

ATTENTION HALTON HILLS: Volunteers needed

The pool of volunteers is getting smaller

By **BEN DUMMETT**
Herald Staff

Social service groups in Halton Hills face an uncertain future unless the current trend of declining numbers of volunteers can be reversed, Judith Rasanen of the North Halton Distress and Information Centre says.

Between work and extra-curricular activities like physical fitness pursuits, fewer people now have time to devote to volunteering, Ms. Rasanen said.

The centre's volunteers answer telephone calls from distressed and lonely people and make referrals to the appropriate agency for those in need of counselling.

Linda Berry, who runs the Halton Hills Volunteer Centre in Georgetown, agrees with Ms. Rasanen's statements, saying the trend that started in the early 1970s has become acute during the last three to five years.

Under the centre, which is a program of the Halton Social Planning Council, volunteers are matched with agencies and volunteerism is promoted.

Ms. Berry says agency requests for volunteers doubled over the past five years. There are currently 35 agencies on file each with between two and three requests for volunteers, she said.

Ms. Berry is optimistic the necessary volunteers can be found but she said agencies first have to change their recruitment policies to conform to when people have free time.

Because the number of women entering the work force has been increasing during the past two decades, the "traditional" volunteer - a woman between the age of 25 and 55, who stays at home during the day - has been disappearing, said Ms. Berry.

Social service groups can no longer count on a significant number of women and men willing or able to do volunteer work during the day or for an extended period of time, she said.

The problem is magnified in Halton Hills because a large portion of its residents are commuters. While about 33 per cent of Canadians do some hours of volunteer work each month the figure is only between 15 and 20 per cent here. But Ms. Berry added the town has a solid core of volunteers who contribute several more hours than the Canadian average of three hours per month.

Organizations must start offering short-term placements, flexible hours and job sharing, she said. Ms. Berry explained placement sharing involves several people

sharing the same job responsibilities.

The Georgetown unit of the Canadian Cancer Society is one area agency that is employing job sharing to meet its shortage of people willing to sit on its executive.

Barbara Johnson of the cancer society said the organization's positions of campaign and residential chairpersons have been split so that the responsibilities will now be shared between two people.

But for some agencies, it's im-

possible to adapt their service to suit the general public's time constraints.

Meals-On-Wheels' volunteer Liz Hardstaff says because the organization serves hot meals at lunch time to needy people, volunteers are required at a specific time.

The executive director of the North Halton Association for the Developmentally Handicapped, John Ellis, faces another kind of problem in recruiting volunteers. He said the association needs volunteers to fill clerical positions but recently he has been unable to attract people to fill them. The association has had to raise the necessary funds to hire the staff to do these jobs, he said.

Ms. Berry says although most people interested in volunteering are motivated by the desire to help the community and the derived satisfaction, most want something more. People are no longer interested in "stuffing envelopes," she said.

For a lot of people, volunteering is a way of gaining work experience to achieve career related goals, Ms. Berry said.

She explained the more positive a volunteer experience is the more likely the person will continue to volunteer.

Ms. Johnson, who is a volunteer with several other groups besides the cancer society, says people are receptive to agencies that offer detailed descriptions of the available volunteer positions in the organization.

"People don't have time to be doing something with a fuzzy job description; they want a job that is specific and one that has a beginning and an end."

Ms. Berry, along with Mr. Ellis

and Ms. Johnson, all agreed seniors are a potential source of volunteers that remains untapped. But they all agreed seniors will be unwilling to offer their services unless agencies recognize their needs.

Seniors like to travel so organizations must offer positions that run for short periods of time, Ms. Berry said.

Ms. Rasanen said nowadays there seems to be a lot of men retiring early who could be volunteers but for some reason they haven't volunteered. Although unsure of the reasons she suggested they associate volunteerism as something pursued only by women.



Linda Berry of the Halton Hills Volunteer Centre

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