

Retirees as Volunteers: Evaluation of their Attitudes and Outlook

By Janet Stone and Edith Velmans

Introduction

Three years ago, an unusual approach to volunteerism was instituted in New York City. A project, called the Second Careers Volunteer Program, was set up to serve the vast pool of retirees whose skills and experience, coupled with new-found time and leisure, equipped them with unique resources which could be effectively put to use in the city's many government agencies and non-profit organizations. For New Yorkers, this was an innovative, unusual concept and, because of rapidly rising costs and a proliferation of both governmental and non-governmental agencies, an idea whose time had indeed come. Here was a means of mobilizing until now an untapped resource of competent and trained mature adult, many of whom were eager to donate their talent and time to the performance of necessary tasks in some meaningful project.

Rationale

The pilot program was a special project of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center, the

Stone, before her retirement, was an editor at Grolier Publishing Company. She joined the Second Careers Volunteer Program as associate director in January 1979 and initiated several projects for the program including preparation of materials for radio promotion and writing and editing a newsletter sent periodically to several hundred program participants. She is currently writing a handbook which will serve as a guide to the structuring of a Second Careers Volunteer Program.

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central agency for volunteer referral in New York City. For several years, the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center had been placing people of all ages in a wide variety of volunteer jobs. But many of those who applied were still working at paid employment and had limited time to give or had little specific experience and few professional skills to bring to the specialization job requests that were being received by the center in ever-increasing numbers. Active, mature people, retirees from business and professional life, seemed to offer a unique volunteer pool, and so, with a three-year grant from The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Second Careers Volunteer Program was organized with the specific goal of placing retirees with backgrounds in the law, medicine, accounting, business, teaching and many other fields in interesting, meaningful volunteer assignments.

Procedure

The first step was to set up an office with an administrative staff. Space was donated by the city, a director and part-time secretary were engaged, and within a short time five or six retirees joined the project in various capacities — as interviewers, public relations coordinators and job developers. The next steps involved accumulating a sizable file of specialized assignments and publicizing the need for volunteers within the growing community of retirees. Over 400 retirees have requested job interviews and have been referred to volunteer assignments since the program's inception. The job request files are growing in number and improving in quality of the assignments as the work of the project is becoming better known, and a steady stream of retirees continue to seek placement.

Recently, the program undertook a comprehensive study to obtain a precise evaluation of its work thus far. Toward this end, a

scientific questionnaire was devised and analyzed by co-author Edith Velmans, a gerontologist and associate director of the program. The questionnaire, to be completed anonymously, was sent to 171 retirees who had registered with the project since it opened its doors. It was detailed and somewhat complicated, and its completion required considerable time and thought. A surprisingly high number of volunteers took pains to fill out the forms, more than enough to provide a meaningful sample. The results of this study* offer illuminating insights not only into the areas of success and failure of the Second Careers Volunteer Program, however, in addition, many of the conclusions that were revealed can be extrapolated and applied to the broad field of volunteerism in general.

The 10-page questionnaire form was designed to obtain a wide range of information from the respondents. The first group of questions dealt with the volunteers' attitudes toward the program and the reasons for their participation. Respondents were asked to indicate their reactions on a 0-to-10 scale that ranged from Not At All Important to Very Important in response to certain statements (i.e., "I'm just interested in keeping busy," "I am interested in supporting my community"). The next group of questions related directly to the assignments offered to the volunteer — how rewarding the assignment was; whether adequate training was provided; whether the work of the volunteer was appreciated. Also examined were the volunteers' attitudes toward retirement in general — the reasons that led to retirement; what hazards retirement posed; whether retirement had been voluntary or mandatory. A final section was designed to obtain a personal profile of the volunteer in terms of age, sex, education, family situation, and interests.

Within a month from the date of mailing, 109 questionnaires were returned to the Second Careers Volunteer Program office, and of these 104 had been completed. The responses were then coded and analyzed by computer. The information contained in this article is based on conclusions and analysis of the Velmans Study.

Analysis of Data

By far the greatest number of men and women who sought volunteer assignments through the Second Careers Volunteer Program — about 80% of the total number of applicants — were white middle- and upper-class professionals. The program attracted few Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities. Six percent of the respondents were under 60 years of age; 58% were in their 60s, 34% were in their 70s, and 2% were over 80. In the 50 to 70 age group, women outnumbered men and in the 70 and older range, men outnumbered women, while overall the sex division was about equal. Questions

relating to marital status revealed that 45% of the applicants are married, 30% are widowed, and the remaining 25% are single, separated or divorced.

Women tend to seek volunteer assignments much sooner after their retirement date than do men. Most of the males involved in the study waited an average of four years before seeking volunteer work. These figures seem to suggest that women retirees prefer to continue with their work routines while men prefer to devote their time to hobbies or some type of part-time employment. Of all those still engaged in some part-time work, men outnumbered women three to one.

Several questions in the study related specifically to the retirees' reasons for becoming volunteers. For example, respondents were asked to state their reactions, on a 0-to-10 scale, to statements such as:

Following are different explanations that people have given us as reasons why they are participating in the Second Careers Volunteer Program. For each of these, please tell us — using the rating scales — how important these are to you personally as reasons why you have been participating.

Not At All	Somewhat	Very
Important	Important	Important
To Me	To Me	To Me

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

I'm just interested in keeping busy.

I am interested in supporting my community in an active way.

I am participating because I feel New York City is in trouble and I would like to help out in some way.

I have volunteered because I am interested in exploring new ways of life.

I am participating simply because I view this as an appropriate retirement activity.

I chose to volunteer because I am interested in meeting new and different people.

I chose to volunteer now, but would rather find paid work than volunteer work.

I am participating because I was bored with having little to do now that I am retired.

I chose to volunteer because I

want a new area of interest or would like to attain a new skill.

I am participating because I hope to find paid work through volunteering.

Other reasons (please specify):

The results indicate that volunteers were equally as concerned with "aiding the community" as they were with "seeking new meaning in living." A question relating to volunteer work as a possible means of re-entry into paid employment registered by far the lowest average importance, at levels substantially below "somewhat important." Broken down into sex differences, volunteering as "a way to keep busy" was more important to men than to women and slightly more men than women made up the small group of those who answered affirmatively the question about eventually finding paid work, while more women than men were interested in helping the community, but more men than women were interested in helping New York City. The age breakdown revealed that a majority of retirees over 70 chose volunteering as a way to keep busy, while those in the 50+ group placed primary importance on the desire to help the city and to develop new interests and social relationships.

Another group of questions related to general attitudes toward retirement and were measured by responses to the following statements:

The following statements all deal in some way with retirement. Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with each of them.

Strongly Disagree Uncertain Strongly Agree

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

For me personally, retirement was a crisis in my life.

I began planning for retirement quite a few years ago.

I view my retirement years as a time of great potential fulfillment and involvement.

A concern that I have about retirement is that I may be too idle and that the things that I do may be deemed by some as of little value.

Volunteer work for those who are retired can be seen by some as demeaning.

In our society, we tend to neglect and ignore those who are retired.

I retired because I did not want to work any more.

My retirement was mandatory, not voluntary.

In analyzing the responses in this area, Mrs. Velmans found that the strongest agreement as a whole appeared in answer to the statement "retirement is a time of great potential." She also found indications of some positive relationship between that statement and the following one — "I planned my retirement years ago," though differences in mean scores in these two statements suggest that although people might anticipate retirement, it does not necessarily follow that they will make concrete plans for it.

At least four times as many participants looked at retirement as a time of potential fulfillment as those who did not, while the number of respondents who feared idleness or regarded involvement in activities as being of little value was almost equal to those who did not. This measurement seems to indicate that looking forward to retirement does not necessarily exclude feelings of crisis. A significant minority was concerned that retirement would mean either idleness or considerable diminution of value.

Predictably, these general attitudes toward retirement bear a close relationship to the way in which retirees view the work of the Second Careers Volunteer Program specifically. Those people who view retirement as a time of potential fulfillment and who believe that they have something valuable to contribute are those who respond most positively to the work of the project. Conversely, those who see retirement as a time of problems and conflicts regard the program's goals with a greater amount of reservation and skepticism. The satisfaction factor is closely linked to how people view themselves in retirement.

One section of the questionnaire sought to elicit volunteers' evaluations of how the Second Careers Volunteer Program functioned in specific areas — how the staff performed at initial interviews; what kind of volunteer assignments were offered; how they appraised their most recent job assignments. For example, respondents were asked, "How would you describe the attitude of the staff when you first talked to them about a job assignment?" Over 71% indicated that they considered the attitude of the staff very helpful and cooperative; about 14% scored the staff between somewhat and very helpful; about 10% found them only somewhat helpful and one person (1%) was dissatisfied.

Other factors that bear a direct relationship to retirees' attitudes toward volunteering are age, physical health, and living arrangements. Those participants in the youngest age group (50 to 70) tended to be more critical of the program and more difficult to place in jobs they considered satisfying than those in the older groups. The most readily satisfied group were those in the best physical condition. People living with spouses were less enthusiastic than those living alone. This last finding might indicate that people with limited or no companionship not only have fewer options, but also have fewer responsibilities and more leisure time to give. Mrs. Velmans' findings showed that, in general, retired people are willing to spend a reasonable amount of time doing volunteer work, provided they feel that they are making a significant contribution. Given certain factors — proximity to home, pleasant atmosphere and the interest of work — retirees are willing to spend a large portion of their leisure time volunteering. A majority of the questionnaire respondents worked three or more days a week.

In appraising their most recent job assignments, the key factor seemed to be whether or not the participants felt that they were making a meaningful contribution, and not just performing "busy work." A significant number felt that what they were accomplishing was rewarding and useful to the agency and helped to decrease its workload. Whether the work was rewarding to the volunteers themselves was another matter, and one not so affirmatively stated.

In connection with your most recent voluntary job assignment, please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. If the statement does not apply to you, just circle the number 5.

Strongly Disagree Uncertain/ Doesn't Apply Strongly Agree

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The assignment was rewarding and useful to me personally.

The assignment was rewarding and useful to the agency that supplied me with work.

The location of the job assignment was important to me.

The job description I was given did not at all match the actual assignment I was asked to carry out.

I felt that I was not given adequate training to carry out the assignment asked of me.

Volunteers at the agency to which I was assigned are not treated as well as are paid employees.

At this job assignment, I felt I was contributing in a constructive and meaningful way to the work load.

At this job, I felt I was just being given "busy work" because I am retired and am a volunteer.

The job assignment ended up a burden for me, because of the personal costs involved in getting to and from work.

At this job, I feel I attained a second career and learned new skills.

In this assignment I had difficulty adjusting to a role of a subordinate.

In the assignment I was given, I did not really feel needed; only tolerated.

In this job, I wish I had received compensation for carfare or for my luncheon expenses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the in-depth study undertaken by the Second Careers Volunteer Program point up certain conclusions that are applicable to any project of a similar nature. There is no doubt that the caliber of volunteers such a program attracts is superior, and that city agencies and non-profit organizations could turn to these programs as a source of competent, willing, conscientious volunteers to fill assignments where certain specific skills are necessary. Realistically, no retiree volunteer program can be expected to place every applicant in the most appropriate assignment. But with proper interviewing, sensitive treatment, and good rapport with agency volunteer coordinators, a program focusing on placement of skilled retirees can be a valuable source of specialized assignments for volunteers and a valuable source of expertise for government agencies and non-profit organizations.

The role of the agency volunteer coordinator in providing accurate job descriptions cannot be overestimated. One of the serious hazards to any retiree volunteer program is that information supplied by the coordinator about available assignments is not specific enough and so sometimes misleading. Through repeated contacts with interviewers and field representatives of the retiree program, coordinators can request the specific skills their agencies need. In addition, coordinators can, through adequate orientation, on-the-job training and personal supervision, increase the potential of the volunteers

sent to them. The more accurate the job description and the more thorough the orientation to the agency and its need for the volunteers, the better satisfied will retirees be with their assignments and the agencies with the volunteers' performance.

Perhaps in no other area of volunteer work do attitudes — both of the volunteer and of the coordinator — play a greater role. Reference has been made to how volunteers' views of retirement affect their feelings about their assignments. Attitudes of coordinators toward these volunteers are no less important. A primary responsibility of coordinators is to impress upon salaried staff the fact that these volunteers will in no way threaten their positions. The Second Careers Volunteer Program referrals are to supplement not replace paid staff. This direct approach should go a long way toward removing feelings of antagonism in what might otherwise be a delicate situation. The atmosphere in which the volunteers work, the way in which they are regarded by their co-

workers, supervisor and by the coordinator, all of these factors play an enormously important role in the satisfaction volunteers find in their work and in the level of competence and performance the agencies can expect.

*"An Evaluation Study of Second Careers Volunteer Program (of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center) by Edith Velmans"
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