

# The Health Benefits of Volunteering for Older Americans

## A Review of Recent Research



According to data from the Corporation for National and Community Service, 18.7 million older adults – more than a quarter of those 55 and older – contributed on average more than three billion hours of service in their communities per year between 2008 and 2010<sup>1</sup>. Older volunteers meet a wide range of community needs - helping seniors live independently in their homes, tutoring and mentoring at-risk youth, providing financial education and job training to veterans and their families, and helping communities recover from disasters. In fact, older adults who volunteer typically volunteer more hours in a year than other age groups.

In addition to providing valuable services to individuals and communities, older volunteers are also living active lives through volunteering. A growing body of research shows an association between volunteering and mental and physical health benefits. In particular, older volunteers report lower mortality rates, lower rates of depression, fewer physical limitations, and higher levels of well-being. This issue brief summarizes recent research and suggest implications of the findings.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM SELECTED RESEARCH

### **Older Americans who volunteer frequently live longer and report less disability.**

Previous research has shown that volunteers live longer. This was observed in volunteers age 70 and older (Luoh and Herzog, 2002; Harris and Thoresen, 2005) and, in a more recent national study, among volunteers who were 50 and older (Lee et al 2010). A study of Americans over age 60 found that those who volunteer reported lower disability and higher levels of well-being relative to non-volunteers. The effects of volunteering were found to be greater than other factors including income, education level, or marriage (Morrow-Howell et al., 2003). All of these studies were designed to control for factors associated with health, mortality, and disability. While it remains possible that the

lower mortality and increased functional activity observed in volunteers is associated with individual characteristics of those who choose to volunteer, there is initial evidence that the health benefits of volunteering are due to increased physical, social, and mental activity that are a result of volunteering (Harris and Thoresen, 2005; Fried 2004).

Volunteering may be particularly helpful for older Americans undergoing a life stress or for those who are at risk for being isolated. One study found that bereaved individuals who engaged in volunteering activities to help others experienced a shorter course of depression than those who did not volunteer (Brown, Brown, House, and Smith, 2008). Volunteering can provide a sense of purpose and future outreach should include older adults undergoing transitions such as

<sup>1</sup>**Volunteering in America 2010.** This report is a partnership between the Corporation for National and Community Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Bureau for Labor Statistics to collect volunteering data annually through the Current Population Survey's (CPS) Supplement on Volunteering.

unemployment or retirement (Greenfield and Marks, 2004). Finally, there is evidence that the health benefits of volunteering are strongest among rural retirees, and those who do not drive or are limited drivers (Lee et al 2010).

### **Volunteering can be part of a healthy lifestyle.**

There is increasing research that volunteering can support an active lifestyle. (Fried et al) There is strong evidence that physical activity remains important to health outcomes through the oldest ages (Healthy Futures 2010). A recent study found that over a 20 year period, environmental volunteering during midlife was significantly associated with greater physical activity (Pillemer et al., 2010). In a study of Experience Corps, an intergenerational volunteer model which recruits older adults to serve in schools, volunteers reported more often than a comparison

group sustained increased physical activity over three years (Tan et al., 2009). Another study about Experience Corps showed volunteers experience increased brain activity as measured by functional MRIs and the preservation of cognitive function, as compared to a control group (Carlson et al., 2008; Carlson et al., 2009). A more recent study showed that after two years, volunteers from Experience Corps had reduced levels of depression and functional limitations, while the similar aged control group had increases in both categories (Hong and Morrow-Howell, 2010). While Experience Corps was designed as a health intervention for older adults (Fried et al., 2004; Tan et al., 2010), other studies of volunteers engaged in varied service activities also showed lower rates of depression (Musicka and Wilson, 2003).

## **RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

Research demonstrates that volunteering is associated with active lifestyles and health benefits, particularly for older Americans. Volunteers not only help their community but also experience better health in their later years, enjoying greater levels of well-being, lower rates of depression and increased strength and energy.

This finding is especially significant given current demographic trends. As our aging population increases – with almost one in every five Americans projected to be age 60 or older by 2030 – there is a great opportunity to engage older Americans in volunteering as a way to meet critical community needs while contributing to longer, healthier lives.

This research points to several implications for policymakers, government agencies, health officials, and nonprofit and community organizations that utilize older volunteers.

- Given the positive health benefits associated with volunteering, efforts should be made to engage populations that could benefit the most from volunteering or are underrepresented among current volunteers, including low-income individuals and people with disabilities. Programs such as Senior Corps that offer small stipends or reimbursements for transportation or other costs associated with volunteering make it possible for large numbers of older volunteers to serve their community.
- Volunteering can provide a sense of purpose and future outreach should include older adults undergoing transitions such as unemployment, retirement, or the loss of a spouse.
- For those living in rural areas, volunteering can provide an important way to stay connected and active.

Programs for older Americans should include volunteer opportunities in rural areas and consider ways to lower the barriers to volunteering, such as stipends that can reimburse the cost of transportation.

- As the leading edge of the Baby Boomer generation approaches retirement age, nonprofits and community organizations need to be ready to recruit and retain boomer volunteers. Adoption of key practices, such as matching volunteers with appropriate and challenging assignments, providing professional development opportunities for volunteers, and treating volunteers as valued partners, can help build organizational capacity to recruit and retain boomer volunteers.
- While marketing and recruitment efforts directed to older volunteers should reference the potential health benefits of volunteering, researchers should consider designing health interventions based on volunteering.
- National days of service, including the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service and the September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance, can be an effective way to introduce new volunteers in service activities that can turn into a long-term commitment.

The results of such efforts will not only help solve community problems, but could simultaneously enhance the health of the growing number of older adults.

For more information about Senior Corps and other programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service, visit [NationalService.gov](http://NationalService.gov). For a searchable database of volunteer opportunities geared to older Americans, visit [GetInvolved.gov](http://GetInvolved.gov).