in which they work and for the staff with whom they work. Not all older persons will choose a one-to-one relationship with a client, but those who do become very articulate advocates for their client. Recognition, for them, comes from the client himself and his progress in the program.

Administration has been defined as the accomplishment of goals through the efforts of other persons. When older persons are enlisted as volunteers, their efforts can make a tremendous difference in the lives of the people with whom they work. Coordination of volunteer services then means that each older volunteer is placed where he can use his unique knowledge and skills and where he enjoys working. As RSVP spreads across the United States, the administration of programs involving older volunteers will tap the greatest unused pool of manpower we have in the United States today. It is up to us to find ways for everybody to help somebody!

The Older Volunteer: Expectations and Satisfactions

Anna L. Babic, MSW

The older segment of our population plays a very small role in the volunteer world, considering the number of elders there are and the resources they have to offer (Schindler, 1971).

A short time ago, the older volunteer was a volunteer who had grown old. This description is in sharp contrast with the attention now being directed to the recruitment of older persons to become volunteers so that the resources and skills they have developed over a lifetime may be used to alleviate some of the critical shortages which presently exist in the human services.

These comments are presented in order to stimulate directors of volunteers to consider recruitment of the elderly. The experiences may help others to make the most effective use of older volunteers so that both the older person and the agency can achieve maximum benefits.

The following observations are based upon close contact with a group of older volunteers (SERVE-in-Syracuse), upon observations and conversations with volunteers and staff in several of the original SERVE projects, and upon conclusions reached by the research findings of the SERVE project. Several factors concerning the observations should be kept in mind. First, all the older persons are involved in a group volunteer experience. Second, although many of the older persons had previous volunteer experience, for most this was their first exposure to an ongoing scheduled assignment. Consequently, these volunteers do not represent the typical stereotype—the middle-class, "professional" volunteer upon whom so many agencies rely. They represent an untapped resource for recruitment of volunteers.

Three major areas concerning older voluntarism are discussed: adjustment, role perception, and the cost of volunteering. These areas are by no means mutually exclusive, nor are they all-inclusive. They are chosen because they illustrate some over-all results of experiences with older volunteers. In some respects, they indicate that older persons are no different than others who volunteer, in other respects, differences do appear.

Adjustment

Many of the older volunteers are able to verbalize, in various ways, the fears which they experienced prior to entering the agency for the first time—this is especially true in mental health settings. When potential volunteers are given the opportunity to observe various possible assignments, they tend to choose areas where they are able to use skills they have developed throughout their lives. In other words, the apprehensions precipitated by the unfamiliar situation are reduced somewhat when the older person can perform a task in which he feels reasonably comfortable and competent.

The popularity of such assignments as: mending, furniture repair, and preparation of various
materials for use in agencies or institutions is testimony to this initial desire for security. Unfortunately, the most pressing needs in mental health settings frequently involve one-to-one relationships with patients. This situation can create a conflict between agency expectations and those of the older person. However, an interesting phenomenon has been noted by staff who have had the perspective of contact with older volunteers over a period of several years. Once the older person has adjusted to the situation and is comfortable in it, he frequently begins to observe other needs of the institution and will request a different assignment. This request often moves toward a person-to-person relationship. The pace of movement, of course, depends upon the individual. A director of volunteers who is sensitive to this need of the older volunteer and who is aware of potential progression can restrain a natural impulse to manipulate the volunteer toward an initial person-to-person assignment. In this manner, by delaying agency gratification and consciously emphasizing volunteer gratification, both parties can ultimately achieve mutually satisfying results.

It should be remembered that this progression is by no means universal—it is a pattern which has been noted. The process can be encouraged and expedited by staff, especially within the context of on-going orientation and on-the-job training. For example, staff members of the institution can offer the volunteers who repair toys an opportunity to deliver them to the patients who will use them. Or, a staff member who works with the patients can describe his operation (including volunteer needs) and can extend an invitation for the volunteers to visit the area.

On-going, informal orientation and training has been found to be the most useful method for satisfactory retention of the older volunteer. In general, formal training sessions tend to intimidate the elderly (Lebel & Lebel, 1971)—practical, on-going sessions concurrent with volunteer experience seem to be most effective.

Role Perception
The degree of comfort felt by the volunteer and an opportunity for progression to more challenging assignments, supplemented by on-going training sessions all contribute to the development of the older volunteer's perception of his role. Older volunteers appear to be happiest when they can move quickly into an assignment. Perhaps this is another reason they tend to choose task-oriented initial assignments. It is much easier to evaluate accomplishments in terms of a stack of mended clothing than it is to measure the tedious process of developing a relationship with a patient. The work-output frame of reference is retained by the older volunteer and comes to light when many of them [in institutions where lunch is provided for volunteers] report that, initially, they worried about the state "wasting money," i.e., cost of lunch. This concern indicates their low level of perception about the relationship between the value of their voluntary effort and its relationship to the needs of the institution. Once again, over a period of time, this contribution becomes more obvious to the volunteer and he views the situation from a totally different perspective—with respect to both himself and the institution.

These paraphrased comments by "veteran" volunteers reflect their sense of accomplishment, confidence, and self-worth:

—My arthritis doesn't bother me on Thursday!
—"My" patient is looking forward to my appearance—I can't disappoint him.
—My [health] problems are insignificant, compared to those of the patients I work with.

In summary, the adjustment and role perception of the older volunteer are directly related to the on-going process of training. Therefore, a meaningful training process is most effective when it is aligned with the volunteer's development, rather than one in which the volunteer is pulled along at someone else's predetermined pace.

It is impossible to cover all parts of the volunteer operation in this brief overview (for a comprehensive description of all aspects of working with older volunteers, see Community Service Society, 1971). The "line" supervisor of the volunteer has a vital function. The supervisor's attitude, about volunteers in general and about older persons in particular, can enhance the experience, or can destroy it. Directors of volunteers who prepare line staff so that the older volunteer is welcomed and has specific assignments are much more effective. Line staff members are also on-the-spot and can help the volunteer to see his contribution in relation to the needs of the institution.

The Cost of Volunteering
The older persons to whom these observations apply are not wealthy. They are of moderate or
low-income. They are "comfortable" because they have learned to manage with their available resources. It is, therefore, unrealistic to expect them to provide out-of-pocket expenses, in addition to assuming responsibility for contributing time and energy. Therefore, successful recruitment and retention of older volunteers is contingent upon consideration of methods to meet the hidden costs of volunteering—specifically, expenses for transportation, meals, and (if necessary) uniforms.

Many of these older volunteers flatly state that they would not be able to participate if they had to depend upon public transportation—cost, transfers, time spent on the bus—are all cited. Conversely, others have said that their prime motivation, initially, was that they would receive a hot lunch. These costs to the volunteer must be anticipated and met.

The peripheral effects of providing services of this type—the ego-strengthening to the volunteer, the nutritional and social value represented by meals, and the creation of new social opportunities for the elderly—all should enter into the total framework of planning for expanding volunteer opportunities for older persons.

RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) is now a division of the newly-created ACTION agency in Washington. RSVP provides funds for the costs of volunteering, so that more and more older persons can be encouraged to contribute services to their community. State Offices on Aging and Action can provide specific information about RSVP.

Benefits to the Institution

A successful volunteer experience can be of great benefit to the institution. Obviously, many on-going needs of the institution will be met more adequately. However, the older volunteer is also a potential public relations person. The concept of the elderly volunteer is a relatively new one, and volunteers are questioned by their friends and relatives. The volunteers report that they have had to respond to comments of this sort:

—Why do you go there? (specifically addressed to a state mental hospital placement.)
—You are taking a job away from someone.
—If you like it so much, why don’t you get a job there? Why are you volunteering?

Older volunteers have learned to respond to these reactions. Their answers help others to understand the institution, to better grasp the supplementary supports represented by the volunteer’s efforts, and to perceive the satisfactions experienced by the older person when he has an opportunity to contribute. The public relations element can be summarized best by an older volunteer who proudly announced: “We don’t expect pay because the job which we do is priceless.”

The Group Experience

The fact that these observations are based upon experiences with groups of older volunteers was mentioned earlier. The effects of group participation have been minimized, up to this point, so that directors of volunteer services do not get the impression that group involvement is a prerequisite to the use of older volunteers. However, there are some unique aspects to a group approach which must be noted, albeit briefly. First and foremost is the peer support the group provides for older persons with minimal previous volunteer experience. Everyone shares this bond of inexperience; if some members are "veteran volunteers," the fact that all members are elderly becomes the common denominator. The group also provides an opportunity to develop new friendships.

For the sponsoring institution, the group can decrease some of the administrative time devoted to placement, orientation, and in-service training. Individual interviews and conferences can never be eliminated, but many communications can be expedited through group meetings. Problems, as well, tend to be more easily discussed when they are shared with peers; countless times, support for insecure members has helped to allay anxieties.

The final observation about the value of the group approach has been the firm conviction that the older volunteers should have a staff member who is the official representative of SERVE. The staff person’s role varies. It is not designed to interfere with the role of the official institutional staff representative. The SERVE staff person may be the advocate for the older volunteer; he may follow-up on volunteers who drop out; he may explore new placement opportunities in the community; he may recruit additional volunteers. In executing any, or all, of these functions the staff person helps to develop group identity and group cohesion.

Summary

Experiences with these groups of older volunteers, especially those in the thoroughly-
researched pilot project, dispel several apprehensions about older volunteers.

First, older persons of lower income groups, with no previous volunteer experience, can be recruited as volunteers and they can become effective in a variety of institutional settings.

Second, older volunteers are capable of assuming volunteer responsibilities on an ongoing basis. As noted earlier, health problems do not affect attendance, for the volunteer experience sometimes causes them to forget about, or ignore, chronic impairments.

Third, the retention rate of volunteers in the pilot project has been excellent.

... 70 per cent of the 642 volunteers who participated in the program since its inception were still serving regularly at the close of the [3-year] demonstration period. Moreover, attendance was excellent (Community Service Society, 1971).

Fourth, the volunteers over age 65 were as consistent in attendance and performance as were those in the 55-65 age group.

This discussion has described several factors which are essential in the development of a program of volunteer service opportunities for the elderly. These factors are defined as: adjustment, role perception, and cost of volunteering.

The effective involvement of older volunteers requires a complex interplay of components, many of which do not differ from those of other volunteer programs. The projects upon which these observations are based have demonstrated that there are a variety of service opportunities for older volunteers. Directors of volunteer programs are therefore encouraged to consider older persons as potential recruits because, in many communities, the elderly truly represent a rich, but frequently overlooked, human resource.

References


SERVE: A Case Illustration of Older Volunteers in a Psychiatric Setting

Janet S. Sainer, MSW,1 and Florence K. Kallan, MSW2

Community Service Society of New York decided in 1966 to sponsor a 3-year research and demonstration project on Staten Island. During this period SERVE (Serve and Enrich Retirement by Volunteer Experience) was supported in part by a grant from the Administration on Aging, Social and Rehabilitation Service, US Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, supplemented by private foundations and individuals. Since January, 1970 SERVE on Staten Island has been continued by the Community Service Society.

From its inception SERVE focused on providing an opportunity to persons of retirement age to make constructive use of their time, talents, and lifetime of experience through volunteer activities thereby giving them a renewed sense of satisfaction and purpose in life. In addition, it was hoped that the constructive use of this tremendous untapped manpower resource would help meet the many volunteer needs of community agencies and organizations.

SERVE-in-New-York-State

The success of SERVE on Staten Island led the Community Service Society in 1969 to initiate SERVE-in-New-York-State, under a Title III grant from the New York State Office for the Aging. SERVE-in-New-York-State staff provides technical assistance and consultation to communities throughout the state interested in developing older volunteer programs.

As of January, 1972, SERVE programs were operating in 21 counties throughout New York...