Recruiting Older Volunteers

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According to surveys on volunteering, over the last 25 years there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers and percentages of older people who volunteer—possibly as much as a fourfold increase—from about 11 percent in 1965 to more than 40 percent in 1990. Even so, we need to ask: Is it possible to mobilize a much larger and more effective volunteer force among the older population? A recent survey found that over 15 million older persons in the United States do volunteer work but there are another 14 million who would be "willing to volunteer if they were asked" (Marriott, 1991). A number of studies have found, in fact, that a major reason many older people give for not volunteering is that no one asked them!

Recently, in working on a research project, I was interviewing a 70-year-old woman who told me: "I want to be of service." She had worked as a nurse for most of her life. After retiring, she went to graduate school and earned a master's degree in anthropology. She is unable to walk because of arthritis and several operations on her spine, but she gets around in a wheelchair. She reads a lot (especially books in anthropology); she paints; and she spends time with old and new friends.

"It's not that I have nothing to do," she said, "but I think I have something to give. I'd like to tutor children. . . ." She tried calling several agencies in the small town where she lives, but, so far, no organization has offered her a position as a volunteer.

How many retirees are like the woman anthropologist I met—eager to volunteer but frustrated in their efforts? There is no doubt that a lot has been accomplished in developing programs for older volunteers. But it seems that much more could be done.

THE OLDER VOLUNTEERS PROJECT

This workshop is based on our book, *Older Volunteers: A Guide to Research and Practice,* by Lucy Rose Fischer and Kay Banister Schaffer (Sage, 1993). *Older Volunteers* is intended to bridge the gap between research and practice by making research on older volunteers accessible to practitioners who work with and develop policies concerning older volunteers.

For this book, we conducted a comprehensive review of research on recruiting, retaining and working with older volunteers and a synthesis of "best practices" from case studies of exemplary volunteer programs. Although there are numerous "handbooks" on volunteering, they are al-

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most never based on research. Conversely, research conducted by social scientists is rarely accessible to practitioners who work with volunteers. *Older Volunteers* gives volunteer coordinators a central source for information on the effectiveness of various types of programs for recruiting and working with older volunteers.

We reviewed about 350 articles and monographs for this project, including about 125 articles specifically on older volunteers. We supplemented the literature review with 57 case studies of exemplary and innovative programs that work with older volunteers. The sample of volunteer programs was identified by national experts on volunteerism and included a diverse set of volunteer programs, including: cultural, health, social welfare, civic, counseling, educational, community action, religious, intergenerational, services for the elderly, fund raising, and corporate retiree programs.

Older Volunteers addresses a number of practical issues of interest to those working with volunteers, such as: What motivates people to do different kinds of volunteer work? What are the most effective ways of maintaining the commitment of volunteers? What problems are confronted in working with volunteers, especially older volunteers, and what are the solutions to these problems? What are the special issues in recruiting and working with older minority volunteers? How can organizations avoid exploiting older volunteers?

WHO VOLUNTEERS—AND WHY?

Is it possible to predict who will volunteer? Why do some people help and volunteer more than others? Several demographic factors can help to predict who volunteers. People with more education, higher incomes, a higher occupational status, and better health are more likely to volunteer than other people. There also seems to be an "altruistic" personality— that is, that some people are inclined to be helpers because of their moral character, their capacity for empathy, and their particular personality traits.

But demographic or personality factors do not give a complete explanation for when or why people volunteer. There are also situational factors. Certain circumstances encourage and inspire helping behavior—so that; the more favorable the social conditions, the larger the numbers of people who would be inclined to help and volunteer.

Imagine the following scene:

It is evening and you are taking a walk in your neighborhood. You look up and see a woman lying in the road. She seems to have been hit by a car. In the moonlight, you think you notice blood staining the road, and she seems to be moaning in pain. It is a quiet neighborhood and, although there are lights on in some of the houses, you see no one else on the street. What do you do?

And here is another scene:

In the early evening, you are walking along a city street. The street glitters with neon lights, and there are many restaurants and a few shops open. You pass a woman and a child, squatting in the doorway of a shop. They are both dirty and shabbily dressed. An old blanket and a pair of adult-sized crutches are lying on the cement sidewalk beside them. The woman, looking up at you, asks for money. "We need money to eat," she says. What do you do?

These are both situations in which an individual might help someone in need. But they seem quite different. Emotionally, morally, and legally, they elicit different levels of responsibility. It is likely that your response to these two scenes is not the same.

In the first situation, it is hard to imagine not helping. In fact, to simply notice and walk on might be considered, morally if not legally, as negligence since there is no assurance that someone else would help and the woman could die. Interestingly, the woman and child in the second vignette may also be in peril. Presumably, they are lacking a basic necessity— food— without which they also could die. Even so, many people who pass them probably will turn away and give nothing.

Experts on altruism contrast two kinds of conditions that elicit helping behavior: strong versus weak situations. In "strong situations," the following conditions apply:

- There is a pressing need.
- There is no alternative source of help.
- There is a strong likelihood of a direct and positive impact.

All of these conditions are met by the first scenario; they are arguable in the second. In the case of the woman lying injured on a lonely street, the vulnerability is clear: there is an ostensible risk of immediate death. Since the street seems to be empty, there is no one else to take responsibility for this woman's life. There is also a strong probability that intervention by a passerby will be useful—at the very least, an ambulance can be called. Moreover, what is called for is a one-time service. The passerby has no reason to suppose that, after this one act, he/she will be called upon for any ongoing responsibility or rescue service. A quick and spontaneous "altruistic calculus" will show that the cost (to the helper) is relatively modest, while the benefit (to the woman on the street) is substantial.

With the situation of the woman begging on the street, the first condition is partially met: the woman asking for help is vulnerable and in need. Even so, the need is not so immediate that she would actually die if the passerby does not help her. In fact, one of the most critical factors here is the presence of other alternative sources of help. Numerous studies of the "bystander effect" have shown that the number of people nearby strongly affects the choice to help or not. In this case, a passerby can rationalize that there are many others on the street to give her money and/or there are other sources of help (government funds and private charities) and/or perhaps she could help herself (get a job). There is, finally, the issue of the impact of help. At best, the benefit will be temporary. In a short while, this same woman and child will again need money

for food. Moreover, donating to these two people will make virtually no dent in the overwhelming problem of hungry and homeless people in our cities.

Regular volunteer work for organizations is more likely to approximate a "weak" than a "strong" helping condition. In regular volunteering, there is more likely to be a muted than a critical need for help. In many kinds of volunteer work, the impact is subtle rather than obvious. And, most important, it is very rare for a potential volunteer to believe that he/she is indispensable for a needed and necessary service to be provided.

Even if regular volunteering constitutes a relatively "weak" helping situation, there are still matters of degree. For example, sometimes potential volunteers offer unique contributions, so that alternative sources of help either are not available or could not be nearly as effective. Often there are immediate and critical needs for help (for AIDS patients, teenagers using drugs, elderly at risk of losing their independence, and so forth).

A very important factor is the probable impact of a volunteer's efforts. A number of studies have shown that people are more likely to help if they feel competent and effective. The "warm afterglow of success" reinforces helping behavior, while failure and frustration make people want to quit. All volunteers—including older volunteers—do not want to waste their time.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

Based on our research review, we have identified five principles of recruitment:

1. Some people are more likely to volunteer than others and, therefore, are easier to recruit.
2. Certain social conditions predispose people to volunteer: if there is a pressing need, no alternative source of help, and a likelihood that help will have a direct and positive impact, people are more likely to volunteer.

3. The decision to volunteer is based on an analysis of the costs and the benefits.

4. People are attracted to particular opportunities and causes, not to volunteering in the abstract.

5. People are more willing to volunteer for high status than low status organizations.

These five principles of recruitment offer a way to understand the diverse conditions of recruitment. In developing a recruitment strategy for a particular volunteer program, the way each principle applies to a particular program is assessed first. Each of these principles has implications for how to recruit:

1. *Some people are more inclined to volunteer than others and, therefore, are easier to recruit.* Both demographic and personality factors influence recruitment. People who have resources (high income, a high level of education, good health, and so forth) are more likely to volunteer than their counterparts. People who volunteer tend to be relatively active, socially involved, empathetic and self confident. People are more likely to volunteer if they have an "altruistic identity." To recruit older volunteers from these "natural" markets, we suggest working through the organizations to which they belong—such as churches, senior centers, unions, corporations, and civic societies. With "difficult" target markets, the focus needs to be on overcoming the barriers or diminishing the costs of volunteering.

2. *People are most likely to volunteer their help under conditions of a "strong" helping situation—that is, if there is a pressing need, no alternative source of help, and a likelihood that their help will have a direct and positive impact.* Volunteer organizations can emphasize one or more of these conditions—for example, by showing that particular volunteers are in a unique position to help. A critical social factor is the volunteer's assess-

ment of how much "good" will be accomplished. Older volunteers, like all volunteers, do not want to waste their efforts and time. Evaluations of volunteer programs can be useful for providing feedback to volunteers on the impact of their work.

3. *The decision to volunteer is based on an analysis of the costs and the benefits.* The "costs" include such factors as the time expended (especially the time lost from other potential activities) and the inconvenience. The "benefits" refer to the gains both to self and others. The cost–benefit analysis in the decision to volunteer is different for older and younger persons, at least in some ways. For example, retired persons, typically, do not forego salaried hours when they volunteer. Even so, there are other costs associated with age. For instance, many older persons have difficulty with night driving, and the cost of participating in a volunteer program during evening hours may seem insurmountable.

The potential benefits from volunteering also differ somewhat with age. Older volunteers are attracted to volunteering as an opportunity for learning, personal growth, and socialization but tend to have little interest in volunteering for the sake of enhancing or developing their careers. Volunteer programs that wish to attract older persons, rather than younger volunteers, need to reduce the "costs" or barriers for older persons rather than utilitarian ends for the volunteer.

4. *People are attracted to particular opportunities and causes, not to volunteering in the abstract.* Both personal ties and ideology are important in the decision to volunteer. The process of recruitment, therefore, is a process of matching volunteers with appropriate programs and positions. When volunteers are recruited carefully and selectively, they are more likely to be involved, active and committed to their voluntary organizations.

5. *People are more willing to volunteer for high status than low status organizations.* High status volunteer organizations have the following characteristics: the organization is very visible in the community and is considered prestigious; the members are well educated, upper class, and/or male; and the organization is well funded. These features are interrelated. There is a circular effect associated with status: high status individuals are attracted by high status organizations, and vice versa. High status organizations typically have no problems in recruiting volunteers. A volunteer organization can improve its status in the following ways: by making its program more visible in the community; by joining coalitions with higher status organizations; by developing community leadership roles both for the organization and for individual members; by suggesting that its membership is "selective" so that not just anyone can join; and by developing symbols of membership, such as special insignia and ceremonies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OLDER VOLUNTEERS

There has been an "age revolution" in American society. Life expectancy has increased dramatically, people are retiring at earlier ages and Americans are spending an increasing portion of their lives in their post-retirement years. Moreover, older people today have more resources than previous generations: they are healthier into older ages, more educated and less likely to be very poor. A number of gerontologists and other policy analysts argue, however, that our society currently underutilizes the productive potential of the older population.

In American society, the needs for the services of volunteers seem more critical than ever. There are burgeoning numbers of youth at-risk, children living in poverty, homeless people, frail elderly in need of personal care, and so forth. At the same time, there are economic pressures on younger persons, who, living in two-earner or single-parent families, often have little discretionary time for such activities as volunteering.

Older persons are in a key position to volunteer. They often have time for activities like volunteering. They have an accumulation of abilities, skills, and experiences to offer. And, for many, there is a driving need for meaningful and productive endeavors. It is likely that there is an "untapped potential" for increasing the numbers of older volunteers and also for enhancing the impact of the work that older volunteers do. But to realize this "potential" will require creative strategies for recruiting and working with older volunteers.