

**COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR MP:**

**A HOW TO KIT  
FOR VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS**

**THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR ROUNDTABLE**

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## **VOLUNTARY SECTOR ROUNDTABLE**

This kit is produced by the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR), comprised of the leadership of the following organizations: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, Canadian Conference of the Arts, Canadian Council for International Co-operation, Canadian Council on Social Development, Canadian Environmental Network, Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, Community Foundations of Canada, Representative for the Faith Communities, National Voluntary Health Agencies, National Voluntary Organizations, United Way of Canada-Centreaide Canada and Volunteer Canada. Since 1995, VSR has worked on a number of key issues affecting the health of the voluntary sector. Issues such as accountability, capacity, taxation and improved relations with the federal government are the focus of VSR. With a fiscal dividend now a reality, the profile and value of the voluntary sector is better appreciated and strengthening its capacity will remain a priority for the Voluntary Sector Roundtable. The Voluntary Sector Roundtable is also devoted to increasing the role of the voluntary sector in the policy making process. The voluntary sector should play an active role in policy making that affects the well being of our civil society.

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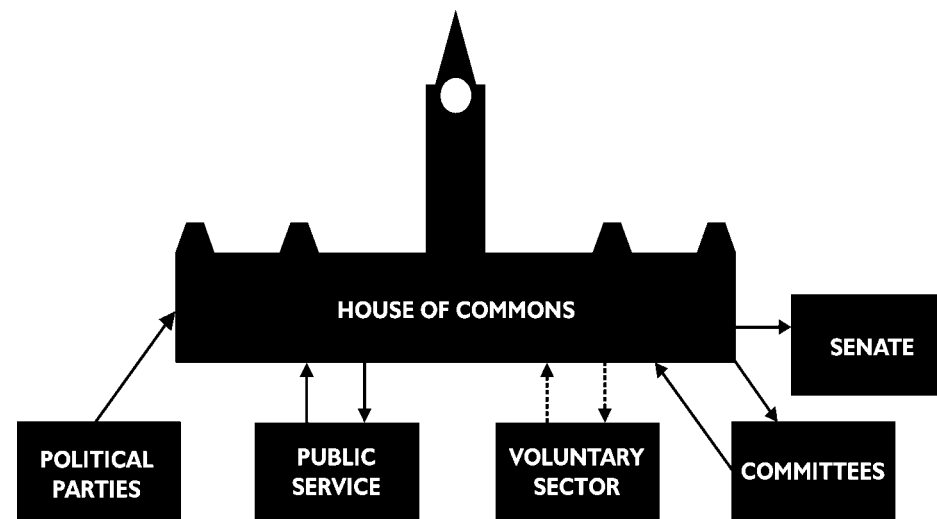
# INTRODUCTION

## What this Kit is All About

This kit describes how to communicate with your MP. Wherever your voluntary group is based in Canada, contacting your local MP is an economical, convenient way to communicate with the federal government.

One of the main reasons for improving the profile of the voluntary sector with the federal government is for the sector to have a greater say in the policy making process. Groups throughout the sector have experienced the impact of federal government policies. Informing your MP about the issues that affect your group and your community plays a role in public education and can influence legislation in the future.

Your organization may want to influence a specific area of legislation. It is helpful to know how policies are developed: legislation may be initiated by political parties, government departments, or parliament. Legislation is further developed, debated and altered in committees, in parliament and finally in the Senate. (The Senate can refuse to pass proposed legislation into law.)



Your organization may want to become more involved with the policy making process. For example, if you have knowledge in a specific area of legislation, you may want to participate in committee debate. It is possible to apply for funding to permit travel to a committee meeting. The use of video conferencing is also growing in popularity. Check the web site address ([www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca)) for more information. Your MP, or his or her assistant may also help you obtain information about the status of a policy being developed within a committee or a government department.

This How to Kit is about contacting the federal government. The kit can also be useful to communicate with municipal and provincial levels of government. Find out what level of government is shaping the legislation that your organization is concerned about.

In this kit you will find an outline of four key areas shaping the future of Canada's voluntary sector as a whole. These are:

- 1) The need for the voluntary sector to be involved in the policy making process;
- 2) The need for capacity building within organizations;
- 3) More tax incentives for donors; and
- 4) Greater accountability of the voluntary sector.

Bring these issues to your MP's attention.(page 5) The body of this kit is your "tool box" with tips about "Communicating with your MP".(pages 7-9) Finally, sections about the role of the voluntary sector describe one perspective about how the sector is part of the larger society. Use this to find out how your MP views the voluntary sector (pages 10-12). This perspective of the voluntary sector can also be used as a starting point to debate and develop your organization's role in public policy discussion: plan a board meeting to discuss how your organization fits into the big picture. Finally, a description of how to increase the influence of the voluntary sector highlights the importance of the role of the media in shaping government policies. Develop and reinforce your relationship with your MP by using the media. (page 13)

Involve your Board Members in discussion about the issues raised in this kit. The development of ideas that reflect democratic decision making of your Board must be at the heart of your organization's effort. This is key to strengthening the voluntary sector and our democracy.

The voluntary sector can move off the sidelines and play a much more important role in the development of public policy. With this kit your organization can start the process. The kit provides you with information about how to develop a relationship with your MP. The substance of your message must emerge from the debate and decisions of your Board. There is always potential for innovation and imagination from within your group to produce a unique poster or special event to more personally involve your MP in the work of your organization in the community. As a result of communicating with your MP, the federal government can gain knowledge about the real value of the voluntary sector.

## CANADIANS WANT A STRONG VOLUNTARY SECTOR

As political parties and Members of Parliament think about policies for Canada's future, the voluntary sector must play a key role. Your organization may have specific reasons to meet with your MP. At the same time it is possible to bring broader concerns of the voluntary sector to your MP's attention.

*Despite its importance, policy makers are not sufficiently aware of the actual size and nature of the sector, how it functions, the value it adds, and the challenges it faces. (Red Book II)*

### **Inform your MP**

#### **Let your MP know that the following matters are of concern to the voluntary sector:**

- The voluntary sector needs greater recognition and a place at the table in public policy discussion. In reality, the voluntary sector and groups such as yours see firsthand the effects of cutbacks touching peoples' lives. The voluntary sector needs to share this experience and knowledge with government decision-makers. We need to develop partnerships in public policy discussion.
- Voluntary organizations are facing the challenge of coping with government cutbacks and downloading of services. At the same time, there is strong indication that greater capacity for job creation and service delivery is needed in organizations throughout the voluntary sector. We need increased core grants and program funding in order to respond to increased demand. Government can help by providing funding for training and technical support.
- The voluntary sector needs a supportive legislative and regulatory framework. We need government to ensure modernization of legislation defining charitable activity in Canada. The Voluntary Sector Roundtable has been working with the Department of Finance to provide new incentives to encourage charitable giving.
- The voluntary sector is committed to strengthening governance and accountability not because there are major problems in the sector, but to ensure that the high standards the public have come to expect from the sector are maintained and enhanced. Groups have boards of directors who are responsible for the overall health and administrative effectiveness of the organization. The Voluntary Sector Roundtable created the Panel on Accountability and Governance to ensure effective program outcomes, greater transparency, and, guidelines for ethical and effective fundraising methods and financial management. Voluntary sector organizations need the capacity to meet the demands of operating effective and responsive organizations.

## COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR MP

### Tips to help you with your meeting

#### Plan Ahead:

- Make sure that your organization's plans to communicate with your MP or federal government representative are part of an overall work plan for the year.
- Make sure the Board of Directors of your organization has agreed to the substance of the message to pass on to your local MP. State clearly the purpose of planned meetings. Identify areas of concern that are the responsibility of the federal government.
- If staff are planning and meeting with the MP, ensure that a board member or senior volunteer also participates. This helps the MP see first-hand the commitment of his or her constituents to the voluntary sector.

### Your Objectives:

- To inform your MP about the goals, activities and needs of your organization.
- To inform your MP about social needs in your community.
- To let your MP know about the importance of the voluntary sector in his/her community.
- To involve your MP in the work of your organization.
- To develop a bond of trust so that your organization is considered a source of information about issues in your community.
- To identify where the government could support the voluntary sector.

### How do I get a Meeting?

- Call your MP's local constituency office and make an appointment. You may not reach your MP. Talk with the MP's assistant who is a key resource person. Note his/her name. Inform the assistant about the work of your voluntary organization. Provide the assistant with a summary of your purpose. MPs appreciate a briefing!
- If your MP is out of town or too busy to meet with you, meet with the MP's assistant. An MP's constituency assistant plays an important role informing the MP, likely in Ottawa, about local issues.
- Be flexible in deciding the date of the meeting.
- Confirm the time and place of the meeting in a letter which also includes:
  - a. The items you want to discuss and what you want to achieve. Clearly state your purpose.
  - b. A list of members of your group who will be attending the meeting, and their positions.

- If your MP is a Cabinet Minister it may take two or three months to get an appointment subject to last minute changes. Follow-up your letter with friendly calls to the assistant inquiring about the status of your request.
- Don't get discouraged.

## CHECK LIST

- Know your MP. Research his/her background. Information is available by checking the Web Site of the MP's political party. **Check the list of Internet site addresses in this kit.**
- Know your MP's party position. Remember all MP's are committed to the policies of their party. Check the Web Site address (page 16) for the party positions on different issues.
- Use this information to prepare topics for discussion. How does your organization's work intersect or mesh with your MP's concerns and party position. Point out the areas of a party platform that match your organization's area of concern. Talk about the benefits of working together.
- Identify your organization's main issues of concern. Ensure that you have board approval for your presentation. Focus on issues your organization works on or has experience in.
- Make sure you are up to speed on any current debate on these issues. Focus on possible solutions.

## How do I Organize the Discussion?

- Practice your presentation with a co-worker or volunteer so that you feel comfortable giving the presentation. Ideally, a volunteer should do the presentation.
- Gather succinct and relevant material to leave with your MP.
- Produce one or two page handouts that summarize issues, the support or action sought, and information on your organization.
- Plan a brief agenda and time frame for your presentation. Devote at least half of the allotted time to a two-way free flowing discussion.
- Choose the most able speaker(s) from your organization to meet with the MP.
- Limit the number in the delegation to four or less.
- Appoint the most articulate person in the group as a spokesperson but divide the responsibilities so that each person can speak.
- Identify what the MP can do such as raise an issue in caucus or with a committee, speak to the relevant Minister, ask a question in the House, support or oppose an upcoming decision or policy, speak at an event, etc.

## **What do I say to my MP?**

- Introduce your organization.
- Explain its mission, goals and objectives
- Describe the volunteers and those the organization serves.
- Introduce and explain the issues you wish to discuss.
- Talk about the experience of your organization using examples to illustrate both problems and solutions.
- Talk about solutions that are feasible at the community level.
- Invite and involve your MP in your organization's activities.
- Offer your expertise whenever needed by your MP or whenever you think it might be needed.
- Be sincere and passionate without being too emotional.
- Take notes! Decide ahead of time who will be equipped as the official note taker.

## **Your MP wants:**

- To be well informed about events in his/her constituency.
- Reliable contacts for information about the constituency.
- To be acknowledged for positive political action.

## **Your MP does not want:**

- To be talked down to or belittled.
- To have his or her time wasted.
- To hear repetitive versions of the same argument.
- To be part of an emotional display of anger.

## **The Follow-up:**

- Have participants evaluate the meeting. Revise and expand notes taken during the meeting.
- Call and thank the MP's assistant and ask for feedback.
- Write a letter of thanks to the MP.
- Write a brief press release for the local paper. The press release can reinforce the message you delivered to your MP.
- **Make sure that what you tell the media is exactly the same as what you tell your MP.**
- Inconsistency can lead to lack of credibility. Your local paper influences your MP. (A media report on your activities can also help foster support for your organization. Board members and volunteers will feel that their work has gained importance in the community. The public will learn more about your organization.)
- Set up the next meeting with your MP to follow-up on issues that arise from your first meeting.
- Put your MP on your organization's mailing list and send him/her regular updates.

- Include a report of your last meeting on the first update that you send your MP.
- At election time host an all-candidates' debate. This is an educational opportunity for all.
- At the next election, if you have space, host a polling station.

### **Are you Lobbying?**

- All organizations that have an employee who is paid to lobby must register with Industry Canada's *Lobbyists Registration Branch*. Few voluntary sector organizations have the capacity to pay employees to lobby. Your organization can verify the information on lobbying available at the following internet address: <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/lobbyist>.

### **Final Tips**

- Be on time for the meeting. Don't take more time for the meeting unless it is made available.
- Answer questions honestly. If you don't have an answer, offer to get back to your MP or the assistant with the information.
- Be a good listener.
- Ask good questions that will keep your agenda in focus.
- Plan a condensed version of your presentation in case the meeting time shortened. **Be flexible.**
- Prepare an information package of handouts including a one-page summary of your main points in large print. Have enough hand-outs for participants in your group, the MP and his or her assistants.
- Bring a camera and take pictures for your newsletter.

# UNDERSTANDING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

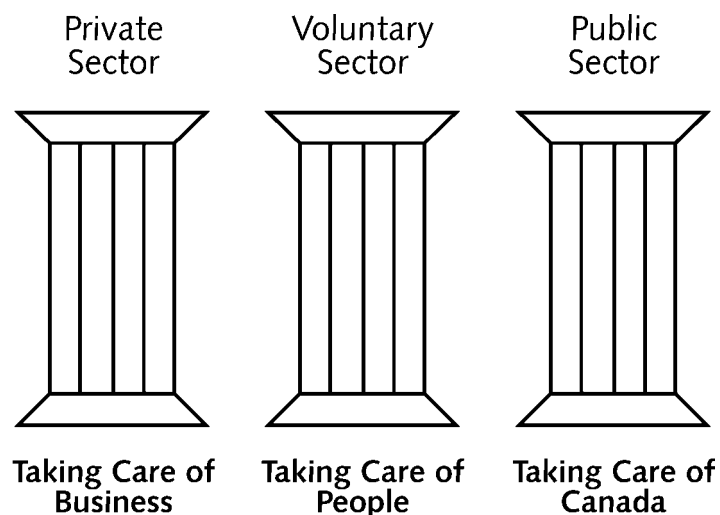
## One of the Three Pillars of Society

Your group is part of the voluntary sector. The other two main sectors of society are the public sector (includes government) and the private sector (or the business sector). We hear a lot about the voluntary sector or the 'third sector'. We also need to know about its importance in our economy and to the well being of civil society.

The Liberal government's "Red Book II" recognizes the importance of the voluntary sector:

*"Canada's ability to offer opportunity and security to its citizens is tied to the vitality and capacity of the voluntary sector. Alongside the public and private sectors, the voluntary sector constitutes the third pillar of Canadian society and its economy. Despite its importance, policy makers are not sufficiently aware of the actual size and nature of the sector, how it functions, the value it adds, and the challenges it faces."*

Here is one way of viewing the voluntary sector in society:



Political and economic change in Canada means that the roles and responsibilities of leaders of the three sectors are changing. There is a need to talk about this with government. In the past decade the federal government has increased downloading, privatization and debate involving citizens. All this means that there is an important need to make government aware of what the voluntary sector is all about.

Tell your MP what your organization is doing and help him/her understand the role of the voluntary sector in his/her riding. Inform your MP about the importance of policies or measures to support the voluntary sector so it can continue to play a role keeping a healthy civil society.

# THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN CANADA

The voluntary sector in Canada is a key pillar of Canadian society. The voluntary sector makes a huge contribution to the quality of life in our community:

- Established organizations in the voluntary sector count on the volunteer labour of more than 7.5 million Canadians.
- In Canada, volunteer work is equal to 578,000 full-time jobs or an estimated worth of 16.3 billion dollars. \*
- The voluntary sector includes 76,000 charitable organizations that provide over 1.3 million jobs and produce annual revenues of \$90 billion. The voluntary sector also includes over 100,000 non-profit groups such as trade unions and professional organizations, community and recreation associations, cooperatives and historical societies. A broader definition of the voluntary sector also includes colleges, schools and hospitals largely funded by government.
- Voluntary organizations serve as the lifeblood of communities. Organizations such as community and recreational associations, service clubs, advocacy groups and community development associations play an important role linking people to their communities.

## The Voluntary Sector is Effective

- Voluntary organizations produce services that improve the quality of life in our community. Many voluntary groups function specifically to achieve a community based mission.
- The size and nature of government makes it impossible for public sector agencies to identify and serve all needs in our community. Voluntary organizations emerge in response to social needs. Without the voluntary sector, many people would slip through the cracks of our social infrastructure and suffer from lack of care.
- Through work in the community, citizens gain a better understanding of their communities.
- Voluntary agencies operate under the democratic structure of boards, committees and membership involvement. Voluntary groups provide service, encourage voluntary activity, defend less advantaged people, support research, and assist in the development of public policy.
- At its heart, the voluntary sector relies upon the altruism and generosity of dedicated volunteers.

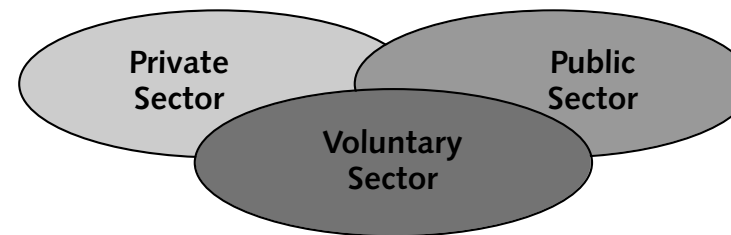
## The Voluntary Sector is Under Stress

Over time, government and society have come to depend upon the heart of the volunteer sector. Downsizing of government services combined with cutbacks weighs heavily on grassroots community groups dedicated to taking care of people. The notion that altruism can attend to more and more social needs challenges the fundamental character of the voluntary sector: greater expectation of work performed by volunteers takes for granted altruism and human kindness.

\* These statistics are from the study, *Caring Canadians*, Statistics Canada, 1998. Please refer to the insert in this kit for more data about the voluntary sector.

## A NEW ROLE FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Canada needs to include the voluntary sector in the policy making process.



The Private Sector holds a well established role influencing public policy.

Social change in the 1990's leads us to look at new roles for public, private and voluntary sectors.

In our interaction with government, the voluntary sector promotes democracy by providing organization and space for citizens to participate in the community. The diversity of the voluntary sector provides an arena for the development of democracy. At the same time, much of the voluntary sector depends on government for financial support to play this important role.

Public policy affects the voluntary sector and the well being of civil society. Policies made without the voluntary sector do not maximize the opportunity to take care of people.

***Tell your MP how spending cuts have affected your community, your organization and its volunteers.***

# THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR CAN INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT

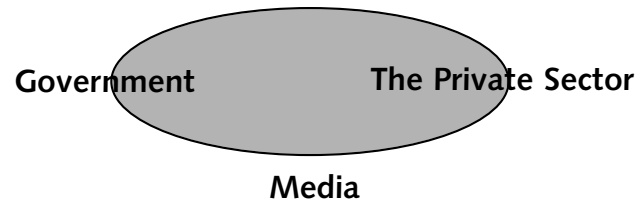
## The media is of critical importance in influencing government.

The voluntary sector is often left to respond in a piecemeal manner to government policies such as downloading. This can be changed. Voluntary organizations can be more proactive. A key access point to your MP is your local newspaper.

Working with your MP gives your organization a chance to voice its concerns about policies. It is important to look for ways to educate your MP and the public rather than become frustrated about your differences.

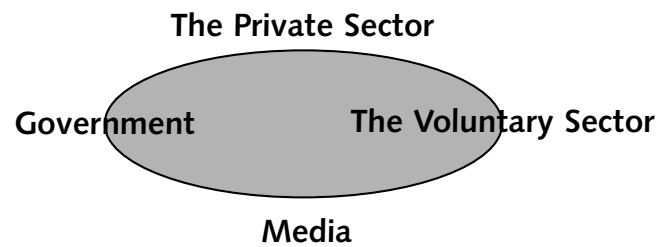
Your communication with government is also a voice for the voluntary sector. Including the media in your public relations strategy can strengthen the voice of the voluntary sector in the policy making process.

As is well known, both private sector and media influence government policies.



The voluntary sector also needs to play a strong role in the public policy process. The media needs more information about the voluntary sector. Keep the media updated about your organization's activities.

Contact your MP. Contact your local newspaper. Send your MP clippings about voluntary sector activities in your community. Strengthen your organization and the voluntary sector.



Use the media to continue to strengthen your relationship with your MP.

## SUMMARY

This project is a nation-wide initiative to build parliamentary support for the voluntary sector. Such an initiative is to be achieved by encouraging voluntary sector organizations to meet with their MPs. This kit is made to help your organization play a role to increase the profile of the voluntary sector with the federal government. As voluntary sector representatives across Canada communicate with their MPs, the federal government and opposition parties can better understand the reality faced by the voluntary sector.

**Communicating with Your MP** provides an opportunity for voluntary sector organizations to inform the federal government about the importance of the voluntary sector. Your MP is your contact to the federal government.

### **Your part / Our part**

Your participation is important! We want you to develop a relationship with your Member of Parliament. As MPs across Canada learn about voluntary sector groups in their constituencies, the federal government will gain a better understanding of the voluntary sector. This helps the voluntary sector participate in the policy making process. Contact us with the results of **Communicating with Your MP**. This can be done by faxing us the information at 613-238-5257 or by e-mail at [vsr-trsb@web.net](mailto:vsr-trsb@web.net). The Voluntary Sector Roundtable will use the results to develop a national strategy to ensure a role for the voluntary sector in the policy making process.

**Communicating with Your MP** offers tips that can also be used to relate to representatives of provincial and municipal levels of government. This "How to Kit" can help you tell all levels of government about your organization and the voluntary sector. As organizations across Canada communicate with the federal government, MPs will better understand the value of the voluntary sector.

## **INTERNET SITE ADDRESSES AND PHONE NUMBERS**

For information about MPs, calendars, committees:

**[www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca)**

Federal Parties Internet Sites:

The Bloc québécois: **[www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca)**

The Conservative Party: **[www.pcparty.ca](http://www.pcparty.ca)**

The Liberal Party: **[www.liberal.ca](http://www.liberal.ca)**

The New Democratic Party: **[www.fed.ndp.ca/fndp](http://www.fed.ndp.ca/fndp)**

The Reform Party: **[www.reform.ca](http://www.reform.ca)**

Am I lobbying? For more details:

**[lobbyists.reg@ic.gc.ca](mailto:lobbyists.reg@ic.gc.ca)**

Library of Parliament - Public Information Office - will research, find answers, give information on just about anything:

Tel: **(613) 992-4793**

Fax: **(613) 992-1273**

For information on Standing Committees:

Tel: **(613) 992-3150**

For information on Parliamentary Associations:

Tel: **(613) 993-0330**

Voluntary Sector Roundtable Internet Site:

**[www.vsr-trsb.web.net/vsr-trsb](http://www.vsr-trsb.web.net/vsr-trsb)**