

High wages lure away non-profit staff

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Calgary's hot economy is scorching the voluntary sector, forcing it to scramble for staff and fight for dollars to ensure survival, according to a report released last week.

"It made it clear that there are very large underlying challenges to the sector that are systemic," Katherine van Kooy, president of the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, said of her group's report.

Strength Under Stress: A Portrait of Calgary's Voluntary Sector, found there is more pull for donations, with places like hospitals and universities actively campaigning for cash, and higher competition for trained staff, who leave the non-profit sector to work for more money in the private realm.

That, topped with a shift from long-term volunteers to more episodic contributions, is stressing the system.

"It's sobering for sure," Volunteer Calgary president Mario Siciliano said of the findings, "but it is also the reality."

Keith Seel, the voluntary board chairman of the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary, knows that all too well. His organization, which offers treatment to those with disabilities, sees a 60 per cent turnover in staff annually because the pay is more lucrative working for the government.

Seel estimates the wages for therapists and the like are 30 per cent higher in a hospital setting.

"We are wanting and obligated to supply a high-quality service, but challenged and restricted by how much we can pay," said Seel, who is also director of Mount Royal College's Institute for Non-Profit Studies.

Calgary's voluntary sector includes registered charities, non-profits and community-based organizations working in a variety of areas including arts, recreation, health, social services, sports, seniors, environment and international development.

The voluntary sector is a critical part of Calgary's social infrastructure and helps ensure the economic and social stability of our community.

Those looking for a volunteer opportunity can check out the more than 1,000 available positions at www.volunteer.calgary.ab.ca.

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