Maximizing Elder Volunteerism and Service: Access, Incentives, and Facilitation

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Volunteering or service among older adults is associated with a range of positive outcomes including better health, greater life satisfaction, and extended longevity (Morrow-Howell, 2000; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999; Oman, Thoresen, & McMahon, 1999; Van Willigen, 2000). Volunteering provides older adults with an opportunity for personal growth as well as a sense of purpose and productivity in later life (Morrow-Howell, Kinnevy, & Mann, 1999; Bundens & Bressler, 2002). Their actions are also associated with positive outcomes for those who are served (Wheeler, Gorey, & Greenblatt, 1998).

U.S. Census projections indicate that more than one third of Americans will be over the age of 50 by 2020 (Prisuta, 2004). They are expected to be better educated and have longer and healthier lives than previous generations (Gerteis, Winston, Stanton, Moses, Grodner Mendoza, & Roberts, 2004); hence productive, active engagement in later life is more likely. Their participation in volunteerism may be predicated on organizational efforts targeted specifically to the creation of volunteer opportunities and management practices for older adults (Kovacs & Black, 1999).

We apply an institutional perspective to the study of later-life volunteering (Hinterlong, McBride, Tang, & Danso, in press; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, Tang, Thirupathy, & Nagchoudhuri, 2003). This perspective focuses on the link between institutional capacity to host volunteer roles and individual capacity. How can volunteer opportunities be made available such that older adults have access and incentives for participation, and information and facilitation for role performance? This article summarizes results of a two-phase project on institutional capacity for elder service.

The first phase included telephone interviews with 22 volunteer administrators of nonprofit organizations that host older volunteers (Morrow-Howell et al., 2003). Volunteer administrators report a range of strategies to recruit and retain older volunteers. The top recruitment strategies include word-of-mouth, other agency referrals, and targeted solicitations through letters or newspaper ads. In terms of role facilitation, a majority of administrators note a commitment to role accommodation and facilitation, e.g., variation in hours, supports for those with physical dis-

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abilities, and training. This research note reports on findings from the second phase of the project, which assessed older adults' perceptions of volunteer roles and institutional efforts in recruitment and retention.

METHODS

Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 43 older volunteers from 13 organizations in the metropolitan St. Louis area. The volunteer administrators, who participated in the first phase of the study, identified possible respondents who were 60 years of age or older with at least one year of volunteer experience. Focus group sessions ranged from 60 minutes to 90 minutes, consisting of seven to 14 people. The focus group sessions were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded separately by two coders. A hierarchical coding structure was developed with major codes reflecting the institutional perspective. The codes and quotes were analyzed for key themes. Divergent perspectives and relationships were noted, and the coding scheme was revised and condensed. Counts were developed for each theme, and applicable quotes were selected as examples.

FINDINGS

The findings are categorized according to access and information regarding volunteer roles, incentives to begin and continue volunteering, and facilitation for role performance. Overall, findings suggest that older volunteers may perceive informal strategies for recruitment and retention as more important than formal ones.

Access and Information

Access pertains to role requirements and a person's eligibility and ability to fill the role as well as how information about the role reaches potential volunteers. The likelihood of seeking volunteer opportunities is influenced by prior familiarity with the organization or the organization's cause (n=18). This familiarity developed from having been clients in the past or having relatives who were clients of the organization. As one respondent stated,

Many years ago an organization like

NAMI [National Alliance for the Mentally Ill] in New Jersey came to my rescue when I desperately needed help. And about 10 years ago I was walking down the street and I saw the NAMI sign and I wandered in.

Another respondent reports,

I love kids, and I was a pediatric nurse before I retired at 55. So when I was looking for a place to volunteer, it led me right here to Cardinal Glennon [children's hospital].

Older adults often learned of volunteer roles through family members or friends (n=13) who were involved with the organization. To a lesser extent, respondents also gained access to volunteer roles through formal volunteer recruitment efforts such as advertisements (n=7).

Incentives

Incentives include the rewards or perceived benefits possible through the volunteer role. Respondents report personal motivations for seeking volunteer roles, including interest in the cause (n=5) and volunteering overall (n=12). The underlying sentiment was that volunteering helped them ease into their later-life transitions. When asked about possible formal incentives such as training or stipends, respondents indicated that their decision to continue volunteering had more to do with personal satisfaction and quality of the volunteer experience. In addition, incentive to continue volunteering was influenced by the support received from the organization. Respondents (n=17) emphasized that responsiveness and inclusion in decision-making greatly affected their motivation to continue volunteering. One respondent stated that, "You get the satisfaction and motivation by helping others. But our organization is like a family... We are treated as volunteers and we are treated as part of a team."

Facilitation

Facilitation refers to supports or flexibility for role performance offered by the organiza-

tion. Respondents focused on respect and inclusion in decision-making (n=17), verbal appreciation by staff and clients (n=16), and flexibility in task assignment and willingness to allow breaks (n=9). A few discussed the role and importance of training (n=7). Appreciation for respect and inclusion was expressed by this respondent: "They're willing, if I come up with an idea, requiring purchase of something… I've gotten nothing but a positive response, like, 'Let's go with it… or let's do this, it's a good idea.'" In regard to flexibility, one respondent stated that, "If someone is not able to do the [hospice] caregiving at homes, there are other options. There's people that come in who can help in the office."

Some respondents indicated that the organizations were particularly cognizant of the increasing age and growing health limitations of the volunteers, and made special efforts to accommodate their needs. One respondent stated, "I don't drive because of my eyes. They even come and pick me up and take me home. I wanted to quit when they moved, because it would be too far to walk and this woman said, 'We'll always pick you up and take you home.' And besides, they have luncheons and get-togethers and things like that [which make her want to continue volunteering]." Related to the social aspect of volunteerism, several respondents said they like open work environments and shared workspace, where they can be with other volunteers, staff, and clients.

DISCUSSION

While implications from this study should be drawn with caution, given method limitations and the small sample size, several key points are worth noting for future volunteer management research. Findings from this study emphasize consideration of unique volunteer recruitment and retention practices for older adults. Given their social networks, life experience, expertise, and interests, older adults' access to volunteer roles, their feelings about the instrumental value of volunteering, and role performance may be different than young adults' (Morrow-Howell & Tang,

2004).

Older adults may be more likely to access volunteer roles through informal means. This may require that organizations put their formal efforts into facilitation of informal outreach methods, like training and encouraging current clients, family members, and volunteers to recruit others. Recruitment materials may need to reflect this informal recruiting strategy. Recruitment may benefit from inclusion of messages that older adults consider to be motivating. Information about the role may need to emphasize the mission of the organization and how the volunteers' efforts will support it. When older adults enter the "volunteering marketplace" seeking role replacement, it may also be important to emphasize respect of their experience and their inclusion in agency processes.

These findings suggest that accommodation and flexibility facilitate sustained volunteerism by older adult volunteers. Volunteer administrators may need to evaluate volunteer functioning at the beginning of and throughout their task assignment. Task assignment may need to change, depending on the volunteer's functional level, or additional supports may be needed, e.g., transportation. Obviously, these supports beg consideration of costs, but so does loss of a skilled, trained volunteer. Older adults in this study also discussed "facilitators," such as social opportunities and verbal appreciation for contributions, as motivators. These are low-cost strategies that may have high payoffs.

In conclusion, utilizing older adults as volunteers may require a unique approach. Further research should study effective recruitment and retention strategies for older volunteers, so that volunteer administrators can focus their efforts. These findings provide fodder for hypothesis development and theory building, emphasizing access, incentives, and facilitation.

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