THE SENIOR CITIZEN AS VOLUNTEER

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I have been asked to discuss some suggestions for the better utilization of the elderly as volunteers. This topic has to be seen in the light of the fact that there is nothing at all new about retirees volunteering their talents. In this nation of volunteers two groups, the very young and the elderly, have traditionally made us the largest pool of volunteers. Practical reasons have determined this. These two groups have more time available during the daylight hours when most agencies conduct their business. But despite the historicity of this involvement of the senior citizen, it is only in the past ten years that we have seen a sizeable increase in the utilization of mature volunteers, to the point where today they very nearly constitute the hope of voluntarism in this country.

Why this recent change? Only recently have many agencies removed age barriers from their volunteer job descriptions. It was not until the mid 1950's that one of the leaders in voluntarism, the American Red Cross, removed an age barrier of 50 and opened their volunteer ranks to the retired. A great deal of fallacious mythology has in the past kept the elderly out of many areas of service. These myths about the elderly have been largely dissipated in recent years. Movements toward an early retirement age, the growing number of people living to more advanced age, all these factors have broken down old barriers. The result is that we find ourselves on the threshhold of an era that will give greater and greater opportunities to serve to those whose declining years used to be spent in idleness and isolation. It has been estimated that today there are six times as many people over 65 as there were in 1900. The Administration on Aging has released figures that show that those in the over 65 category increased from three million in 1900, to six and one-half million in 1930, to sixteen and one-half million in1960 . . . and by 1990, less than two decades from now, it is estimated that this group will total some 27 million in the United States.

These figures indicate that there is today a senior citizen population that constitutes something like ten percent of our overall population. It would be reasonable to extrapolate that something like 25% of this group, or about five million retired people form the potential pool of aged volunteers from which this nation might draw.

What are those five million prospective volunteers like? Statistics tell us that within that group, for every 100 men there are 130 women. Of the men some 71.3% are married, while only 36% of the women are married. Fully 70% of the elderly reside in urban areas. Actuarians tell us that the men in this group who have reached the age of 65 have an average of 12 more years of life and service left, and the women who are 65 will live an average of 16 more years. Taking those who are 65 and older as a group, 92 % are white and 8% are non-white. The picture this data gives us is that those who retire today face another 15 years or so of near-active life for which they must find meaning. They will generally do this in an urban setting and perhaps most important, will be or will perceive themselves to be poor.

So much for the statistics concerned with the elderly. Statistics are cheap and plentiful. But so often statistics do not answer the questions we face when we try to approach the problems of voluntarism among the elderly. How can we increase the availability of meaningful volunteer assignments for the aged? How can we entice more elderly people out of their self, and culturally imposed, isolation to take these assignments? How can we develop a trained corps of administrators who understand the special needs of the elderly and who can supervise and train them with sensitivity? How can we prepare a nation devoted to youth culture and a value system that rewards only those who produce . . . prepare that nation to open its heart to those senior citizens who want to create new careers for themselves, as paid employees or volunteers?

These questions are not casual questions. We are in a state of crisis relative to the needs of the elderly. Their ranks are swelling, their problems are compounding, while we who are their servants hold conferences to debate our next step.

It has been suggested to me that I approach these problems by reciting to you some case histories of successful senior volunteer programs around the country. I am going to leave that portion of my remarks to the last because I don't feel that the case-study method is the most fruitful approach in the midst of a crisis. Case-studies are not without usefulness, but they usually

tell us only about the successes and not about all the mistakes these programs made on their way to success. And the implication of the case-study technique of problem solving is that what worked well in one community is readily transferable to another. One can only make that assumption if he falsely believes that all communities, and all project managers, and all retired people are alike.

Let me, then, spend a few moments putting the senior citizen volunteer into an abbreviated psycho-sociological context. You have all read the many studies about the aged, studies showing the mental outlook of the elderly, his sociological disengagement, his traumatic change in roles, the effect of social stigma on the elderly, the damaging effect of increased poverty, and so on. I am going to ask you for a moment to go through those studies with me very briefly in order to isolate some basic principles that may help us to understand the aged volunteer and potential volunteer. I think we need this exercise so that we will better understand how to deal with this category of volunteers, how to develop more meaningful programs for him and how better solicit his interest in volunteer programs. We can design all the volunteer programs we want to, design them with all the best intentions in mind, but if we do not have the needs and capabilities of the elderly clearly in mind we will be designing more failure and doing a disservice to the aged who are our primary concern.

When we look at the very process of aging, we face three categories of change affecting human behavior. The process of aging brings physical change, psychological change and sociological change. It is the latter two changes which concern us as we consider the aged as volunteers.

A search of the literature on the psycho-sociological changes which occur in the aging soon turns up something called "the theory of disengagement." The theory of disengagement goes something like this. The trauma which results from the aging process, and more especially from a radical change of life roles, for instance, the departure of children from the home, the sudden loss of employment due to retirement, the sudden reduction in income, the loss of a spouse, results in a disengagement from society. The circle of friends decreases and new friends are not found to replace them. The loss of old roles results in a desire to seek isolation because of a loss of self-esteem. In short, disengagement theory implies that even as social interaction decreases among the aged, the very quality of what social interaction remains is lessened.

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Those of you familiar with this theory know that it shelters two opposing schools of thought. One view is represented by Cumming and Henry who state that this disengagemeent is an inherent part of the aging process; that it is as natural and determinative as the biological changes which accompany aging.[1] The other school is represented by the gerontologist Arnold Rose who contends that it is no such thing, but is actually the effect of the surrounding environment. Rose argues that the elderly are pushed by society into their disengagement and that this disengagement from society compounds the physical deterioration and hastens early demise.[2] For better or worse, I will follow the majority of scholars and support Dr. Rose's findings. The social disengagement which we find so prevalent among the aged is culturally imposed, but subject to change for many senior citizens if we can find ways to change the environmental situation of the elderly. In other words, if voluntarism can contribute to bringing the elderly out of his withdrawal from social vitality we can contribute to a longer and more meaningful life for the aged.

Now, let's look at how this disengagement affects the older citizen. First of all we have to remember that the roles we all adopt in life are most important; they are what give our lives meaning. If we lose those roles we lose self-esteem. It is the loss of self-worth that is so critical among the elderly. Now, when those role losses take place, according to Rose's interpretation of the disengagement theory, the older person may behave or react in several different observable ways.

The first of these reactions or categories can be labeled "wholesome adjustment." These are the persons for whom aging does not bring trauma. The individual in this group carries his old self roles into old age because he does not retire, or is self-employed. Or he finds new roles just as satisfying as his earlier lost roles. He retains his vitality and for him things do not essentially change in old age. Figures do not exist for this category of the elderly, but to emphasize that this category is in the minority, let us assign an arbitrary 10% of the elderly population to this group.

The second response to the trauma of role loss is by far the majority response. This is the category within which people, upon losing old roles which sustained the ego, make little or no effort to find new roles. Again arbitrarily, I would assign the figure of 60% to this group. That is, perhaps as much as 60% of the elderly "drop out." We often refer to the elderly as the "hidden poor." Within this category are the millions of urban, white, poor, mostly female who simply surrender to the aging

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process and disappear behind their television sets. These are the multitudes for whom the majority of our services to the elderly are designed. The possibility of converting these wasting and wasted individuals into productive volunteers who find new roles and careers in voluntarism is an urgent task, but a well nigh impossible one. Many changes of attitude in the overall society will have to take place before the syndrome of this category can be changed.

The third category of those who go through the disengagement process are those who are able to replace the lost roles of earlier life with new roles found and developed within a new sub-culture called "the aging." That is to say, this group drops out, it drops out *into* a peer context of other older folks and retirees. These are people who gravitate toward the Golden Age Clubs and the Senior Citizen Centers. They enter a new sub-culture of the aged and find new and satisfying roles there. They are able to convert old age from the destroyer of self-esteem into the very basis for a new self-esteem. But this is a small group. It is perhaps no larger than five percent of the total elderly population. Membership totals in the Senior Citizen Centers around the country probably would bear this out. But this is the group which provides the largest pool of elderly volunteers we have been able to tap to date. And it is to the organized grouping of the elderly, that sub-culture to which I referred, that we turn whenever we have need to recruit new retiree volunteers for some project.

If you have been keeping count on me you know that my assignments of percentages to each group leaves 25% remaining now for the fourth category. These are the folks who feel they have been forcibly, prematurely and unfairly disengaged from society. They, for the most part, did not retire voluntarily. They still feel they can work, and want to work. Not only that, they need to work. The need arises from both a financial need and an ego need. These are the five million or so senior citizens who want to establish new roles for themselves, who have talent galore, and who need only the slightest push to come out of their isolation and contribute themselves to society once again. This is the group to which we must address our attention. These are the ones we can keep off the list of recipients of services and make into deliverers of services.

Such a categorization as I have just run through is of course an over-simplification. But it serves to outline the scope of the problem we are dealing with when we design programs for utilizing senior volunteers and pinpoints, I think, the most productive areas for our recruitment drives among the elderly.

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In this categorization I have emphasized the importance of finding life roles which lend self-esteem. When these roles are lost to us through involuntary retirement, or simply as a result of the aging process, we either find new and acceptable ones or we vegetate. The roles we adopt in earlier life are generally related to employment. In this society, for better or worse, we are what we do. From age 20 to 65 that seems to be the name of the game. Suddenly we reach the age of 65, the game goes on, but we are not allowed to play. All our life we have been rewarded according to how well we produced. And now everyone thinks how wonderful it is we have all this retirement leisure. But I am convinced that the restoration of self-esteem to the elderly made possible by an increased involvement of the aged in voluntary programs will succeed best if the word "leisure" is abandoned and the word "work" or "task" reinstated. Volunteer assignments must be made as meaningful and rewarding as any work assignment, and must be given the dignity and discipline of work if our volunteer programs are truly going to assist the elderly in recapturing their critical sense of self-worth. That is both the challenge and the hope of an expanded utilization of senior citizens in voluntary roles.

To recapitulate, we must first understand the sociological ground rules of the aging process . . . that something called social disengagement is taking place. We who help to structure society can help in reducing that disengagement so that more elderly remain in the mainstream of life's vitality and off welfare roles. We ought to concentrate our efforts at recruiting retiree volunteers from among those who are most likely to respond and most anxious to discover the new roles offered by voluntarism.

Getting, now, more specific, what can I tell you of actual programs in this field, what has worked in program design, where are the success stories throughout this land? I must preface the case-studies I will briefly describe by insisting that the utilization of the elderly is nowhere an art or a science. We have only modest beginnings here and there; no great break-throughs, no convincing statistics. But we *are* on the *threshold* of truly developing this untapped national resource. That state government which will assign a deservedly high priority to the utilization of the elderly as volunteers, not with one or two pilot projects, but on a state-wide basis, will reap untold riches in the distribution of services.

When we look at actual programs we find them falling under three rough headings. First, there are the four federal programs: The Foster Grandparents Program begun in 1969,

the two national programs which use retired executives as consultants to small businesses, and RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Project) which was designed in 1969, but for which no money was found until this year. I am not going to describe or evaluate these programs because material on them is easily accessible elsewhere. Let me just say that you should pay particular attention to the RSVP program as it will be a great inducement to innovative voluntary programs in your state in the months ahead.

The second grouping of volunteer programs using the elderly can be called the standard or stock attempts to relate the retiree to volunteer assignments. Found within this prosaic category are such activities as the agency which places the elderly volunteer in other comunity service agencies, the tutorial programs, the telephone reassurance projects, the friendly visitor programs, the transportation pools, the retired executive-consultant service, and the Meals-On-Wheels programs. These are the standard types of programs and there are many, many examples of each. They deserve some time to describe them, but space won't allow more than to mention them. I want rather to spend a little time on the third category — the category of innovative programs — because what you learn here may cause you to try some innovative programs of your own.

One of the cleverest and most useful new programs is being conducted in Massachusetts. It is a crisis intervention center limited primarily to the questions of bereavement. The Centers' Counsellors' ages average 72 and all are themeselves widows or widowers.

Another is a sewing club in Missouri where with donated mill ends elderly volunteer women sew clothing for the children of welfare mothers, while at the same time teaching the mother to sew. For most of these youngsters the piece of clothing is the first new garment they have owned. *Everyone* connected with this project benefits.

In New York City the Housing Authority has a program they call the Tenant Patrol. Retirees are enlisted in the Patrol to act as the eyes and ears of the Police Departmnt by sitting in lobbies and acting as a deterrent to crime and vandalism in New York's housing developments.

The problem of getting surplus food into the hands of those who most need it in rural Oregon has been met by the creation of Rural Food Delivery. Essentially this is an automobile food delivery system in a rural area similar to a Meals-On-Wheels program in an urban area. Both utilize the senior citizen to provide the transportation.

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A new nation-wide program aims at using the retired volunteer to help the elderly fill out income tax forms. A similar effort seeks to advise the senior citizen in the matter of old age benefits.

A new group in Washington, D.C. calling itself "The Senior Craftsmen," market the art work and handcrafts of those over 50. Seventy-five percent of the proceeds go to the artisan and 25% to the retail outlet the group has created.

There you have some of the more creative uses of senior citizens that I am aware of. In addition to these samples of specific programs, we are seeing two other new areas opening to mature volunteers. One is the whole correctional field with hundreds of courts beginning to use the elderly in one-to-one assignments with parole and first offender cases.

The other is in the new area of consumer counselling and consumer education. No one is more in need of comparative shopping help than the retired person who lives on a fixed and limited income. This highly specialized field is now attracting many retired volunteers.

Again, let me point out that funding for further innovative programming such as I have just been cataloging is going to be more available than in the past because of the new RSVP program of the Older Americans Act.

If nothing else, I hope I have made you aware of the great potential offered to us by that human resource: Our Senior Citizen. Most of us are cogs in a gigantic system which produces and distributes services of all kinds to Americans of all kinds. Part of that delivery system delivers welfare services and it gets bogged down often because of a perennial shortage of manpower. Over against this bogged down delivery system are the elderly — some of whom are recipients of welfare and will always be recipients. Other senior citizens are not now welfare cases. But they will be, and soon, if we don't find them new ways out of their social disengagement. They can either become part of the problem or part of the solution. I vote for the latter; that you, and your colleagues in state government, make as many senior citizens a part of the service delivery system as possible. In that way the retiree can become part of the solution and not just another ego-depressed, lonely, frightened recipient of welfare services.

[1]Cumming, Elaine and Henry, William, *Growing Old*, Basic Books, N.Y., 1961.

[2]Rose, Arnold, *Older People and Their Social World*, F. A. Davis, Pa. 1965.