

A week to recognize the impact of Ontario's secret superpower

If you have ever done work for a charity or nonprofit organization, you know that they are legendary for doing extraordinary things with the scarcest of resources.

They help vulnerable people in our communities, those who are hungry, unhoused, living with addictions, or experiencing mental health issues. In crisis or careening towards it. They boost opportunities for youth, help new Canadians settle in, and support adults with special needs. They enhance our culture with arts and festivals and strengthen our communities with affordable sports and rec programs. They are everywhere and touch all our lives.

Heck, they even drive our economy. In this province alone, charities and nonprofits employ nearly 850,000 people and contribute \$65 billion to our GDP annually. That's more than many for profit industries. In addition, surveys continue to show that 4 in 5 Canadians trust nonprofit organizations.

Ontario has a secret superpower, and it is the nonprofit sector

But there are worrying signs that the sector that has consistently given us so much, year after year, and decade after decade, needs more of our love.

Ontario Nonprofit Network, in its 2023 report *State of the Sector: At a Tipping Point*, describes the sector as "running on fumes." While the pandemic was naturally a challenging time for nonprofits, they were called on to do more but they were also funded to do more. By 2022, these flexible financial supports for the sector had ended. Today the sector is experiencing a sharp increase in demand for services, costs, and expenses, as well as a human resource and volunteer crisis. As the report somberly states, "We are heading into unprecedented territory."

The situation is especially dire for nonprofits that meet basic needs in our communities. One food bank executive director told us that demand had increased by a whopping 35%. Staff and volunteers worked flat out soliciting and sorting food donations, assisting clients, and fundraising to meet the need.

The executive director is well-known as a dynamo and a champion for food security. She was palpably fearful of the future and how she would navigate her organization through it. "We can't stay in this building. We will need something bigger in 2-3 years if the projections for demand keep going the way they are. That means another capital campaign. And the affordability crisis is growing. How are we going to help everyone who needs it?"

Her commitment, her dedication, her intrinsic desire to make life better, this is the hallmark of the professionals who work at charities and nonprofits. Despite the immensity of what was already on her desk, she was looking to the future and beginning to map out a plan to respond.

You have to marvel at the resourcefulness and ingenuity that nonprofit staff direct towards doing good. Their search for innovative solutions is endless.

Nonprofit professionals tend to be highly educated and skilled. Despite this, they also tend to be lower paid than colleagues in other sectors. They work long hours and pour heart and soul into their jobs. They are mission-driven and the social architects of our communities. The "Invisible Champions" of our society.

This week let's show them some love. February 10-14 is Nonprofit Appreciation Week across Ontario. If you know someone who works for a nonprofit, or you are one of the tens of thousands of people who use their programs or services, take a moment to say thank-you. A card, a call, an email, or a shout-out to someone who has made a difference on social media (#NAW2025)? All will help to make our "Invisible Champions" visible.

Recognition might seem like a small thing, but it really is meaningful, especially to a group of people who rarely receive it. Not only is it one of the keys to workplace happiness, but it also boosts morale, raises esteem and makes people feel appreciated. Recognition has a multiplier effect as well, contributing to innovative thinking and creative problem solving.

It is almost impossible to imagine our communities without the scope of the helping programs offered by nonprofits. Heroism comes in many forms. Nonprofit Appreciation Week gives us the opportunity to show gratitude to our nonprofit heroes, locally and across Ontario.

Michele Fisher is the Executive Director of Dufferin Community Foundation, which provides a source of sustainable funding to support the critical work of our local charities.

Raksha M. Bhayana is the CEO and co-founder of the Bhayana Family Foundation, whose mission is to close the recognition gap for the nonprofit sector.