



CHARITY BRIEF

Ottawa Discussion Circle

ABOUT

On 20 March 2025, the Law Commission of Canada (LCC) hosted a discussion circle at the [Arts Court](#) with representatives from the following charitable organizations working in the Ottawa region:

- Ottawa Community Foundation
- Ottawa Food Bank
- United Way East Ontario
- Tungasuvvingat Inuit

LIVING CHARITY

What should the Canadian public understand about the nature and needs of charities and the charitable sector in general?

- Role of charities
 - Charities are essential to Canadian society. They often fill the gaps in critical services that governments do not meet and they can act as a last resort when individuals have nowhere else to turn.
 - The demands and expectations shouldered by charities are rising and increasingly unsustainable.
 - Between flooding, storms and the pandemic, charities in the Ottawa area have been severely tested in recent years. In each instance, they have worked closely together to continue delivering for the people who depend on them.
- Funding and financing
 - Overhead costs are necessary to achieve charities' missions. The public should not judge charities purely based on financial accounts alone because it costs money to run complex, sophisticated charitable organizations, just like any other organization.
 - The number of total donations to Canadian charities has been in decline for over a decade, but this has been partly masked by an increase in the average gift size.
 - Government funding is often limited and many charities are not fully funded for the services they provide.





PURSUING CHARITY

What challenges do charities face in their work that might act as a barrier to achieving their mission?

- Upstream issues
 - Charities react and respond to issues that arise when systems further upstream fail. Charities do not have the capability or capacity to address root causes (e.g., insufficient income) that lead to the outcomes they seek to address (e.g., food insecurity).
 - The jurisdictional and highly institutional nature of government can make it difficult for charities to know which level of government or which department to approach, let alone work with effectively.
- Staffing issues
 - Recruitment and retention of high-quality and committed personnel represents a significant challenge in a context where cost-of-living is a top concern for employees. Investment in adequate compensation is critical to attracting and retaining talent.
 - While individuals can find significant fulfillment within the charitable sector, few structural pathways (e.g. college or university programs) exist to stream individuals to the charitable sector.
- Political issues
 - Restrictions on lobbying by charities hinder organizations' ability to engage in advocacy related to their mission, including the sharing of insights, expertise and research. Some organizations refrain from seeking charitable status to preserve a broader ability to advocate to governments.
 - Charities that benefit from government funding can feel constrained from speaking critically about issues they are addressing for fear of jeopardizing future funds and are compelled to "de-politicize" their work.

RENEWING HOPE

What are the possibilities for the future in the charity sector and how should its importance be conveyed from generation to generation of Canadians?

- Community connections
 - Charities should be about enriching communities and society, rather than simply helping to address basic immediate needs which are not met through public policy.
 - Complex and challenging circumstances in Canada and across the world offer an opportunity to galvanize Canadians to build shared social values which are oriented towards communities and collectives, and their individual members.
 - Charities maintain a high degree of trust in the communities they serve (e.g. vaccination education during the pandemic). They do not produce widgets; they serve people.
- Government connections
 - Canadian charities would benefit from a "home" in government, as is the case in the United Kingdom or Australia, given their significant role in service delivery, economic activity and employment.





- Charities operate in a fragmented government model which could be streamlined through greater integration and coordination with government programs. Government should work with charities, rather than simply regulating them.
- Charities and the people they serve would benefit from a partnership model with government, rather than a vendor- or transactional-type model.
- Charitable connections
 - Charities often collaborate and cooperate very naturally. There are untapped opportunities to leverage both expertise and capacity across organizations to better serve clients.
 - There is room to drive greater efficiency in the sector by avoiding duplication amongst charities at the incorporation stage.
 - Charities must work together to model and provide evidence that the people of Canada are part of a shared community and have obligations to one another.

