Older Volunteers: Trends

By Susan M. Chambre, Ph.D.

One of the most important trends in volunteering over the past 30 years has been the expanded participation of older persons.

In 1965, one in 10 people over the age of 65 reported that they had done some type of volunteer work during the previous year. Since then, surveys have monitored levels of participation on a regular basis, and by 1992, 42 percent of people between 65 and 74 were volunteering. Many older people now continue to volunteer well into their 70s, and 27 percent of people past 75 volunteered in 1992.

This change has several sources. One has been the impact of programs that recruit, place and reinforce older people's involvement. When these programs began in the mid-1960s, some observers wondered whether they would succeed. Serious objections were raised about whether older people were interested, whether their health was too fragile, whether organizations would actually engage them. On the other hand, it was at this time that the Red Cross abandoned its long-standing age limit of 65 for volunteers.

Between then and now, there have been striking shifts in our understanding of older persons and the process of aging. People live longer. They have fewer children and longer periods of retirement than did previous generations. Today's older people are keenly interested in keeping active; for some this involves travel and sports, while for others it involves working for pay or without pay as a volunteer.

Newspaper and magazine articles extol the virtues of volunteering. In articles like "Three Cheers for Older Heroes," "It's Time To Serve Our Country," "Giving Time," "Sharing Knowledge" and "A Legend in Her Own Town," readers are presented with positive views of what their community work can mean for others and for themselves.

Changes in the nature of the older population also account for their higher level of involvement and the weaker link between volunteering and age. Today's older population is better educated, more often native-born and relatively more affluent than past generations. These factors, especially the educational one, contribute to higher levels of participation.

Over the past 30 years, the gap between the educational achievements of the old and the young has virtually disappeared. A person's level of education has a strong influence on whether he or she is involved in volunteer work. Data from a 1991 National Council on Aging survey revealed that few people with eight or fewer years of school volunteered (9 percent) as compared to 17 percent of those with some high school, 25 percent of high school graduates, 38 percent of those with some college and close to half (47 percent) of college graduates. More recent figures have found that 38 percent of high school graduates and 66 percent of college graduates volunteer.

Today's older population includes the first generation of elders who has reached maturity in a society with mass higher education. Many are men who attended college on the G.I. Bill after World War II. Their educational profile explains why older people are attracted to different communal, educational and leisure activities—from playing tennis to vacationing at Elderhostels and attending college—than were past generations.

Cultural and population changes have increased the supply of elders who are interested in volunteer work and generated a demand for their services. Starting in the mid-1960s, a substantial decrease took place in the number of women who were full-time homemakers; a shortage in the supply of daytime volunteers was foreseen. It was found that retired persons could step in; several initiatives designed to expand community services by older persons came into being, expanding volunteer opportunities for this population level.

Today, older volunteers provide social and emotional support to recovering child abusers, abused or neglected children, patients in mental hospitals, retarded children and adults, families with chronically ill or retarded members, and boarder babies, including those with AIDS.

They work in many different settings—daycare centers, schools, prisons, hospitals. Recent new roles include consulting with small business owners, mentoring young people, joining VISTA and the Peace Corps, providing services to other long-living people in their own communities or in nursing homes, parent education, health education for other elders, working as auxiliary police, doing income tax returns, working as consumer advocates and engaging in lobbying and voter registration.

These efforts have expanded the supply of older

volunteers by making volunteering attractive, by actively recruiting people and helping them find appropriate volunteer jobs, and in some programs like RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) and Foster Grandparents, reducing economic barriers by providing stipends, carfare or a free lunch.

Actual participation and interest both have increased. In 1974, only one in 10 older people who were not volunteering said they were interested in becoming involved; more recently, surveys have found 25 percent and 37 percent interested.

Several programs for older volunteers were begun by the federal government during the 1960s. The first was the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), started in 1964 by the Small Business Administration. Its 13,000 members provide volunteer management expertise to prospective or current small business owners.

Three other federally sponsored programs merged into ACTION when it was formed in 1971. The Foster Grandparent program began in 1965 as an anti-poverty effort to provide community services employment and an income supplement to low-income elders. In 1990, 27,000 Foster Grandparents, 89 percent of them women, were providing social and emotional support to children with "special or exceptional needs," including autistic and physically handicapped, abused and neglected children, teenage parents and adolescents with substance abuse problems.

Currently the largest single program with about 410,000 participants, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), renamed the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program in the recently passed National and Community Service Trust Act) was established in 1969. RSVP recruits volunteers, often through other organizations, who are screened and placed in RSVP-sponsored programs or other organizations. Its original premise was that older people would benefit from volunteering as part of a group. The approach has been modified, with RSVP volunteers now working alongside people of all ages, but the idea has been retained in identity as an "RSVP volunteer" that unites people working in scattered locations.

A third federally sponsored program, the stipended Senior Companion program established in 1974, engages 10,000 volunteers in visiting frail elderly in their homes and providing social support.

The federal government's role in starting and funding programs has diminished in recent years, and public-private partnerships and private sector initiatives have become more prominent in the development of new programs for older volunteers. Intergenerational service programs and the engagement of senior volunteers in helping other elderly such as The Points of Light Foundation's Seniors in Service to Seniors (SISS), now being piloted at several location nationwide, have taken on increasing significance.

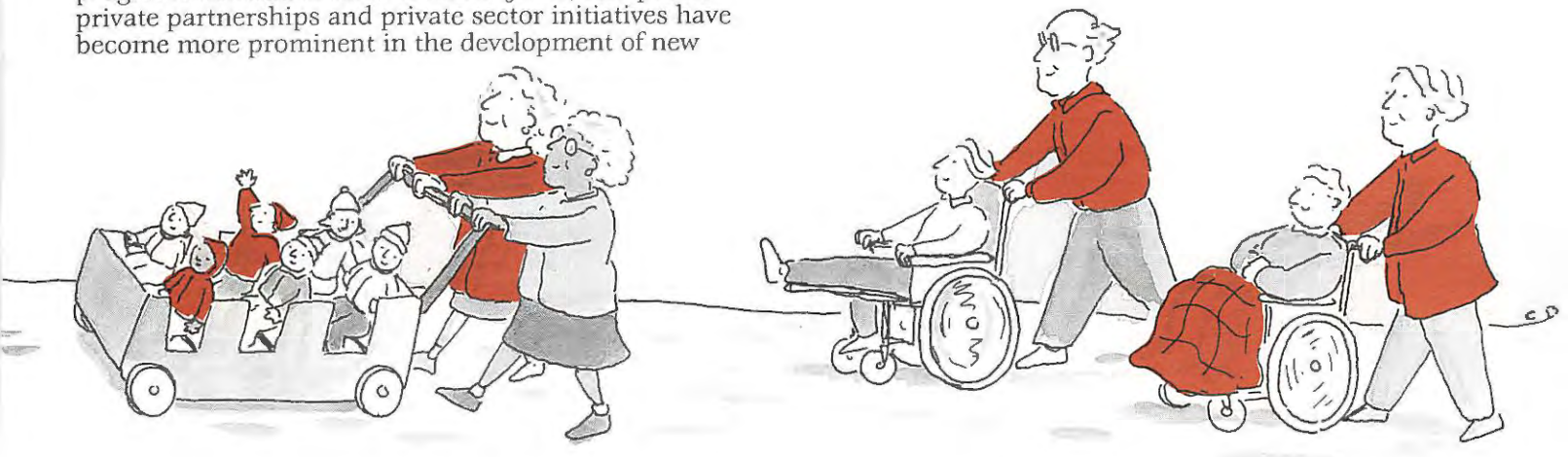
From 16 programs for older volunteers in the U.S. in the mid-1960s, the number of community-based efforts has become too large to count. One of the earliest nongovernment programs was the Shepherd's Center in Kansas City, in which a coalition of 22 churches in 1972 created a network of programs in which elders were both clients and collaborators.

In 1984, the National Council on the Aging piloted the Family Friends program in which older volunteers provide social support to a family with a mentally ill member or a retarded child. Initially funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the eight national demonstration sites are being expanded to 14 with federal Administration on Aging funding.

More recently, a collaboration of six foundations created the Linking Lifetimes program, which includes intergenerational efforts such as telephone reassurance between elders and latchkey children and between nursing home residents and the developmentally disabled.

Perhaps the largest private sector initiative—involving close to 400,000 people, or 8 percent of older volunteers—is that of the American Association of Retired Persons. AARP has begun or cosponsored programs like the Widowed Person's Service (started in 1973) and the Volunteers in Tax Assistance (VITA) program. A nationwide talent bank matches volunteers and jobs. Regular articles about volunteering in AARP's widely read publications, *Modern Maturity* and *50 Plus*, have played an important role in shaping people's perceptions about community service.

The National Executive Service Corps, founded in 1977, places professionals and business executives. It provides consulting services to nonprofit organizations in 22 states; there were 148 consultation projects in New York City alone in 1990. The Corps' Science/Math Enrichment program in Baltimore city schools is designed to motivate students and expand their understanding of how math and science are used in the work world.



The National Retiree Volunteer Center, established in 1986, offers technical assistance to corporations interested in establishing programs for retired employees. The Honeywell Corporation, for example, sponsors the New Vista School for teenage mothers which is partly staffed by Honeywell retirees. By early 1991, the National Retiree Volunteer Center had helped launch projects in 44 corporations.

While many new programs are age-segregated and designed to help elders find new social roles when they retire or their family obligations diminish, studies of the volunteer patterns of elders suggest that these features oversimplify the diverse paths to volunteer interest and activity among older persons.

In 1988, very few older volunteers in the U.S. were in ACTION or the AARP-sponsored programs, while in Calgary, Alberta, only 38 percent of older volunteers reported "working in connection with other seniors." As in all age groups, the largest concentrations of elders (57 percent) are in churches and synagogues. Some organizations rely heavily on older volunteers without necessarily designing programs for their participation. More than half of Red Cross volunteers, for example, are over the age of 55, and many of them have been involved in the organization over a substantial part of their lives.

A second feature of programs for older volunteers is an assumption that retirement, widowhood or reduced parenting responsibilities activates elders to become involved or to expand their participation. Pamphlets and other publications describe community service as a "work substitute." There appears to be something to this. Continuing in one's trade as a volunteer allows one to work part-time without rigid work scheduling and financial dependence.

But many older volunteers also are continuing previous patterns of community service. In Calgary, 45 percent reported being involved in volunteer work "throughout their lives" while only 21 percent said they began to serve after they retired. Volunteer program retention appears far greater for people who have volunteered in the past.

Role loss at retirement does not necessarily foster volunteerism. Having free time, seeking companionship or wanting to reduce one's sense of loneliness motivates a minority of elders. Indeed, elders have a higher tendency to volunteer if they are married and if they are working. Many older people successfully combine paid and unpaid work, especially if they work part-time. Fifty-eight percent of working and 42 percent of retired elders volunteered in 1990.

Why are people who have left the paid labor force less often involved in volunteer work? One possibility that has not been examined by researchers is that some people might be unwilling to work without payment. For some, retirement was a welcome relief from an unrewarding job. A small number believe they have "paid their dues" to society. Retirees do not appear to reallocate the time they spent working to social or communal activities; much of it goes, instead, to solitary and passive pursuits like watching television—especially among men. The tendency to join and participate in voluntary associations does not appear to change much over a person's life.

In addition to the assumption that retirement will motivate elders to begin to volunteer, fictive kinship relationships with children, adolescents and adults are often set up as inducements to older persons to volunteer. These roles may be personally enriching, but they do not present many opportunities to link elders with volunteer roles that benefit members of their immediate community or families.

Few elders (5 percent) volunteer to ensure "the continuation of activities or institutions I or my family benefit from." Elders also report that they are less often asked to volunteer: 37 percent of people over 65 indicated that they were involved in their current volunteer activities because someone asked them (the comparable figure for volunteers of all age groups is 41 percent).

Although there are more volunteer opportunities for older persons today than in the past, there are not enough ways they can be involved in the same way as younger people—i.e., asked to volunteer by organizations that benefit them, their families or their friends.

While participation is higher among elders with histories of community involvement, it is possible to attract new elder volunteers: close to half of a sample of people in the Family Friends program were new to volunteering. Recruitment of retirees, in particular, is a cost-effective strategy because they devote more time than other groups when they are involved. One recent study found that 69 percent of retirees, 55 percent of people who were employed and 54 percent of those describing themselves as homemakers devoted 10 or more hours a month to volunteer work.

Retirees and previously uninvolved volunteers may be attracted by different types of roles. Some may be interested in community service that is defined as a "leisure alternative"; not a way to "work" or be a "grandparent," but a change from playing golf or watching television. Defined in this way, some elders might be attracted by a chance to engage in a contributory form of leisure.

Schools and youth organizations could involve older people by recruiting grandparents and greatgrandparents just as they involve parents. They are especially needed because far fewer parents are available during daytime hours than in the past. It is realistic to recruit grandparents, since most live close by and regularly visit their grandchildren. This strategy has another consequence. Grandparenthood and greatgrandparenthood are meaningful but sometimes ambiguous social roles. Involvement with organizations serving their offspring might strengthen their relationships with their grandchildren by providing a context for shared experiences.

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Many more elders live in suburban areas than in the past. This change suggests a growing need to arrange transportation for older volunteers, not just reimburse costs. A second strategy is to create at-home volunteer opportunities. This is currently done in the Linking Lifelines program, in which people offer social support and information by telephone.

In addition to the increase in older people volunteering, the volunteer labor force has increasingly become composed of people past the age of 65. It is important to understand why many of them do volunteer, and why some do not. In the future, we will need to continue to refine our efforts to support this large and important source of unpaid labor and to offer elders the opportunity to maintain or expand their social relationships, to apply job skills learned over the course of a lifetime, and contribute to their communities and their families. ■

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