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COMMUNITY SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES AND OLDER AMERICANS

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Abstract

Contemporary society has brought about a situation where older Americans have limited opportunities for contributory roles. They have limited involvement in the development and provision of services aimed to promote their own well-being and the welfare and well-being of others. This article examines the importance of contributory roles and functions in light of theoretical perspectives, social work values, and research evidence which indicates that life satisfaction and psychological well being of older persons is related to continued productivity and the opportunity to carry substantive social roles. This article reviews and discusses contributory opportunities for older persons as part of community service employment programs, sponsored volunteer programs, and associations of older persons and substantiates the benefits of these organized efforts for older Americans, sponsoring organizations, and service consumers. Continuation and expansion of contributory roles for older persons will improve the quality of their life, will reduce the extent to which they are considered a resource consuming national problem, and will contribute to the development of a conception which views older Americans as a valuable national resource.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTRIBUTORY ROLES FOR OLDER AMERICANS

The idea of using public funds to enable older persons to contribute to their own well-being and that of others rather than being passive recipients of benefits and services is a relatively new one for the general public and for human service professionals. Yet, it is one which demands examination and exploration in the light of both social service principles, human services needs, and what research indicates about the life satisfaction and well-being of older persons being related to continued productivity and the opportunity to carry meaningful social roles.

Old age is inevitably associated with incremental losses and declining competencies; however, the alienation of older persons is often associated with their dispossession from meaningful roles and functions which is brought about primarily by political and economical forces of

our contemporary society. Societal forces deprive a large fraction of older persons of job incumbency, adequate income, and the opportunity to play contributory roles unless they are among the fortunate whose wealth and status in the community cushion them against exclusion from community participation and provide them with options for contributory roles and creative self-expressions. The less fortunate aged are perceived as passive consumers of societal resources, made available to them by national benefits and services primarily through the Social Security Program and the Older Americans Act. The status of beneficiary and service consumer has little prestige in our contemporary society in which one's command of resources and contributions are highly valued (14, 18).

The importance that contribution plays in determining status and prestige in various societies has been a topic of continued interest in the social science literature. In all cultures the nature of attachment of the individual to the social system varies through time and is usually related to the contributions made by a person to the society in which he lives. In cultures with traditional orientations past contributions are valued and considered on behalf of older persons in their advanced years of life. The contributions are seen in a past-present-future perspective, meaning that one's past contributions count today and will continue to count in the future. In our contemporary society, unlike in traditional cultures, contributions are seen primarily in their present light, therefore, the status and prestige of the aged decline along with the diminishing contributions on their part to the society in which they live (7, 14). Dowd suggested that in the case of the aged, their decreased status and prestige is the eventual result of their reduced contribution potential vis-a-vis their social environment to the point where all that remains for them is the humble capacity to comply (9). Four primary functions appear to be indicated as most important determinants of status and prestige in old age. These include advisory (how much is one's advice sought and/or needed), contributory (to what extent can one contribute to the well-being of others), control (to what extent can one care for himself and control his own destiny), and residual (to what extent is one's earlier status and contribution recognized) (18).

Empirical evidence indicates that in addition to good health and sufficient financial resources, the ability to engage in meaningful activities and the opportunities to contribute to the well-being of others are important correlates of well-being in old age. Research indicates that not all older persons desire to continue an active pace of life. For those who attribute importance to active involvement in contributory roles, however, having the opportunity to be active and to contribute to the well-being of others is of primary importance (16).

The ability to engage in meaningful contributory roles plays importance in all stages of life. For older persons this issue often constitutes a serious existential problem. The glamorized golden years, portrayed in travel ads showing retirees walking contentedly in the

Florida sunshine or manicuring a small garden, is a gross exaggeration of life in retirement. While some older persons may be contented not having the pressure of the world of work, there are many others for whom growing old in a period of inflation means that they need full or part time opportunities to work in order to maintain or achieve a minimal standard of living (3). For a significant segment of the older population the opportunity to work on a full or part time basis is necessary for a minimal level of instrumental security, and for another segment of the older population the ability to be contributory, productive and community oriented is important for their psychological well-being (6).

Need for Sponsored Community Service Opportunities

Large numbers of older persons in contemporary society are gradually and/or abruptly denied of recognized and meaningful roles and functions, including being forced into retirement against their wishes. For these reasons, there have been attempts to counteract societal pressures and to create opportunities for older persons to invest their energies and creativities and to make it possible for those interested to work on a full or part time basis. There are additional reasons for the need to develop sponsored community service opportunities for older Americans. These include the changing population trends in our society and the growing demand for human services which go unmet because of scarcity of resources on the part of community agencies.

Current population trends indicate that informal supportive networks have been declining and will continue to decline in the future. This is demonstrated by declining fractions of intact (husband and wife headed) families, by rising numbers of one person headed households, and by the increasing percentage of female participation in the labor force. These trends indicate that the family as an institution will have a reduced ability in the future to provide the necessary attention and assistance needed by the very young, by select groups of adults (ill, disabled, retarded), and by impaired aged. These functions will have to be provided for, to an increasing extent, by formal organizations funded from public sources. These organizations are facing an increasing demand for their services, at a time when their financial resources do not allow the needed expansion of services. These agencies will be obliged, therefore, to use, to a greater extent, the services offered by volunteers. However, as indicated above, changing population trends indicate that the availability of the traditional volunteers (married housewives) will decline, and therefore, service agencies will be in need of manpower from new sources (4).

Older persons, whose numbers and relative fraction of the total population is projected to continue to rise in years to come, can be seen as prime candidates to provide this much needed effort. Research indicates that only a small fraction of the older population (those who volunteered in their younger years) find their way to volunteer their services on their own. Self-initiated volunteerism in old age tends to

follow previously established patterns, namely, those with previous voluntary association tend to continue their participation patterns into old age, while those who did not engage in voluntary roles in earlier years continue to be non-joiners in old age as well. Research also indicates that predictors of voluntary intent among older persons parallel predictors of actual participation patterns -- the younger, the better educated, those with a perceived interest and ability to serve others are more likely candidates to express an interest in volunteerism. It is obvious, therefore, that organized efforts are needed to recruit, train, and employ the services of older persons in community services (11).

Community Service Opportunities for Older Americans

A review of the literature reveals three types of organized efforts which provide older persons with the opportunity to help themselves and to help others. These are federal employment programs for the aged, Action sponsored volunteer programs, and associations of older persons.

Officially, the primary purpose of employment and Action programs is to enhance the economic and social well-being of the program participants. There is a realization on the part of initiators and funders of such programs that there is a sizeable fraction of the older population who live in states of economic deprivation and many of them do not have the opportunity to contribute on their own to the well-being of others in their communities. These programs aim, therefore, to address the economic well being of program participants providing them with remuneration and/or stipends for their time and effort. These programs also profess to offer their participants channels of involvement which serve to reduce the isolation which a sizeable fraction of them would otherwise experience in their communities (4).

There is an awareness on the part of initiators and sponsors of these programs that critical and extensive community service needs go unmet because of the scarcity of financial resources. These community service programs, by capitalizing on the time, energy, experience, and skills of older persons, make it possible for community service agencies to serve more people, to address more needs, and in some instances to address unmet needs by engaging in new service ventures. These programs while important for older persons are also instrumental in augmenting the efforts of human service organizations, thereby making it possible for more people of various ages to be beneficiaries of human services (4, 11).

The primary purpose of the associations of older persons is to provide benefits to their own membership in a variety of areas (pensions, financial benefits, insurance benefits, travel cost discounts, purchase discounts, etc.). They also aim to improve the images of older persons in our society, and to a more limited extent to work on legisla-

tive and programatic issues which benefit a larger segment of the older population. From time to time, associations of older persons mobilize their membership to lobby for improved benefits and for other legislative issues of interest to older persons. Most of the associations of older persons, with the exception of Gray Panthers, are not even mildly militant in lobbying for their causes. For the most part, then, associations of older persons provide opportunities for their members for social and political involvement and those that sponsor community service employment programs provide opportunity for older persons to invest their energies for the benefit of others.

Volunteer community service opportunities for older persons exist in nonprofit agencies. The traditional volunteers, however, include primarily those who do not have to work during their adult years. The sponsored community service employment and volunteer programs make it possible for a larger segment of the older population without prior volunteer or human service experience to engage in such activities on a volunteer basis, for a stipend, and/or for pay. The traditional and sponsored volunteer programs and the sponsored community service programs for older persons provide an organized framework for investment of energy by older persons for the benefit of service consumers in a variety of human service organizations in the community, in congregate living environments, and in institutional settings (11).

Community service programs saw their beginning in Mainstream, initiated by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965. Older Americans were one of the target groups to be served by Mainstream. At this time, the Department of Labor has jurisdiction over employment programs which have seen over the years growth, retrenchment, and regrouping. After years of legislative deliberations, community service employment programs were consolidated in the Older Americans Community Service Act (Title IX-1973). Since 1975, this legislative enactment has been the major vehicle for the distribution of federal funds for (a) nationally administered contracts offering part time jobs for low income older persons, and (b) statewide programs providing part time work for older persons. At present, eighty percent of funds go to five national sponsors: Green Thumb, National Council of Senior Citizens, National Council on the Aging, National Retired Teachers Association-American Association of Retired Persons, and the U.S. Forest Service. These national associations also provide the sponsorship for the locally administered community service programs. The other twenty percent of the funds have been allocated to state governments for the employment of older persons in community services. Title IX program participants numbered 12,400 in 1975. Their numbers grew to 22,400 in 1977 and to 47,500 in 1979 under what is now the Title V Program of the Older American Act. During 1978, the average hourly wage of older persons employed under this program was \$2.80. An additional number of 24,600 older persons (about one percent of all participants) found employment with the Comprehensive Employment and Training Program, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Labor (21).

Action--Older American Volunteer Programs--the federal volunteer agency established in 1971, administers several volunteer programs. The more extensive of these programs include: (a) Foster Grandparent Program, (b) Senior Companion Program, and (c) the Retired Senior Volunteer Program. Under the Foster Grandparent Program, in 1976, 13,500 older persons worked with children in a variety of settings including hospitals, homes for dependent and neglected children, institutions and correctional facilities. The primary goal of this program is, as its name implies, to provide grandparental love and care to children with special needs. In 1978, 16,600 older persons offered their services to 41,500 children (21).

The Senior Companion Program was modeled after the Foster Grandparent Program with its purpose to offer assistance and attention to older people. Senior companions, who are themselves low income older persons, provide their services in private homes in the community as well as in residential care settings for the aged including nursing homes. This program is rather small and involved only 1,372 in 1976 and 3,300 in 1978.

Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) provides volunteer opportunities for older persons, most of whom are without prior volunteer experience, in a wide range of social, educational, health, rehabilitation, nutrition and other service agencies. In 1976, RSVP operated in 50 states and also in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. This program provided in 1976 volunteer opportunities for approximately 200,000 older persons. Participants in this program in 1978 numbered 250,000 at an average cost of \$80 per volunteer a year (21).

As indicated, associations of older persons and public and private human service organizations initiated demonstration projects which were the forerunners for the categorical Community Service and Action programs. The administration of these programs have taken place on the local level. The funding for community service opportunities for older persons has come almost exclusively from the Federal government. Only in very few instances have projects, initiated by local service agencies, been funded by private foundations or from local funding sources.

Community Service Program Impact

Descriptive data from program narratives indicate program benefits to program participants (satisfaction with roles and functions and with funds received), and to beneficiaries of their efforts (children, adults, and older service consumers). Children are reported to have been aided to better adjust to school functioning and to have a better feeling about themselves (15). Physical and mental status of retarded children have been improved by the efforts of community service program participants (12). Sponsored volunteer programs have improved the satisfac-

tion of program participants and that of those who received their attention (11). Widows who were recipients of attention from volunteers reported that they have been helped and a majority of those receiving attention became volunteers themselves (1).

A number of programs were more systematically evaluated, some employing control groups in their research design. Reynolds' study of 16 schools utilizing older persons as service providers demonstrated benefits to providers, children, and school administration (19). Cowan's research on the use of older persons as school mental health aides indicated that program participants enjoyed their work, were open to new learning and training, as well as the satisfaction of school administrators with the quality of their work. Children, evaluated by teachers and aides, were found to have improved in their school adjustment (8). Ferrari studied foster grandparents in work with problem children in slum area schools and a control group of non-elderly volunteers working with similar children. Children interviewed reported that they were helped most by the foster grandparents. Attitude testing showed that the program had a more positive effect upon the lives of foster grandparents than on members of a control group (10).

Gray's study of a group of foster grandparents and a control group of adults who were not service providers, indicated that the foster grandparents experienced greater life satisfaction as a result of their work (13). Saltz' preliminary findings of a nationwide longitudinal study of foster grandparents in homes for dependent children, day care programs, and in work with retarded and emotionally disturbed individuals were highly indicative of effectiveness (20). Greenleigh Associates were employed by the Federal Administration on Aging to monitor a sample of 10 of the first 21 Foster Grandparent Programs in the first two to three years of operation. Their findings indicated benefits to program participants, financial savings to agencies, and improvement of agency services (17).

Kirschner Associates employed for a nationwide evaluation of Senior Aide Programs identified a number of positive attributes of senior workers in community service as compared to younger persons: richness of experience, stability, dependability, and willingness to accept modest wages. Noting that most were employed in non-profit community agencies, their conclusion was that the older worker may also be of value for the small private employer, despite the general reluctance on their part to employ older persons (2). Senior Companion Program impacts are illustrated by Breslau & Haug (1972) who found that program goals were well met for volunteers, and for community individuals serviced in a one-to-one basis in the Cincinnati Catholic Charities Service Friend Project (5).

The reviewed research indicates that older persons can play a significant contributory role in community service programs. These studies point to increased life satisfaction and improved social and

personal adjustment for service providers, financial savings, freeing of professional time, and improvements of agency services. These in addition to the program benefits for the children, adults, and older persons who were, of course, the consumers of the services provided. One must conclude, therefore, that the community service employment and sponsored volunteer programs provide community service agencies with an invaluable manpower resource from which they and their clientele stand to benefit to a considerable extent. In turn, the opportunity for older persons to play contributory roles enhances their economic, social and mental well-being.

Implications for the Future

Review of community service programs leads one to a number of important conclusions which have clear implications for policies affecting communities, human service agencies and older Americans.

First, while there is little doubt that participation in community service roles enhances the economic, social, and psychological well being of the older person, at present the opportunity for this in our society either in business or community service is limited. The area of community service appears to offer rich potential for further development. Present programs have only scratched the surface of need. The evaluated programs clearly demonstrate the older person's capability for and interest in community service. Urgent need exists to gain wider public acceptance for the employment of older persons and for formulation of a national policy to institutionalize part time remunerative community service employment for persons who seek them, for whatever reason--income supplementation, the chance to contribute to society, or merely for self-enhancement.

Second, traditional volunteer activities provide valuable instrumentalities for negating the deleterious effect of retirement. Yet, traditional volunteer activity may serve the needs of only a select group: the better educated, and the more affluent. Volunteer community service may not interest or serve the need of low income persons. This suggests that ways will be needed to imbue volunteering with greater status, that training will be a necessary component if meaningful and effective service is to be provided, and that financial stipends may contribute to an increase in the number of older volunteers.

Third, paid employment and volunteering for a set stipend appears to be an important alternative, especially for low income persons who need financial supplementation. There is reason to believe that since community service represents a new area of endeavor for most persons that training must be built into programs to assure maximum benefits to service recipients. Surprisingly, few programs now provide this. In addition to multiplying community service opportunities, ways must be found to permit older persons to remain part time in areas of employment which they are already skilled.

Fourth, currently available community service opportunities for older Americans constitute only a very modest beginning in need of considerable expansion and funding stability in the future. These programs deserve greater local and national recognition than they are presently receiving. RSVP, the largest of sponsored volunteer programs, offers community service opportunities for approximately one percent of older Americans. Other Action programs which carry some stipends and the community service employment programs reach only less than one-half of one percent of older Americans. It is obvious, therefore, that considerably more employment opportunities, part time employment, and sponsored volunteer services need to be developed to augment the efforts of community service agencies in order to benefit older persons and the communities in which they live.

Since private agencies do not have the necessary resources to expand community service opportunities to any significant extent, it is evident that the viability and continuance of these programs and the expansion of new options for community service will depend upon favorable public policy and financing, as well as on the initiative and ongoing sponsorship of community agencies.

Fifth and finally, expanding employment opportunities for older Americans on a full or part time basis, increasing their options for participation in traditional and action volunteer programs, and their increased involvement in formal associations of older persons will enhance the quality of their life. It will reduce the extent to which they are considered a resource-consuming national problem and pave the way for acquisition of a new and contributory status in our society whereby they will be recognized as a valuable national resource.

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