

Senior Volunteers: A Priceless Resource

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Topic: Volunteer Risk Management

Note: This article is excerpted from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center's book, [No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management—5th Edition](#).

Seniors are participating as volunteers for nonprofit organizations in record numbers. Participants include AmeriCorps—formerly Senior Corps, the federally-funded national “network of programs that tap the experience, skills, and talents of older citizens to meet community challenges” (Source: www.nationalservice.gov) to seniors who serve in large numbers of nonprofits throughout the country, to senior church members, grandparents, and others who pursue local volunteer opportunities in human services, recreation, cultural arts, and social services.

Recent census information states that “One out of every five Americans—some 72 million people—will be 65 years of age or older in 2020. This is 20 percent of the population. The age group 85 and older is now the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population.” (Source: www.census.gov.) According to a report by Independent Sector and AARP, 47 percent of working Americans 50 years and older volunteer, while 42 percent of retired Americans in this age group volunteer. The report notes, “Retired volunteers aged 50 and over are even more dedicated than those still working...they give substantially more hours per month.” (Source: Experience at Work: Volunteering and Giving Among Americans 50 and Over, www.independentsector.org). With population increases of 31 percent (50- 64 years old) and 12.5 percent (65 and older) projected between 2000 and 2010, older Americans represent a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit and volunteer organizations.

The benefits to seniors who volunteer include:

1. providing an outlet for professional skills, talents and interests;
2. providing a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment; and
3. providing growth and learning opportunities, keys to a successful aging experience.

The benefits a nonprofit realizes by recruiting senior volunteers include:

1. access to multitalented, experienced volunteers whose myriad talents can quickly fill a nonprofit's volunteer wish list; and
2. enhancing the volunteer experience for volunteers of all ages by bringing a diverse group of individuals together to work on behalf of a community or cause.

Risk Management Do's and Don'ts When Engaging Seniors in Service

Do:

1. Think about the types of assignments and responsibilities senior volunteers will have in your agency before you begin a targeted recruitment effort. Respect these valuable volunteers by planning for their involvement in your nonprofit well before they arrive at your new volunteer information session or recruitment drive.
2. Ask prospective senior volunteers for input about their involvement in your nonprofit. Find out what tasks they are comfortable performing and what tasks or activities they cannot or do not want to perform.
3. Require that senior volunteers, along with all other volunteers, complete a Medical Information Form

containing information on special medical conditions (such as allergies), all medications and at what dosage they are taken, and key contact information in the event of a medical or other emergency.

4. Engage seniors who initiate disclosure of a specific physical or other limitation. Explore with the seniors what they are comfortable doing or how the task or assignment can be modified to address the limitation rather than rule out the possibility of their participating in the activity or contributing to your agency.
5. Learn about the special talents and skills of senior volunteers. Your fundraising chair or Foster Grandparent may be a retired or working risk manager, and able and willing to serve on your risk management committee in addition to performing program-related service; or your volunteer senior companion or Meals-on-Wheels driver may be a former salsa instructor who is willing to donate dance lessons to your silent auction.
6. Provide a position description to each senior volunteer in order to convey your expectations with respect to the volunteer's role and responsibilities in your agency. The job description should provide the kind of information the senior volunteer will need to determine whether he or she can fully perform the tasks you require.
7. Include specific job requirements (e.g., lifting boxes weighing up to 30 pounds) on your volunteer position descriptions. Spelling out specific tasks lets prospective volunteers know what you require while reducing the chance that a mismatch will be made.
8. Schedule regular breaks for volunteers working shifts of two hours or longer. Encourage all volunteers to let you know when they need to take more frequent rest, stretch or comfort breaks than are scheduled.
9. Provide an orientation and appropriate training for senior volunteers. Every volunteer needs information about what you expect, as well as resources available to help them succeed while working for you—just as your staff members do in order to perform as you wish.
10. Create a welcoming environment for senior volunteers. If there is a substantial learning curve for service, consider pairing new volunteers with experienced "mentor" volunteers who can show them the ropes. Consider pairing people by age group so as to avoid any resentment an experienced senior might feel being shown how to chop vegetables in a soup kitchen, paint a kitchen wall in a home rebuilding project, or stuff envelopes at an advocacy group by a teenager or young adult, or educate all your volunteers how to work with people of all ages as part of their volunteer experience.
11. Strive to provide flexibility in work hours and assignments. Keep in mind that all seniors have busy lives that may involve providing child care, caring for elderly parents, managing family matters, other volunteer commitments and more.
12. Remember that patience is a virtue when supervising all volunteers. A senior whose memory "isn't what it used to be" may be among your most active and valued volunteers. The occasional need to repeat instructions is well worth the benefit you'll reap from dedicated, mature volunteers who believe in your mission. Also, consider whether perhaps it was the instructions that needed fine-tuning and not the senior's hearing or comprehension.
13. Encourage senior volunteers to ask questions while serving your agency. Like volunteers in other age groups, some seniors may be reluctant to ask questions because they fear that the question suggests ignorance or inattentiveness. Gently encourage questions and make certain all your volunteers know "there is no such thing as a dumb question."

Don't:

1. Don't make assumptions about physical or other challenges facing seniors simply because of their age. Assuming that any volunteer 60 or older will not have the energy for coaching duties, or jobs that require prolonged standing or walking, is a grave mistake.
2. Don't assign senior volunteers "busy work." Remember that perhaps more so than other groups of volunteers, seniors infrequently look for "one day" or temporary volunteer opportunities. Don't miss the opportunity to engage a volunteer who will make a meaningful contribution to your nonprofit.
3. Don't exempt senior volunteers from your screening process because you believe it is disrespectful to screen mature adults or you believe that older people do not pose a risk to vulnerable clients. All prospective workers should be subject to a screening process based on an analysis of the risks of the position. A rigorous process should be employed whenever a volunteer (or paid staff member) will have unsupervised contact with vulnerable clients, whether they are young, disabled or elderly.