



Volunteering Services:

Assessing the Needs of ESS Volunteers
For the Emergency Social Services Association

By Pamela Findling and Nissa Wells
April 11, 2006



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For Kerry Evans,
Executive Director
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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report reflects the findings of research that was conducted between February 1, 2007 and March 23, 2007 for the Emergency Social Services Association (ESSA). We intend to address the following issues for the organization:

- What services the Emergency Social Services (ESS) volunteers use and appreciate
- What services the volunteers require that they are not currently receiving
- Whether desired services are already available to them through ESSA or other BC organizations

Methodology

Our recommendations are the result of information gathered from surveys, content analysis, and interviews. As well, we conducted a literature review in the areas of volunteer retention, disaster preparedness training, the needs of retiree volunteers, and older adults' computer usage.

Discussion

One of the key findings was the importance of sharing lessons learned. ESSA currently does this through the website, forum, and mESSAges. While volunteers are generally happy with the website and newsletter, the forum is underused—despite its great potential.

ESSA offers several seminars to the ESS volunteers. While survey respondents generally spoke highly of the seminars, they identified three possible barriers to their participation in them: content, location, and price. However, our research revealed that the true problem may lie in misperceptions of these three things and we recommend ESSA target the volunteers directly in the marketing of seminars.

Finally, volunteers seemed confused about ESSA's purpose and services. They do not seem to know what exactly it is that the organization can do for them. As a result, we recommend ESSA develop methods to more effectively convey the organization's purpose to volunteers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a result of our research, we offer the following four recommendations, listed here in suggested order of priority:

1. Use the website, online forum, and newsletter to continue to strengthen the communication of lessons volunteers have learned through exercises and responses to disasters.
2. Identify methods to clearly communicate what services ESSA provides to ESS volunteers so that they will use them more.
3. Promote seminars to ESS volunteers to ensure they are aware of the available content, locations, and prices of the seminars.
4. Work with Emergency Social Services Directors to identify and implement benefits of volunteering in order to motivate and retain ESS volunteers.

Introduction

This report reflects the findings of research that was conducted between February 1, 2007 and March 23, 2007 for the Emergency Social Services Association (ESSA). As you know, ESSA provides disaster preparedness support for over 5000 Emergency Social Services (ESS) volunteers across British Columbia. Recently, volunteers have expressed some concern about the training and assistance they receive from the organization. We intend to address the following issues in this report:

- What services the volunteers use and appreciate
- What services the volunteers require that they are not currently receiving
- Whether desired services are already available to them through ESSA or other BC organizations

As a result of this research, we are able to make recommendations that will help ESSA best meet the needs of ESS volunteers. Guiding us through the process was our insider-expert Kerry Evans, the Executive Director of ESSA.

Our research was productive and we are able to make the following key recommendations to ESSA as a result:

5. Use the website, online forum, and newsletter to continue to strengthen the communication of lessons volunteers have learned through exercises and responses to disasters.
6. Identify methods to clearly communicate what services ESSA provides to ESS volunteers so that they will use them more.
7. Promote seminars to ESS volunteers to ensure they are aware of the available content, locations, and prices of the seminars.
8. Work with Emergency Social Services Directors to identify and implement benefits of volunteering in order to motivate and retain ESS volunteers.

These recommendations are explained and supported in greater detail in the remainder of this report. After explaining how we conducted our empirical and theoretical research, we will present our findings and more specific information about how ESSA can implement the recommendations we suggest above. These findings are under the following headings:

- What Motivates Volunteers
- Sharing Lessons Learned
 - Websites

- Forums
- Newsletters
- Seminars and Classes
 - Importance of Classes and Training
 - Content
 - Location
 - Price
- The Need for a Clearer Message from ESSA
- Conclusions and Recommendations

Methodology

Empirical and Theoretical Research

Survey: Our research started with a survey we conducted regarding ESSA's services. We created an online survey using www.surveymonkey.com. On February 13, 2007, Kerry Evans sent out the survey on our behalf to Emergency Social Services Directors across the province. These Directors then distributed the surveys to volunteers in their regions. Because of this, we do not know how many people actually received the survey. This survey and its results are included as Appendix A.

We received some very useful feedback as a result of the survey but we did encounter a couple of obstacles that may have affected the results. First, the majority of the respondents (58%) were from Vancouver Island. Second, out of 5000 volunteers across BC, we only received 76 responses. These two factors clearly indicate an imbalance in our results and may have influenced their validity. As a result, conclusions that we draw from the survey results may not be representative of the full ESS volunteer population.

Content Analysis: Once we received the survey results and were able to analyze them, we identified a few questions that we still needed to answer. These questions included the following:

- What seminars and classes does ESSA currently offer?
- What seminars and classes do ESSA's partner organizations offer?
- How can forum usage be increased?
- How does ESSA currently share the information about lessons that volunteers learn through exercises and responses to disasters?

To answer these questions, we conducted a content analysis of ESSA's website (www.essa.ca), the online forum, eight issues of mESSAges, the seminar program guide, and a sheet from ESSA identifying courses offered by partner organizations. We also studied www.westcoastmoms.ca, a new website that has an active online forum, to try

to identify things that help make their forum successful and how that might apply to ESSA's online forum.

To round out our understanding of ESSA's work, we also examined the annual report, organizational chart, and a provincial map that illustrates the different regions of the province that ESSA supports.

Interviews: We created a short interview for Emergency Social Services Directors to attempt to establish in more detail in which areas ESSA's services are lacking. This interview is included as Appendix B and was sent to ten Directors by email on March 19, 2007. We only received two responses and they contained little useful information. As a result, the interview process was not very successful.

After realizing how little ESSA's online forum was being used and how much potential it held, we also sent a short, informal email interview to Lara Leontowich, administrator of www.westcoastmoms.ca. Her answers helped us identify methods to help make an online forum active and successful.

Theoretical Research: Our initial theoretical research included three subject areas: volunteer retention, disaster preparedness training, and the needs of retiree volunteers.

As our research progressed and our survey identified possible areas of improvement, we conducted further theoretical research into the area of older adults and computers (the majority of ESS volunteers are of retirement age). Since our early research indicated online forum and website usage were two potential services that volunteers could greatly benefit from, we thought it prudent to investigate what needs older adults may have in relation to computers. As a result, our theoretical research ended up covering the following four areas of study:

- Volunteer retention
- Disaster preparedness training
- The needs of retiree volunteers
- Older adults and computers

Discussion

What Motivates Volunteers

While it is important to clarify that ESSA does not take responsibility for recruiting, retaining, or motivating volunteers, motivation is still an important consideration in our research. If ESSA knows what motivates ESS volunteers, they will be better able to customise services to help meet the needs of the volunteers. By researching what may