

What is VNPSOM?

Province-wide organization gears up to take on challenges of voluntary and non-profit sector. **BY ZACK GROSS**

The scenarios have been drawn before. What would Manitoba communities look like — and how would they cope — if there were no volunteers, no citizens willing to take on responsibilities, no groups ready to deliver services or operate programs? Who would coach our kids? Who would deliver meals on wheels? Who would raise money for medical research or equipment for the disabled? Who would put on theatre productions or art exhibits? And, who would champion the cause of poor children, new Canadians or the unemployed? Who would sit on committees and boards of directors? Who would undertake future planning and come up with innovative ideas for communities, outside of government and business?



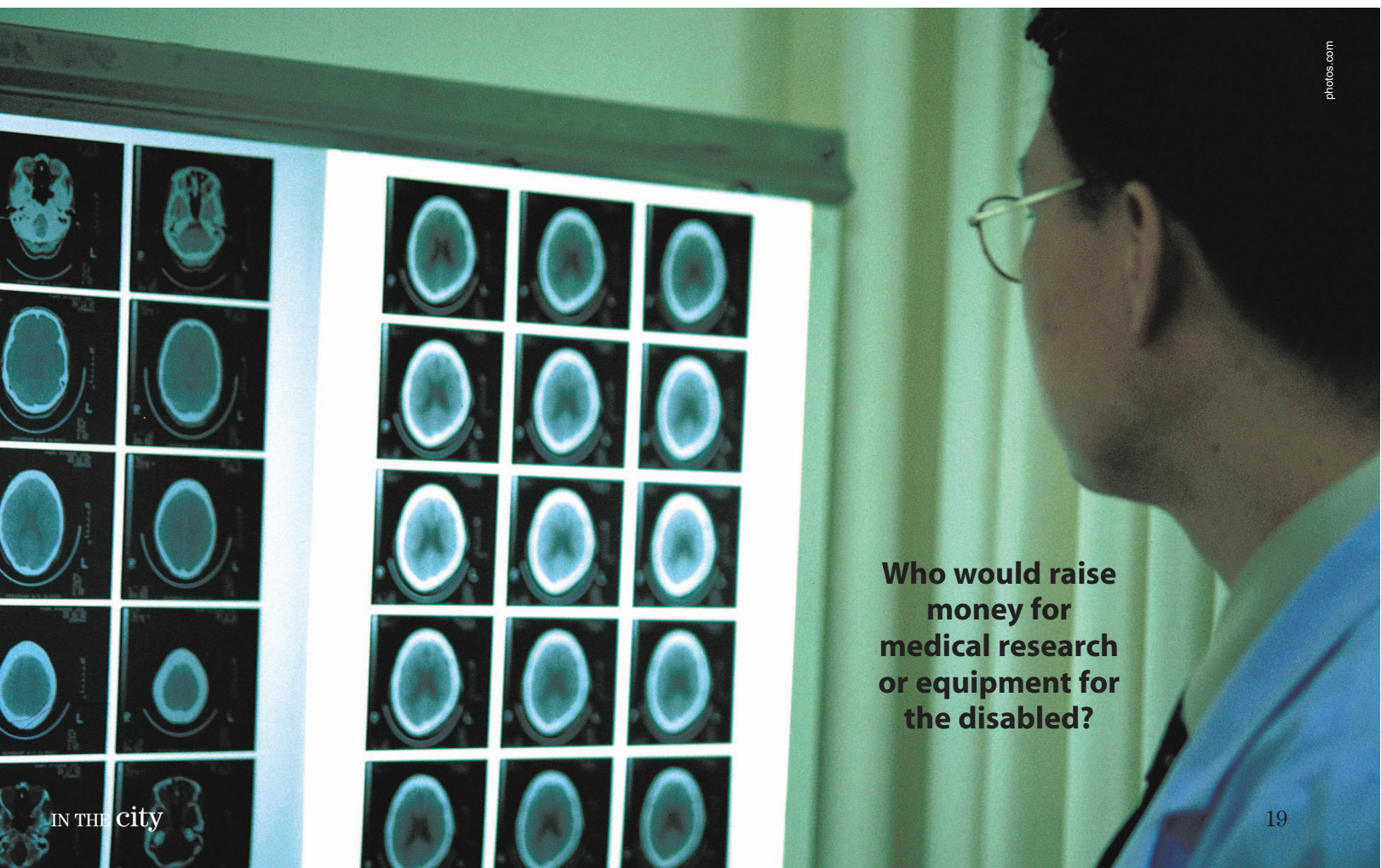
The voluntary and non-profit sector — made up of community-based organizations that strive to sustain and strengthen our urban, rural and northern communities by delivering the kinds of programs and community leadership listed above — faces many challenges. The Manitoba Voluntary Sector Initiative (MVSII) was launched in 2000 to address these challenges:

- recruitment and retention of staff and volunteers;
- financial sustainability and organizational learning;
- the role of youth and ethnocultural groups;
- the relationship of the voluntary and non-profit sector to other sectors, such as government, business and labour;
- and the changing role of the sector in Canadian society.


Province-wide focus groups, conferences, meetings with private and public sector groups, and academic research followed, culminating in an authoritative report on the sector in Manitoba and in declarations of support of the voluntary and non-profit sector being signed by the Provincial Government, the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, the Manitoba Federation of Labour and others.

From this process has been born the Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector Organization of Manitoba (VNPSOM), an umbrella organization dedicated to strengthening the infrastructure and the voice of the sector and implementing a pan-Manitoban set of solutions to the challenges (short and long-term) facing voluntary and non-profit community organizations. A Steering Committee, which is geographically and linguistically representative of our province, has been working for more than a year to develop a governance model for VNPSOM and to find longer term financing that will facilitate the building of a provincial body.

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Who would raise money for medical research or equipment for the disabled?



Who would coach our kids?

VNPSOM's governance principal is a made-in-Manitoba model called Diverse Distributed Leadership (DDL), whereby the power and the responsibilities in the organization are decentralized and shared around the province. VNPSOM has attained its non-profit incorporation and will hold a major event this spring to re-engage those organizations who showed interest when the process first began. With resources secured, hopefully by summer, a province-wide presence and coordinating staff can be put in place and a plan of action will be rolled out.

Some of the practical and concrete tasks VNPSOM will take on include the following:

- bringing organizations together in "brown bag" sessions to discuss common issues;
- promoting awareness in the public of the vital role of the voluntary and non-profit sector;
- arranging group buying so that the sector can get the best deal on needed equipment, supplies and insurance;
- speaking to decision-makers and those with influence in government, business and labour about the role, challenges and potential of the sector;
- and, ultimately, building the collective influence of the voluntary and non-profit sector (over 8000 organizations in Manitoba alone) so that it will be consult-

ed and heeded on public policy.

VNPSOM has also supported a technology network for and by the sector and has assisted it by bringing groups together in Thompson, Brandon, Portage, Winnipeg, and the Interlake to discuss the opportunity to strengthen our work by providing informa-

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tion technology capacity building to the sector. VNPSOM is working with another innovative organization to help introduce new technologies to the sector that are cost effective and make use of current computers and even older ones — the Prairie Linux Users Group (PLUG) (www.plug.ca).

And, VNPSOM is discussing new ways to approach the financing of sector organizations as the issue of sustainability is uppermost in the minds of many groups. The voluntary and non-profit sector needs to be under-

stood and recognized not only for its social value, but also for its economic value and the scope of its activity.

You can learn more about the Voluntary Non-Profit Sector Organization of Manitoba (VNPSOM) by accessing its website at www.voluntarysector.mb.ca and by contacting one of the following people: Lynn Slobogian in Brandon (727-5675), Martin Itzkow in Winnipeg (941-9414), Dennis Hallick in Portage La Prairie (857-8928), Pam Logan in Thompson (778-1206), Zack Gross in the Interlake (389-5302) or Lynne Rochon in the Franco-Manitoban Community (925-2839).

The voluntary and non-profit sector is one of the most trusted parts of our society, ranking second behind medical personnel. Canadians recognize that, since deep funding cuts in the 90s, the sector has been asked to take on more and more of what used to be handled by government. To strengthen and sustain the voluntary and non-profit sector, to have it benefit from greater co-operation and co-ordination, and to have it speak with one voice, an umbrella organization is being created. This can only be good news to those in the sector who, day to day, struggle to keep their programs and services alive and their communities strong. **ITC**

Zack Gross is a member of the Manitoba Network of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative (CVI) and a member of the Steering Committee of the Voluntary Non-Profit Sector Organization of Manitoba (VNPSOM).