

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

Charities have felt pinch of recession

We just celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas is not far behind. So we're reminded of what we've got — and what we can give.

The fall is, after all, a time when we're often asked to open our hearts and our pocketbooks to those less fortunate than ourselves. And Canadians have traditionally responded to these requests with generosity.

According to the 2007 *Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* — a survey conducted by Statistics Canada every three years — nearly 23 million Canadians, or 84 per cent of the population over 15, made a donation to a charity in the survey period.

Those donations amounted to \$10 billion in 2007, a 12-per-cent jump from the \$8.9 billion reported in 2004, the previous survey period. Not surprisingly, people with higher incomes donated significantly larger amounts, though those in lower income brackets donated a higher percentage of their total income.

This means that almost all Canadians were willing to part with their hard-earned money to help others. But it wasn't just money they gave — Canadians were also free with their time.

Nearly 12.5 million Canadians, or 46 per cent of those over 15, volunteered during 2007. All told, this amounted to nearly 2.1 billion hours of volunteer time, or the equivalent of close to 1.1 million full-time jobs. Fully 84 per cent of us helped others directly, without going through a charity.

This generosity of time, money and spirit is one of the things that makes Canada a great place and Canadians great people. But amid this positive news, we must consider some negatives: Only 79 per cent of British Columbians donated to charity, compared to the national average of 84 per cent and a high of 91 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador.

And while the percentage of British Columbians volunteering was almost identical to the national average, the average number of hours we volunteered dropped to 172 in 2007 from 199 in 2004 — the largest decline of any province except Saskatchewan.

The reasons for the unsettling news from B.C. are unclear, but what is clear is that charities have had a rough ride since the survey was conducted. Any business that relies on people to open their pocketbooks is undoubtedly affected by a recession, when people's wallets have little left.

Although StatsCan has yet to crunch the numbers, it appears many charities have suffered from the economic downturn, both in terms of a decrease in donations and a drop in the value of their assets.

This means that giving to charity is more important than ever. And fortunately, it's also easier than ever. Imagine Canada notes that there are 20,000 non-profit and voluntary organizations in B.C. alone, with 82 per cent providing services within B.C., and 62 per cent serving their local regions.

There's plenty to choose from, then, though that can be a problem, since many people who don't donate say they don't know which to trust. But Imagine Canada makes that easy too, as it has developed a code of ethics, and maintains on its website (imaginecanada.ca) a list of organizations that abide by the code.

There are also the old standbys — the well-known and well-respected organizations like the United Way of the Lower Mainland, which recently kicked off its 2009 fundraising campaign, with a goal of \$30 million.

And even if you don't have money to give at the moment, there are many things you can do. Bequests and planned giving are popular in times of recession, as they represent ways of making commitments to charities without having to give money you don't have at present.

Many charities are also willing to accept donations of clothing or food — something that can be life-saving, but doesn't cost you a cent since these are things often just sitting around the house. And, as always, volunteering is free, but gives you something priceless in return.

Above all, we must keep in mind that need always exists. So those of us who are able to fulfill that need ought to be willing.