

ABSTRACT

The Foster Grandparent Program was a federal initiative established in 1965. Throughout the years of program operation, there has been no systematic analysis of the entry level characteristics of potential volunteers. This longitudinal analysis of program volunteers supports the need for on-going research in the management of volunteer resources.

A Case for Research: Understanding the Characteristics of Potential Volunteers

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism is often considered an extension of civic responsibility. Blood drives, church bazaars, hospices, and soup kitchens are efforts familiar to most Americans. As early as 1662, Boston's first settlement houses were opened by volunteers. Recently Hurricane Andrew and the Mid-West floods proved that volunteers generously respond when tragedies occur. A majority of Americans report they give to charity or volunteer because "those with more should help those with less" (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1990). It has been a social expectation that needed volunteers respond to the call.

The American culture, however, is experiencing cycles of rapid change. Women, the traditional source of volunteer support, are entering the work force in increasing numbers. Single-parent families are more prevalent, minority cultures are more visible, our society is aging. These social changes create new realities for the management of volunteer resources. It is more problematic to assume a typical volunteer will be available when needs develop. Because administrators need to anticipate these changes, research becomes a critical component of program management. As characteristics of available volunteers change, managers may need to alter administrative initia-

tives, goals, and objectives. This study examined some specific characteristics of new volunteers who enrolled in Foster Grandparent Programs. The time frame for the study was 1980–1990. Although the study is specific to older volunteers, the repercussions for volunteer management are clear. Agencies dependent on volunteer support must maintain congruence between the abilities of the volunteers and the selection of tasks. Research can no longer be viewed as expendable. It is a critical component of program management.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was devised to access information describing entry level characteristics of Foster Grandparent volunteers. The survey instrument, using straightforward, closed-end questions, requested data from a random sample of 35 Foster Grandparent Programs. Information was obtained on 610 volunteers. The settings for the programs were selected from a federally prepared listing of all existing Foster Grandparent Programs. There is a broad data base available for analysis because the program operates on a national basis and has standardized age and income requirements. Information was requested on the age, gender, education level, literacy, and

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disabilities of new volunteers. The general approach to the data analysis was to provide cross-sectional data on the programs for 1980, 1984, 1988 and 1990, to summarize program variables over this period and to analyze longitudinal changes in program variables. The criterion for statistical significance was set at .05 so that the probability that an observed effect actually occurred by chance was less than 5%. The expectation was that the analysis would help to identify senior citizens most likely to pursue involvement in these programs.

SURVEY RESULTS

The age of the volunteers was significantly different among the four time periods. A student Neuman-Keuls test indicated that the volunteers who enrolled in 1988 and 1990 were significantly older than the volunteer enrolling in 1980 and 1984. The results indicated a significant linear trend with the age of incoming volunteers increasing over time since 1980. In 1980, the oldest newly enrolled volunteer was 77 years of age. By 1990, the oldest newly enrolled volunteer was 87.

The education data were more difficult to interpret. Even though monthly in-service training is a federal requirement, some programs never requested education data from volunteers. Other projects gave volunteers who had completed GEDs credit for "4 years of high school education." The results demonstrated a large discrepancy in the education levels of new volunteers. There were volunteers who had completed only 3-4 years of formal education. Very few volunteers had received any college education. In 1980, the mean was 8.8 years of education. In 1990, the mean was 10 years, but that figure was definitely inflated by the GED credits. The surveyed population did not meet the median level of education, twelve years, which is found among the elderly as a whole (U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1990). It was not possible to obtain detailed information about literacy skills because pro-

ject directors found it difficult to judge the literacy levels of volunteers. Since there is no single standard currently used to define functional literacy, the difficulty of making such an assessment was realistic. However, literacy problems could be expected from a cohort of low-income seniors.

The gender distribution of the volunteers differed significantly over time and demonstrated a significant increase in female participation. This feminization of the Foster Grandparent Program occurred in spite of the fact that the programs were nationally encouraged, especially in 1988, to significantly increase male participation. In 1980, 80.9% of the program participants were female. By 1990, 92.3% of the program participants were female.

Finally, the percentage of volunteers who were experiencing disabilities demonstrated a highly significant increase in 1990. In 1980, 7% of the new volunteers had specific disabilities. By 1990, project directors reported that 19.6% of the new volunteers had serious disabilities. In annual reports filed with ACTION, project directors attempt to estimate the number of enrolled volunteers who have handicapping conditions. In 1989 and 1990, programs received training in the legal issues of accessibility and were encouraged to increase sensitization to handicapped accessibility issues.

DISCUSSION

The information obtained from this study is important to project directors. When the characteristics of potential volunteers are defined and anticipated, volunteer management issues such as recruitment, retirement, training, and termination can be better analyzed. Such research also helps project directors examine new initiatives for program involvement. At the time of this study, many Foster Grandparent Program directors were attempting to implement new program initiatives. Most of those initiatives were developed on a federal level

and encouraged volunteer placements in areas such as drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, child abuse and neglect (ACTION, 1989). As mentioned earlier, there was also encouragement to increase the numbers of men enrolled in Foster Grandparent Programs.

The information gained from the study helped structure a framework for resolving those management issues. An older corps of volunteers could certainly suggest a growing emphasis on personnel issues such as recruitment, retirement and termination. Although the literature indicates that older persons are generally healthier than in past generations, the prevalence of long-term chronic diseases and disabling conditions still rises exponentially with age. Research substantiates that the retirement or termination of volunteers is a difficult issue for many project directors (Cook, 1992). That same study indicated that volunteers often did not want to retire and that health concerns forced the issue. As more volunteers retire, project directors can expect to increase the amount of time recruiting replacements. Recruitment efforts would be more efficient if project directors had a clear profile of those persons most likely to enter the program.

The new emphasis areas suggested for volunteer involvement could create some unexpected challenges for an increasingly older corps of volunteers. That group of volunteers might have less experience and less confidence in areas such as drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse or juvenile delinquency. The increases in both age and disability would suggest some difficulties with physically demanding placements as well as greater need for accessible transportation. Because the Foster Grandparent Program is restricted to low-income individuals and because women statistically share a much larger burden of poverty, the initiative to increase male volunteers could expect minimal success. Finally, the literacy/education level of the volunteers could af-

fect the development of training materials and job descriptions. It would be important, especially in the new program areas requiring a high level of skill, to assure that adequate education and support be available.

SUMMARY

As volunteer managers, project directors often stress the importance of matching the talents and abilities of volunteers with appropriate placements. Some placements are better able to cope with disabilities, absences, reduced levels of education and other special needs. When project directors lack understanding of the needs and characteristics of volunteers, initiatives for service will be developed but the volunteer resources to complete the job might be unavailable.

This study underscores the importance of both research and strategic planning in the field of volunteerism. Volunteerism has long been deemed the "methodology for getting things done" (Ellis and Noyes, 1990). But patterns of volunteerism are changing. When Americans select volunteer activities, they are increasingly faced with the need to juggle conflicting values. The allocation of time becomes a bigger issue. Volunteers are showing a greater reluctance to make long-term commitments to a single volunteer activity. There is some suggestion that although increases have been reported in the average number of hours volunteered on a weekly basis, there is decreased volunteerism among women, singles, youth volunteers, college graduates, and those earning between \$20-\$40,000 per year (American Red Cross, 1988). Project directors need to understand how those changes will be evidenced in their specific programs.

As the search for potential volunteers intensifies, volunteer programs may change recruitment and marketing strategies. "Business as usual" may be a technique of the past. Volunteer managers can expect increased pressure to expand involvement with mandated volunteer

efforts (community service placements for educational course-work requirements). Adequate research increases the efficiency of the planning process.

The 10-year study of entry-level characteristics among Foster Grandparents was a road map. It indicated likely detours and suggested the need for possible program adjustments. It provided a framework for strategic planning. As a result, some programs will be able to more successfully match potential volunteers with appropriate tasks.

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