

Are you helping others?

Millions of retirees are finding satisfaction in volunteer work. Here's how they're serving and how you can join them.

By Linda Hubbard Getze

When 66-year-old Lester Komer retired from his job as a Postal Service employee he decided to do something he had never done before—serve as a volunteer. Now, four years later, he divides his time among three different voluntary pursuits. "I had always heard, 'When you give, you get much more back in return,'" he says. "Now I know it's true."

Komer first joined the Andrus Volunteer Program at the University of Southern California's Andrus Gerontology Center. Among other activities, this energetic group of more than a hundred older people aid the university in research projects, give seminars on aging and voluntarism to community groups, and offer peer counseling services.

"Becoming an Andrus volunteer was a total awakening for me," says Komer, who is the group's vice chairman and a member of its speaker corps. "It's what got me started. Now I also do volunteer work counseling at a senior center and acting as an advocate in a nursing home."

By volunteering, Komer is both carrying on a tradition that is part of this country's heritage and breaking new ground. The United States—a nation of joiners—has a rich history of voluntarism. It is estimated there are now 175,000 formal volunteer groups in existence, with thousands more informal ones.

Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, commented on the scope and depth of volunteer efforts in American society when accepting the 1980 Alexis de Tocqueville Award presented by the United Way of America:

"All our lives, as presently lived," he said, "are inconceivable without the large involvement of voluntary organizations, voluntary gifts and voluntary services. . . . Voluntarism, in its variegated manifestations, is America uniquely at its best."

Now, emerging societal and political forces are changing the voluntary scene. Yesterday's typical volun-

teer—a white, female, middle-class homemaker between the ages of 25 and 55—is vanishing. Today, 60 percent of this group is working in paid employment. The result is fewer volunteers and fewer volunteer hours from the traditional ranks.

They are being replaced, however, by people like Komer. Members of this new breed of volunteers include men, single people, college students and older people—many of whom are volunteering for the first time in retirement.

In addition, the political cry for smaller government and less spending is causing public and private policymakers alike to look with renewed interest at the voluntary sector. Leaders in the field of voluntarism believe that budget cutbacks will result in a greater demand for volunteer workers from both private and government agencies. Such a demand, they say, may raise the status of volunteers.

"This is a time for change for all of us in the volunteer community," says Kerry Kenn Allen, executive vice president of VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement. "We've gone through a period that focused on paid work. In the social service area, we've looked to paid professionals. By doing so, we've possibly undervalued the unpaid worker."

Like unpaid workers, older Americans have often also been assigned a diminished role in the nation's economic and social life. In many cases, they have been stereotyped as recipients rather than providers of services.

But this is changing, too. Organizations that use volunteers, in particular, are beginning to realize that a vast untapped resource—the talents and experience of older persons—is available to them.

Recruiting older people for volunteer assignments began in earnest only within the last 15 years. Yet statistics show the depth of their volun-

tary involvement. A Harris Survey in 1974 found that 4.5 million people over 65 were serving as volunteers, with another 2.1 million saying they would like to but had not done so.

Indeed, volunteering in later life is one of the viable alternatives to complete retirement. Studies show people are living longer in retirement and have the time, energy, mobility, good health and motivation to make a contribution. Volunteering not only benefits others, but also offers the participant an avenue of social approval and an opportunity to increase feelings of usefulness.

Most, but by no means all, older volunteers are retirees with sufficient income who do not feel the need to seek paid employment. Their retired status allows them to shift away from job orientation, choosing involvement activities that combine the untried with the familiar.

Today, this country has a growing number of volunteer opportunities that specifically involve older people. They are sponsored by government, private agencies, corporations and independent groups and offer a wide variety of jobs.

One of the largest programs for older people is run by the Federal Government. Currently, more than 250,000 volunteers 60 years and older take part in one of the three Older American Volunteer Programs (OAVP) administered by ACTION: the Foster Grandparent Program, the Senior Companion Program, and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program. These volunteers serve in almost a thousand local projects and devote an annual total of nearly 79 million hours.

While the emphasis of each program is different, all share a common goal—to provide meaningful roles in retirement for older people by using their skills, talents and availability to meet locally identified needs of individuals and communities. FGP and SCP are targeted to low-income older persons who serve 20 hours per week

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and receive a small stipend that is nontaxable. RSVP volunteers serve an average of four hours per week and receive no stipend.

"Our programs are unique among government programs because they are based on the concept that older people are invaluable resources," says Betty Brake, director of OAVP. "Other programs are based on the idea that older people need help. We create a different psychology by saying, 'We need you more than you need us.'"

The Foster Grandparent Program, begun in 1965, was the first ACTION program for older Americans. It offers older men and women the opportunity to provide companionship and guidance to emotionally, physically and mentally handicapped children, usually within an institutional setting.

Last year 71 of the original volunteers—there are now 17,000—were honored at special 15th anniversary festivities in Washington, D.C. A number expressed their feelings and experiences:

"I need the children as much as they need me," said 80-year-old Eve Habern. Recalled Daisy Grider, 75, who spent four years teaching a child to walk: "Every day, I went home with his fingerprints on me, and then one day he turned me loose and went to the water fountain alone."

The 3,500 volunteers in the Senior Companion Program give individual care and assistance to frail older people. By mobilizing and coordinating existing community services for the homebound, the Companions often have been successful in preventing or delaying the institutionalization of their clients.

Willie Mae Evans, 90, has been a Senior Companion for five years. She says: "You know, everyone needs a little assistance in this world. Isn't it better to help each other than to pull one another down?"

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is the largest ACTION program, with more than 270,000 volunteers. RSVP volunteers serve in a variety of organizations, agencies and institutions including courts, schools, libraries, day care centers, hospitals and nursing homes. They also develop independent projects.

The unlimited opportunities for involvement through RSVP have resulted in many innovative programs



Volunteer, left, in ACTION's Senior Companion Program helps homebound woman with sewing project. Such assistance often delays or prevents institutionalization.

throughout the country. Project Share (RSVP of King County, Wash.) brings older people and students together to share their thoughts about growing up in different worlds. The Best Years project of the Humboldt County, Calif., RSVP produces a weekly 30-minute television program that spotlights aging issues and services. The Big County, Tex., RSVP coordinates a home repair service for older people.

RSVP volunteers are also involved in activities that are not the exclusive concern of older people. Energy conservation, environmental balance, rural transportation, urban planning and crime prevention are all areas that RSVP programs have touched.

Recently retired John Petherbridge, 67, sums up the attitude of many of his fellow RSVP volunteers: "I didn't take kindly to the idea of having nothing to. I wanted to be with a group of people who have a positive view of life and a willingness to participate in the community."

As all government-sponsored programs, ACTION's OAVP is subject to funding cutbacks. To date, however, they have been relatively minor.

"We want to expand OAVP," says Thomas Pauken, director of ACTION. "These programs will be the cornerstone of the new ACTION. What is happening is a shift in approach, but existing programs will be continued and built upon."

While the largest, OAVP is not the only Federally sponsored program for older volunteers. The Service

Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) began in 1964 and is administered by the Small Business Administration. There are now 12,000 SCORE volunteers working in 365 chapters throughout the United States.

SCORE's objective is to tap the expertise of retired business people to aid those beginning a small business or having trouble running an existing one. Since its inception, SCORE volunteers have counseled 730,000 small business firms.

"For most SCORE volunteers, it isn't so much a case of helping others as it is the challenge of going into a business and trying to find out what the problem is," says Elwyn Nellis, a SCORE volunteer and until recently the organization's public relations director. "We're able to look toward the future rather than back on past accomplishments."

American businesses themselves are also becoming involved with older volunteers. The Honeywell Retirees Volunteer Project was begun in late 1978 by Honeywell, Inc. in Minneapolis. Interested in the needs of local nonprofit social service agencies, the program initially recruited 35 volunteers—retirees who had worked at all levels of the company—for placement in the agencies.

"The unique thing we do," says retired Honeywell executive Ray Condon, "is not to put a person into just any job. That's not a good approach. If you follow up on some of those 'I'll take anything' assignments, you'll



Love is the gift Foster Grandparents give handicapped children.

find the volunteer lasted 30 days. Our people are still there."

Program manager Elmer Frykman, himself a Honeywell retiree, reports the project now has 325 volunteers working at 115 local agencies.

"Our key to reaching many of these volunteers is through our common association with the company," says Frykman. "They identify right away."

Education is another area that is tapping the resources of older volunteers. The Andrus Volunteer Program, previously mentioned, is an example of what is being done at the university level. Others are sponsored by community colleges. The Talent Bank at Edison Community College in Fort Myers, Fla., recruits retired professionals to share their wisdom, ideas, successes and mistakes with college students.

The National School Volunteer Program (NSVP) promotes the use of older volunteers in elementary and secondary schools by providing recruitment assistance to more than 1,200 school volunteer coordinators nationwide. NSVP believes that one of "the largest untapped sources of talent to assist in schools is our growing number of senior citizens." Opportunities for NSVP volunteers include serving as tutors, classroom aides, career counselors, etc.

Older Americans assist each other through their voluntary involvement in membership organizations like AARP. In chapters throughout the country, volunteers work in such



Retired business people who become SCORE volunteers offer their wisdom, experience to those beginning or having trouble running small businesses.

AARP service programs as Tax-Aide, Widowed Persons Service and 55 Alive.

The success of programs that fall under the Older Americans Act is also due in part to efforts of older volunteers. Some 250,000 serve at nutrition sites, outnumbering paid workers eight to one. Another 31,000 people over 60 volunteer their time to area agencies on aging. And a high proportion of tasks at senior centers are done by older volunteers.

The motivation to become involved is prompting older people to begin independent volunteer programs. These grass-root efforts operate often without the benefit of outside funding. The Gray Gladiators in Albuquerque, N.M., are one example.

Founded six years ago, the Gladiators are a loosely organized group of about 175 older men and women whose primary interest is benefiting their community. They assist at local events such as the annual balloon festival, organize services for seniors, and participate in various fund-raising projects.

Involvement is also available to older Americans in the thousands of organizations and agencies that do not segregate their volunteer workers by age. ACTION's Peace Corps and VISTA programs, the Veterans Administration, the Red Cross and various other health, charitable, fraternal and religious associations have jobs open at every level.

During the coming decade, experts

believe older citizens employed in voluntary service can make a significant impact on the quality of American life. As more and more people live longer and healthier lives in their retirement years, the potential for them to contribute their experiences and skills will increase, placing them in a unique position to combat some of the ills that plague society.

"In the 1980s there is, more than ever, a tremendous need for volunteers in social services," says John Keller, director of ACTION in Region X. "We are faced with declining resources and increased social needs. The volunteer work force of older Americans is best equipped to meet these needs. They have experience in overcoming hardships and have lived through times of economic scarcity. They are needed now more than ever." □

How to Become Involved

Interested in volunteering? The following is a list of national programs you can write to for more information about involvement opportunities for older Americans.

ACTION
806 Connecticut Ave. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20525
(800) 424-8580 Ext. 239

SCORE
1441 L St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20416
National School Volunteer Program
300 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, Va. 22314