

Older Volunteers: An Agency Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Since late 1989, the Victoria Volunteer Bureau, with the support of Health and Welfare Canada's Seniors Independence Program, has been involved in its Seniors Volunteering Project. The project's objective has been to develop and test strategies to promote seniors' involvement in volunteering. Earlier stages of the project, described in previous issues of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* (Lee and Burden, 1990-1991, 1991), focused on the extent and nature of seniors' volunteer participation in the Canadian community of Greater Victoria.

The research reported here examines this issue from an *agency* perspective. It sought to determine current and future practices in volunteer-based agencies. More specifically, this research examined the roles senior volunteers play in agencies, agencies' experiences with recruiting and retaining seniors and the agencies' willingness to respond to seniors' volunteering concerns.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

The data reported here were obtained through a questionnaire mailed to 226 agencies which have a volunteer component. The agencies were located throughout the Greater Victoria region and all were members of the Victoria Volunteer Bureau. Questionnaires were mailed in August, 1990, with a follow-up telephone reminder two weeks later. A total of 141 completed surveys were returned, for a response rate of 62.4%.

PROFILE OF RESPONDING AGENCIES

The sectors in which responding agencies were active primarily consisted of Health (37.6%), Social Services (27.0%), Social/ Recreation (14.9%) and Education (10.6%). The remaining 9.9% were involved

with environmental, correctional, fundraising, cultural, international development and tourism activities.

Agency size, as measured by number of paid staff, ranged from one to over 100 employees. The largest proportion (34.0%) had one to five employees. Overall, the median number per agency was 6.7 employees.

Agency size, as measured by number of clients served, also had a wide variation, ranging from less than 20 to well in excess of 500. The largest proportion (36.9%) served between 101 and 500 clients. Overall, the median number served per agency was 384 clients.

The number of volunteers involved in each agency ranged from less than 5 to more than 500, with a median of 40 volunteers. Overall, 36.2% of the agencies had 20 or fewer volunteers, 25.5% had 21 to 50, and 38.3% involved more than 50 volunteers.

INVOLVEMENT OF SENIORS AS VOLUNTEERS

Although 86.5% of responding agencies indicated that they currently involve seniors as volunteers, over one-third (35.5%) reported that seniors make up no more than 10% of their total volunteer body. However, 33.3% stated that seniors constitute over half of their volunteers.

Not surprisingly, when asked if they would like to increase the number of seniors volunteering with their organization, 89.4% responded positively.

THE ROLES OF SENIOR VOLUNTEERS

The agencies which involved seniors as volunteers (86.5% of all respondents) were asked about the types of work they felt were most and least suitable for their older volunteers, the traits which benefitted and

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hindered seniors' performances, and the advantages and disadvantages particular to having this group as volunteers. It should be noted that many agencies pointed out that the age of the volunteer is immaterial; it is the 'fit' of the volunteer with the position that is important.

Well over half the agencies (59.8%) felt that there were no tasks which were unsuitable for older volunteers. However, 29.5% indicated that they had found tasks requiring heavy work (lifting, moving, etc.) to be unsuitable. A wide array of other tasks felt to be unsuitable were given, although each task was mentioned by no more than 4.0% of the respondents. Again, it was largely felt that suitability was not dependent on age, but on the individual's appropriateness for the job at hand.

When asked if there were tasks which were particularly *suitable* for seniors, agencies became much more expansive, mentioning a wide array of possibilities, as shown in Table I.

Table I
Tasks Which Agencies Have Found to be Suitable for Seniors

Tasks	n	%*
Office Work	40	32.8
One-to-One Relating	33	27.0
Social	24	19.7
Visiting	23	18.9
Crafts	18	14.8
Library/Research	10	8.2
Sales/Fundraising	10	8.2
Tutoring	8	6.6
Hosts	8	6.6
Board/Committee Work	7	5.7

*Percentages are based on the 122 agencies which involve seniors as volunteers. Percentages total more than 100% since respondents could give more than one answer to this question.

To discover why the agencies felt certain tasks were more or less appropriate, respondents were asked to identify those traits which they felt affected seniors' usefulness. Table II shows that the patience of the older volunteers is a particularly useful characteristic, as identified by 27.1% of those agencies involving seniors as volunteers. Other useful traits included the time they have available (given by 26.2%) and the high levels of commitment (21.3%).

Table II
Positive Traits of Senior Volunteers

Traits	n	%
Patience/Personality	33	27.1
Time Available	32	26.2
Commitment	26	21.3
Knowledge	16	13.1
Special Interest	11	9.0
N/A	4	3.3
Totals	122	100.0

The only "less useful" characteristic of senior volunteers identified by a significant percentage of respondents (34.4%) related to physical and health limitations.

Agencies identified several key advantages of involving seniors as volunteers. These included their reliability (given by 45.9%), the time they have available (38.5%), their personalities (26.2%) and the experience they bring to the volunteer job (23.0%).

Primary disadvantages of involving seniors as volunteers included health limitations (31.9%), limited availability (16.4%) (this is in contrast to the 38.5% who saw seniors' availability as an advantage), lack of flexibility (13.1%) and a reluctance to take responsibility (9.0%).

When asked what worked well when involving seniors as volunteers, respondents identified five key approaches: giving volunteers specific duties (given by 29.5%); involving seniors in the agency (21.3%); communicating effectively (12.3%); providing orientation (11.5%) and showing appreciation (7.4%). What did not work well included improperly matching the volunteer with the job (13.9%) and using high pressure (12.3%).

RECRUITING STRATEGIES

The recruiting strategies these agencies suggested for reaching seniors included media advertising (21.3%), working with seniors' networks (11.5%), making presentations (7.4%) and familiarizing seniors with the agencies (4.3%). Interestingly, only 1.4% identified personal recruitment as a suitable approach. This is in marked contrast to what seniors themselves say are the best ways to reach them. Lee and Burden (1991) report that a "personal approach from someone you know" would have the most

recruiting influence, followed by hearing a speaker and advertising in the papers. While general appeals through the media may seem easier or more cost effective, agencies' reliance on this method indicates a reluctance to adapt to the requirements voiced by seniors themselves.

OPTIONS FOR INCREASING SENIORS' INVOLVEMENT

This section responded to issues brought forward by the senior volunteers as barriers to volunteering (Lee and Burden, 1991). It sought to determine the extent to which agencies would modify their practices to better fill the needs of the potential senior volunteers.

Agencies were asked whether or not they were willing to consider providing each of five different options: transport, bus fare/mileage, flexible hours, vacations and job-sharing. Not unexpectedly, options which did not require additional funds were considered more possible than those which had a price tag attached. Table III shows that providing transport and bus fare/mileage are constrained by financial limitations. As well, many agencies pointed out that it is their policy not to provide transport for volunteers. Each of the other options, flexible hours, vacations and job sharing, were viewed much more favorably. Indeed, many agencies reported that they already provide these benefits to their volunteers.

Table III
Agency Willingness to Provide Various Options

Would agency consider providing:	Yes %	Perhaps %	No %
Transport	14.9	23.4	61.7
Bus Fare/Mileage	25.5	27.6	46.8
Flexible Hours	75.2	9.9	14.9
Job Sharing	78.7	9.9	11.4
Vacations	92.9	1.4	5.7

These findings complement what senior volunteers themselves are saying. As reported in Lee and Burden (1991), senior volunteers appear less interested in the financial sides of volunteering than with the flexibility which breaks and job sharing afford.

ROLE OF THE VOLUNTEER BUREAU

This final section asked agencies to identify the role they see the Volunteer Bureau playing in supporting older volunteers. It was quite clear to 41.8% of respondents that the major role for the Bureau is in matching volunteers with the agency needs. Secondary roles included providing training (12.1%) and recognition for volunteers (7.1%). The kind of training agencies wanted to see the Bureau provide was not specific or job-related. Rather, it focused on the role of volunteers, their rights and responsibilities, and a general orientation to volunteering.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The experiences and observations of the agencies reported here can benefit groups considering expansion of their complement of senior volunteers. Understanding what seniors can bring to the volunteer experience and what limitations one can reasonably expect will help in ensuring a suitable match between the individual and the volunteer job. As well, ensuring that the volunteer jobs are well defined and communicated and that volunteers are suitably oriented and recognized for what they provide will go a long way in making the volunteer experience work well for both the individual and the agency.

NOTE

This report is the third and final stage of research on the Seniors Volunteering Project. The results of all three stages have been used in the development of a practical manual for agencies to use in helping to recruit and meaningfully involve seniors as volunteers. To obtain a copy of the manual and its accompanying promotional kit, contact: The Victoria Volunteer Bureau, 211-620 View Street, Victoria, B.C., Canada, V8W 1J6.

REFERENCES

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