Helping Senior Corps Stations Understand Older Volunteers and Improve Volunteer Management

KEN MURRAY, JOLENE NIERNBERGER

They're coming!

The oldest baby boomers will be 65 in January 2011, with 77 million more to follow. While this demographic phenomenon poses a national challenge, it also presents a national opportunity.

The challenge, of course, is to be found in providing the resources for Social Security, health care, appropriate living environments, livable communities and social networking that will be needed for this increasing population. As a society, it will be necessary to make careful plans and difficult choices.

What may be seen as a challenge for some is an opportunity for others. Over the years baby boomers have been surveyed by AARP and other organizations to find out what they wanted and expected as they aged. They have consistently said that they want and expect to remain actively engaged in life through work and volunteer service. While economic factors are delaying retirement for some, the fact is that older adults in general will be available to play an active role in their communities through volunteering. This offers a potential boon to organizations and causes that are ready to receive them and effectively use their skills.

1. Assets brought by older volunteers

- Experience

  According to the National Council on Aging, "Demographic trends point to the continued growth of the healthiest, best-educated, and most financially independent generation of older Americans in the nation's history. This represents a growing resource of time, energy and talent with the potential to competently address community problems nationwide through volunteer work and employment."

  The first asset brought to communities by older volunteers is their experience. All Senior Corps volunteers have lived a minimum of 55 years; most have lived much longer. In those years, they have had many experiences that lend themselves to volunteer service.

- Skills

  Experience brings skills. To live life fruitfully requires that we acquire the skills needed to survive and thrive.

  "Skilled volunteers" is a term that refers to individuals with particular abilities that are developed by virtue of a professional career. This term is fraught with difficulty, however, because it implies that people who have not received advanced education or training have limited skills. This is not true. Volunteers' skills may be in listening to other people or offering a simple suggestion to help someone. Their skills may be in relating lovingly to children or offering support to elders. Having interpersonal skills and building relationships are as meaningful, important and useful as accounting, planning, or computing. Every older person is likely to have developed some very useful skills that will be invaluable in their volunteer service.

- Knowledge

  In addition to skills, experience brings knowledge. One can't live 55 or more years without learning. Again, what one learns will depend in some degree on what one has experienced, so no two volunteers' knowledge base will be the same. As with skills, it is up to us to discover what knowledge volunteers possess and how they might use that knowledge creatively and usefully in volunteer service.

- Work Ethic

  Those who work with older volunteers often comment on their work ethic. They are dependable and have willing attitudes. Many have worked hard throughout their lives, whether that was in their employment, raising a family, or serving their communities. They are experienced at setting goals and working steadily to achieve them. They transfer that same work ethic into volunteer service.

- Dedication

  In addition to having a great work ethic, older volunteers exhibit strong loyalty. If they believe in the mission, they will dedicate their time and invest their resources to making the cause successful. Oftentimes they will enlist others to volunteer as well. They will be champions for the cause in the community.

- Wisdom

  Older volunteers often have great wisdom. Wisdom is a kind of seasoning and perspective that can come from having lived and experienced life over a period of years. It's an understanding of what matters most, putting things in perspective. This is a tremendous gift that can be shared with the organizations where these volunteers serve and the individuals with whom they work.

- Time

  Time is a gift. Older volunteers have time to give; however, one should not assume that those who are fully or partially retired from the paid workforce will be "available upon request". Many have active social lives, hobbies, travel plans, family commitments and other demands on their time. Volunteer managers must respect these demands. However, if those who are invited to serve believe in the mission and feel they can make a difference, they will make the time to be involved.

2. Considerations to keep in mind when working with older volunteers

- Motivation

  Older volunteers, like volunteers in general, may have many different motives for volunteering.

  The desire or need to make a difference is a powerful motivator to serve. Wanting "to give back", "help someone else" or to "change things" are reasons to become active and involved in service, whether young or old.

  Another motivation for many older volunteers is social connection. For those who have been a part of the workforce for much of their lives, retirement can mean the loss of a social network that sustained them for many years. Volunteering can become a way of maintaining relationships and making new friends.

  For limited-income seniors who volunteer as Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions, the stipend and other benefits offered may be incentives to serve through these programs. The stipend may be the 'hook' in recruitment, but the satisfaction felt by engaging in meaningful service is exemplified by the retention and longevity that is found in these programs.

  Another motivation for some older volunteers is the opportunity to exercise leadership through community service. For those who had leadership roles through their employment, volunteering would be an avenue by which they could continue this role; for others, volunteering may give them the opportunity to develop their leadership skills.

The desire to learn new skills also motivates people to volunteer. Volunteering may offer people the opportunity to try something they have never had a chance to try in their working or personal lives. Including an opportunity to learn with the opportunity to serve oftentimes brings commitment and excitement to the volunteer experience.

- Different styles

  Just as volunteers have various motivations for volunteering, they will have various styles of volunteering, as well.

  The classic model of volunteering that many volunteer managers appreciate is the volunteer who wants a clear, predictable and set structure to their volunteer service. Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions are required to volunteer 15 to 40 hours per week. Some RSVP volunteer assignments also have this degree of structure. The volunteers and volunteer managers have expectations and knowledge of a commitment of time and can plan their service accordingly.

  Some volunteers, however, prefer episodic or project-based volunteering. Baby-boomers seem to prefer this type of volunteer opportunity. These short-term projects are completed quickly and enable the volunteers to move on to another project. This type of service allows volunteers the flexibility to fit the volunteer assignments around their busy lives. Volunteer managers must identify the needs and interests of their volunteers and assign them to the appropriate project to assure that the project will be successfully completed.

- Sensory issues

  When discussing sensory issues, it is important to avoid stereotyping. Many older people don't need special accommodations. Some, however, may need "reasonable accommodations," in order to complete certain tasks successfully.

  In terms of volunteer engagement among older persons, vision and hearing may affect volunteering. An older volunteer may not be able to work in a dimly lit environment as a younger volunteer would. An older volunteer might need written materials printed in a larger font. Similarly, when speaking to an older volunteer, it may be best to face the individual directly and speak slightly slower and more clearly. It is important to understand, however, that most older volunteers will need only simple changes to speech and hearing patterns.

- Mobility issues

  As with sensory issues, one must avoid stereotyping. On a trip to Scotland, Ken once saw a sign warning drivers to be watchful for elderly pedestrians. It featured a picture of a person bent over at a 45 degree angle carrying a cane. However, many older people have no mobility problems; yet for some, extra consideration may be required. As with sensory issues, simple changes will usually suffice. As a volunteer manager, consider the environment where the volunteer will serve. Is the area free of clutter? Can the site be made safer? Can a volunteer sit instead of stand while serving? Being-proactive in considering the work conditions as well as the needs and abilities of the volunteer will pay big dividends in making it possible for older volunteers to share their tremendous gifts.

- Aids to memory

  Many older people have very good memories. However, short term memory does change with age. Certain accommodations can make the volunteer-effort successful for all volunteers, young and old. For example, complicated, multi-step tasks and instructions can be simplified and provided in written form. Reminders can be given verbally or in writing as well.

3. Managing older volunteers

- Position Description

  To lay the groundwork for managing volunteers, we recommend that you start with clear position descriptions for all volunteers. The position description allows you to set out in a straightforward way what is expected of the volunteer and what the volunteer can expect from you. Taking the time to go over the position description with the volunteer allows you both to clear up any questions and set the stage for a successful volunteer experience.

- Orientation & Training

  Orientation and training are very important for all volunteers. Orientation is a time to learn about the needs and interests of the volunteers as well as the time to provide information as to what the expectations are, what tasks will be performed and how to perform them. It is also a time to provide appropriate background information, such as why the task is important or what is to be accomplished and how it fits into the mission of the organization. Matching volunteers with a task or project that they will find enjoyable as well as challenging may help assure success in the effort. Solid orientation and training are invaluable in assuring that the final goals of the project are met.

People have different learning styles, so the orientation and training should accommodate those differences as much as possible. Some guidelines abstracted from a report by National Service Fellow Caroline E. Crocoli are as follows:

Some individuals are auditory learners. They learn by hearing the trainer's key points and they reinforce this learning by offering spoken feedback. With older volunteers, it is important to make whatever accommodations are necessary to assure that they can hear the presentation.

Others are visual learners. They learn by seeing key points in written form or in some other kind of visual medium. They tend to recall what they have read or seen. Older volunteers who are visually impaired may need certain accommodations such as appropriate lighting, large print and high contrast on written materials to help them serve with greater success.

We all learn from doing. Allowing time for the volunteer to enjoy "on-the-job" training by offering peer support and shadowing are other ways to assure that the volunteers will find their niche in the organization.

- Supervision

Supervision is important for all volunteers. It is important to know whom to contact when assistance and guidance is needed. Volunteers must have someone whom they can call when schedules change or emergencies arise. Providing volunteers a schedule, a contact number and a procedure to follow will provide not only a sense of security but also an understanding that their work is meaningful and valuable.

A supervisor should be available when needed, but also throughout the activity or project. Providing oversight and recognizing the accomplishments of the volunteers will not only assure success, but is incentive for the volunteers to give their best efforts.

When the project is complete, scheduling time to de-brief will be invaluable when planning future projects. Managers who take time to give direction, provide support, invite their volunteers' perspectives and ideas, and listen to their concerns will benefit from the process.

- On-going support

  All volunteers appreciate support, and for some older volunteers it may be necessary to their sense of accomplishment. Continuous support can be formal, regularly scheduled in-service training, or informal "check-ins" to see how the project is progressing. Either method allows the manager to bring additional information and knowledge that will help the volunteer succeed. It also provides a sense of reassurance that the volunteer is not alone.

- Evaluation

  "How am I doing?" For conscientious volunteers, this is a question that is to be expected. Volunteers need to know that what they are doing is important, meaningful and will make a difference in the lives of others and their community. The evaluation process is a way of providing an answer to the question.

  The word "evaluation" evokes visions of surveys, questionnaires or measurement scales. Volunteer managers can complete formal evaluation instruments (there are many available online). For our purposes, the term is broader, and can be less formal. A good place to start is by reviewing the volunteer's position description with him or her and providing positive feedback such as saying "You are doing fine," or "You are doing well, but here are some suggestions to help you do even better". This evaluation may be in the form of an easy conversation. No matter what form, feedback and reinforcement is important to those who have invested their time, talents and resources in a volunteer project.

- Recognition

  A performance evaluation is one way to recognize the work of the volunteers.

  Another means of recognizing volunteers may be to host a volunteer recognition banquet. For many Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion Programs an annual banquet or formal celebration is a standard form of recognition. The celebration may include all volunteers sharing a meal, entertainment and honoring volunteers individually.

  Typically, RSVP does not have all the volunteers together for in-service trainings, so the banquet is perhaps the one time to gather a large group of the volunteers together in one place to say "thank you." Sometimes RSVP volunteers who come to the banquet are surprised that there are so many other RSVP volunteers doing so many different things. It is an eye-opener.

  Recognition does not have to be in the form of an annual banquet, however. There are many publications available with ideas on ways to honor volunteers. One such

article is entitled "101 Ways to Recognize Volunteers". The simplest and most common way to recognize is to say, "Thank you" often, and mean it. For some, a sincere expression of appreciation is all that is needed. Cards, notes, plaques, pins, and other tokens or awards may also be ways to show appreciation.

If volunteers play an important role in the organization, a volunteer manager would be wise to publicize the valuable contributions made by highlighting the volunteers' impact on the mission of the organization or agency and the services they provide. This may be accomplished by sharing the work of the volunteers at staff in-service meetings, by including volunteers at staff functions and special events, and through newsletters and the local media. News briefs, articles and photos of the volunteers and their achievements will not only highlight the individuals and the organization, but may also bring more volunteers and donors.

4. Conclusions

- Older volunteers as a resource

  As noted at the beginning of this article, older volunteers are a tremendous and growing resource. In the future, there will be increasing numbers of older people who will have time to volunteer. They will have a level of knowledge, skills and resources that will be unprecedented. Many of them have formed social attitudes that lead them to want to share their knowledge and abilities in making a positive difference, helping others. Appropriately tailored volunteer opportunities will appeal to them, and our organizations and communities will benefit. Our national leaders have fostered the growth of an ethic of service. Older volunteers can and will answer that call.

- With proper training and management, older volunteers can handle a wide variety of assignments

- Stereotypes about older volunteers are misleading. With appropriate training and support, people of any age and varying capabilities will be able to make very significant contributions.

- It is worth the investment to help older volunteers succeed. When volunteer managers invest their time to recruit and support older volunteers, the return on that investment is more than worth the time and effort. Studies have shown that on a strictly monetary basis, older volunteers more than pay for themselves, because of their work ethic, their wisdom, their experience and their abilities. Older volunteers will greatly enrich our organizations and support our causes.

  Recruit older volunteers. You will be glad you did.

This article offers insights and ideas from two veteran directors of Senior Corps programs. Senior Corps is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The three programs of Senior Corps are

> The **Foster Grandparent Program** (FGP) - engages people age 55 and older to serve children with special needs in schools, day care centers, hospitals and homes. Volunteers serve 15 to 40 hours per week. Those who are eligible receive a stipend of $2.65 per hour to supplement their income, and other non-monetary benefits. http://www.seniorcorps.gov/about/programs/fg.asp
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> The **Senior Companion Program** (SCP) - engages people age 55 and older to serve adults with special needs to help them remain independent in their homes. Volunteers serve 15 to 40 hours per week. Those who are eligible receive a stipend of $2.65 per hour to supplement their income, and other non-monetary benefits. http://www.seniorcorps.gov/about/programs/sc.asp
>
> The **Retired and Senior Volunteer Program** (RSVP) - engages people age 55 and over in a broad range of service activities. They may be of any income level; they are not paid a stipend. They serve from a few hours a week to many more; some serve on short-term, episodic or special projects. RSVP volunteers may be placed with any public or private non-profit organization, or health care organization, whether non-profit or for-profit.
> http://www.seniorcorps.gov/about/programs/rsvp.asp

Ken Murray is Director of the Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) sponsored by Southern Maine Agency on Aging in Scarborough, Maine. Jolene Niernberger is Director of the Foster Grandparent Program and Senior Companion Program sponsored by Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas.