



The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities

The *Rural Senior Volunteers in Rural Communities* project examined the role of senior volunteers in three rural areas within Nova Scotia to understand the contributions of volunteering for seniors and their communities. The project included a literature review, focus groups with rural seniors and interviews with key informants. This publication is one of three providing highlights from the project.

Rural Senior Volunteers: Organizational Considerations

Volunteering in Rural Communities

Senior volunteers are at the heart of sustaining rural communities. They commit time, energy and expertise to the community tasks at hand. In return, senior volunteers experience gains in levels of physical activity and life satisfaction, greater exposure to the wider social world, better social supports and better mental health, as well as the maintenance of cognitive abilities and a decrease in television watching. Many senior volunteers benefit immensely from volunteering, but they sometimes do so at the cost of overextending themselves.

Structural Impediments to Volunteering

To enhance the recruitment of senior volunteers into organizations, it is important to maintain the wellbeing of all volunteers in community organizations. The issues of organizational survival and declining membership and the perception of a seeming lack of volunteerism among younger generations (including those who are newly retiring) are not, however, solely individual problems. The burnout among the seniors who do too much and the cost of volunteering to those who can't afford to volunteer in the ways they would like to, are the result of structural impediments and changes over time which have not been adequately addressed by society in general. These impediments and changes include

- physical barriers (inaccessibility for those with various disabilities)
- closure of local schools: lack of local space/resources

- retraction of church-based organizations and services
- changing needs for caregiving and of caregivers
- centralization of services and commercial enterprises (such as gas stations, grocery stores, pharmacies)
- labour market restructuring and the massive entry of women into the paid labour market

An appreciation of the social processes involved in addressing these impediments to volunteering in rural communities requires organizations to radically rethink and rework the ways and means of recruiting newly retired seniors into volunteerism.

Recruitment

Recruitment of volunteers into community organizations is most often a concern for organizations who have not consciously built in successor groups of volunteers to their organizations. Any organization that draws on volunteers from only one generation will ultimately face this problem. When seniors volunteer, it is often a result of personal circumstance. Senior volunteers see a need that is related to them as individuals or members of their community.

The Best Ways to Recruit Senior Volunteers

- personal contact
- word-of-mouth through a community network
- stress the benefit of volunteering as beneficial to the individual
- outline the benefits of volunteering to community
- demonstrate the usefulness of the volunteer tasks
- provide meaningful markers of accomplishment

More Clever Recruitment Strategies

Senior volunteers bring occupational skills and life experience to their organizations. They describe their contributions to sustaining their rural communities through volunteer organizations in six key ways. Senior volunteers like other volunteers are more interested in seeing their contributions count than in simply responding to recruitment advertisements. When recruiting senior volunteers, it is best to stress the social benefits (and indeed the fun and enjoyment of volunteering) to volunteers as well as to demonstrate how the community organization looking for volunteers is:

- 1) supporting and providing services which complement and also support and providing services that various levels of government have not provided;
- 2) fundraising and bringing financial resources into the community at large and the various communities within communities with real accountability;
- 3) passing on culture, language, history and opportunities for equality to the next generation as well as to visitors in the region.

Biggest Individual Barriers to Volunteering

- financial cost
- fatigue or burnout
- available transportation

Community Organizations Can Address Individual Barriers for Senior Volunteers

- reimburse costs whenever possible
- provide support (opportunities to acquire knowledge, social time, food, drink, opportunities to network)
- identify beginning and end points for volunteer tasks
- break down goals into discrete and concrete tasks
- provide recognition both formally (through public means) and informally (with sincere pats on the back)
- create successor groups of volunteers
- coordinate transportation
- lobby for income tax credit for volunteer hours



Highlights from *The Role of Senior Volunteers in Sustaining Rural Communities* by Jane Gordon and Brenda Hattie with contributions from Sandra Murphy and Rusty Neal, June 2008.

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For further information contact:

Nova Scotia Centre on Aging
Mount Saint Vincent University
Halifax, NS B3M 2J6
902-457-6546
nsca@msvu.ca
www.msvu.ca/nsca