

importantly, the fact that most seniors cope with the declines that come with ageing does not mean that all seniors are without need. Rather, the minority who are frail, who live in poverty, and/or are isolated or lonely must not be forgotten when the general portrait of Canadian seniors is revealed. This will become clearer in the following sections as contemporary issues are raised.

### **Current Issues - A Meaningful Life**

The vast majority of Canadian seniors are retired; they do not work in the paid labour force. Those who do, primarily do so on a part-time basis. While this can be viewed as 'free' time, a well-deserved 'rest' from a life of hard work, and a 'reward' for their contributions to society, a capitalist society like Canada tends to view lack of participation in productive roles as non-contributing to society and worse, as an economic drain. Furthermore, seniors' exclusion from paid labour has not been replaced with societally defined and sanctioned roles. This is becoming more of an issue as disability free years within old age increase. The latest figures show approximately a third of the added years that people are now enjoying are disability free (Olshanky, 1998). This is not to argue that all seniors should necessarily have role involvements that are different from those in which they are now engaged. But many seniors represent resources that often remain untapped at the present time. Not only do many seniors wish to contribute to society, they believe that such involvement is essential to a meaningful old age, through a sense of worth and usefulness (Centre on Aging, 1998). In addition, the federal government is now recognizing the potential of volunteerism to provide meaningful roles while also providing a mechanism for harnessing the resources which seniors represent, and seniors themselves are asking for more meaningful involvements. In other words, the idea of giving back to society is intertwined with the concept of meaningful volunteerism. As expressed by Hadley (1998):

'The Troisième Age of human development is a time when we can give back to society the lessons, the wisdom and resources that we have derived throughout our long and productive lives... This Troisième Age is a special period when we can deepen our wisdom and personal sense of spiritual identity. Whatever emphasis each of us might place in this stage of life, our full engagement implies an enhancement of the common good.' (Hadley 1998, "Volunteering and Healthy Aging: What We Know" 1999).

As noted earlier, only about a quarter of seniors are involved in formal volunteering. The 1997 National Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (NSGVP) reveal that, while formal volunteer rates among youths have doubled since the survey in 1987 (from 17% to 34%), volunteer rates among older adults (65+) remain relatively stable at 23%. However, these seniors devote more of their time to volunteering than do other age groups (202 hours/year compared with the next largest category, 160 hours for those 55-64 years of age to a low of 125 hours among those 15-24 years of age) (Statistics Canada 1998; Brennan, 1989).\*

Volunteering in the new millennium differs significantly from the past. During the past century, Canada evolved into a welfare state with societal institutions in psychiatric care, criminal justice, services for the developmentally handicapped, economic security and

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\* Interestingly, understanding volunteering among seniors (or younger adults for that matter) has not captured the interest of researchers. In contrast, the area now being referred to as informal volunteering (support and caregiving) has a long history of academic research, though it is not considered part of the volunteering literature (Chappell, 1999).