

The Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations: Creating a New Voice

Grantor: The Muttart Foundation

Grantee: Volunteer Calgary

Summary: Creating a Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations to coordinate the voices of the sector

“Quality of life isn’t just business development and jobs. A great city blends business development and social development into true-blue community economic development” says Martha Parker, Executive Director of Volunteer Calgary. Calgary is about to take a leap forward towards that goal, with a three-year grant from the Muttart Foundation of Edmonton to create the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations. This forum is poised to be a unifying voice for the Calgary voluntary sector, an objective that many people have been pursuing for over seven years.

Individual charities tend to struggle in their separate silos for survival, with little knowledge of, or time and energy for the sectoral issues they have in common. For many, the issue is organizational survival. Bob Wyatt, Executive Director of the Muttart Foundation, is well-versed in this challenge. During the 1990s, the Foundation worked with many social service organizations to increase their effectiveness and their efficiency. It believed that supporting the infrastructure of charitable organizations would create better organizations, which in turn would deliver better programs. The Muttart Foundation website declares: “A charity is more than the sum of the programs it offers.”

Wyatt is concerned about crosscutting issues that impact on all the organizations in the voluntary sector. “We recognize that charities are struggling individually, but there is a need for them to look at the meta-level.” he says. He started thinking about ways to encourage the voluntary sector, particularly in Alberta, to work together to address common issues like legislation and taxation. On a number of occasions, both formal and informal, Wyatt talked about the need for vol-

untary organizations to find ways to come together differently. “I talked about the Chamber of Commerce as a model that could be emulated in the sector,” says Wyatt. He believed this forum could give the sector the voice it needed. His vision was for a Calgary Chamber of Charities.

Volunteer Calgary was aware of Wyatt’s idea. After a town hall meeting hosted by Volunteer Calgary as a lead-up to the 1997 federal election, Parker realized that there was little understanding of the voluntary sector and its common issues.

So Volunteer Calgary became interested in exploring the feasibility of the Chamber of Charities model that Wyatt had been talking about. It applied for and received a grant from the Muttart Foundation to do a feasibility study of the concept. However, although Calgary charities showed great interest, no group had the resources to move the idea forward. Because the Board of the Muttart Foundation wanted to see the initiative come from the sector itself, Volunteer Calgary’s report had no immediate follow-up. Yet both the Foundation and Volunteer Calgary remained interested in the concept and continued to work on sector-wide capacity-building.

Meanwhile, at the national level, a voluntary sector voice was emerging through the Voluntary Sector Roundtable, an informal group of national charities that

came together in the mid-90s to discuss the relationship of the sector with the federal government. Members of the Roundtable participated in a joint effort with federal officials to map out the major issues in the relationship, such as regulatory and funding issues. This experience in working together demonstrated to many leaders in the sector how important it was to have a forum to articulate issues of concern. The joint report of this group, appropriately titled *Working Together*, led directly to the federal commitment of \$90 million over 5 years to work on developing and building the relationship, under the heading of the Voluntary Sector Initiative.

In 2000-2001, partly as a result of the renewed momentum in the voluntary sector fostered by the federal commitment to the Voluntary Sector Initiative, there was renewed community support in Calgary for the creation of a local charitable sector voice. This led to the formation of an interim planning group, composed of well-connected sector representatives from solidly established organizations in Calgary. The group organized three community consultations with over 125 representatives from the sector at each



one. At one consultation, when volunteers were called for to help determine the structure of the proposed new organization, over 80 people came forward to sit on working groups.

The planning group also organized many focus groups. Parker sees the group's role as "building network capital. We have a broad range of people who can get information out quickly." Feedback from the consultations and networking led to a change in the proposed organization's name. Charity was felt to be a concept that no longer fit the range of organizations and activities in the voluntary sector. From now on it would be known as the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations.

In June 2003, Volunteer Calgary submitted a formal proposal to the Muttart Foundation to develop the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations. "Our Directors looked at their business plan, at what they hoped to achieve and at what they have done on an interim un-staffed basis and decided to award the grant," says Wyatt. "The movement has gone as far as it can without staffing. Our grant will allow Volunteer Calgary to hire staff and to pursue broad membership within the sector."

The funding officially begins in September 2003, with three years of seed money to bring the concept to life. After 2 years, a formal external evaluation will be

conducted, with the possibility of further funding from Muttart for an additional five years. Parker has high hopes that "this organization, made up of folks who work in the sector, adds such tremendous value to the sector that at the end of our three-year grant time it is regarded as absolutely necessary." Wyatt sees this sectoral investment as consistent with the role of the philanthropic sector...to spend money and take risks.

The funding period lies ahead, yet a great deal of success in building the voluntary sector has already been accomplished. Parker believes the sector in Calgary has a strong enough voice now to be heard on crosscutting issues. For the Muttart Foundation, this grant is in keeping with its present mandate of investing in charities. "The grant will bring together a variety of different types of organizations to collaborate at a higher

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level than the day-to-day operation of their agencies," says Wyatt. "Who knows what will come out of it. Once people start sitting down together to discuss policy issues, any number of things can result. We're not going to pre-judge what that looks like."

"Just because it's risky doesn't mean we'll turn it down," he says. "We are prepared to take risks; we want to make sure they are wise risks. Our Foundation has always believed that private foundations are the one entity in society that can afford to fail."

The Muttart Foundation's support for the voluntary sector in Calgary will strengthen the "third pillar" of the community. Thanks to the Muttart Foundation's partnership with Volunteer Calgary, the dream of a more effective partnership for all the players in the community of Calgary now has a greater chance of being realized.

For more information visit the Foundation
Web Site: www.muttart.org

