

Enhancing volunteer experience and retention at Distress Centre Halton: Program assessment and recommendations

Prepared for
Distress Centre Halton

In
August 2025

By
Jeanna Pillainayagam
Bleona Ademaj
Maduomethaa Pathmaraj
Caroline Rodriguez
Anjana Sudharshan

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	3
Context	3
Assessment Questions	3
Methods	3
Findings	4
Survey Participant Demographics	4
Overall Satisfaction with Volunteer Program.....	8
Volunteer Training	11
Volunteer Supports	13
Volunteer Scheduling	19
Volunteer Retention	20
Recommendations	22
Appendix 1: Survey Questions	24
Appendix 2: DCH Staff Interview Guide.....	33

Executive Summary

Distress Centre Halton (DCH) is a non-profit charitable organization offering emotional support and crisis intervention through year-round telephone services for over 50 years. DCH operates the Distress Line, which connects callers with front-line volunteers trained to support individuals experiencing emotional distress or crisis. These volunteers provide immediate and compassionate non-judgmental listening to help callers through difficult moments. Since 2018, DCH also operates the TeleCheck outbound calling program which offers ongoing support to those facing isolation, awaiting mental health services, living with Alzheimer's, and seeking non-clinical mental health assistance. In an on-going effort to enhance volunteer engagement and support systems, DCH collaborated with the McMaster Research Shop to examine volunteer demographics, satisfaction levels with the volunteer program and the support they receive, and potential areas for the volunteer program's growth/improvement. This was investigated using a comprehensive survey with volunteers and interviews with staff. This report summarizes our findings and offers an overview of how volunteers and staff perceive the volunteer program at DCH.

Findings from the assessment suggest that volunteers are overall quite satisfied with their volunteer program at DCH. Most individuals found that the quality of training provided was very good and prepared them well for their role. However, it was noted that introducing more role-playing training calls would assist with building greater confidence in managing high-stakes or infrequent types of calls. The most popular additional support that volunteers indicated they would find valuable was more training on managing emotional distress after challenging calls. DCH staff highlighted common barriers to volunteer retention including lack of communication from those who may be experiencing emotional burnout, and ongoing challenges in ensuring consistent shift coverage.

The research team proposes six recommendations to help DCH strengthen volunteer communication, training, engagement, and retention. Recommendations include implementing an automated check-in system for volunteers who have not signed up for shifts over a set period of time to encourage open communication, introducing a mandatory follow-up training requirement, and offering flexible shift lengths for volunteers who have completed a set number of service hours. Additional recommendations include establishing a shift confirmation process 48 hours before each shift, enhancing training and support for high-intensity calls, and implementing regular recognition initiatives for both volunteers and staff.

Introduction

Context

Distress Centre Halton (DCH) is a non-profit charitable organization that provides emotional support and crisis intervention through telephone services for over 50 years. The organization operates the Distress Line, which offers immediate, non-judgmental listening and crisis intervention. Since 2018, DCH also operates the TeleCheck outbound call program which supports those struggling with isolation, clients awaiting mental health services, Alzheimer's patients, and those seeking non-clinical mental health support.

DCH's call services are supported by a team of approximately 282 trained front-line volunteers. The organization provides a 7-week training program on providing emotional support to people in distress or crisis, with ongoing mentorship and access to multiple support channels such as training shifts with a mentor listening into volunteers' calls to provide guidance, a 24/7 on-call phone, and responsive email communication. As part of its ongoing commitment to strengthening volunteer engagement and support, DCH partnered with the McMaster Research Shop to conduct a point-in-time assessment of its volunteer program.

Assessment Questions

The main assessment questions for this project are:

1. What are the demographics of DCH's current volunteer base?
2. What are the volunteers' overall satisfaction with the volunteer program?
3. How effective are the current support systems for volunteers and what are some common issues that occur when supporting volunteers?
4. What are some potential areas for improvement and new initiatives that could be useful for the volunteer program?

The findings from this assessment will provide DCH with information to help them identify opportunities to expand upon and improve their volunteers' experience, such as the development or adoption of new supports or initiatives for their roles.

Methods

The research team used two methods to answer the assessment questions:

1. An online survey distributed to existing volunteers in the summer months of 2025 (copy of survey in Appendix 1), and
2. Supplemental semi-structured interviews with staff (copy of interview guide in Appendix 2).

The research team analyzed quantitative data from the survey using descriptive statistics to identify trends in volunteers' demographics, overall satisfaction with the volunteer program, satisfaction with volunteer training, and supports accessed. Team members used content analysis for open-ended responses to identify categories and areas of interest among gaps or potential areas of improvement in the volunteer program. Research team members used thematic analysis to analyze the interview data, identifying key themes raised by staff related to the five topics of interest.

This approach requires two health checks:

1. **Response bias:** Volunteers who chose to complete the survey compared to those who did not may have held stronger views and opinions on DCH's volunteer program. Those feeling disengaged or who've lost interest are typically less likely to respond to feedback surveys, potentially skewing results toward more engaged participants. The low representation of post-secondary students (16% of respondents despite comprising a significant portion of DCH's volunteer base) suggests possible sample bias that limits generalizability.
2. **Self-report limitations:** The survey relied on participants' retrospective evaluations of their experiences, introducing potential recall bias. Self-reported satisfaction and support usage may not reflect objective program outcomes or actual volunteer behaviors during their service. However, interviewing staff helped to triangulate subjective volunteer perspectives with those of external observers.

These considerations should inform interpretation of results and guide future evaluation methods to capture a more comprehensive understanding of DCH's volunteer program and participant experiences.

Findings

81 respondents participated in the survey (~29% of all volunteers). None of the questions were mandatory to answer, so some questions have less than 81 responses. Additionally, a total of six DCH staff members were interviewed.

Survey Participant Demographics

Age (Figure 1): Most were between the ages of 23-35 (n = 27). The next largest age group was the 18-22 range (n = 17).

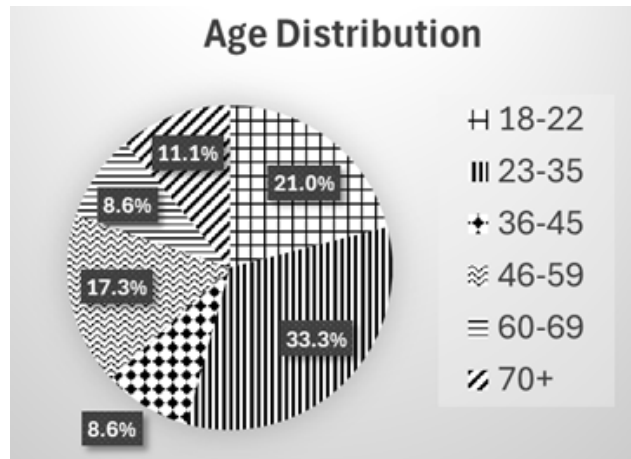


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Survey Participants (n = 81)

Racial Background (Figure 2): The majority of respondents identified as White (n = 44), with the second and third largest groups being South Asian (n = 17), and East Asian (n = 8).

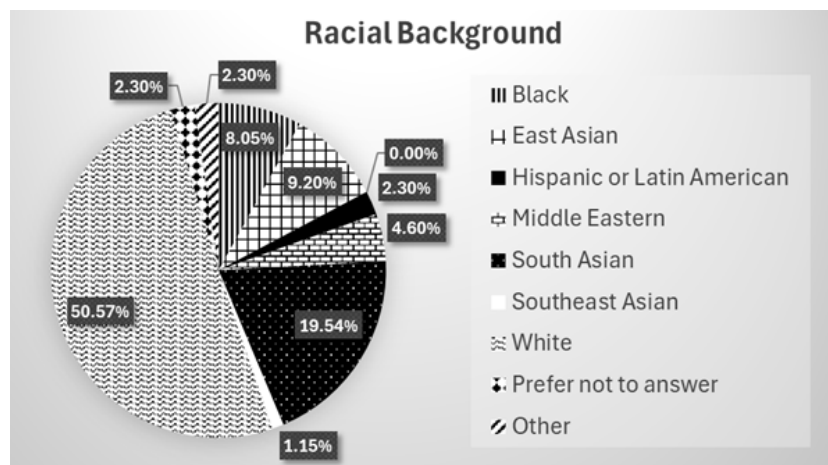


Figure 2: Racial Background of Survey Participants (n = 81)

Languages Spoken: Almost all (n = 80) speak English fluently, with other languages spoken by more than one respondent being Punjabi (n = 9), Hindi (n = 6), Urdu (n = 6), Mandarin (n = 3), Arabic (n = 3), Spanish (n = 3), Polish (n = 2), Portuguese (n = 2), French (n = 2), and Cantonese (n = 2).

Gender (Figure 3): Most respondents identified as female (n = 54), while a smaller proportion identified as male (n = 26), and one individual identified as transgender.

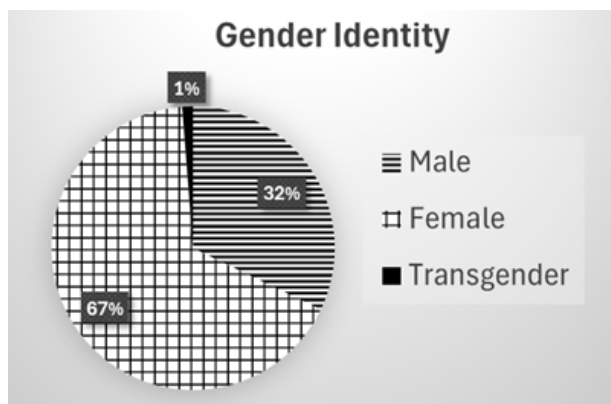


Figure 3: Gender Identity of Survey Participants (n = 81)

Area of Residence (Figure 4): The greatest number of survey respondents live in Oakville (n = 17), with solid representation also from Halton Hills/Milton and Hamilton.

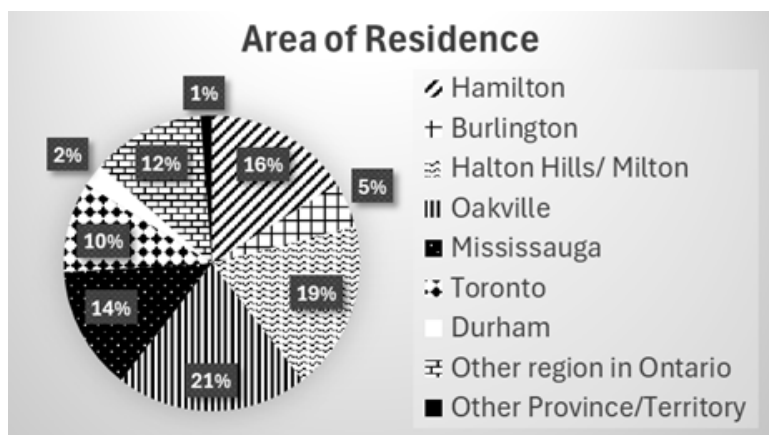


Figure 4: Area of Residence of Survey Participants (n = 81)

Current Employment Status (Figure 5): The largest number of survey respondents are currently working full-time (n = 33), with other common employment statuses being retired (n = 12), and full-time post-secondary students (n = 11).

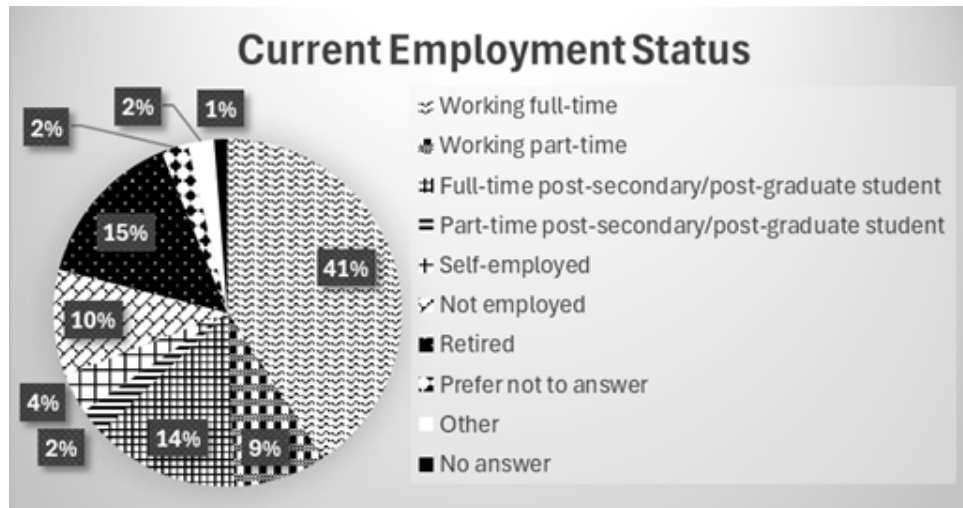


Figure 5: Current Employment Status of Survey Participants (n = 81)

Of the full-time and part-time post-secondary students (n = 15), most are McMaster students (n = 8) and undergraduate students (n = 9).

Time at DCH (Figure 6): The greatest number of survey respondents have been a volunteer at DCH for over 2 years (n = 25), with a high number of individuals also having been a volunteer for 1-2 years (n = 22) and for less than 6 months (n = 20).

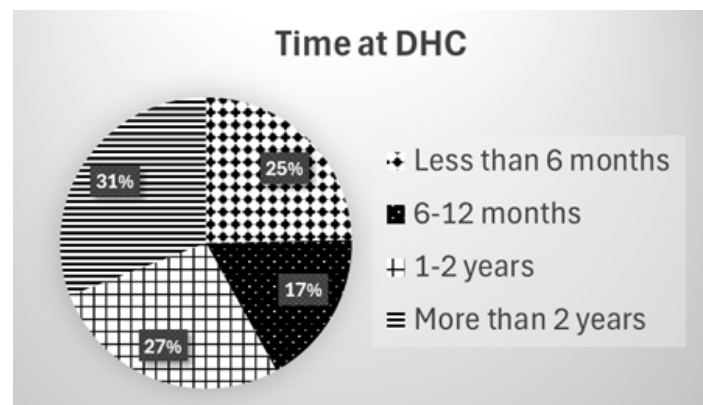


Figure 6: Time Spent as a Volunteer at DCH for Survey Participants (n = 81)

Survey respondents indicated that they have held the following volunteer roles at DCH: Distress Line Volunteer (n = 78), Mentor (n = 24), TeleCheck Volunteer (n = 23), Display Table Volunteer (n = 16), Trainer (n = 7), Board Member (n = 2), Bingo Volunteer (n = 1). Most individuals have held multiple volunteer roles.

Overall Satisfaction with Volunteer Program

Participants are Satisfied, Feel Like They are Making a Difference

The survey asked respondents a variety of questions to understand their overall satisfaction with the volunteer program at DCH. Figure 7 shows most participants were very (n = 37) or extremely satisfied (n = 32) overall with their experience as a volunteer, while fewer participants were moderately satisfied (n = 4).

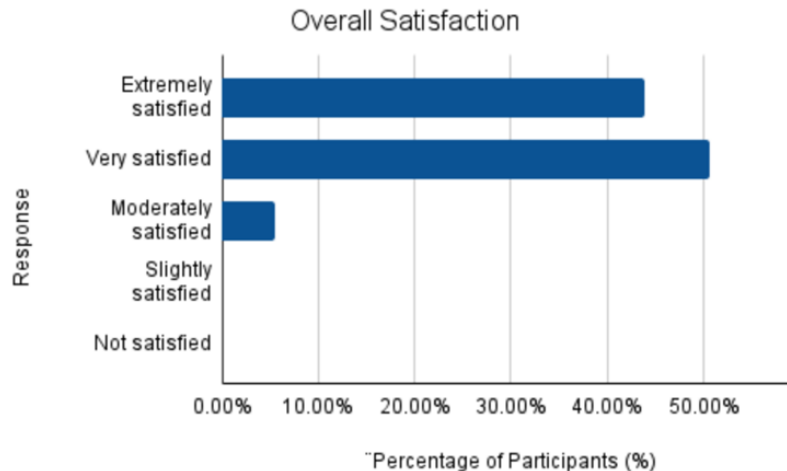


Figure 7: Overall Volunteer Satisfaction with the DCH Volunteer Program (n = 73)

The survey asked participants to indicate whether they feel like they have made a meaningful impact through their work as a volunteer (Figure 10). The highest number of participants (n = 36) reported definitely feeling like they had, with many others (n = 30) saying they felt that they mostly had. Some participants (n = 7) felt that they have made somewhat of a meaningful impact.

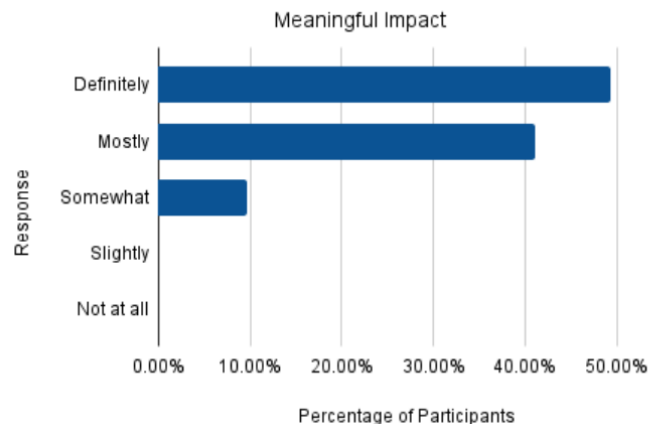


Figure 10: Volunteers' Perceptions of Whether They Have Made a Meaningful Impact Through Their Work at DCH (n = 73)

Many respondents expressed gratitude, stating that they had experienced personal growth volunteering at DCH, allowing them to grow as a person and gain greater empathy, advocacy skills, and emotional insights. They felt that the organization provided excellent training and support systems and felt pride in being a part of the team.

Most Individuals Volunteer with DCH to Give Back to Their Community and Because of Personal or Vocational Interests in Mental Health/Social Work

Survey respondents were asked to select all question options that align with their primary motivation for volunteering at DCH (Table 1). Participants indicated that their top motivators include giving back to the community (n = 58), personal interest in mental health (n = 51), gaining experience for a career in healthcare or social work (n = 37), and personal experience with distress or mental health challenges (n = 24). Some respondents (n = 5) elaborated on other primary motivations including personal development, resume building, and work in first responder settings.

Table 1: Primary Motivations for Volunteering at DCH (n = 73)

Motivation	Number of Respondents Who Selected This
To give back to the community	58
Personal interest in mental health	51
To gain experience for a career in healthcare or social work	37
Personal experience with distress or mental health challenges	24
To meet school/volunteer requirements	6
Other	5

Survey respondents were then asked to what extent the volunteer program is helping them achieve the motivations they identified earlier (Figure 8). The majority of respondents indicated that their volunteer experience is either completely (n = 37) or mostly (n = 33) aligned with their motivations. Only a small proportion (n = 3) said that their experience is somewhat aligned.

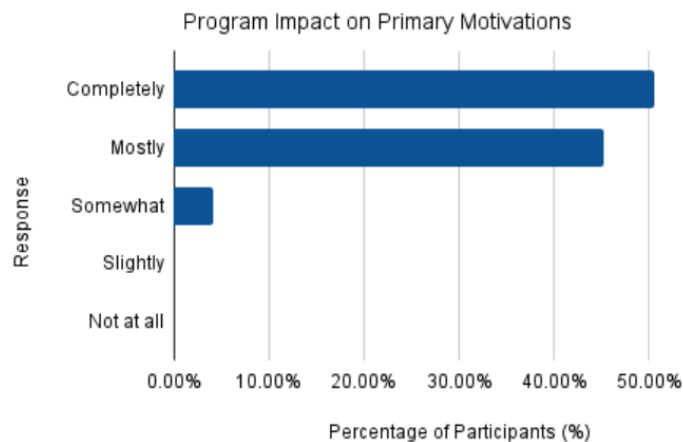


Figure 8: Extent to Which the Volunteer Program Helps Participants Achieve Their Primary Motivations (n = 73)

Most Volunteers Would Like to Stay Though Uncertain About Commitment

Survey respondents who have been volunteering for less than a year at DCH were asked if they would like to stay beyond the 1-year commitment period. Out of those who responded (n = 45), the majority said yes (n = 36, 80%), some were not sure yet (n = 9, 20%), and nobody reported that they would not like to stay as a volunteer.

The survey then asked respondents to elaborate on what factors are influencing their decision on whether to stay as a volunteer with DCH via open-ended feedback. Out of those who answered the question (n = 14), there was a common theme around a sense of fulfillment as a motivator to continue volunteering. However, many also described uncertainty about their future involvement due to increasingly busy schedules.

Suggestions to Improve the Volunteer Experience

Some survey respondents (n = 25) provided open-ended feedback on suggestions for improving the volunteer experience:

- Enhanced peer connection: Real-time group chats, peer check-ins, and ongoing contact with training cohorts
- Improved feedback: More detailed call evaluations and performance insights
- Flexible scheduling: Shorter shift options for volunteers with multiple commitments
- Equitable workload: Address imbalances where some volunteers take fewer calls or cancel last-minute
- Recognition: Increased appreciation and acknowledgment of volunteer contributions

- Extended support: More comprehensive training and sustained mentor relationships beyond initial onboarding

Many of these suggestions are discussed in more detail in the ensuing sections.

Volunteer Training

Overall Comprehensive and Engaging Training

Survey respondents were asked to rate the quality of training DCH provided in preparation for crisis work (Figure 11). The majority of respondents rated their experience as very good (n = 30) or excellent (n = 30). Some individuals rated their experience as good (n = 10), and one individual rated it as fair.

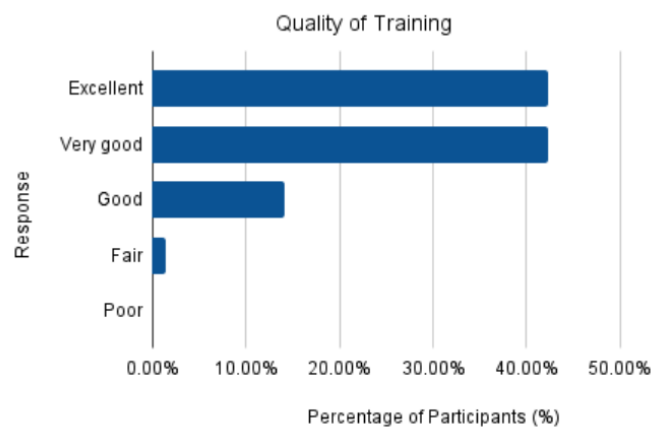


Figure 11: Volunteer Training Quality Rating (n = 71)

Survey respondents were asked how well the training they received prepared them for their role as a volunteer (Figure 12). Most participants selected very (n = 38) or extremely well (n = 29). A smaller number felt somewhat well prepared (n = 4).

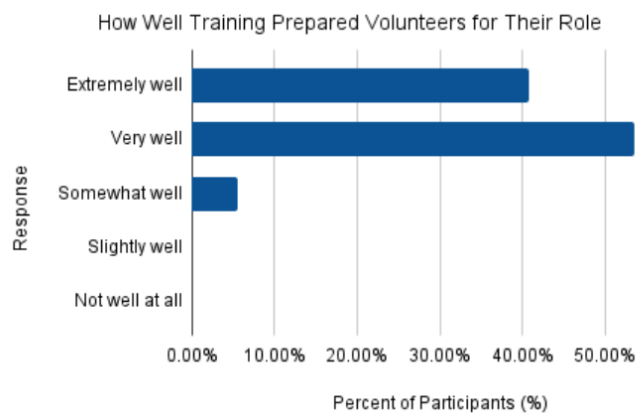


Figure 12: Volunteers' Perception of How Well Training Prepared Them (n = 71)

Survey respondents were invited to elaborate on their previous responses about the quality of training they received via open-ended feedback. Out of those who responded (n = 71), a common theme emerged around appreciation for the overall supportiveness of the training program. Several participants provided positive feedback about the trainers, mentor shifts, and ongoing training opportunities. One frequently provided suggestion about increasing the number of role plays is further discussed in the next section.

Interview participants explained that volunteers tend to report positive sentiments regarding the program's extensive and responsive training framework. One staff member stated, "If the volunteer feels they're not ready... then they can ask for an extra mentor shift. We also have an on-call phone, [if] volunteers need to debrief or had a really tough call."

Staff reported that they have not heard of any gaps in training from volunteers, suggesting a positive perception of training effectiveness among volunteers. Additionally, staff mentioned that volunteers have expressed appreciation for reflective practices such as call report feedback from mentors, which guide their practice and validate their contributions. Recognition of volunteers' efforts reinforces commitment and continued involvement with the organization. However, while the training has been described as "extensive" and "valued", staff reported that some volunteers also expressed that it could be intimidating. As a result, there have been requests from volunteers for support tools such as call recordings, in addition to the current call reports provided by staff, to improve readiness.

Suggestions to Improve Volunteer Training

28 survey respondents provided suggestions to improve the volunteer training process, including:

- Increased scenario practice and role-playing for more difficult calls, such as repeat or emotionally challenging callers, suicide, as well as crisis de-escalation, to build greater confidence before taking calls independently.
- Expanded mentorship opportunities by providing more than one mentor shift, with some volunteers suggesting a progressive structure where the first shift is for observation and the second for taking calls.
- Offer additional one-to-one support and extra mentoring for volunteers who feel less confident after completing the initial training program.

Staff emphasized the importance of responsive and adaptive training approaches to reflect the evolving nature of callers' concerns. They acknowledged the training has been updated in the past three years to address emerging topics calls about medically-assisted death. They also shared a desire to, "...modernize without losing the human touch," in regard to preserving human connection in training, in light of new tools such

as artificial intelligence-based mental health services that may lack authenticity. Other suggestions from staff include:

- Address high-stakes situations that are not explicitly taught in current training, such as what to do in a child abuse call
- Develop clearer documentation for fringe cases to provide staff with better resources when supporting volunteers through unusual/high-stakes calls
- Equipping staff with specific knowledge to pass on to volunteers during challenging situations.

Volunteer Supports

Real-time and Multi-channel Support

Interview participants provided insights on the support system in place for volunteers. Prior to starting their roles, volunteers attend mandatory training that includes real examples, mentorship, and live feedback, which staff shared helps “...most [volunteers] feel supported and prepared.” Once beginning their shifts, volunteers have access to what staff describe as “triaged support,” which includes a 24/7 on-call support phone volunteers can call or text, a monitored shifts email during business hours, and private coach sessions for immediate peer or supervisor support. One interview participant shared that volunteers often text the on-call phone directly for advice or emotional support during or after a difficult shift, highlighting that, “...there will be someone to talk to about how you just handled that call. And it's someone who knows the callers, who's been in your shoes and been nervous at one point.” Staff reported that the human-centred nature of this system is greatly valued by volunteers. However, staff shared that some misuse of these systems occurs, with volunteers occasionally calling the on-call phone for issues better suited to email, suggesting that there is a need for clearer communication on when to use which channel.

Beyond training and immediate support, volunteers are supported through ongoing education sessions and call reports, in which mentors provide structured feedback on calls. Monthly education sessions are provided on common themes such as ending calls, handling crisis calls, and handling sex callers. These sessions offer refreshers on how to address both recurring and niche challenges. While the sessions are perceived by staff as well-designed, they are underutilized. One staff member shared that the education sessions are, “...not used as well because on average less than 20 volunteers attend those.” Attendance is often limited to a small core group, with “...some [sessions] used more or attended more than others.” Furthermore, staff provide regular performance feedback to volunteers through call reports. This regular feedback is seen by staff as providing volunteers with opportunities for reflection and growth. Feedback is “consistent, constructive, and supportive,” and helps to maintain connections between volunteers and staff. Positive reinforcement from staff remains a core factor in continuously supporting volunteers through their shifts and time within the organization.

High Awareness of, Access to, and Satisfaction with Most Supports

The survey asked respondents to select from a list all of the volunteer supports that they are aware of, and all of the ones that they have accessed (Figure 13). Participants were familiar with most of the available supports including monthly education sessions (95.71%), the on-call volunteer support line (94.29%), emails (92.86%), mentorship shifts (80%), the DCH Minute (monthly volunteer newsletter) (75.71%), and open house events (70%). Most participants have accessed emails (82.86%), monthly educational sessions (71.43%), on-call volunteer support (61.43%), the DCH Minute (60%), and mentorship shifts (54.29%). However, the open-house events (20.29%) have not been accessed by most volunteers.

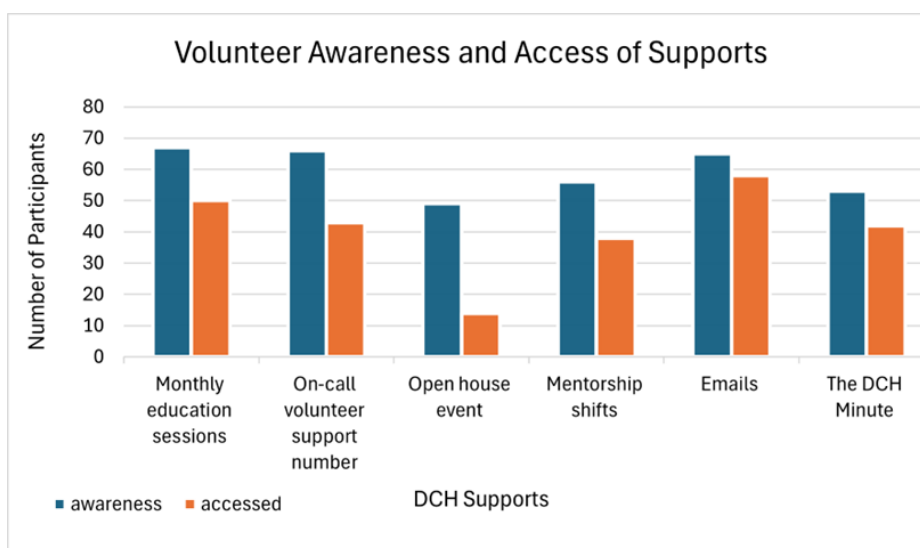


Figure 13: Volunteer Awareness and Access of Supports (n = 70)

Survey respondents were asked how helpful the support provided by DCH has been for their role as a volunteer (Figure 14). Several participants reported that they found it extremely (n = 30) or very helpful (n = 34), while fewer found it moderately (n = 5) or slightly helpful (n = 1).

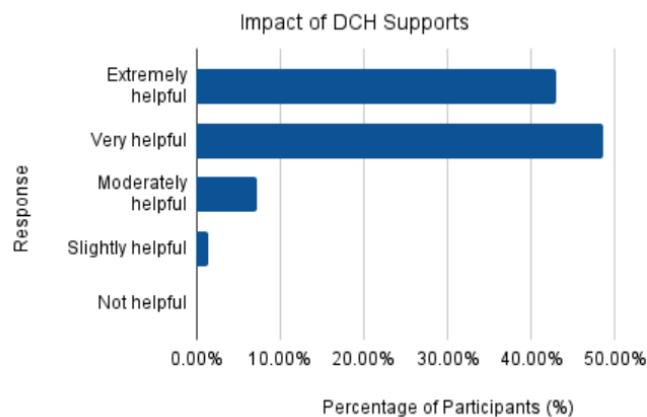


Figure 14: The Helpfulness of Supports Provided by DCH (n = 70)

Survey respondents were then asked to elaborate on any supports that they have found helpful or unhelpful via open-ended feedback. Out of all who responded (n = 19), almost everyone (n = 18) identified various forms of support they found helpful, with on-call assistance being mentioned most frequently. One participant reported being directed to voicemail when seeking on-call support after a difficult call and noted that the level of support varied between different DCH staff members.

Staff Perspectives on Uneven Support Access

Staff perspectives on volunteer support access diverged from the survey findings. One interview participant explained that “...there’s over 100 to 200 [volunteers] that don’t really get any type of support and maybe it’s because they don’t need it, but they’re kind of just like a mystery to me a little bit.” This disconnect makes it difficult to gauge the needs of volunteers who remain silent about support or outreach. Staff efforts to bridge this gap have faced obstacles. For example, one staff member reported offering drop-in sessions as an additional support for volunteers, but they had low attendance. While those who access support tend to report high satisfaction, staff have limited insight into those who don’t engage with available supports. Staff are actively seeking ways to include more voices in feedback and support structures.

Those That Ask for Help Feel Supported Following Challenging Calls

Survey respondents were asked if they have ever requested and received support from DCH following an emotionally difficult or intense call. Out of all who responded (n = 70), 36 reported that they requested support after an intense call (51.43%). 20 participants had intense calls but did not ask for support (28.57%), 13 never felt they needed support (18.57%), and 1 reported requesting support but not receiving it (1.43%).

Those who’ve requested help were asked to indicate how supported they felt after emotionally difficult or intense calls (Figure 15). Most respondents felt very (n = 17) or

extremely supported (n = 15) after emotionally difficult or intense calls. A few respondents felt moderately (n = 3) or slightly supported (n = 1).

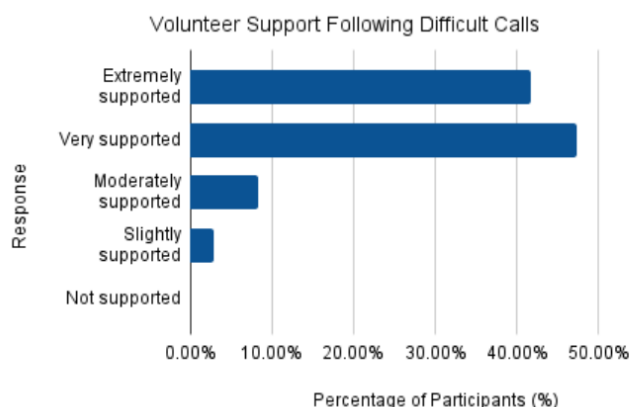


Figure 15: How Supported Volunteers Felt After Difficult Calls (n = 36)

Staff note that crisis response work is emotionally demanding, and that some volunteers disengage following difficult calls. One staff member noted: "Sometimes volunteers disappear because they've had a really difficult call and they're not sure how to... they're nervous to start again." Solo shifts can intensify this stress, as another participant explained: "I've heard that it can be kind of anxiety-inducing if they're the only person on the shift."

To address these challenges, staff have identified real-time debriefing, follow-up support, and ongoing emotional coaching as critical interventions. Pairing volunteers on shifts can improve both emotional safety and teamwork, though this approach creates its own complications, as discussed in the Volunteer Scheduling section.

More Specific Call Report Feedback Requested

Survey respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the call report feedback they are provided with as a volunteer (Figure 9). Most reported being very (n = 40) or extremely satisfied (n = 19). Fewer participants were moderately (n = 9) or slightly satisfied (n = 3).



Figure 9: Call Report Feedback Satisfaction (n = 73)

Some survey respondents (n = 9) elaborated on what would make the call report feedback more useful or satisfying. A common theme revolved around feeling as if the feedback was repetitive. As one participant described: “Most often it says the same thing. 'Nice befriending' or 'thanks for listening'. It's positive but not overly helpful so reading the feedback becomes a chore rather than a useful feedback tool.”

Similarly, another respondent described: “The feedback felt repetitive, like it could be copy/pasted from a template. It didn't feel specific to that call/caller. Although it was still appreciated! But I want to know how to improve.”

More Support with Managing Emotional Impact; Virtual Format Most Accessible

Survey respondents were asked to select all additional supports they would find valuable as a volunteer (Table 2). The most popular choice was more training on managing emotional impact (22.3%), followed by drop-in debrief sessions (18.9%) and social connection opportunities (18.9%). Other suggestions for additional supports include more information on mental illness diagnoses and treatment knowledge, career development, having a life chat feature to interact with other volunteers, as well as education sessions to be recorded for those unable to attend the monthly session.

Table 2: Additional Supports Volunteers Would Find Valuable (n = 69)

Support	Respondents Who Selected This	
	Count	Percent
More training on managing emotional impact	33	22.3%
Drop-in debrief sessions	28	18.9%
Social connection opportunities (e.g., meet-ups)	28	18.9%
Peer support groups	23	15.5%
Regular mental health check-ins	20	13.5%
None of the above	11	7.4%
Other	5	3.4%

Survey respondents were asked which format they would prefer for accessing additional supports (Table 3). The most popular choice by far was virtual meetings (37.1%).

Table 3: Preferred Format for Accessing Additional Supports (n = 81)

Format	Respondents Who Selected This	
	Count	Percent
Virtual meetings	52	37.1%
Anonymous online discussion boards	25	17.9%
In-person sessions	22	15.7%
One-on-one sessions	22	15.7%
Scheduled group check-ins	18	12.9%
Other	1	0.7%

Survey respondents were asked to list any barriers that would make it difficult for them to access supports (e.g., time, confidentiality, comfort). Out of all who responded (n = 29), about half (n = 15) stated that there are no barriers, while some (n = 10) discussed time being a barrier. Others mentioned that travelling for in-person events can be a challenge, and some noted that the timing of supports also affects their ability to access them.

Staff Concerns About Resourcing Additional Supports

When asked about incorporating new volunteer supports, staff frequently discussed staffing limitations and funding constraints. One staff member shared “I think there needs to be another way of considering how to staff [the on-call phone] so then staff also feel supported [be]cause it's a lot to take on with being a 24-hour service.” With a small team supporting a large volunteer base, and a limited budget, the current structure may potentially place a heavy burden on staff. Another staff interviewee called for greater recognition of the important work that is being done at the centre. This broader recognition of staff contributions can help provide the necessary organizational

support and motivation staff need to fulfill both the emotional and operational elements of their roles.

Volunteer Scheduling

Volunteers Generally Satisfied with Scheduling, but Some Want Shorter Shifts

Survey respondents were asked whether the volunteer schedule was flexible in meeting their needs. Out of those who responded (n = 72), the majority said yes (n = 66, 90.41%), while a handful said no (n = 6, 8.22%).

Survey respondents were then asked to elaborate on what changes to the scheduling process would be more accommodating via open-ended feedback. A common theme among all who responded (n = 5) related to wanting shorter shift options.

Scheduling Challenges and Gaps

Staff report that DCH volunteers use iCarol, a self-scheduling platform that allows them to select and manage their shifts online. Most volunteers navigate the system comfortably and can make changes independently when planned in advance, though last-minute updates require emailing staff. This flexible system is generally effective, but challenges remain when volunteers sign up for shifts and do not attend without notice.

To address these coordination issues, DCH manually monitors volunteer attendance by tracking sign-ups against actual logins, following up directly with volunteers who show patterns of absence. The organization offers incentives like double shift credits during low-availability periods, but ensuring reliable coverage remains difficult during peak organizational periods and holidays when cancellations spike.

Shift pairing, while beneficial for emotional support, creates additional complexities. Call distribution inequities can generate tension when one volunteer handles significantly more calls than their partner during the same shift. As one staff member explained: "We have volunteers that in a four-hour shift maybe will take two calls and then the other person on the lines will take 10 within the same time frame." Some volunteers inadvertently contribute to these imbalances by struggling to conclude calls, as they "don't want someone to feel like they're just trying to get off the phone." Staff monitor these dynamics and provide education sessions on effective call management while reassuring volunteers that imbalances are recognized and addressed when possible.

DCH has also streamlined the transition from training to active volunteering. Staff noted that, previously, delays in scheduling mentor shifts sometimes caused new volunteers to lose interest before beginning regular shifts. In response, DCH adjusted timelines to allow earlier mentor shift completion, reducing wait times and improving integration for newer volunteers.

Interview participants identified intentionality behind volunteer intake and scheduling as an area for improvement. This would involve obtaining clearer information during intake regarding volunteer preference, such as time-of-day availability, to enable more effective shift planning. With regards to inconsistent attendance, particularly when volunteers sign up for shifts but fail to show up without notice, one staff member shared an important gap: “We can’t always follow up about absences every single day, so there is occasionally a gap between when they miss their shift and when we follow up.” Establishing clearer expectations around attendance and timelier follow-up have been proposed to reinforce volunteer commitments. Staff hope to ensure they are, “...noticing those people who start to drift away and re-engage them before they vanish.”

Post-secondary Volunteer Scheduling Challenges

Interview participants identified clear attendance patterns tied to the academic schedules of post-secondary student volunteers. Staff noted that during high-stress academic periods, particularly exam seasons in December, March, and April, volunteer attendance tends to decline. Several staff members observed that many students either cancel shifts at the last minute or disengage temporarily without communication.

Attendance inconsistencies also extend into the summer months, when students' routines become less structured and vacations are more frequent. These seasonal trends contribute to challenges in scheduling and shift coverage, especially when paired with the self-directed nature of the volunteer program. Interview participants emphasized the importance of anticipating these fluctuations when planning shifts and highlighted a need for adaptive scheduling strategies to accommodate the academic realities of student volunteers.

Volunteer Retention

Challenges with Remote Volunteering and Community Connection

Staff discussed how the transition to remote volunteering following COVID-19 has fundamentally altered volunteer engagement at DCH. While remote operations expanded accessibility and increased applications, they disrupted the strong in-person community that previously anchored long-term retention. As one staff member reflected: “Pre-pandemic, everything was in person. We turned around to remote very quickly... and I think we see a lot larger attrition and problems with retention.”

The remote environment creates isolation that contributes to volunteer disengagement. Many volunteers now “may never meet a staff member or another volunteer” and simply “fade away” without requesting formal leave. One staff member noted, “We have over 300 volunteers on file, but only about 150 to 170 of them are doing shifts per month.”

And that's not necessarily meeting their shift commitment but doing at least an hour of showing up during a month." With limited contact beyond "e-mail or the caller feedback reports," building meaningful connections becomes challenging. This isolation particularly affects staff's ability to express appreciation, as one participant explained: "There's a lot fewer opportunities for us as staff to express our appreciation in a verbal way," since written communications rarely capture the warmth of in-person praise.

Remote work has also made early disengagement harder to detect. Staff described a "squeaky wheel gets the grease" dynamic where vocal volunteers receive attention while those who "silently step back" may go unnoticed for extended periods. This pattern of "ghosting" - where volunteers quietly disengage without explanation - eliminates valuable feedback opportunities and delays intervention efforts, making it difficult to assess program weaknesses or improve retention strategies.

Despite these challenges, volunteers have expressed appreciation for community-building initiatives like DCH's occasional in-person Open House events. Staff report that volunteers "would like to have more in person contact with staff and other volunteers." While the organization continues virtual programming, staff believe hybrid opportunities and increased in-person events could strengthen volunteer connection and engagement.

Retention Pathways: What Encourages Volunteers to Stay

Staff emphasized that long-term volunteer engagement is most successful when volunteers feel valued, supported, and connected from the very beginning. Survey respondents were asked if they felt recognized and appreciated for their contributions as a volunteer (n = 73). The majority of participants said yes (n = 69, 94.52%), while a small number said no (n = 4, 5.48%). Three respondents stated that more recognition and opportunities should be given to volunteers, but did not provide any specific examples of what that could look like.

Staff suggest the foundation of volunteer engagement and support is laid early through personalized communication during training and onboarding, but it is sustained through consistent feedback and ongoing recognition. As one interview participant explained, "We give feedback on a lot of [call reports]. That's where we would let them know, you know, they did a fantastic job, give them any tips. And I do know that volunteers specifically look for that." In a remote environment where casual encouragement is harder to offer, this kind of targeted feedback becomes essential for helping volunteers feel seen.

Opportunities for growth also play a powerful role in encouraging continued involvement. Staff explained that inviting experienced volunteers to become mentors, trainers, or team leads helps strengthen their commitment and sense of purpose. "We

tend to retain them by putting them into our leadership tracks,” one staff member shared. These roles do more than acknowledge past contribution; they offer a meaningful path forward, reinforcing the idea that volunteers are not just filling shifts, but growing with the organization.

Incentives like double shift credits may help in the short term, but staff agreed that deeper retention comes from creating meaningful experiences. Connection, not obligation, is what ultimately sustains long-term volunteer engagement.

Recommendations

This assessment revealed some insights into the current experiences of volunteers at DCH and potential gaps in the training and supports offered in the volunteer program. Drawing from the findings from both the volunteer survey and staff interviews, the following recommendations aim to guide DCH in strengthening volunteer communication, training, engagement, and retention.

- 1) Implement an Automated Check-In System:** The scheduling platform currently allows staff to monitor volunteer activity, but it does not generate communication when someone becomes inactive. An automated check-in would extend this by sending a courteous email if a volunteer has not signed up or logged in for a defined period (e.g., four to six weeks). This would require syncing the current scheduling platform with a basic email automation tool. The goal is not to pressure the volunteers, but to provide a prompt that encourages open communication. The automated message could thank them for their contributions, ask if they wish to continue, and provide an option to formally step back if needed. This approach could reduce “ghosting” by trying to ensure volunteers do not disengage silently and are given a final opportunity for recognition, closure, or to express concerns. It would also reduce the workload for staff to manually follow up with volunteers who seem disengaged.
- 2) Mandatory Ongoing Training Sessions:** Introduce a mandatory follow-up training requirement in addition to the initial training program. Volunteers would be required to attend one or two educational sessions per year, which could be scheduled as mid-year sessions or chosen from existing monthly education sessions. This can help volunteers reinforce core skills and cover new or evolving topics, while increasing volunteer confidence and preparedness. This would also address feedback raised by staff and volunteers about the need for more specialized training. The mandatory nature of these sessions could also provide opportunity for re-engagement with inactive or “silent” volunteers, and improve overall attendance at ongoing educational sessions.

- 3) Introduce Flexible Shift Lengths:** Introduce the option for shorter two-hour shifts alongside the current four-hour shifts, particularly for volunteers who have already met a set threshold of service hours. Offering this flexibility could help reduce burnout and make volunteering more manageable for those balancing other commitments. The observed variation in call volume, where one volunteer may take 10 calls in a shift while the other receives two or three can be used as a case study during training to emphasize workload disparities and reinforce the value of flexible scheduling.
- 4) Implement Shift Confirmation System:** If not already in place, set up an automated reminder and confirmation system within iCarol, the software DCH uses for scheduling shifts, to improve shift reliability. A reminder could be sent 48 hours before a scheduled shift, prompting volunteers to confirm or cancel with a single click or quick reply. If no response is received, staff could follow up with a personalized reminder. This process would help ensure adequate shift coverage, reduce last-minute cancellations, and allow staff to make adjustments. During volunteer onboarding, clearly communicate and document expectations of last-minute absences to set a strong foundation for accountability.
- 5) Enhanced Training and Support for High-Intensity Calls:** Strengthen training for challenging crisis situations (e.g., suicide, child abuse calls) through more role-play scenarios and mentorship sessions before new volunteers begin taking real calls. For current volunteers, this could entail being required to attend at least one drop-in session annually to practice scenarios with a mentor. For staff, this could include developing more robust documentation for fringe cases and topics not covered in initial training to better guide volunteers during on-call support. Improving promotion of drop-in sessions can help encourage participation, as often volunteers may not be aware of the current training resources available to them.
- 6) Volunteer and Staff Recognition:** Implement regular recognition initiatives such as a volunteer of the month spotlight and annual volunteer and staff awards celebrating dedication and commitment. Host community open houses, which have been well-attended in the past, that combine recognition ceremonies with networking, panel discussions featuring volunteers and community speakers, and skill-building workshops. These events would help strengthen volunteer engagement and community connection, a value both staff and volunteers identified as key to maintaining long-term commitment and motivation.

Appendix 1: Survey Questions

Distress Centre Halton Volunteer Survey – Summer 2025

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in our survey. We are volunteers from the McMaster University Research Shop, helping Distress Centre Halton (DCH) to better understand how volunteers experience their roles, how well current volunteer supports are working, and what improvements could be made to strengthen their volunteer program. Your feedback is valuable and will be used by Distress Centre Halton to support, improve, and sustain their volunteer program.

The survey takes about **10-15 minutes to complete** and asks about your overall satisfaction and experiences with the volunteer program and the training and supports you receive, as well as any areas for improvement. It's completely **voluntary** and **anonymous** - no identifying information will be collected.

Participation will not affect your access to Distress Centre Halton services or your involvement as a volunteer. You may skip any questions you're uncomfortable answering.

For further information or questions about this project, please contact Research Shop Team Lead, **Jeanna Pillainayagam** (pillainj@mcmaster.ca), or the Distress Centre Halton representative, **Lauren Anastasi** (Lauren@dchalton.ca).

By consenting to participate in this survey, you:

- Understand that your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and that you can stop taking the survey at any time.
- Understand that your individual responses to this survey will be kept anonymous and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team (including McMaster Research Shop volunteers and Distress Centre Halton staff).
- Understand that you have had the opportunity to ask any questions about this survey.

Do you consent to participating in this survey?

- Yes
- No

Demographics

1. How old are you?
 - a. <18
 - b. 18-22
 - c. 23-35
 - d. 36- 45
 - e. 46-59
 - f. 60-70
 - g. 70+

2. Which race category(ies) best describes you? Select all that apply:
 - a. Black (African, African Canadian, Afro-Caribbean descent)
 - b. East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese)
 - c. First Nations, Inuk/Inuit, or Métis
 - d. Hispanic or Latin American
 - e. Middle Eastern (e.g., Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian, Kurdish, Lebanese, Turkish)
 - f. South Asian (e.g., Bangladeshi, Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
 - g. Southeast Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese)
 - h. White
 - i. Other (please specify): _____
 - j. Prefer not to answer

3. Which language(s) do you speak fluently? Select all that apply:
 - a. English
 - b. French
 - c. Spanish
 - d. Arabic
 - e. Urdu
 - f. Mandarin
 - g. Italian
 - h. Tagalog
 - i. Polish
 - j. Portuguese
 - k. Punjabi
 - l. Other (please specify): _____
 - m. Prefer not to answer

4. What is your gender identity?
- a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Transgender
 - d. Non-binary
 - e. Genderfluid
 - f. Two-Spirit
 - g. Other (please specify): _____
 - h. Prefer not to answer
5. Are you transgender?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer
6. Which area do you currently live in?
- a. Hamilton (including Dundas and Stoney Creek)
 - b. Burlington
 - c. Halton Hills / Milton
 - d. Oakville
 - e. Mississauga
 - f. Toronto (City of Toronto, Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, York, East York)
 - g. Durham (Oshawa, Whitby, Ajax, Pickering, Clarington, etc.)
 - h. Other region in Ontario (please specify): _____
 - i. Other Province/Territory (please specify): _____
7. What is your current employment status? Select all that apply:
- a. Working full-time
 - b. Working part-time
 - c. Full-time post-secondary/post-graduate student
 - d. Part-time post-secondary/post-graduate student
 - e. Self-employed
 - f. Not employed
 - g. Retired
 - h. Other (please specify): _____
 - i. Prefer not to answer

8. If you are a post-secondary/post-graduate student, what year are you in?
- a. Undergraduate Year 1
 - b. Undergraduate Year 2
 - c. Undergraduate Year 3
 - d. Undergraduate Year 4
 - e. Undergraduate Year 5 +
 - f. Masters
 - g. PhD
 - h. Other (please specify): _____
9. If you are a post-secondary/post-graduate student, are you a student at McMaster University?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
10. Which university/institution are you a student at? (open-ended)
11. How long have you been a volunteer at Distress Centre Halton?
- a. < 6 months
 - b. 6 - 12 months
 - c. 1-2 years
 - d. > 2 years
12. Which roles have you held as a volunteer at Distress Centre Halton? Select all that apply:
- a. Distress Line Volunteer
 - b. TeleCheck Volunteer
 - c. Display Table Volunteer
 - d. Mentor
 - e. Trainer
 - f. Other (please specify): _____

Overall Satisfaction

13. What is your primary motivation for volunteering at Distress Centre Halton? Select all that apply:
- a. Personal interest in mental health
 - b. To gain experience for a career in healthcare or social work
 - c. To give back to the community
 - d. To meet school/volunteer requirements
 - e. Personal experience with distress or mental health challenges
 - f. Other (please specify): _____

14. To what extent is the volunteer program helping you achieve the motivations you selected in the previous question?
- a. Not at all
 - b. Slightly
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. Mostly
 - e. Completely
15. How satisfied were you with the call report feedback you were provided as a volunteer?
- a. Not satisfied
 - b. Slightly satisfied
 - c. Moderately satisfied
 - d. Very satisfied
 - e. Extremely satisfied
16. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. What would make the call feedback you are provided more useful or satisfying? (open-ended)
17. Do you feel like you have made a meaningful impact through your work as a volunteer at Distress Centre Halton?
- a. Not at all
 - b. Slightly
 - c. Somewhat
 - d. Mostly
 - e. Definitely
18. Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience in the volunteer program so far?
- a. Not satisfied
 - b. Slightly satisfied
 - c. Moderately satisfied
 - d. Very satisfied
 - e. Extremely satisfied
19. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. How has the volunteer program met or not met your expectations? (open-ended)

20. If you have been volunteering for less than a year, would you like to stay as a volunteer with Distress Centre Halton beyond your 1-year commitment?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not sure yet
21. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. What factors are influencing your decision on whether to stay, or not stay, as a volunteer with Distress Centre Halton? (open-ended)
22. Is the volunteer schedule flexible to meet your needs?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
23. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. What changes to scheduling/the scheduling process would be more accommodating? (open-ended)
24. Do you feel recognized and appreciated for your contributions as a volunteer at Distress Centre Halton?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
25. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. What would make you feel more appreciated? (open-ended)

Training

26. How would you rate the quality of training provided to prepare you for crisis work?
- a. Poor
 - b. Fair
 - c. Good
 - d. Very good
 - e. Excellent
27. How well did the training you received prepare you for your role as a volunteer?
- a. Not well at all
 - b. Slightly well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Very well
 - e. Extremely well

28. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question(s) regarding training. If you've indicated that the quality of training you've received was not good enough, or that it did not prepare you enough for your role as a volunteer, why was this? (open-ended)

Supports

29. Which of the following volunteer supports are you aware of? Select all that apply:
- a. Monthly education sessions
 - b. On-call volunteer support number
 - c. Open house event
 - d. Mentorship shifts
 - e. Emails (e.g., shifts@dchalton.ca)
 - f. The DCH Minute (monthly volunteer newsletter)
 - g. Other (please specify): _____
30. Which of the following volunteer supports have you accessed? Select all that apply:
- a. Monthly education sessions
 - b. On-call volunteer support number
 - c. Open house event
 - d. Mentorship shifts
 - e. Emails (e.g., shifts@dchalton.ca)
 - f. The DCH Minute (monthly volunteer newsletter)
 - g. Other (please specify): _____
31. Overall, how helpful has the support provided by Distress Centre Halton been for you in your role as a volunteer?
- a. Not helpful
 - b. Slightly helpful
 - c. Moderately helpful
 - d. Very helpful
 - e. Extremely helpful
32. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. Are there any particular supports you have found helpful? If so, why? Are there any particular supports you have found unhelpful? If so, why? (open-ended)

33. Have you ever requested and received support from Distress Centre Halton following an emotionally difficult or intense call?
- a. Yes
 - b. No – I’ve had intense calls but did not request support
 - c. No – I’ve never had a call where I felt I required such support
 - d. No – I’ve requested support before but never received it
34. How supported have you felt after emotionally difficult or intense calls?
- a. Not supported
 - b. Slightly supported
 - c. Moderately supported
 - d. Very supported
 - e. Extremely supported
 - f. Not applicable
35. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. What could be done to make you feel more supported after emotionally difficult or intense calls? (open-ended)
36. How supported have you felt **specifically** by supervisors or volunteer program coordinators?
- a. Not supported
 - b. Slightly supported
 - c. Moderately supported
 - d. Very supported
 - e. Extremely supported
37. Feel free to elaborate on your answer to the previous question. What could be done to make you feel more supported by supervisors or volunteer program coordinators? (open-ended)

Areas for Improvement in Volunteer Program

38. Which types of additional support would you find valuable as a volunteer? Select all that apply:
- a. Peer support groups
 - b. Regular mental health check-ins
 - c. Drop-in debrief sessions
 - d. More training on managing emotional impact
 - e. Social connection opportunities (e.g., meet-ups)
 - f. Other (please specify): _____
 - g. None of the above

39. Which format(s) would you prefer for accessing additional supports? Select all that apply:
- a. In-person sessions
 - b. Virtual meetings
 - c. Anonymous online discussion boards
 - d. Scheduled group check-ins
 - e. One-on-one sessions
 - f. Other (please specify): _____
40. Are there any barriers that would make it difficult for you to access supports (e.g., time, confidentiality, comfort)? (open-ended)
41. Are there any other suggestions you would like to make on how to make your volunteering experience better? (open-ended)
42. Are there any changes/improvements that could be made to the volunteer training process to better prepare individuals for their volunteer roles? (open-ended)
43. Do you have any other overall comments or suggestions for improving your volunteering experience? (open-ended)

Appendix 2: DCH Staff Interview Guide

Staff Insights on Distress Centre Halton's Current Volunteer Program and Support Systems

Verbal Information and Consent

[Interviewer to say]: Hello, my name is [introduction]. I'm a student volunteer with the McMaster Research shop – a program that works with local organizations to help them with research. I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Our team is working on a project with Distress Centre Halton and working directly with Lauren Anastasi. The purpose of this project is to better understand how volunteers experience their roles, how well current volunteer supports are working, and what improvements could be made to strengthen the volunteer program. I'll be asking you about your perspective as a staff member who works closely with volunteers, including your views on volunteer engagement, support systems, communication, and potential areas for improvement. The information I gather today will be used to help us develop a set of recommendations for Distress Centre Halton to support, improve, and sustain its volunteer program. The interview will take about 30 minutes.

Do you have questions about the project at this time?

Before we begin, I want to spend a few moments going over some basic ground rules for today:

- Your participation is voluntary. You can leave or stop participating in this interview at any moment you choose with no repercussions on yourself.
- You do not have to answer any questions you're not comfortable with.
- The information which we collect from these interviews will be anonymous. However, keep in mind that we can be identified through the stories we tell when deciding what to tell me.
- With your permission, this interview will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what you say.
 - o All audio files and transcripts will be securely stored in a Microsoft Teams folder that only the Research Team has access to.
 - o We will also be taking notes throughout the discussion.
 - o Only the research team will have access to transcripts from this discussion.
 - o The tapes and transcripts will only be used for this project and will be destroyed once the report is complete.
- We ask that when using abbreviations or acronyms, you say the full name at least once to aid transcription.
- If at any point you feel tired or fatigued please let us know and we can take a short break.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you give your consent to participate in this interview?

[Interviewer start recording on MS Teams]

Introduction (Rapport Building) and DCH Staff Background

[Interviewer to say]

Before we get into the main topics, I would love to ask a few questions just to get to know you a bit better and hear about your journey at DCH.

1. Could you briefly describe your role at DCH and how long you have been part of the team? How does it relate to the volunteer program?
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* What initially drew you to work with DCH?
2. What does your role look like in terms of interacting with or supporting volunteers?

Topic 1: Volunteer Program Experience

1. What kind of feedback, either formal or informal, have you heard from volunteers regarding the volunteer program? This can include things like their roles, responsibilities, the training they receive, and the supports they receive.
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* If you haven't received much feedback directly, do you feel there are any gaps in how volunteer experiences are communicated or shared with staff?
2. Have you noticed any differences between newer volunteers and long-term volunteers in terms of how engaged they are? If so, what do you believe may be the reason for this difference?

Topic 2: Volunteer Support Systems

1. In general, how do volunteers seem to be performing in their roles? Have you observed or received feedback of any ongoing issues? If so, is there or theme/pattern to the kinds of issues that come up?
2. What resources or supports are currently available, if anything, to help volunteers with their roles?
 - a. *Follow-up:* Are there any supports to specifically help them deal with the emotional and practical demands of their role?
3. Do you feel the current training process adequately prepares volunteers for their responsibilities?

- a. *Possible follow-up:* Are there any common points where volunteers tend to struggle during training?
- 4. Based on your experience, are there particular supports you have seen volunteers use more often, or that seem to have the most impact?
- 5. Are there supports you feel could be improved or are not being used effectively?
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* Are there any specific resources that you feel are more effective at promoting volunteers' wellbeing?
 - b. *Possible follow-up:* What might help address [challenges from Q1]?

Topic 3: Communication and Coordination

- 1. How would you describe DCH's current communication practices with volunteers such as updates, check-ins, and feedback?
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* Are there any aspects that work well or could be improved?
- 2. What platforms are used to communicate with volunteers? Do you find them effective?
- 3. Have you faced any challenges in coordinating volunteer logistics, such as shift changes, availability, or communication gaps?
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* What is currently working well with regards to shift scheduling and monitoring of volunteers?
- 4. Have you noticed any attendance-related challenges among post-secondary volunteers? Do these tend to follow seasonal or academic patterns?
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* How do you currently handle these absences, and are there ways DCH staff could better support consistency in shift attendance?

Topic 4: Volunteer Retention

- 1. From your perspective, what are some reasons why volunteers might decide to reduce their involvement at DCH or leave their positions?
 - a. *If already mentioned in Topic 3, ask if there are any other reasons that were not mentioned yet.*
- 2. Have there been any patterns in volunteer retention that have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 3. How often does DCH recruit new volunteers, and do you think these recruitment cycles influence retention in any way?
- 4. Is there anything that you feel DCH could do to help volunteers feel more connected to the organization or to encourage them to stay longer?
 - a. *Possible follow-up:* Have any strategies been tried in the past to improve volunteer retention? What seemed to work well, and what didn't?

Topic 5: Areas for Improvement

1. What is one change you would suggest to improve the current volunteer program?
2. Are there any supports you feel staff would find helpful when assisting volunteers?

Closing

[Interviewer to say]

Before we end, is there anything you would like to share about your experience working with volunteers or anything you think we should consider moving forward?

[Interviewer to say]

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with us today. We really appreciate your perspective and the thought you have put into your responses.