

Utilizing a "Rich" Resource: Older Volunteers

Ellen S. Stevens, DSW

As more people live longer, the need to continue one's sense of purpose impacts upon more and later lives. While work inside and outside the home once constituted purpose, new-found leisure time is accompanied by the ongoing need for meaningful activity.

Of the thirty million senior citizens in the United States, approximately 35%—or 10,500,000 people—engage in volunteer service.¹ More than half of these older adults work under the auspices of a volunteer organization. However, the attrition rate of such volunteers approaches 25% during the first year of service.² This presents a multi-faceted problem: turnover is costly to the volunteer organization, disruptive to the placement agency, and distressing to the beneficiaries and providers of the volunteer service.

A recent study was proposed to increase theoretical and practical understanding of senior volunteer retention and satisfaction. The intent was to learn how to keep senior volunteers—and how to keep them satisfied.

This article describes the nature of the study, reveals why the older adults in the study chose to continue or discontinue volunteer service, and identifies characteristics that contribute to staying on the job. Practical applications for the volunteer administrator are offered.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

A sample of 151 older volunteers from one metropolitan volunteer organization comprised the study population. Questionnaires were completed by 66% of the current volunteers sampled ($n=114$) and 50% of the former volunteers sampled ($n=37$), constituting a total response rate of 61%

The questionnaire was developed with two rounds of pretesting with older volunteers working under the auspices of the

same volunteer organization from which the sample was obtained. Measures of reliability and validity were established.

The study is both descriptive and explanatory. It identifies sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and points to associations between these characteristics and levels of satisfaction and retention. The volunteers of the study range in age from 60 through 93, are primarily married or widowed, and are four times as likely to be women as men.³ The minority representation in this sample is disproportionately high—21% are Black, 21% are Jewish, and 20% are Italian—notably higher percentages than are typical in the population-at-large.

The socioeconomic status of the sample is relatively low. More than half of the volunteers reported annual incomes of less than \$10,000, including 23% who reported less than \$5,000 per year. More than one-third had no more than a grade school education.

These volunteers served in a range of settings, including schools, hospitals, private industry, and senior citizen centers. They usually worked within one mile of their homes in communities where they had resided for more than 30 years.

Thus, the volunteers of the study are older adults who are residentially stable, predominantly female, often of minority status, low in socioeconomic status and working for nonmonetary reward. These volunteers are distinguished from the prototype of volunteers by age (they are older), racial and ethnic background (strong minority representation), and socioeconomic status (they are poorer and less educated).⁴ Furthermore, these volunteers are distinguished from the prototype of *older* volunteers in both socioeconomic status and gender ratio. Here we have older volunteers who are more-often-than-not low-income women.

Ellen S. Stevens, DSW, is Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work. Her research on older adults as volunteers earned her the Doctor of Social Welfare degree from Columbia University in 1988. The findings of her study led to a recent training session for eighty volunteer administrators in New York City.

WHY DO THEY STAY?

The profile of these volunteers prompts inquiry into reasons for older adults with limited resources *volunteering* their time. The questionnaire proffered the following questions and response choices:⁵

What is the MAIN reason you are volunteering? (Circle one number below.)

1. I LIKE THE WORK I DO
2. I LIKE THE PEOPLE I WORK WITH
3. I FEEL USEFUL
4. IT FILLS MY TIME
9. OTHER; PLEASE SPECIFY _____

The most frequently-cited reason for volunteering was I FEEL USEFUL.

Former volunteers were asked the same question, worded as follows:

What is the MAIN reason you stopped volunteering? (Circle one number below.)

1. I DID NOT LIKE THE WORK
2. I DID NOT LIKE THE PEOPLE I WORKED WITH
3. I DID NOT FEEL USEFUL
4. IT DID NOT FILL MY TIME
5. IT TOOK TOO MUCH OF MY TIME
9. OTHER; PLEASE SPECIFY _____

The most frequently-cited reason for dropping out of the volunteer role was I DID NOT FEEL USEFUL.

For this sample, the need to feel useful during later life is a primary motive for continuing in the volunteer role. This finding points to the need to address the older volunteer's need to feel useful—a key factor in influencing continued involvement of the senior volunteer.

CRITICAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR PROMOTING USEFULNESS

In order to optimally utilize this "rich" resource, we look to qualities of the volunteer role that are associated with higher levels of retention and satisfaction. This study revealed three characteristics that, combined with sociodemographic characteristics of this sample, best explain how to keep and satisfy senior volunteers.

The three R's of ROLE-SET INTERACTION, ROLE RECOGNITION, and RESPECT are the critical characteristics. "Role-set

interaction" is contact on the job with paid and volunteer staff; "role recognition" is positive feedback from people at the placement agency as well as the volunteer organization; "respect" refers to prestige perceived in former work positions and current volunteer position.

For the volunteers of the study, contact with others on the job, positive feedback, and respect at levels formerly perceived were directly related to likelihood of staying on the job and staying satisfied. The volunteer administrator is challenged to meet these needs.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The volunteer administrator is confronted with the turnover phenomenon. Meeting the volunteer's need for usefulness through role-set interaction, recognition, and respect may be a beginning to preventing an end. Recruitment, placement, and supervision of older volunteers, and the staff who work with them, can incorporate these findings to meet this need.

Recruitment Practices

Targeting older adults who live within close proximity of agencies in need of volunteer services is conducive to volunteer interaction. People who are already active are likely candidates for involvement in service activity;⁶ thus, viable marketplaces for older volunteers are neighborhood senior centers, civic organizations, and churches and synagogues. Visual displays of information such as large-print posters, and personal presentations of the need for people-power, alert seniors to an opportunity to put their experience to use. Older people who know each other through one organization may find it supportive to jointly embark upon the application and orientation procedures in a new setting. Transportation provisions, post-volunteering meals, and intermittent socializing may create opportunities for role-set interaction both on and off the job.

The recruitment process may be consummated with a written plan composed by volunteer and staff member. This plan addresses the volunteer's goals, time availability, proximity needs, and areas of interest and expertise. The volunteer and volunteer organization retain a copy of this plan

to be updated during ensuing conferences. The development and use of such a plan may be reminiscent of employment practices which conveyed respect during earlier stages of adulthood.

Placement Practices

Preplacement interviews can glean information about the prospective volunteer's areas of knowledge and skill and current interests, while assessing the level of prestige inherent in former positions. This enhances the likelihood of placement in a position that will tap the volunteer's interests and maximize opportunity for success and recognition. Preplacement site visits present an opportunity for joint decision-making from the beginning of the placement process, creating a partnership that conveys respect. Additionally, role-set interaction now takes on a staff-volunteer dimension.

Once the placement decision is made, effort can be directed toward creating a "volunteer-friendly" environment. The physical environment of the older volunteer should be conducive to interaction; thus, placement near other volunteer or paid staff members serves this end. A designated workspace conveys respect and is often reminiscent of previous work conditions. The social environment should integrate older volunteers. They should be party to memoranda about agency policies and procedures, invited to participate in relevant meetings, and included in mealtime get-togethers and social events. In addition, periodic evaluation conferences between the volunteer coordinator and older volunteer can enable a mutual exchange of information, observations, and feelings. Such communication may bring problems to light before they become obstacles.

Supervision

A primary element in successful supervision of senior volunteers is recognition. Positive feedback from people at all levels of the placement site falls on eager ears. Of equal importance is praise from members of the volunteer organization who may have less-frequent personal contact with volunteers-on-site. Written communication and telephone contact may effectively bridge this gap.

Recognition of the older volunteer's worth to the organization may take on varied forms. Verbal recognition, smiles and pats on the shoulder, written letters of commendation, certificates, trophies, and plaques all provide valuable nonmonetary reward. Importantly, the people who take time out to demonstrate this recognition, often paid staff who are pressured and oftentimes unrecognized themselves, will benefit from such recognition of their own merit to the organization.

Eventually, the older volunteer's tenure on the job will end. An exit interview can reveal to the organization the volunteer's reason for ceasing service, provide a time for final expressions of gratitude, and convey to the volunteer a sense of appreciation and usefulness that she or he may convey to prospective volunteers.

CONCLUSION

Older volunteers are here—but to stay? Much depends on the organization's ability to satisfy the continuing need for a sense of usefulness. Meeting this need has a high payoff: millions of dollars of services are provided voluntarily,⁷ staff and clients receive continuity in volunteer service, and older adults are afforded a viable role in later life.

Meeting this need can be catalyzed through application of the three R's: role-set interaction, recognition, and respect. Involvement with others on the volunteer job, positive feedback to the older volunteer, and a working plan and partnership between paid and volunteer staff appear to maximize senior volunteer satisfaction and retention.

The volunteer administrator is invited to apply these research findings in recruitment, placement, and supervisory processes with older volunteers. A staff-volunteer partnership which begins during recruitment and continues throughout the placement period enables reciprocity in exchange and mutuality in benefit from this vital human resource of older adults.

FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United*

States, 1989, pp. 36 and 371.

2. Interviews with James Sugarman, Retired Senior Volunteer Program in New York City, New York, 1984-87.

3. This is two times the usual ratio of 2:1 for older female:older male volunteers.

Susan Maizel Chambré, "Is Volunteering a Substitute for Role Loss in Old Age? An Empirical Test of Activity Theory," *The Gerontologist* 24 (June 1984): 292-8.

4. Russell A. Ward, *The Aging Experience*, New York: Harper and Row, 1984.

5. Ellen Stevens, "Goodness-of-Fit in Senior Volunteerism," DSW dissertation, Columbia University, 1988, pp. 176 and 191.

6. Susan Maizel Chambré, "Older Volunteers as Joiners," paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Antonio, Texas, November 19, 1984.

7. U.S. Government, *ACTION 1987 Annual Report*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. This report states that \$242,000,000 in services was provided by 387,000 Retired Senior Volunteer Program volunteers in FY 1987.