

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents findings from exploratory research with 52 culturally-diverse senior adult volunteers serving as Foster Grandparents in the southwestern United States. The focus is on satisfaction in later life and volunteers' needs for social support. Practice and evaluation strategies are proposed to determine the linkage between social support, life satisfaction, and improved volunteer retention.*

# Serving and Keeping Those Who Serve: Foster Grandparents and Their Own Family Needs

Ellen S. Stevens

## INTRODUCTION

The Foster Grandparent Program of the National Senior Service Corps matches low income senior adult volunteers with children and adolescents with special needs. Children and adolescents receive emotional support and mentoring from seniors who gain enhanced self-esteem from these activities, and communities reap valuable service. Millions of dollars in service are provided by nearly 24,000 Foster Grandparents (Corporation for National Service, 1997). Benefits provided are a small, tax-free stipend, assistance with transportation, meals, and supplemental insurance during service, and an annual physical examination. Their payback—in addition to these concrete benefits and the gratification they experience from serving—may be enhanced through the social connections Foster Grandparents make that support their own “family values.”

This article presents findings from an exploratory study that inquires into the social support needs of Foster Grandparents. Specifically, the nature of relationships with family and friends is assessed and the following questions are addressed:

- To whom do senior volunteers turn for social support?

- Which relationships enhance life satisfaction?
- What can volunteer organizations do to meet the needs of senior volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds?

The focus here is on what Foster Grandparents say about their relationship needs. Through this information, administrators of volunteer organizations and practitioners at placement agencies can generate ideas about where their volunteers are coming from and what to do to help them stay.

## BACKGROUND

As America proceeds through an era of cost-cutting and retrenchment, her volunteer workforce is being pushed to the fore. A significant cadre of this workforce is senior adult volunteers who are vital contributors to the national economy. Senior adult volunteer programs produce over \$1 billion in volunteer service. The Foster Grandparent Program alone, contributing approximately 22 million hours of service each year, produces \$243 million in volunteer service exclusive of programmatic costs (Corporation for National Service, 1997). As a result, requests for proposals are increasingly being issued for the development of more Foster Grandparent Programs (University of Houston, 1997).

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*Ellen S. Stevens' research with senior volunteers began during her doctoral studies at Columbia University and continues through her role on the faculty of the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work. Her interest is the enhancement of life satisfaction for growing cohorts of senior adults who may choose a volunteer career in later life. Practice-related publications appear in *The Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *Families In Society*, *Clinical Gerontologist*, and *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*. Her research has been presented at national conferences of the American Society on Aging, the Gerontological Society of America, and the National Organization for Human Service Education.*

Greater expectations are being imposed upon volunteer organizations as service agencies, with good intentions and fiscal constraints, look to volunteers to fill the gaps (McSweeney and Alexander, 1996; Wilson and Simon, 1993), gaps that can be filled with productive seniors. The fiscal benefits of volunteer service can be undermined by excessive costs incurred by volunteer turnover. Keeping senior volunteers satisfied is time- and cost-effective (Heard, 1997; Stevens, 1991).

The satisfaction of senior volunteers is related to giving as well as receiving. The giving of one's self, by way of skills and talents, may lead to a sense of usefulness that, for many, is the payoff (Stevens, 1993a; Wilson and Simon, 1993). Receiving may happen through formal recognition at ceremonies, informal recognition through camaraderie and praise, and concrete benefits such as stipends—all of which heighten the value of the volunteer experience (Asche and Janey, 1989-90; Corporation for National Service, 1997; Fisher, 1995; Stevens, 1992; Stevens, 1993b). The many senior volunteers who live alone can, through volunteering, engage in a give and take for mutual benefit. Older adults who live alone in their communities are said to benefit from the social support and sharing provided by friendships. Well-being is supported by having a confidante—even at a distance—and maintaining ties with old friends. This lends support to the "socioemotional selectivity theory of aging" that attests to the value of relationships which are tried and true (Potts, 1997).

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the social support needs of Foster Grandparents and to shed light on services that can sustain the service they provide. Research into what Foster Grandparents say about their social support needs and relationships forms the basis for practice implications.

The study intended to answer three questions: 1) Who are the study's Foster

Grandparents? 2) To whom do they turn for social support? 3) What do the demographics and support systems of this population mean for volunteer organizations that want to find and keep senior volunteers?

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Foster Grandparents serving communities in the southwestern United States voluntarily completed a 45-item questionnaire about "social support" and "satisfaction in later life." Social support was defined as "frequency of contact with family for the purpose of sharing activities, visits, belongings, and doing favors," and "frequency of contact with a significant other for the purpose of sharing personal feelings and concerns" (Mangen and Peterson, 1982). Satisfaction in later life was defined as "the overall quality of existence as derived from the comparison of one's aspirations with one's actual achievements" and was measured by the Life Satisfaction Index (Neugarten, *et. al.*, 1961).

The questionnaire also inquired into socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education, income, occupation, health, race and ethnicity, and community residence. It was pre-tested for reliability and validity with a sample of older adults and was personally administered to the study sample.

The study sample included senior volunteers from two Foster Grandparent programs. Members of the first program served in an urban area and were part of a larger study who completed the questionnaire in 1989 (n=31). Members of the second program served in a rural area and completed the questionnaire in 1997 (n=21). The total study sample is 52.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

Information provided by the 52 senior volunteers was analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency distributions, cross-tabulation tables, and Pearson correlations were utilized to describe and under-

stand the data provided by these volunteers. Data analysis focused on determining how "contact with family" and "contact with a significant other" were associated with "later life satisfaction" for this culturally-diverse group of Foster Grandparent volunteers.

## FINDINGS

### *Who are these Foster Grandparents?*

The volunteers in this study—from a rural and urban area of the southwestern United States—exemplify senior adult cohorts most on the rise: racial and ethnic minorities who are older elders. This is not to say that Caucasian elders are not Foster Grandparents—some are—but in this study 90% of the overall sample self-identified as members of minority

groups. More than three-fourths of the sample were in their seventies and older. Sociodemographic characteristics are identified in Figure 1.

While a majority of these Foster Grandparents have age and minority status, they are all low in socioeconomic status. Overall, the majority had no more than grade school educations and incomes of less than \$5,000 per year. The majority are women who are now on their own. They enjoy relatively good health and residential stability.

Levels of later life satisfaction ranged from "low" to "high," with half of the Foster Grandparents indicating "moderate" levels of life satisfaction. About one-third indicated "high" satisfaction, and a smaller percentage indicated "low" levels.

Age		Race and Ethnicity		Annual Income	
60 - 69	24%	Black	65%	< \$ 5,000 (approx.)	61%
70 - 74	34%	Hispanic	21%	\$ 5,000- 9,999	31%
75 - 79	22%	White	10%	\$10,000-14,999	4%
80 - 89	20%	Other	4%	\$15,000 or more	4%
TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%
Education		Occupation		Gender	
< Grade School	21%	Housework	43%	Female	79%
Grade School	39%	Office Work	10%	Male	21%
High School Grad	36%	Business & Managerial	23%		
College Grad	4%	Professional	12%		
		Other	12%		
TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%
Marital Status		Health		Residential Stability	
Married	23%	Excellent	14%	> 15 Years	88%
Widowed	46%	Good	48%	10-15 Years	2%
Divorced	27%	Fair	30%	5-10 Years	2%
Separated	2%	Not very Good	8%	1- 5 Years	8%
Never Married	2%				
TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%
Household Composition		Later Life Satisfaction		Geographical Setting	
Myself only	52%	Low	16%	Urban	60%
Myself + 1	34%	Moderate	50%	Rural	40%
Myself +>2	14%	High	34%		
TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%

**Figure 1**

**Who are the Foster Grandparents of the study?  
Sociodemographic characteristics of the study sample**

Overall, these Foster Grandparents were moderately satisfied with life, of low socioeconomic status, and were women who were often minorities living alone in their communities of long-term residence. Some rural-urban differences were notable.

The rural elders were more culturally diverse with the majority Hispanic (43%) and the second largest group African-American (29%). These elders expressed somewhat higher levels of life satisfaction (40% were "highly satisfied," compared to 29% of urban elders) and socioeconomic status (45% reported incomes of \$5,000-\$10,000, compared to only 21% of urban elders).

The urban elders were usually African-American (90%), more likely to be widowed (55%, compared to 33% of the rural elders), and poorer in income (71% had incomes of less than \$5,000, compared to 45% of the rural elders). They were somewhat lower in life satisfaction (13% indicated low satisfaction compared to 10% of the rural elders). These rural-urban differences are summarized in Figure 2.

A primary study purpose was to identify sources of social support and determine how this "support" links with "satisfaction."

*To whom do these Foster Grandparents turn for social support?*

The types of social support analyzed in this study were "contact with family" and "contact with significant other." Contact with family—for the purpose of sharing visits, activities, and belongings, and doing favors—was measured by "frequency of contact with relatives." Contact with significant other—for the purpose of sharing personal feelings and concerns—was measured by "frequency of contact with family member or friend." Figure 3 shows to whom volunteers turn for social support.

Contact with family was at "moderate" levels for most. Contact with a significant other was at "high" levels for most. For these volunteers there was less contact with family than with significant others. Less contact with family, more contact with significant others: Which type of contact relates to life satisfaction?

For these Foster Grandparents, it was contact with family that made the difference. The volunteers who were most satisfied were those with the most family contact ( $r=.62, p<.01$ ), indicating a highly significant and moderately strong association between family contact and satisfaction. This led to inquiry into marital sta-

Foster Grandparents in <i>Rural</i> Setting	Foster Grandparents in <i>Urban</i> Setting
Hispanic and African-American	African-American
Higher Socioeconomic Status	Lower Socioeconomic Status
Married or Widowed	Usually Widowed
Higher Life Satisfaction	Lower Life Satisfaction

**Figure 2**  
Rural-urban differences

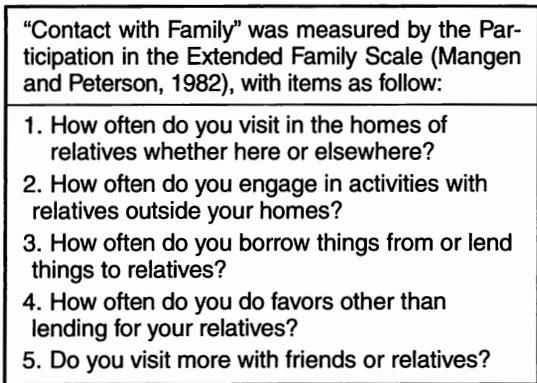
Contact with Family		Contact with Significant Other		Who is the Significant Other?	
Low	20%	Low	8%	Family Member	59%
Moderate	55%	Moderate	41%	Friend	39%
High	25%	High	51%	None	2%
TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%

**Figure 3**  
To whom do volunteers turn for social support?

tus: Was it involvement with a spouse that made life satisfying? Not necessarily. There was no indication that being married was associated with higher satisfaction in later life for these volunteers.

When volunteers in urban and rural settings were analyzed separately, contact with family was salient for both groups. Rural volunteers had more frequent contact with family and, for them, giving and receiving social support was also significant.

Even though many volunteers shared personal feelings with family or friends, it was getting together with relatives for activities, visits, the exchange of belongings, and doing favors that seemed to bring satisfaction in later life. Figure 4 itemizes the components of contact with family.



**Figure 4**  
**Items measuring "contact with family"**

In summary, when it comes to social support, family togetherness has much to do with life satisfaction for these senior volunteers, the majority of whom are women from minority groups who live alone. For the rural elders who had more frequent family contact, both frequency of contact and giving and receiving support were related to satisfaction. It was the rural elders who expressed higher levels of life satisfaction.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Demographic projections forecast a growing number of ethnic minority elders, the prototype of Foster Grandparents. Vol-

unteer administrators can anticipate a growing number of culturally-diverse seniors who choose a volunteer career in later life (A. Monk, personal communication, 1984; Wilson and Simon, 1993).

The importance of family to this diverse group of senior volunteers suggests implications for the support functions of volunteer organizations. Seniors who volunteer to serve children are, in all likelihood, carrying out their own family values, the values they place on family membership, belonging, involvement. However, for many Foster Grandparents their own families—families of origin and families of procreation—are out of reach. Most volunteers in this study were widowed, divorced, or separated, and living alone. These elders may be among the few remaining survivors of their families.

What can Foster Grandparent programs (and possibly other programs) do to address the cultural value of family when family is gone? The benefits that may result from addressing this issue may enhance the recruitment and retention of this population by meeting the needs of those who are meeting the needs of others.

#### *Recruitment*

While Foster Grandparenting does not pretend to replace family, it may serve some of its functions. Activity-sharing, visits, doing favors, and borrowing and lending establish the importance of connectedness between elders and others and imply an interchange with the senior volunteer. Can volunteer programs tap into volunteers' ideas about family and their concerns about their own families? And in so doing, can the volunteer experience engender a culture of connectedness for senior volunteers? Since sharing, mutuality, and exchange are valued in the context of family, are there ways that volunteer administrators can address these needs in the volunteer milieu? Empowered seniors are likely to express their needs, if invited, to agency staff. Offering the opportunity and acknowledging the need for involvement is what matters.

Senior volunteers can impact the volunteer organization through its recruitment strategies. Who better than current, satisfied volunteers to reach out to peers for organizational affiliation? And given the long-term community residence of most of these volunteers, potential volunteers who live nearby may be a source of connection to one another as they travel to and from the volunteer work site together. Their residential stability, in both rural and urban settings, bodes well for retention on the job. Community-based peer recruitment could boost the cadre of senior volunteers and become the resource to meet ever-increasing community needs.

### *Retention*

In-service sessions, inherent to Foster Grandparent programs, can address volunteers' changing roles and relationships. Only moderate amounts of family contact were the experience for most, the contact that was most associated with satisfaction with life. The partnership between volunteers and organizational leadership could be the unit that sets the training agenda. One option could be a focus on family—the families of foster grandchildren and their Foster Grandparents, and the families of the Foster Grandparents themselves. In-service sessions could periodically deal with support for Foster Grandparents whose own families are out of reach.

Such a support function could be offered through volunteer peer group sessions that provide opportunity to recollect past events that the volunteer's own family enjoyed together, reminisce about relatives and meaningful relationships both past and present, and relive memories the volunteer is fond of or grappling with. Volunteers will hear the accounts of others and learn they are not alone. Connecting with others who share some of the same inner life can bring a meaningful past into the present and create social linkages that enliven a sense of family and bond peers to each other.

Some questions that address volunteers' family values might include:

- What kinds of things did you and your family do together?
- What did you do for them? What did they do for you?
- What are some of the high points you remember? Some of the low points?
- How are your family members living on through your life?

Senior volunteers can be organizational partners in the planning and facilitation of these sessions.

### *Evaluation of Program Effectiveness*

It would not be at all surprising if this reliving of family memories enhanced the later life satisfaction of Foster Grandparents and if enhanced satisfaction, in turn, enhanced retention. The impact of family-focused programming can be evaluated to determine its impact on life satisfaction. Thus, the relationship between social support, satisfaction, and retention would be evaluated as follows: Family-focused support group → Later life satisfaction → Senior volunteer retention.

The evaluation of support group effectiveness could be done by 1) measuring later life satisfaction using the Life Satisfaction Index (Neugarten, *et. al.*, 1961); 2) implementing the support group function as a component of in-service training sessions; and 3) again measuring later life satisfaction using the Life Satisfaction Index.

Does this support group function lead to higher levels of life satisfaction? Are the volunteers who are higher in satisfaction the volunteers who are staying on the job?

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There are a quarter of a million senior volunteers who are, relative to all elders, often poor and members of minority groups. Like many other elders, they often are widows who live alone. These volunteers are giving their talents, skills,

time, and lives. They are out on the front lines influencing society's next generations. They are a valuable human resource. Agencies want to find them and keep them. Senior volunteer programs at large are experiencing challenges with recruitment, retention, and costly turnover. Financial subsidies and fringe benefits provide incentive and reward to Foster Grandparents, but research into what contributes to satisfaction in later life portrays an opportunity to further serve those who serve.

While not meant to generalize to all seniors, this study of a small, culturally-diverse sample of Foster Grandparents presents findings worthy of consideration and further exploration in other settings:

- Frequent family contact is associated with higher levels of later life satisfaction;
- For rural elders who had more frequent contact with family, the giving and receiving of family support is associated with higher levels of later life satisfaction;
- Minority group members are a fast-growing cohort of the aging population and constitute a sizeable proportion of elder volunteers; and
- Elder volunteers may be the few remaining survivors of their families with remembrances in need of expression.

Recognizing the needs of these elders—many of whom experience racism, classism, ageism, and sexism—meets the mutual needs of volunteers and all volunteer organizations that utilize, or could possibly utilize, a senior volunteer resource. A culture of connectedness through partnership—with the organization and with other volunteers—can facilitate the expression and actualization of the values of family membership, belonging, and involvement. *Recruitment* can be enhanced by elder volunteers who reach out to peers to join the volunteer family.

*Retention* can be addressed through in-service support groups that acknowledge the value of family to elderly volunteers. *Evaluation* can measure levels of life satisfaction and assess the impact of family-focused programming on satisfaction and retention.

The human resource of senior volunteers is alive and well and growing. As the population ages and increases in diversity while public resources shrink, senior volunteers who are well-served can continue their service provision. Supporting their efforts through research-based practice directions can further their well-being. Facing their own constraints while service needs mount, organizations can enjoy productive and mutually satisfying partnerships with senior volunteers and benefit from the person-power they provide.

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