in Table 19 highlights strategies for improving HWF recruitment, emphasizing awareness (n=41) as the largest barrier in recruitment. Other improvements in resources and training (n=10) were also noted by noted by respondent groups.

Table 19*How can HWF NGOs Improve Volunteer Recruitment?*

		Awareness n=41 (34%)	Resource n=10 (8%)	Training n=10 (8%)	Human Resource n=9 (8%)	Incentive n=5 (4%)
Gender	Male	19	4	5	5	4
	Female	22	5	5	4	1
Age	Youth	7	6	1	4	1
	Adult	21	3	6	3	4
	Mature	13	1	3	2	
Region	Western	16	3	7	4	3
	Central	19	5	2	4	1
	Atlantic	6	2	1	1	1
Community	Urban	23	7	7	7	4
	Suburban	11	2	3	1	
	Rural	7	1		1	1

Table 19*How can HWF NGOs Improve Volunteer Recruitment?*

		Awareness n=41 (34%)	Resource n=10 (8%)	Training n=10 (8%)	Human Resource n=9 (8%)	Incentive n=5 (4%)
Disability	With a disability	17	1	1	2	2
	Without a disability	24	9	9	7	3
Visible minority status	Visible minority	5	2	3	4	2
	Non-Visible minority	36	8	7	5	3

Notes

Responses to question 17, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Replies to questions 8, 9, 19, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

Replies to question 15 was used to determine respondents who self-identified as a visible minority.

Nil replies (n=41) and statistically insignificant themes (n=4) are not reflected in this table.

Findings in Table 20 show respondents' availability for additional volunteer hours, with urban adults being the most flexible, preferring short-term (n=47) or medium-term commitments (n=47).

Table 20
How Many Extra Hours Would Respondents Have for the HWF?

		Short: A few hours a week n=47 (39%)	Medium: A few hours a month n=47 (39%)	No extra time n=26 (22%)
Gender	Male	25	26	17
	Female	22	21	9
Age	Youth	12	10	8
	Adult	19	29	13
	Mature	16	8	5
Region	Western	18	22	9
	Central	22	18	12
	Atlantic	7	7	5
Community	Urban	32	28	15
	Suburban	10	13	8
	Rural	5	6	3
Disability	With a disability	7	13	7
	Without a disability	40	34	19

Notes

Responses to question 18, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, 19, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

The data in Table 21 highlights supports needed for volunteering, highlighting training (n=16) and incentives (n=13) as critical resources across demographics, with significant needs noted by those with disabilities.

Table 21
What Supports do Respondents Need to Volunteer in the HWF?

		Training n=16 (13%)	Incentive n=13 (11%)	Disability support n=12 (10%)	Awareness n=8 (7%)	Transportation n=8 (7%)	Time n=7 (6%)
Gender	Male	8	11	6	2	3	4
	Female	8	2	6	6	5	3
Age	Youth	3	5	2	1	3	2
	Adult	7	7	6	6	3	4
	Mature	6	1	4	1	2	1
Region	Western	10	4	5	5	1	3
	Central	4	7	5	3	5	2
	Atlantic	2	2	2		2	2
Community	Urban	11	10	6	6	6	4
	Suburban	4	2	4	2	1	2
	Rural	1	1	2		1	1
Disability	With a disability	2	3	12	2	2	1

Table 21
What Supports do Respondents Need to Volunteer in the HWF?

		Training n=16 (13%)	Incentive n=13 (11%)	Disability support n=12 (10%)	Awareness n=8 (7%)	Transportation n=8 (7%)	Time n=7 (6%)
Visible minority status	Without a disability	14	10		6	6	6
	Visible minority	3	6		1	1	1
	Non-visible minority	13	7	12	7	7	6

Notes

Responses to question 19, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

Replies to question 15 was used to determine respondents who self-identified as a visible minority.

Nil replies (n=43) and statistically insignificant themes (n=13) are not reflected in this table.

Findings in Table 22 show barriers related to operational expectations of HWF volunteering, with extended time away from home (n=61) and limited access to services (n=61) most commonly reported.

Table 22*Would These Expectations be a Barrier to Volunteering?*

	This is a barrier			This is not a barrier	
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Travel outside my community	23	39	31	12	15
Limited access to services	18	43	38	14	7
Living in tents / Sleep on cots	23	32	29	29	7
Shift work	15	30	41	20	14
Extended time away from home	26	35	28	22	9

Findings in Table 23 show that younger and urban respondents are more likely to face operational barriers compared to their rural counterparts.

Table 23
Understanding Who is Affected by These Barriers?

		Operational barriers n=85 (71%)	No operational barriers n=35 (29%)
Gender	Male	45	23
	Female	40	12
Age	Youth	21	9
	Adult	45	16
	Mature	19	10
Region	Western	37	12
	Central	39	13
	Atlantic	9	10
Community	Urban	56	19
	Suburban	20	11
	Rural	9	5
Disability	With a disability	13	14
	Without a disability	72	21

Table 23
Understanding Who is Affected by These Barriers?

		Operational barriers n=85 (71%)	No operational barriers n=35 (29%)
Visible minority status	Visible minority	23	3
	Non-visible minority	62	32

Notes

Responses to question 20, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.

Replies to questions 8, 9, 17, and 21 were used to determine respondents who self-identified a disability or medical limitation.

Replies to question 15 was used to determine respondents who self-identified as a visible minority.

Total Respondents (n=120).

Table 24 illustrates additional barriers to volunteering, with disabilities (n=15) and flexibility (n=5) being most frequently noted, particularly by male and urban respondents.

Table 24
Are There Additional Barriers to Volunteering With the HWF?

		Disability n=15 (13%)	Flexibility n=5 (4%)	Human Resource n=5 (4%)	Incentive n=4 (3%)	Safety n=4 (3%)	Employer Support n=3 (3%)
Gender	Male	8	2	4	2	1	1
	Female	7	3	1	2	3	2
Age	Youth	2				2	1
	Adult	8	3	2	2		2
	Mature	5	2	3	2	2	
Region	Western	7	3		1	1	2
	Central	5	1	5	3	3	1
	Atlantic	3	1				
Community	Urban	6	2	5	3	3	2
	Suburban	5	3		1	1	1
	Rural	4					

Notes

Responses to question 21, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups. Nil replies (n=78) and statistically insignificant themes (n=6) are not reflected in this table.

The data in Table 25 highlights preferred incentives for volunteering, with income tax deductions (n=64) and a small stipend per shift (n=63) being the most favored across all demographic groups.

Table 25
What type of Incentives Would Respondents Prefer?

		Income tax deduction n=64 (53%)	Stiped per shift n=63 (53%)	Thank you certificate n=48 (40%)	Volunteer service medal n=38 (32%)	Awards ceremony n=30 (25%)	Vehicle license plate n=26 (22%)
Gender	Male	36	33	25	20	15	15
	Female	28	30	23	18	15	11
Age	Youth	14	14	12	11	12	7
	Adult	33	30	21	23	13	13
	Mature	17	19	15	4	5	6
Region	Western	23	21	20	12	11	9
	Central	29	31	22	20	16	14
	Atlantic	12	11	6	6	3	3
Community	Urban	35	37	29	27	22	16
	Suburban	18	18	14	6	7	6
	Rural	11	8	5	5	1	4

Notes

Responses to question 22, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups.
Total Respondents (n=120).

Findings in Table 26 show final comments on barriers to volunteering, indicating strong support for the HWF program (n=13) alongside notable concerns about human resource practices (n=6).

Table 26
Respondents' Final Thoughts on Barriers to Volunteering

		Supports HWF n=13 (11%)	Human Resource n=6 (5%)	Incentives n=2 (2%)	Training n=2 (2%)	Awareness n=1 (1%)	Oppose HWF n=1 (1%)	Resources n=1 (1%)	Safety n=1 (1%)
Gender	Male	7	4	2	2		1		
	Female	6	2			1		1	1
Age	Youth	2	1	1				1	
	Adult	6	4	1	2	1	1		1
	Mature	5	1						
Region	Western	7	2	2	2	1	1		
	Central	6	4						1
	Atlantic							1	
Community	Urban	9	6		1	1			1
	Suburban	4		1	1		1		
	Rural			1				1	

Notes

Responses to question 23, 24, 25, 26, and 27 were used to identify the socioeconomic sub-groups. Nil replies (n=93) and are not reflected in this table.

Table 27 illustrates key barriers to HWF volunteering, showing that awareness (n=74) and time constraints (n=64) were the most reported obstacles, particularly among urban respondents.

Table 27
Key Barriers for the HWF Program

	n	%
Awareness	74	62
Time	64	53
Training	47	39
Human Resource	37	31
Transportation	37	31
Incentive	35	29
Disability	27	23
Resource	25	21
Flexibility	23	19
Safety	18	15

Notes

Responses to question 8, 9, 11, 17, 18, 19, 21, and 23 were used to identify the key barriers.

Percentage out of 120 respondents.

Findings in Table 28 show barriers among respondents interested in volunteering, with time (n=38) and training (n=27) being the most frequently reported issues for those currently engaged or interested in volunteering.

Table 28
Barriers for Respondents Interested in Volunteering

	Volunteers						Staff
	Not yet		Current		Past		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Time n=50 (42%)	38	32	5	4	5	4	2
Training n=37 (31%)	27	23	5	4	4	3	1
Transportation n=29 (24%)	23	19	1	1	4	3	1
Incentives n=28 (23%)	20	17	3	3	5	4	
Human Resource n=25 (21%)	16	13	2	2	7	6	
Disability n=20 (17%)	14	12	3	3			3
Flexibility n=20 (17%)	13	11	3	3	4	3	
Resources n=20 (17%)	13	11	3	3	3	3	1
Safety n=16 (13%)	9	8	3	3	2	2	2

Notes

Responses to question 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 21, and 23 were used to identify the key barriers.

Total respondents n=120

Findings From Focus Groups

Focus group discussions offered critical insights into the HWF program, complementing and extending survey findings with qualitative depth. Participants included a diverse group of current or past NGO volunteers, business owners,

firefighters, paramedics, community leaders, and interested members of the public (Table 2). Using an open thematic analysis approach, guided by the interview framework in Appendix B, the discussions explored barriers, organizational challenges, and perceptions of the program, revealing both support for and criticisms of the HWF and participating NGOs.

Barriers to volunteering emerged as a dominant theme, aligning with survey findings where 53% (n=64) identified time constraints and 45% (n=54) noted training as obstacles (Table 27). Focus group participants mentioned rigid schedules and inaccessible training, with one stating, "Training expectations are designed for full-time volunteers, not episodic ones" (Appendix B). Participants also emphasized rural disparities, noting that NGOs tend to prioritize urban centers, leaving rural areas under-supported.

Inclusivity challenges were also discussed, particularly regarding support for volunteers with disabilities. Focus group participants called for adaptive roles and accessible training, aligning with survey findings where 22% (n=27) cited barriers related to disability support (Table 5). Distrust in organizational management was another recurring theme, with participants describing "red tape" and inefficiencies as deterrents to engagement.

Despite these criticisms, expressions of support for the HWF program were evident. Participants recognized the program's potential to strengthen disaster response and foster community resilience. One participant observed, "The HWF program could be an incredible resource if it's implemented effectively." Another noted the humanitarian

spirit of volunteering: "It helps others, and people are doing it out of the kindness of their hearts, and that resonates with me."

Participants also expressed positive perceptions of certain NGOs, praising their community-focused initiatives. Team Rubicon, for example, was commended for its proactive and innovative approach, with one participant stating, "They put the community first and take a fresh look at how to approach things."

However, broader concerns about the program's effectiveness tempered these positive perceptions. Many participants viewed the HWF as struggling to meet its objectives, with one noting, "The program feels like it's failing because people don't know it exists." This participant's sentiment underscores the need for improved visibility, outreach, and inclusivity to realize the program's potential and build trust among volunteers and communities.

Summary of Findings

The findings emphasize the importance of aligning volunteer programs, such as the HWF, with volunteers' motivations and needs to enhance community-based disaster resilience. Survey data from 120 respondents and two focus group discussions highlight significant barriers to volunteer engagement, perceptions of organizational inefficacy, and operational challenges that may undermine NGOs' ability to mobilize surge capacity during crises.

Key barriers identified include a lack of awareness about HWF opportunities, reported by 62% of survey respondents (n=74), and time constraints, noted 53% (n=64; Table 27). Focus group participants elaborated on these challenges, emphasizing how

rigid schedules, inaccessible training, and limited outreach deter engagement, particularly in rural areas. One participant stated, "NGOs don't worry about rural areas... all the attention goes to urban centers" (Appendix B). Training requirements emerged as a dual-edged barrier, with 39% of survey respondents (n=47) citing insufficient or overly demanding prerequisites as obstacles, aligning with focus group comments calling for more flexible and accessible training models (Table 27).

Inclusivity challenges were also discussed, particularly regarding support for volunteers with disabilities. 23% of survey respondents (n=27; Table 27) noted disability-related barriers, while focus group participants stressed the need for adaptive roles and accommodations to improve engagement. Distrust in NGOs emerged as a recurring theme, with focus group participants citing "red tape" and favouritism as significant deterrents, echoing survey findings where 31% (n=37) of respondents mentioned organizational inefficiencies with human resources as barriers (Table 27).

Recognition and incentives were highlighted as key motivators. Financial and symbolic rewards, such as stipends or certificates, were identified by 29% of survey respondents (n=35; Table 27) and reinforced in focus groups, where participants emphasized the value of meaningful acknowledgment. One participant noted, "A simple thank you can make a big difference" (Appendix B).

Despite criticisms, participants expressed optimism about the HWF program's potential to strengthen disaster response and foster community resilience. Some focus group members praised its humanitarian mission, with one stating, "The HWF program could be an incredible resource if implemented effectively" (Appendix B). Team Rubicon

was commended for its proactive, community-first approach, though concerns about the program's visibility and effectiveness remain prevalent. One participant remarked, "The program feels like it's failing because people don't know it exists" (Appendix B).

Discussion

Public Awareness of the HWF Program

Awareness was the most frequently identified barrier to volunteering with NGOs in the HWF program, cited by 62% of respondents (n=74), indicating significant gaps in outreach and communication strategies (Table 27). Eight-six respondents (n=103) reported having no prior knowledge of the HWF program, highlighting limited effective public visibility and engagement efforts (Table 9). One survey respondent remarked, "I don't know where to start," while another stated, "People don't know options, feel unqualified to help" (Appendix A, Question 8). These findings align with focus group discussions, where participants emphasized the lack of effective advertising. One focus group participant noted, "There's been nothing out there... I haven't heard anything about it, so how can I even volunteer?" Such comments indicate the disconnect between potential volunteers and the NGO's outreach efforts.

Further evidence from Table 10 shows that 72% of respondents agreed (n=49) or strongly agreed (n=38) that they are willing to help after a disaster if they know about the need. This response suggests that improving awareness could directly increase volunteer engagement. Flint and Stevenson (2010) emphasize that community-based engagement and visible branding initiatives can significantly enhance awareness and foster trust among diverse demographics. Applying their framework to the HWF context

highlights the importance of strategies that connect volunteers to the program through localized and culturally resonant approaches.

Key demographic trends indicate that 63% of urban residents (n=75), particularly 68% of males (n=68), 50% who are aged 31–54 (n=61), were most likely to report awareness barriers (Table 5). Urban respondents frequently mentioned frustration with outreach strategies that failed to reach them effectively, with some recommending digital campaigns and localized outreach as solutions (Appendix A, Question 17). Rural participants, by contrast, emphasized their reliance on informal networks like word-of-mouth due to limited NGO presence in their communities.

Thirty younger respondents aged 19–30 (25%) from suburban areas (Table 5) faced compounded challenges, including systemic barriers such as limited culturally inclusive outreach and advertising strategies that failed to resonate with their lived experiences (Appendix A, Question 8). One younger visible minority survey respondent noted, "The ads don't speak to people like me. It feels like we're not seen" (Appendix A, Question 8). These findings suggest a need for targeted strategies addressing cultural and geographic inequities in outreach.

The survey revealed recommendations for improvement, including targeted advertising campaigns and recruitment efforts in schools and universities. Respondents emphasized the importance of leveraging social media and digital platforms to increase visibility (Appendix A, Question 19). A focus group participant suggested incorporating branding initiatives, such as volunteer uniforms or banners, stating, "Visible branding can make people aware and proud to volunteer." These strategies align with Flint and

Stevenson's (2010) recommendation for community-based outreach, demonstrating their relevance in the HWF context.

Time Constraints as a Barrier

Time constraints emerged as a significant barrier to volunteering within the HWF program, cited by 53% of respondents (n=64) as a major obstacle to participation (Table 27). This challenge reflects difficulties in balancing personal, professional, and volunteer commitments. One survey respondent remarked, "I do not have time to commit to volunteering currently" (Appendix A, Question 8). At the same time, another noted, "My family and business commitments don't leave enough time" (Appendix A, Question 8). These findings illustrate how limited availability hinders volunteer engagement.

Despite these challenges, Table 7 indicates that 68% (n=100) respondents expressed a strong desire to help others and 53% (n=64) respondents want to meet new people, indicating that time constraints, rather than lack of interest, prevent participation. Table 8 reveals that 62 respondents (52%) prefer short-term or episodic volunteer commitments, while Table 20 shows that only 47 respondents have a few extra hours per week (39%) available for volunteering. An additional 47 respondents (39%) are available for a few extra hours per month. These preferences emphasize the importance of NGOs offering flexible opportunities to accommodate varying time constraints.

Table 28 provides insights into current and past NGO volunteers who reported time constraints as a barrier. Among 50 respondents interested in volunteering (42%), 10 individuals—5 current volunteers (4%) and 5 past volunteers (4%)—explicitly

identified time as a key obstacle. This group highlighted how competing demands from professional obligations and personal commitments limit their ability to engage with the program effectively.

Table 13 adds further context, showing that 32 respondents (27%) explicitly cited being too busy as a reason for not volunteering. Table 11 breaks down the demographics of respondents who mentioned time as a barrier, revealing that this issue disproportionately affects full-time employed urban males aged 31–54. males aged 31–54. One survey respondent explained, “Volunteering competes directly with my ability to provide for my family” (Appendix A, Question 8), emphasizing the need for opportunities aligned with professional commitments.

Focus group participants echoed these findings, describing how rigid scheduling structures deter potential volunteers. One participant observed, “The lack of short-term or episodic roles makes it impossible to volunteer while working full-time.” Discussions also highlighted the value of micro-volunteering opportunities, which allow individuals with limited availability to contribute meaningfully, as suggested by Bartram et al. (2017).

Survey respondents offered actionable solutions, such as more flexible scheduling and short-term volunteer roles. Recommendations from Appendix A (Question 19) mentioned the need for roles requiring minimal ongoing commitment. One respondent noted, “Short assignments that fit into my schedule would make a big difference.”

Spontaneous volunteer surges often occur during disasters, establishing flexibility and preparedness in advance is essential for an effective, resilient response system. Flint and Stevenson (2010) and Volunteer Canada (2023a) highlight that volunteer frameworks function best when they incorporate scheduling adaptability before crises strike. By integrating flexible structures and roles into volunteer programs early on, organizations can reduce strain and confusion when a disaster occurs. This proactivity not only streamlines response and recovery efforts but also ensures that volunteers can effectively balance personal commitments, helping to sustain engagement throughout prolonged disaster management cycles.

Flint and Stevenson's (2010) argued for adaptive volunteer frameworks, emphasizing the importance of flexibility in disaster response contexts to broaden participation. This approach applies to the HWF program, which relies on formal volunteers through participating NGOs. The NGOs can build flexibility before a disaster strikes by offering varied scheduling options and formalized preparedness structures. This flexibility ensures that volunteers can be effectively engaged before a crisis, throughout an immediate event and extended into recovery phases. Volunteer Canada (2023a) similarly highlights that accommodating diverse availability through innovative scheduling solutions strengthens NGOs' capacity to cope with fluctuations in volunteer turnout, preventing strain on the system when disasters do occur.

Training Requirements and Credentialism

Training requirements are necessary for operational preparedness yet also present a barrier to volunteering with NGOs under the HWF program. In addition to

general training, credentials—including certificates for specialized roles, background checks, or professional qualifications—are often required before volunteers can participate in disaster-response activities. Survey findings indicate that 45% of respondents (n = 54) consider these training and credential mandates to be a major obstacle (Table 27), particularly among rural residents, individuals with disabilities, and episodic volunteers (Table 5; Table 28).

Table 28 reveals that 38 respondents (32%)—primarily potential volunteers—reported challenges with training accessibility due to scheduling, cost, or perceived irrelevance. One survey respondent noted, "Training should be increased but needs to be flexible," while another explained, "The cost of certifications is prohibitive and discourages involvement" (Appendix A, Question 19). Additionally, Table 7 shows that 53 respondents view learning new skills (44%) and 36 respondents enjoyed feeling needed (30%) as motivators for volunteering yet training expectations and a lack of skills remain significant barriers.

Table 13 further contextualizes this issue, indicating that 32 respondents (27%) cited insufficient skills as a barrier to volunteering. This response aligns with findings from Table 15, where 67% of respondents—47 likely and 33 very likely—expressed a desire for training to improve their skills and enable them to volunteer with NGOs in the HWF program. Moreover, 10 respondents (8%) in Table 19 emphasized the need for training to improve the HWF program, and 16 respondents (13%) in Table 21 reported that additional training support is essential for NGOs to enhance their volunteer engagement.

Demographic trends further contextualize these findings. Respondents aged 31–54 (n=16) from urban areas (n=18) most frequently cited rigid training schedules as a deterrent (Table 13). Rural respondents (12%, n=14) highlighted accessibility challenges linked to geographic isolation and the limited availability of in-person sessions (Table 5, Table 13). Twenty-seven individuals with disabilities (22%) emphasized the lack of accommodations in the workforce, such as training options for remote learning or reduced physical demands, contributing to their exclusion (Table 5, Table 10).

Focus group insights offer qualitative depth to these findings. Participants stressed the necessity of competency training while highlighting barriers arising from its implementation. One participant remarked, "Mandatory training is necessary but often inaccessible for rural volunteers or those with disabilities." Another observed, "Training expectations are designed for full-time volunteers, not those with episodic availability." These comments reflect a disconnect between organizational training frameworks and the needs of diverse volunteer demographics.

Existing literature supports these findings, noting that restrictive training policies can exclude volunteers who cannot meet rigid expectations (Hustinx et al., 2016). McLennan (2022a) emphasizes the importance of aligning training programs with volunteer motivations to sustain engagement. International practices, such as Germany's Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOST), demonstrate how modular and online training models can enhance accessibility while maintaining competency (Fathi et al., 2020).

Human Resource Policies as a Barrier

Human resource policies emerged as a barrier to volunteering in the HWF program, reported by 31% of respondents (n=37) as a significant obstacle (Table 27). Key challenges include bureaucratic inefficiencies, restrictive rules, and limited volunteer autonomy. One survey respondent remarked, “There’s too much red tape, and the onboarding process is overly complex,” while another noted, “Volunteers aren’t included in decisions, and it feels like we’re just there to fill gaps” (Appendix A, Question 8). These issues illustrate how organizational policies can alienate potential volunteers and diminish engagement.

Table 11 identifies 17 respondents (14%) who explicitly cited human resource issues as the primary reason they do not volunteer. This group comprises urban adults, predominantly males employed full-time, who pointed to inadequate volunteer management and restrictive policies as significant barriers. Similarly, Table 12 reveals actionable feedback from 7 respondents (6%) who recommended improving NGO human resource practices to enhance the HWF program. Suggestions included clear communication of expectations, better onboarding processes, and participatory decision-making to align organizational policies with volunteer goals.

Table 14 contextualizes the importance of alignment between NGO policies and volunteer goals, with 86 respondents—51 agreeing (43%) or 35 respondents strongly agreeing (29%)—highlighting that seeing the impact of their work motivates continued engagement.

Respondents viewed human resource inefficiencies as discouraging volunteer engagement. Tables 16 and 17 indicate negative perceptions of NGO policies as bureaucratic, inefficient, and undervaluing volunteer contributions. These concerns align with focus group insights, where participants described distrust of paid staff, leading to micromanagement. One participant shared, “Paid staff don’t trust volunteers to do the job properly, and it creates a culture of micromanagement.” To resolve this, NGOs should establish operational definitions distinguishing volunteer and staff roles, ensuring volunteers complement rather than replace professional responders. Implementing tiered incentive models, participatory decision-making, and structured training pathways can prevent role conflicts while fostering collaboration and sustaining long-term volunteer engagement.

Table 19 identifies nine respondents (8%) who emphasized improving human resource management to address volunteer shortages and reduce burnout among current volunteers. Furthermore, operational expectations were cited as a barrier by 85 respondents (71%) in Table 23, who noted that rigid policies and inadequate support hindered their ability to participate effectively. Tables 24 and 26 highlight additional human resource barriers, with five and six respondents (5% and 6%), respectively, citing management inefficiencies as a deterrent.

Survey respondents and focus group participants proposed several solutions to these challenges. Recommendations included simplifying onboarding frameworks, providing tailored training, and ensuring participatory decision-making processes

(Appendix A, Questions 17 and 19). One respondent noted, “Allow volunteers to be involved in policy discussions—this would make us feel valued and improve trust.”

These findings align with Alfes et al.’s (2017) emphasis on inclusive human resource practices in volunteer management. Kreutzer and Jäger (2011) highlight that participatory approaches can rebuild trust and foster collaboration, while Bartram et al. (2017) stress the importance of aligning management strategies with volunteer motivations.

Transportation Barriers to Volunteering

Transportation barriers are another obstacle volunteering with NGOs in the HWF program, cited by 31% of respondents (n=37) as a key challenge (Table 27). These barriers include the financial and logistical difficulties of travelling to volunteer sites, particularly for rural and suburban residents. One survey respondent noted, “I have no transportation,” while another explained, “The distance and the costs to travel make it hard to help” (Appendix A, Question 8). These challenges highlight the critical role of accessible transportation in enabling effective volunteer engagement.

Table 3 provides additional context, showing that among 68 male respondents, 49 drive their own vehicle (41%), 16 use public transit (13%), and three rely on active transportation methods such as cycling or walking (3%). These findings suggest that while many volunteers depend on personal vehicles, public transportation remains critical, particularly in urban and suburban areas. However, rural participants face additional challenges due to limited public transit options and longer travel distances to volunteer sites. Table 11 identifies 15 respondents (13%) who specifically mentioned

transportation as a barrier, while Table 13 reveals that 19 respondents (16%) found travel for volunteering difficult. These data underscore the systemic nature of transportation challenges for potential volunteers to respond to disasters within the HWF program.

Table 22 highlights operational challenges related to transportation. 62 respondents—39 agreeing and 23 strongly agreeing—said travelling outside their community presents a significant obstacle. Focus group participants supported this finding, emphasizing the financial strain and logistical difficulties of reaching remote disaster sites. One participant remarked, "Without reliable transportation, you can't even get to where the help is needed."

Survey respondents also proposed actionable solutions to these barriers. Table 12 shows seven respondents (6%) who suggested specific improvements, such as providing transportation stipends, organizing carpools, or offering travel vouchers to support volunteers. Table 21 reinforces this need, with eight respondents (7%) explicitly identifying transportation assistance as critical to enabling participation. One survey respondent noted, "NGOs should provide transportation stipends or organize shared rides to make it easier to volunteer" (Appendix A, Question 19).

These findings align with broader research emphasizing the importance of addressing logistical barriers to volunteering. Volunteer Canada (2023a) highlights that reducing transportation costs and increasing accessibility is essential for fostering broader participation. Flint and Stevenson (2010) similarly advocate for localized

volunteer opportunities and improved resource allocation to minimize travel-related challenges.

Incentives as a Barrier to Volunteering

Incentives were identified as a barrier to volunteering in the Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) program, cited by 29% of respondents (n=35) as a key challenge (Table 27). Many respondents expressed that the lack of financial or symbolic rewards reduced their motivation to volunteer. One survey respondent noted, "There's no benefit to volunteering—it feels like unpaid labour." At the same time, another remarked, "Recognition is lacking, and it's hard to justify the time without some form of compensation" (Appendix A, Question 21). These findings reflect the importance of equitable incentive structures in fostering sustained engagement.

Table 7 highlights that 53 respondents (44%) expressed a desire to learn new skills, which can be interpreted as an incentive for volunteering. Similarly, 36 respondents (30%) reported wanting to feel needed, suggesting that social and emotional rewards play a role in volunteer motivation. Table 12 identifies 10 respondents (8%) who explicitly mentioned incentives to improve engagement with NGOs in the HWF program. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of incentives, encompassing both tangible and intangible elements.

Further insights from Table 25 reveal six types of incentives that resonate with respondents, with financial support being the most favoured. 64 respondents suggested tax deductions (53%) and 63 want a small stipend per shift (53%) as the leading preferences. Symbolic rewards, such as a certificate mentioned by 48 respondents

(40%), 38 respondents (32%) prefer a volunteer service medal, 30 participants (25%) would like an awards ceremony, and 26 participants (22%) chose a volunteer license plate as incentives. Focus group participants reinforced these findings, emphasizing the importance of both practical and symbolic rewards. One participant suggested, "Even a small gas card or travel stipend would show appreciation and make a difference." Another noted, "Recognition like a medal or a certificate makes you feel like your efforts matter."

Climate change emerged as an additional incentive for volunteering, with 94 respondents—54 reporting "somewhat increasing" (45%) and 40 reporting "greatly increasing" (33%)—noting the urgency of disaster response as a motivator (Table 18). Table 19 highlights that five respondents (4%) explicitly identified incentives as a way to improve engagement with NGOs. Table 21 shows that 13 respondents (11%) viewed incentives as a critical resource for increasing volunteer participation.

Table 28 provides specific insights into respondents interested in volunteering. Twenty-eight individuals (23%) emphasize the lack of incentives as a barrier. Younger respondents aged 19–30 highlight financial constraints, noting that incentives such as stipends or reimbursement for travel expenses could alleviate their challenges. One respondent remarked, "It's hard to volunteer when you're already struggling to make ends meet" (Appendix A, Question 8).

The literature supports these findings, with Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace (2009) emphasizing that tangible rewards mitigate perceptions of exploitation. Volunteer Canada (2023a) highlights the importance of inclusive incentive structures to address

barriers and sustain engagement. Flint and Stevenson (2010) advocate integrating financial and symbolic rewards to enhance volunteer satisfaction.

Disability Support and Inclusivity as Barriers

Disability support and inclusivity presented further barriers to volunteering within the NGOs in the HWF program, reported by 22% of respondents (n=27) as significant challenges (Table 5). These barriers reflect systemic issues, including inadequate accommodations, limited outreach, and the absence of tailored roles within participating NGOs. One survey respondent stated, “I have physical limitations that make it hard to volunteer” (Appendix A, Question 8), while another explained, “The ability to move into less physically demanding roles would make a difference” (Appendix A, Question 19). These findings highlight the need for inclusive policies to ensure equitable access to volunteer opportunities.

Despite these barriers, Table 7 reveals that respondents with disabilities still expressed strong motivations to volunteer. Among this group, 22 individuals cited helping others as their primary motivation, with meeting people (n=15) as a secondary reason. Additionally, Table 10 shows that individuals with disabilities were highly willing to volunteer after a disaster, with 11 agreeing and nine strongly agreeing to engage if given the opportunity. These findings demonstrate the untapped potential among volunteers with disabilities who are eager to contribute when barriers are mitigated.

Table 8 provides further context, showing that 13 respondents with disabilities preferred flexible shifts, either short or long, to accommodate their unique needs. Flexibility also emerged as the leading improvement suggested by four respondents in

Table 12, alongside offering incentives (n=3) and enhancing human resource policies (n=3). Findings note in Table 19 the importance of outreach, with 17 respondents with disabilities identifying greater awareness of the HWF program as essential for improving volunteer opportunities.

Table 21 highlights that 12 respondents explicitly identified the need for enhanced disability support from NGOs, such as adaptive equipment and accessible transportation. Additionally, Table 23 reveals a near-even split among respondents with disabilities regarding whether their limitations posed operational barriers—13 agreed they were barriers, while 14 did not. This division suggests variability in the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, emphasizing the need for tailored solutions. Table 24 breaks down the demographics of these respondents, providing insight into how different groups are affected by inclusivity barriers.

Focus group participants reinforced these findings, describing the exclusionary nature of some NGO policies. One participant noted, “Volunteers with disabilities are often overlooked because they don’t fit the traditional image of what a volunteer should be.”

Yang et al. (2023) align closely with these findings, emphasizing that structural barriers often exclude volunteers with disabilities. Their research highlights how adaptive policies, such as creating less physically demanding roles and providing technological support, can significantly enhance inclusivity. Yang et al. also stresses the importance of fostering a culture of accessibility within organizations to empower individuals with disabilities to contribute effectively.

Other Barriers to Volunteering in the HWF Program

Other barriers to volunteering with NGOs in the HWF program include resource constraints (n=25, 21%), flexibility and adaptation (n=23, 19%), and safety concerns (n=18, 15%) (Table 27). These challenges hinder engagement even among motivated individuals. One survey respondent remarked, “Limited resources make it hard to help,” while another explained, “I don’t feel safe in some volunteer situations” (Appendix A, Question 8). Addressing these barriers is important for fostering a more inclusive and effective volunteer network.

Resource limitations emerged as an additional barrier, with ten respondents (8%) specifically citing difficulties related to insufficient tools, materials, or logistical support (Table 19). Focus group participants reported on how under-resourced settings amplify challenges for volunteers, with one participant noting, “Without the right equipment or funding, it’s hard to be effective on the ground.” These findings align with Flint and Stevenson (2010), who emphasize the need for adequate resource allocation to enhance volunteer capacity in disaster response efforts.

Lack of flexibility within NGOs was another notable barrier identified by 13 respondents (11%) in Table 28. Additionally, Table 12 shows 15 respondents (13%) suggested that improving scheduling flexibility could enhance engagement. Many respondents emphasized the importance of short-term or episodic volunteer roles, with 62 individuals (52%) expressing a preference for these types of commitments (Table 8). One survey respondent explained, “If the roles were more flexible, I’d have more time to commit” (Appendix A, Question 19). Focus group participants reinforced this finding,

noting that rigid operational frameworks deter volunteers with competing personal or professional obligations.

Safety concerns were reported by 18 respondents (15%) in Table 27, reflecting apprehensions about physical risks in disaster environments. Table 22 reveals that 62 respondents—39 agreeing and 23 strongly agreeing—consider travelling outside their communities to be a significant operational barrier. Focus group participants emphasized the importance of clear safety protocols and comprehensive training, with one participant stating, “The fear of getting hurt or not knowing what to do is enough to keep people away.” Table 24 (n=4, 3%) and Table 26 (n=1, 1%) further highlights five respondents explicitly cited safety as a primary concern, underscoring the need for improved risk management practices.

Data from Table 16 reveal polarized views: positive (n = 48, 40%) and negative (n = 47, 39%), with fewer neutral (n = 25, 21%). Male and urban respondents contributed more unfavourable descriptors. Additionally, 14 respondents (12%) questioned the program's transparency, indicating skepticism about NGOs' efficacy and pointing to broader distrust in institutional structures. One focus group participant echoed this sentiment: “I'm wary of volunteering when I'm not sure the organization will actually use my time effectively,” reflecting Freudenburg's (1993) notion of *recreancy*—where trust erodes if institutions fail to meet public expectations. Table 17 shows potential volunteers expressing both enthusiasm (n = 28 positive) and reservations (n = 26 negative), while past volunteers leaned negative. Neutral responses (n = 25, 21%) generally implied limited familiarity. Overall, NGOs in the HWF program elicit strong

positive endorsements and pointed criticism, underscoring the need for credibility, open communication, and accountability to foster confidence among current, former, and prospective volunteers.

Comparing the HWF program with international and provincial disaster workforce models in these fiscally challenging times offers actionable strategies. The U.S. CERTs emphasize tailored community-level training, addressing key barriers such as awareness and recruitment challenges identified by 62% of respondents (Flint & Stevenson, 2010; n=74, Table 27). New Zealand's fire brigades integrate volunteers with professionals, offering adaptable approaches to recruitment and retention (Grant & Langer, 2021). Ontario and Nova Scotia's decentralized workforce programs demonstrate the effectiveness of localized models in addressing recruitment disparities (Government of Nova Scotia, 2024; Government of Ontario, 2024), with 40 respondents (33%, Table 6) expressing interest in volunteering with multiple HWF NGOs. A survey respondent noted that organizations should "Demonstrate to the public exactly what they do and what is required for different positions" (Appendix A, Question 17). A humanitarian workforce is a valuable tool, aligning community needs with global trends in disaster management and formal volunteer mobilization.

Summary of Discussion

The discussion highlights significant barriers and strategies for improving the HWF program. Awareness emerged as the most critical barrier, with 62% of respondents (n=74) citing limited outreach and communication as challenges (Table 27). Recruitment and retention disparities were addressed by comparing international

models like the U.S. CERTs and New Zealand's fire brigades, which emphasize community-level training and professional-volunteer integration, and provincial programs in Ontario and Nova Scotia, which showcase localized approaches (Flint & Stevenson, 2010; Grant & Langer, 2021; Government of Nova Scotia, 2024; Government of Nova Ontario, 2024; Table 6). Time constraints (53%, n=64, Table 27) and inflexible policies remain significant barriers, with respondents favouring short-term and episodic roles (Table 8).

Training accessibility, human resource inefficiencies, and transportation challenges, each cited by over 31% of respondents (n=37, Table 27), reflect systemic gaps. Focus group participants emphasized the need for flexible training, improved volunteer management, and transportation support. Incentives (29%, n=35), Table 27) and inclusivity issues, including support for volunteers with disabilities (23%, n=27, Table 27), also hinder engagement. A survey respondent aptly noted, "Demonstrate to the public exactly what they do and what is required for different positions" (Appendix A, Question 17).

Recommendations

The recommendations in this discussion synthesize findings from the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) study with existing literature to explore barriers, motivations, and strategies in volunteer engagement. They aim to inform actionable policy and practical improvements relevant to the HWF program while addressing broader disaster and emergency management implications. Future research directions are also proposed to fill existing gaps.

These recommendations address barriers and opportunities identified within the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) program, as defined by the terms and conditions established by Public Safety Canada (2024b). The study focuses on the perspectives of potential, current, and past volunteers engaging with the five participating NGOs. While these organizations independently set their own policies and practices, the research findings and recommendations are based on the opinions and statements of study participants. This thesis does not evaluate or critique the specific policies or performance of any individual NGO. Instead, it seeks to identify broader structural and operational challenges within the participating HWF NGOs, as experienced by volunteers, and propose strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, inclusivity, and program effectiveness.

Recommendation 1: Bridging Awareness Gaps through Targeted Outreach

The research supports the first recommendation that awareness is a barrier for volunteers, emerging as the most frequently identified issue, with 62% of respondents (n=74) citing insufficient outreach and communication as significant challenges (Table 27). Furthermore, most respondents (n=103) reported having no prior knowledge of the HWF program (Table 9). This finding aligns with both survey quotes, such as “I don’t know where to start” (Appendix A, Question 8), and focus group discussions emphasizing the lack of effective advertising and community presence.

Suppose improved awareness strategies, such as localized advertising and inclusive branding, are implemented. In that case, potential volunteers—mainly urban males aged 31–54 and younger respondents aged 19–30—are more likely to perceive

the program as accessible and relevant (Table 9). Flint and Stevenson (2010) argue that community-specific outreach fosters trust by aligning strategies with local needs, which can lead to increased initial and long-term participation. This research highlights that these groups report barriers, such as feeling disconnected from volunteering opportunities (Appendix A, Question 8), underscoring the need for targeted outreach.

When trust is built through outreach, broader engagement across diverse demographics is achievable, strengthening the volunteer base. Awareness is a gateway to addressing other barriers, making it the top priority for improving engagement.

Recommendation 2: Addressing Time Constraints

The research strongly supports the recommendation that flexible policies address volunteers' time constraints, as 53% of respondents (n=64) identified it as a significant barrier to volunteering in the HWF program (Table 27). This challenge is the second most prominent barrier for volunteers, reinforced by qualitative data, with participants citing rigid schedules as a key obstacle. One survey respondent stated, "Depending on when this happens, I simply don't have the time for this" (Appendix A, Question 8), highlighting the conflict between personal responsibilities and engagement. Short-term roles (n=62, 52%) and micro-volunteering options emerged as preferred solutions, underscoring the necessity of adaptable frameworks (Table 8).

This recommendation directly addresses these barriers with empirical and theoretical backing. Bartram et al. (2017) emphasize that flexibility in role design aligns volunteer opportunities with diverse schedules, fostering engagement. If flexible frameworks are implemented, volunteers who feel excluded due to time constraints will

have accessible alternatives to participate in disaster response and recovery activities, increasing program participation and community resiliency.

Time constraints impact a wide demographic and intersect with other barriers, such as awareness and training. Seventy-five urban residents, comprising 63% of respondents (Table 5), face these challenges more acutely due to overlapping obligations and limited scheduling flexibility within volunteer roles. Without flexibility, efforts to improve engagement in other areas may fall short, as individuals would remain unable to participate. While other recommendations, such as incentives or transportation, are important, flexibility enables broader inclusion and addresses foundational challenges.

Through adopting flexible scheduling and micro-volunteering roles, the NGOs in the HWF program can mitigate time-related barriers, ensuring participation across diverse demographics and strengthening its volunteer network. This foundational recommendation builds resilience and inclusiveness in the program.

Recommendation 3: Enhancing Volunteer Training Accessibility

The research strongly supports the third recommendation: to enhance training accessibility and relevance to address significant barriers volunteers face. Forty-seven respondents (39%) identified training requirements as obstacles to engagement (Table 27). This finding is reinforced by empirical data in Table 15, with 67% of respondents expressing a desire for skill improvement—Likely (n=47, 39%) and Very like (n=33, 28%). One participant noted, “Training should be increased but needs to be flexible” (Appendix A, Question 19). The evidence highlights that rigid schedules, high costs, and

inadequate accommodations disproportionately hinder engagement, particularly among rural respondents (n=14, 12%, Table 5) and individuals with disabilities (n=27, 22%, Table 5).

Table 28 further contextualizes these challenges, with 37 respondents (31%) citing training barriers such as scheduling conflicts and cost. Focus group discussions emphasized the disconnect between current training expectations and the needs of rural and episodic volunteers. Participants stressed the importance of remote learning options and reduced physical demands to accommodate diverse needs.

This recommendation proposes practical, evidence-based solutions. Modular and flexible training programs tailored to volunteer needs, as advocated by Hustinx et al. (2016), can mitigate these barriers. If training frameworks are adapted to include digital formats and accessible options, more individuals, including those with limited availability or physical constraints, can participate effectively.

This recommendation aligns with awareness and time flexibility as critical priorities. Without accessible training, potential volunteers may lack the confidence and skills to engage, undermining efforts to improve participation. While less foundational than awareness, enhancing training accessibility is vital for operational readiness and aligning organizational goals with volunteer motivations.

Recommendation 4: Simplifying Human Resource Policies

This recommendation focuses on simplifying human resource policies to reduce barriers to volunteering, which is moderately supported by the research, with 31% of respondents (n=37) identifying these policies as a challenge (Table 27). Overly complex

onboarding processes, exclusion from decision-making, and perceptions of red tape emerged as key frustrations. One participant stated, “There’s too much red tape, and it feels like we’re not included in decisions” (Appendix A, Question 8). These findings underscore the importance of streamlining processes and fostering inclusivity in volunteer management.

This recommendation addresses specific, actionable concerns highlighted by survey and focus group participants. Alfes et al. (2017) emphasize that inclusive management practices—such as participatory decision-making and transparent communication—build trust and enhance volunteer satisfaction. If NGO policies are simplified, volunteers will feel more valued and engaged, ultimately improving retention and participation.

While human resource policies are important, this recommendation ranks lower in priority compared to awareness, time constraints, and training accessibility. These other barriers affect a broader demographic and have more foundational implications for volunteer engagement. However, simplifying NGO policies is critical for addressing operational inefficiencies and ensuring volunteers can effectively engage once they enter the HWF program.

By reducing bureaucratic hurdles and promoting participatory management, the HWF program can foster a culture of trust and collaboration. This evidence-based approach strengthens volunteer engagement by aligning organizational practices with volunteer expectations and motivations.

Recommendation 5: Mitigating Transportation Barriers

The research moderately supports this recommendation. Transportation barriers significantly impact volunteer participation, with 31% of respondents (n=37) identifying financial and logistical difficulties as key obstacles (Table 27). Specific challenges include long travel distances and high costs, with one respondent noting, “The distance and cost of travel make it hard to help” (Appendix A, Question 8). Responses to question nine (Appendix A) offer actionable suggestions, such as providing travel stipends, organizing carpools, and offering transportation vouchers, to address these challenges effectively.

This recommendation is accepted as it responds directly to participant-identified barriers. Volunteer Canada (2023a) emphasizes that reducing transportation costs and improving logistical support are reasonable strategies for fostering engagement. If these solutions are implemented, accessibility for rural and suburban volunteers will improve, enabling greater participation. This research highlights that many potential volunteers are willing but unable to participate due to prohibitive travel requirements, particularly those in geographically dispersed regions (Table 11).

This recommendation ranks lower than awareness, time constraints, and training accessibility. While transportation barriers are important, they affect a more specific subset of volunteers and are often compounded by other challenges, such as resource constraints or inflexible schedules. Nevertheless, addressing transportation issues is essential for creating an inclusive volunteer network.

By mitigating transportation barriers through targeted logistical support, NGOs

within the HWF program can enable broader engagement, particularly among rural and suburban populations. This strategy strengthens accessibility and equity, enhancing the program's overall effectiveness.

Recommendation 6: Developing Tiered Incentive Structures

The sixth recommendation that tiered incentive structures are essential for sustaining volunteer engagement is moderately supported by the research, with 29% of respondents (n=35) identifying the lack of incentives as a barrier (Table 27). Financial incentives such as tax deductions (n=64, 53%) and stipends (n=63, 53%) were the most preferred forms (Table 25), alongside symbolic rewards like certificates (n=48, 40%) and medals (n=38, 32%). One participant remarked, "Even a small stipend would show appreciation" (Appendix A, Question 19), emphasizing the motivational impact of tangible recognition.

This recommendation aligns with findings that volunteers often face financial burdens when participating in disaster response efforts. Tools such as tax deductions or honorariums are not compensation but acknowledgments that offset costs incurred while volunteering. This distinction, supported by Lacetera et al. (2014) and Kosfeld and Neckermann (2011), positions financial incentives as enablers rather than rewards, fostering sustained engagement.

This recommendation ranks just below training accessibility, as it addresses the narrower but still significant issues. Specific incentives impact various demographics differently, such as younger volunteers or those from Western Canada (Table 25) but are less foundational than broader barriers like awareness.

If tiered incentives are implemented, perceptions of exploitation will decrease, increasing volunteer satisfaction and retention. With government backing, such as financial incentives or policy alignment, NGOs within the HWF program can build a more motivated and engaged volunteer base by combining practical and symbolic rewards, ensuring long-term sustainability and resilience.

Recommendation 7: Enhancing Disability Support and Inclusivity

Enhancing disability support and inclusivity is moderately supported by the research, with 22% of respondents (n=27) identifying barriers related to inadequate accommodations and tailored roles (Table 5). Participants highlighted challenges such as physical demands and inaccessible environments, with one stating, "The ability to work in less physically demanding roles would help" (Appendix A, Question 19). These findings align with Yang et al. (2023), who emphasize that adaptive policies and accessible environments foster inclusion and empower individuals with disabilities to contribute effectively.

This recommendation addresses the need for flexible roles and inclusive practices. If HWF NGOs prioritize inclusivity, individuals with disabilities will have equitable opportunities to engage, enriching the diversity and capacity of volunteer networks. However, systemic barriers—such as rigid policies, lack of accommodations for disability limitations, and insufficient outreach—continue to exclude willing participants, limiting the program's reach and impact. Addressing these barriers aligns with the ethical imperatives of disaster response by ensuring no volunteer is marginalized due to institutional practices.

This recommendation ranks below training and incentives but is critical for fostering trust and mitigating cognitive dissonance within HWF NGOs. Cognitive dissonance arises when organizational actions, such as excluding volunteers with disabilities, contradict the humanitarian principles they aim to uphold (Harmon-Jones, 2019). Avoiding labels like vulnerable and empowering individuals to assist their communities strengthen inclusivity and resilience. Practical strategies include implementing adaptive roles, flexible scheduling, and targeted outreach, ensuring long-term diversity and engagement within the HWF program.

Recommendation 8: Addressing Other Barriers to Engagement

The research offers the weakest support for this final recommendation compared to the other seven, as resource constraints (n=25, 21%) and safety concerns (n=18, 15%) impacted fewer respondents (Table 27). While not foundational, like awareness or time flexibility, these barriers remain critical for operational effectiveness and volunteer trust. One respondent highlighted resource issues, stating, “Without the right tools, it’s hard to help effectively” (Appendix A, Question 8). Flint and Stevenson (2010) emphasize that adequate resource allocation and risk management are essential for fostering volunteer engagement and retention.

This recommendation is accepted because it addresses systemic challenges that limit the program’s resilience and inclusivity. If NGOs improve resource allocation and establish robust safety protocols, then barriers to engagement will decrease, enabling volunteers to operate more effectively. Encouraging transparency, such as publicly accessible after-action reports, builds trust and accountability by demonstrating

institutional credibility and responsiveness to volunteer concerns. Additionally, private-sector involvement, such as offering employees flexible time to volunteer or supporting resource needs, could complement these efforts.

Ranked lowest in priority, this recommendation addresses narrower but vital concerns compared to broader barriers like awareness or time constraints. However, addressing resource and safety issues creates a supportive environment where volunteers can thrive. This recommendation complements others by focusing on the structural foundation needed to support volunteers over the long term.

Recommendation 9: Extending the HWF for a Longitudinal Evaluation

Participants emphasized that the long-term success of the HWF program could only be fully understood at least five years beyond the current expiry date (Appendix B). A planned extension would allow a longitudinal study to evaluate sustained impacts and systemic changes in affected communities. Given the program's scope and focus on addressing systemic barriers, federal funding renewal would be essential to support this extended evaluation. This longitudinal approach would enable a comprehensive understanding of the HWF's sustainability, effectiveness, and alignment with its disaster response objectives. Such a study would provide critical insights for optimizing program design and ensuring resilience in Canada's disaster workforce strategy.

Recommendations for Future Study

Future research should examine how volunteer opportunities can accommodate family responsibilities, particularly for those with caregiving obligations. Studies exploring the socioeconomic implications of volunteering on household stability and

employment flexibility could provide insights into sustainable engagement models. Research on intersectional barriers—including racialized minority representation, gender disparities, and age-related challenges—would strengthen inclusivity efforts in disaster volunteerism. Further studies could assess how participatory governance and role differentiation impact retention, preventing conflicts between paid staff and volunteers. Examining culturally responsive outreach, recruitment policies, and the long-term effects of professionalization on volunteer engagement would also be valuable. Addressing these areas would enhance NGO volunteer networks, foster public trust, and support a more inclusive, sustainable, and community-driven disaster volunteer infrastructure within the HWF program.

Conclusion

As the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce (HWF) program approaches its scheduled expiration on March 31, 2026, this study highlights the urgency of addressing systemic barriers to volunteer engagement while fostering community-driven disaster response and recovery strategies. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research identified barriers, including lack of awareness, time constraints, inclusivity challenges, and organizational inefficiencies, all hindering volunteer engagement and undermining public trust in the HWF program.

Findings show that targeted outreach, flexible scheduling, inclusive practices, and tailored training are essential strategies to overcome these barriers. Awareness was the most significant issue (62%, n=74), followed by time constraints (53%, n=64) and inclusivity challenges (22%, n=27). Addressing these issues strengthens

communities by enabling broader public participation in disaster response, reducing reliance on external agencies, and reinforcing public confidence in NGOs' ability to manage volunteers effectively.

The HWF program must adopt localized, adaptive strategies to enhance recruitment, retention, and inclusivity. Flexible roles and micro-volunteering opportunities help mitigate time constraints, while adaptive training frameworks ensure accessibility for diverse participants, including those with disabilities. Additionally, recognition and incentives—such as stipends, tax deductions, and a volunteer service medal—can enhance engagement while addressing financial barriers and ensuring long-term commitment.

Perceptions of the HWF program are influenced by comparisons with international models, such as the U.S. CERTs and New Zealand's fire brigades, as well as provincial initiatives in Ontario and Nova Scotia. These programs illustrate how volunteer integration into emergency management enhances local preparedness, social cohesion, and trust in disaster response systems. By aligning with evidence-based, community-driven models, the HWF can strengthen public trust by demonstrating transparency, effectiveness, and a commitment to inclusivity.

Ultimately, the HWF program strengthens communities by empowering individuals with the skills, resources, and opportunities to serve in disaster response roles. By implementing effective recruitment, retention, and recognition strategies, the revitalized HWF program can sustain engagement, enhance disaster response capacity, and build a resilient volunteer infrastructure that restores public confidence,

fosters local independence, and strengthens national disaster preparedness.

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Appendix A
Stage One Online Survey Questions

1. Informed Consent to Participate in Research and Signature of Research Participant. By participating as a panellist, I acknowledge that my electronic signature confirms that I have read the study information on Strategies for Revitalizing the Humanitarian Workforce Program. Participation is voluntary, and proceeding to the survey constitutes informed consent. I understand I can withdraw at any time without consequences. An electronic copy of the consent form is available.

My questions have been answered, and I agree to participate in this study. Selecting “Yes, I consent to participate in this survey” will be my electronic signature. Do you consent to participate in this online survey?

Select one of the following:

- Yes, I consent to participate in this survey.
 - No, I do not consent.
2. As a participant with this study, you have the option to be contacted for participation in a follow-up focus group. To register for the study's focus groups, please contact the primary researcher: Tom Beveridge.
 - Okay
 3. What makes you want to volunteer? [Select all that apply]
 - Helping other
 - I want to feel needed
 - Learning new skills
 - Meeting new people
 - Other (please specify)
 4. Do you prefer volunteering for? [select one]
 - Short, one-time projects: a few hours or one day
 - Long-term commitments: returning multiple for shifts or days
 - Both options are fine
 - Other (please specify)
 5. Are you currently employed in one or more of these areas?
[select all that apply]
 - Canadian Armed Forces, Regular or Primary Reserve
 - Firefighting services, paid. Local and Forestry
 - Medical professions or adjacent support services
 - Police, Courts or related law enforcement services (CBSA, guards)
 - Public utilities (water, sewage, transportation, communications, power)
 - Does not apply to me

11. What may have prevented you volunteering with one of these five disaster response organizations

[select one]

- I didn't know help was needed
- I don't know where to find information or make contact
- I think I don't have the right skills
- I'm too busy
- It's hard to get to the volunteering location
- Other (please specify)

12. Please indicate how important it is for you to see the impact of your volunteering (e.g., community support and connection with others)

[select one]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. How likely would training for a volunteer position increase your willingness to sign up for? [select one]

- Very likely
- Likely
- Somewhat likely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely

14. What single word effectively describes your perception of the Canadian Red Cross, St. John Ambulance, Salvation Army, Ground Search and Rescue, and Team Rubicon?

- [Textbox]

For this survey, 'visible minority or ethnoculturally diverse group' refers to individuals who identify as belonging to a specific cultural or ethnic community, including but not limited to Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, immigrants, or members of distinct cultural groups.

15. Do you identify as a member of a visible minority or an ethnoculturally diverse group? [select one]

- Yes
- No

16. To what extent do you believe that changing weather patterns and increased frequency of disasters are impacting the need for volunteers in disaster and emergency management? [select one]

- Greatly increasing the need
- Somewhat increasing the need
- No change in the need
- Somewhat decreasing the need
- Greatly decreasing the need
- Other (please specify)

17. In your opinion, how could volunteer non-governmental organizations who are in the Humanitarian Workforce program improve their volunteer recruitment process?

- [Textbox]

Volunteers and Staff are expected to maintain their regular volunteer responsibilities with their organization. Extra time commitment is required for Humanitarian Workforce volunteers above this regular commitment.

18. Considering the additional commitment required for the Humanitarian Workforce volunteers, how much extra time can you commit to training each week or month? [select one]

- 1 or 2 extra hours per week
- A few extra hours each month
- No additional hours
- Other (please specify)

19. What specific support or resources would you need to become—or remain—an active volunteer in the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce program?

[Textbox] In response to large scale disasters in Canada, paid staff and HWF volunteers may be expected to:

- travel outside of their community or province
- live with limited access to services like power or water
- live in tents and / or sleeping on cots
- may involve shift work throughout the day and
- deploy away from home between 7 to 21 days

20. Knowing these expectations for paid staff and Humanitarian Workforce volunteers, are there any barriers which would discourage you from volunteering in the Humanitarian Workforce program?
 [Select one answer for each]

	1 – Strongly Agree	2 - Agree	3 – Neither	4 – Disagree	5 – Strongly Disagree	N/A
Travel outside my community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Limited access to services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Living in tents or sleeping in cots	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shift work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Extended time away from home	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

21. Are there any additional concerns or barriers that might discourage you from volunteering in the Humanitarian Workforce program, and suggest any conditions or changes that could make you more likely to participate?

- [Textbox]

22. Each disaster and emergency response organization has different methods of recognizing volunteers. If the option is available, how would you like to see volunteer Humanitarian Workforce commitment to disasters be appreciated?
 [select all that apply]

- Awards ceremony is held each year
- Income tax deduction for HWF volunteers (like volunteer firefighters and GS&R volunteers)
- License plates for HWF volunteers (like volunteer firefighters and GS&R volunteers) Medal for HWF volunteers (Like the military, St. John Ambulance, Police, Paramedics and Firefighters)
- Small payment each volunteer day (honorarium) at a disaster (like volunteer firefighters)
- Thank you letter or certificate of appreciation each year
- Other (please specify)

23. Is there anything you wish to add about volunteering for the Canadian Humanitarian Workforce program?

- [Textbox]

The following nine questions are used to group survey responses into larger categories.

24. How do you identify yourself? [select one]

- Man
- Non-binary
- Woman
- Other (please specify)

25. How old are you? [select one]

- 18 and under
- 19-24
- 25-30
- 31-44
- 45-54
- 55-65
- 65 and above

26. Which province are you from? [select one]

- Alberta
- British Columbia
- Manitoba
- Saskatchewan
- Ontario
- Quebec
- New Brunswick
- Newfoundland and Labrador
- Nova Scotia
- Prince Edward Island
- Other (please specify)
- I prefer not to say

27. How would you describe the area where you live? [select one]

- Urban (town or city)
- Suburban (edge of town or within 20 minutes of the city)
- Rural (20 minutes or more drive outside of town)
- I prefer not to say

28. What is your main job? [select all that apply]

- Student
- Employed, Full-time
- Employed, Part-time
- Looking for work
- Retired
- Other (please specify)
- I prefer not to say

29. What is your primary source of transportation? [select one]

- I drive my own vehicle
- I rely on public transportation (bus, train, carpool)
- Active transportation (walk, run, bicycle)
- I prefer not to say

30. What is your accommodation arrangement? [select one]

- Rent
- Homeowner
- Shared living arrangements (parents, roommates, dorm)
- Other (please specify) [Textbox]
- I prefer not to say

31. What is your level of education completed? [select one]

- High School
- Community College
- Trade School
- Undergraduate studies
- Graduate studies
- Doctoral studies
- Other (please specify) [Textbox]
- I prefer not to say

32. What is your household income, before taxes? [select one]

- \$20,000 and under
- \$20,500 to \$37,000
- \$37,500 to \$80,000
- \$80,500 to \$110,000
- \$110,500 to \$170,000
- \$170,500 and above
- I prefer not to say.

Appendix B

Stage Two Interview Guide for Focus Group Interview Guide

Welcome, and thank you for being here today. Your participation is important as we aim to gather further feedback on how Canada's non-governmental organizations participating in the Humanitarian Workforce program can better serve their communities and volunteers, such as yourselves. We are particularly interested in understanding what works for you and what hinders your volunteering in response to a disaster in your community. Your insights will help us develop inclusive, diverse, and equitable strategies to rejuvenate the volunteer workforce.

I am Tom Beveridge, a graduate student of the Disaster and Emergency Management (MA DEM) program with Royal Roads University (RRU) in Victoria, British Columbia. Today, I will conduct a focus group, which is a conversation that focuses on specific questions in a safe and confidential environment. I will guide the conversation by asking questions that each of you can respond to. There are no right or wrong answers; just be honest. You can also respond to each other's comments just like in a regular conversation. My role is to ensure everyone gets to participate and that we stay on track. We will be recording this focus group for accuracy, but the recording will not be shared outside of this study.

Before we get started, I want to mention some key points.

First, we will compile today's information into a final report. That report will include a summary of your comments and some recommendations from these focus groups.

Secondly, you do not have to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable with. Today's focus group is anonymous and confidential. "Anonymous" means we will not use your names, and we will not identify you as individuals in our report of this study. "Confidential" means that you should not repeat what is shared in this meeting outside of this meeting. I ask you to respect each other's privacy and refrain from discussing what others have shared today. Although we hope everyone here honours this confidentiality, please remember that another focus group member could repeat what you say here today. So please, do not say anything you feel is needed to keep private.

Finally, you signed an informed consent form before beginning the online survey. As a review, this focus group upholds your confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring secure data management by the research team only. Participation is voluntary, and participating in the focus group will be taken as your informed consent. However, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without any consequences. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact the primary researcher, Tom Beveridge, and/or the Research Ethics office.

Let us begin with introductions.

Opening Questions (Ice Breaker)

1. Could you share a memorable moment from your volunteer work that has had a lasting impact on you?
 - a. What was it about that moment that made it so impactful?
 - b. How has this experience influenced your views on volunteering?
2. What inspired you to attend today's session? What do you hope to take away from our discussion?
 - a. Can you share an example of a positive volunteering experience you have had?
 - b. What does volunteering mean to you personally?

Introductory Questions

3. Reflecting on your previous experiences, how do you perceive the role of non-governmental organizations like those in the Humanitarian Workforce program in community support?
 - a. How do these perceptions influence your decision to volunteer?
 - b. What first steps do you usually take when you decide to volunteer?
4. In what ways do you think volunteer organizations, especially those within the Humanitarian Workforce program, impact local communities?
 - a. How important is the visibility of these impacts to you when choosing where to volunteer?
 - b. Can you describe a time when you felt your volunteer work was especially valuable to the community?

Transition Questions

5. Considering the Humanitarian Workforce program's aim to enhance volunteer recruitment and retention, what initial barriers do you think need addressing?
 - a. How do these barriers differ from those faced in other volunteering contexts you have encountered?
 - b. What specific aspects of the Humanitarian Workforce program do you think could directly address these barriers?

6. What do you find most challenging about beginning volunteer work, particularly with new organizations like those in the Humanitarian Workforce program?
 - a. How do you typically overcome these initial challenges?
 - b. What could non-governmental organizations do to make this transition easier for new volunteers?

Key Questions – the reason for this focus group

7. From your experience and observations, what strategies have been most effective in overcoming barriers to volunteer engagement?
 - a. How could these strategies be applied or adapted within the Humanitarian Workforce program?
 - b. What roles do you believe non-governmental organization managers should play in implementing these strategies?
8. What specific qualities or resources do you believe make a volunteer program effective in retaining its volunteers?
 - a. How could the Humanitarian Workforce program incorporate these qualities or resources to improve volunteer retention?
 - b. What role do you think feedback and communication play in the effectiveness of a volunteer program?

Ending Questions

9. Reflecting on today's discussion, what are the key takeaways that could influence future directions of the Humanitarian Workforce program?
 - a. What additional support or resources would you personally need to become more involved in volunteer activities?
 - b. How could today's discussion be most effectively communicated to current and potential volunteers?
10. Based on our discussion, what are the most critical steps the Humanitarian Workforce program could take to enhance the volunteer experience?
 - a. What specific feedback would you like to provide to the organizers of the Humanitarian Workforce program based on your own needs and expectations?
 - b. How do you envision the ideal relationship between volunteers and non-governmental organizations management within the Humanitarian Workforce program?

Exit Statement

I see our time is up. Thank you for participating and sharing so much useful information for this study. I appreciate the time and effort you have taken to share your insights about volunteering and the Humanitarian Workforce program.

As mentioned in the Informed Consent form, you may request a transcript of your answers from Tom Beveridge for review, edit or removal of your consent to use your answers, up to 35 days after participating in the study today. After this date, the data collected will be anonymized or integrated into the study in such a way that it cannot be extracted without compromising the integrity of the research results.

If you have any questions or would like to learn more about my research, please feel free to contact Tom. You may also contact

Dr. Larry Wolfe
Research supervisor

and/or

Dr. Kyle Breen
Research committee

Thank you again for your contribution.