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Recruiting Volunteers to Teach a Community-Based Wellness Program: Seniors CAN. ¹

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Abstract

This report surveys the literature available on volunteers, particularly older volunteers, examines how the desire for lifelong learning may encourage volunteers, and discusses the connection between volunteering and well-being. It identifies volunteers from two groups: peer-educators from the target audience over 55 years of age; and the staff of agencies that already provide services to elderly clients, such as assisted living facilities or low-income housing agencies that want to add wellness education instruction. Then the report identifies locations to find potential volunteer older adult peer-educators; recommends proposals for recruiting such volunteers as well as paid staff of social service agencies to teach the program; and outlines steps to take in such a recruitment.

Introduction

One out of every five people in the United States is 55 years of age or older (U.S. Census, 2001). This rapidly growing age group has increased needs for social as well as health care services. However, focusing on their needs as a potential drain on society may overlook the vast resources in the aging population. This population cohort, either as a part of the labor force or retired, represents a significant asset for a community. With a creative approach, some of their social service needs can be fulfilled by utilizing the skills of highly qualified peers. Establishing networks of “voluntary groups and community-based organizations” is critical in establishing social and economic regeneration of a community (National Advisory Group for Continuing

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Education and Lifelong Learning, 2000).

Seventy percent of adults report having served as a volunteer at some time in their lives (Hodgkinson, 1995). Volunteering is defined as unpaid work, whether it is performed by an individual, or a group of individuals, with the intent of benefiting others (Scheier, 1982; Van Til, 1988). Van Willigen (2000:S308) defines voluntarism as “unpaid work on behalf of those with whom one has contractual, familial, or friendship obligations.”

The purpose of this report is to discuss and guide efforts to recruit volunteers to teach the Seniors CAN curriculum offered by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE). The Seniors CAN program was developed to help older adults maintain their independent living status and much of the program material could benefit a wide variety of older adults no matter what their residential status (Collins and Hernandez, 2000). Community-based education can be an effective tool to improve older adults' quality of life by enhancing their sense of mastery. Building upon the rapidly growing area of mind-body connection, the ultimate goal is to extend the time frame of participants' independent living by enhancing their knowledge of how to solve everyday problems. As a community-based educational program for older adults, Seniors CAN is designed to enhance mental acuity, self-efficacy and wellness with the end objective of improving quality of life (Collins, 2001).

In order for the program to reach its largest audience, a considerable expansion of instructors must occur. Currently, the course is taught using one paid instructor from Cooperative Extension, and volunteer instructors that include employees from the Las Vegas Housing Authority and Nevada Hand, and one Spanish-speaking peer-educator. The interactive nature of the curriculum with group participation and discussion suggests that having people with a wide span of experience, especially peer-educators, conduct the classes will help generate continued success of the program. Current experience suggests that this can be accomplished by

volunteers from two groups: peer-educators from the target audience over 55 years of age; and the staff of agencies that already provide services to elderly clients, such as assisted living facilities or low-income housing agencies that want to add wellness education instruction. The plan to secure volunteer instructors will target both of these specific groups.

The Seniors CAN wellness educational program has been taught to more than twenty groups (of from five to 35 participants) in urban and rural southern Nevada since it was developed in 1999. Overall impact of "Seniors CAN," is assessed with a pre/post-test design utilizing the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978); the Mastery Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980); and an instrument developed to assess knowledge gain on nutrition, safety and wellness information presented in the Seniors CAN program. The results to date show significantly decreased loneliness, increased mastery and knowledge gain from pre- to post-test on each assessment instrument ($p < .0001$).

This report will: (1) study the literature available on volunteers, particularly older volunteers, examine how the desire for lifelong learning may encourage volunteers, and discuss the connection between volunteering and well-being; (2) identify locations to find potential volunteer older adult peer-educators (3) recommend proposals for recruiting such volunteers as well as paid staff of social service agencies to teach the program; and (4) outline steps to take in such a recruitment.

Seniors: Volunteering, Well-Being and Lifelong Learning

Before establishing proposed criteria for recruiting instructors, it is helpful to recognize how people volunteer, the connection between volunteering and well-being, and the concept of lifelong learning as a part of the desire to volunteer.

How Do Older Adults Volunteer?

Retired persons of any age and individuals over 65 years of age can be viewed as a vast

resource whose potential in the voluntary sector has yet to be fully tapped (Cnaan & Cwikel, 1992; Tierce and Seelbach, 1987). While research has found that volunteering increases with age (Van Willigen, 2000, Curtis, Grabb, & Baer, 1992; Janoski & Wilson, 1995; Knoke & Thompson, 1977; Umberson, Chan, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996), some other research notes that after middle age volunteering tends to decrease (Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Hayghe, 1991; Kim & Hong, 1998). Gallagher (1994) found that seniors spend more hours as volunteers, while Van Willigen (2000) suggests that this may result from the greater amount of “uncommitted time” seniors have available. Volunteerism does drop off considerably after 80 or 85 (Kincade et al, 1996).

Cnaan and Cwikel (1992) examined the issues and motivations of persons over 65 years of age who volunteer, and noted the existence of a variety of differing definitions of “volunteering.” A U.S. Department of Labor Study conducted in 1965 estimated that 8.7 percent of seniors over 65 are “formal volunteers” who participate in organizations. Other polls done by Louis Harris and Associates in 1981 and the Gallup Organizations in 1981 and 1985 found much higher rates, but included “informal volunteering” such as helping family and friends or neighbors. Chambre’s (1993) review of surveys focused on older adult volunteers from 1965 to 1990, and suggested that the percentage of seniors who volunteer has increased with time, citing 11 percent in 1965 and 40 percent in the early 1990s. Definitional issues of the term “volunteer,” (formal and informal) call into question the high percentage in the 1990s (Kincade et al., 1996).

Studies have found that volunteers as most likely to be women, have a higher level of income and education, be in better health and have previous experience as a volunteer (Kincade et al., 1996; Marriott Senior Volunteerism Study, 1991; Perry 1983). For the most part agreement exists regarding these general statements, based on the National Survey of Self-Care and Aging (Kincade et al., 1996), which studied all community-dwelling Medicare beneficiaries

in the contiguous U.S. who were 65 years of age or older in 1990. A stratified, multistage sample found that of the 20 percent who volunteer, a similar percentage of male and female volunteers (19 percent for female, 21 percent for male with a two percent sampling error). This same study supports previous findings that those in excellent or very good health and higher incomes are more likely to volunteer (Kincade et al, 1996). The best predictors of service to others were found to be: age and self-reported health status, along with higher education and income.

Connection between Volunteering and Well-Being

Existing research suggests volunteering may help improve “the physical and psychological well-being” of seniors by maintaining self-esteem, life satisfaction, access to support systems, and activity level, (Van Willigen, 2000; Bond, 1982; Duncan and Whitney, 1990; Dye, Goodman, Roth, Bley, and Jensen, 1973; Hunter and Linn 1980-1981; Moen, Dempster-McClain, and Williams, 1989, 1992; Musick, Herzog, and House, 1999; Oman, Thoresen, and McMahon, 1999; Perry, 1983; Young and Glasgow 1998). However, Van Willigen (2000) notes these previous studies have not sufficiently studied whether seniors’ well-being is improved by volunteerism and considers that senior volunteers already have a high level of well-being. While weaknesses in previous studies may be attributed to their research design (no control group, non-representative samples, no longitudinal studies), another weakness relates to the focus on analyzing actual outcomes as opposed to perceived benefits. As the review of the above research indicates, senior volunteers are more likely to be better educated and cite their health as good. Van Willigen (2000) used two measures of well-being from the first two waves of data from the Americans’ Changing Lives survey from 1986 and 1989: (1) the effect of volunteering on life satisfaction and (2) the physical well-being by measuring perceived health. A number of studies find perceived health and actual health to be highly correlated (Idler and Kasl, 1991; Mossey and Shapiro, 1982).

The survey found that non-volunteer seniors were more likely to report poorer health ($p < .001$). Senior volunteers reported higher levels of “life satisfaction” both in 1986 and 1989. One-fifth or 20 percent of those people volunteered less than 20 hours per year, while 31 percent reported performing 80 or more volunteer hours in the previous 12 months (Van Willigen, 2000). While Van Willigen (2000: S312) does not necessarily suggest that volunteers are more satisfied with their lives and are healthier in the first place, the report notes that “Volunteering does have positive effects on elderly adults’ physical and psychological well-being, and the more active volunteers are, the greater the benefits” (p. S314). Interestingly, church-based voluntarism, which had the greatest percentage of volunteers in both studies, was found to be the most psychologically beneficial type of volunteering. Van Willigen (2000:S317) suggests that senior volunteers will provide their assistance to those types of organizations that are more likely to impact their well-being. This might indicate the Seniors CAN program would benefit since the program is tied to the university and is devoted to improving the quality of life and well-being of older adults.

A recent study of Delaware American Association of Retired Persons members (AARP, 2001:9) found that the top three reasons the elderly gave for volunteering were: helping people, making the community a better place, and personal commitment to a cause.

Volunteering and Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning can play a major role in an older adult's ability to maintain independent living status. Research has demonstrated that an active mind may result in a healthier, extended lifestyle for seniors, while further developing the potential of seniors to make important contributions to the community. The alternative to healthy, productive living is huge increases in medical and social service costs that could drain federal, state and local budgets.

The mind-body connection becomes more powerful as we age (Rowe & Kahn 1998).

New research demonstrates the importance of ongoing mental challenges to keep the brain engaged, making successful aging a “use it or lose it” proposition for the brain as well as the body (Diamond, 1993, Snowden, 1995). Ongoing research reveals the importance of continued learning, of maintaining curiosity throughout the lifetime, asking questions and seeking answers, all activities that will actually change the nerve cells in the brain (Diamond, 1993:31).

The British National Adult Learning Survey highlighted the demand for learning linked to voluntary activity, especially for older adults 40 years of age or more (National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Life Long Learning, 2000). Volunteering for an organization helps the individual feel a part of a larger group and helps to improve self-esteem. The educational process involved in the Seniors CAN program has attraction not only for the attendees, but can also be a benefit for instructors. That ongoing educational process should not be under-estimated as an incentive for recruiting instructors for the Seniors CAN program.

The next section of this study will determine how the above information can be used to develop proposals for recruiting volunteer instructors.

Modeling the Findings - Places to Locate Potential Volunteer Educators

In deciding what population to target for the Seniors CAN instructor project, we propose to target both retired older adults and the staff of social service agencies providing services to the elderly. Since these two groups are somewhat different, retired seniors will be addressed first and various agency staff will be discussed next.

Retired Seniors

The literature has some important implications in targeting seniors to instruct the Seniors CAN project. Of the seniors who volunteer, men are almost as likely to volunteer as women, age is a factor (Kincade et. al, 1996); and only a portion are willing to volunteer on an on-going basis (AARP, 2001). Of those who volunteer for organizations, the greatest percentage volunteer for

churches although seniors will volunteer most often for an organization that provides a sense of well-being. However, only a small portion of such volunteers would be willing to teach (AARP, 2001). The issue of on-going volunteerism for seniors is an important one for the Seniors CAN project since it is a sixteen-week series of classes, as is the hesitancy of some older volunteers to serve as teachers or peer-educators.

On the other hand, Southern Nevada does not lack for people over 55 years old, which would be the ideal cohort for instructors of these classes. Between 1990 and 2000, Nevada's population of 65 and older increased by more than 61 percent (Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2001). The U. S. Census indicates approximately one out of every five Southern Nevadans is 55 or older, with an even younger age cohort of retirees.

In the 1990s Las Vegas became one of the country's top retirement destinations (Gottdiener, Collins & Dickens 1999). While it is not ranked among the top five states in terms of the number of seniors as a proportion of the population, the age group moving to Las Vegas is wealthier and healthier than other communities (Metropolitan Research Association, 2002). This group has time, transportation and a need to be part of their new community. Based on the literature, prime candidates for recruitment would be the more than 200,000 residents between the ages of 55 and 74 (U. S. Census, May 2001).

The literature has also pointed out that seniors are more likely to volunteer and that income, physical health, and education also play some role in identifying which people would be willing to volunteer as instructors in the Seniors CAN program. Seniors with higher formal educational levels are more likely to volunteer than those with a high school education or less (Van Willigen 2000). Recruitment of such seniors will be greatly aided by the program's affiliation with the University of Nevada, Reno. As instructors for the program, these seniors will also be affiliated with the University of Nevada and have access to ongoing research provided

directly by Cooperative Extension faculty and staff. Volunteer instructors may perceive this affiliation as being part of a large, respected group of people.

University affiliation is also a very useful tool in recruiting lifelong learners who could use the university resources as a source of new knowledge. These learners could be found in any number of groups or organizations such as: retired public employees, including military personnel, churches, health clubs, community centers, and health insurance programs which target seniors through specialized programs. A web site should also be considered. The following discusses each of these in more detail.

Public Employees

There are more than 70,000 government employees in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area and many remain in Nevada after retiring. Many of these employees are highly educated as this group also includes school district teachers and other professionals. The Nevada Public Employees Retirement System, which provides coverage for most local and state public sector employees, including the Clark County School District, indicates that of the approximately 25,000 benefit recipients, 18,171 are past government employees and school teachers (this does not include public safety personnel).² This would be an excellent group from which to recruit because of their past public sector involvement. For retired school teachers, facilitating a community-based wellness program would be slightly different from formal classroom teaching, but such retirees would have the ability to present information and facilitate discussion of a subject area. Information about the Seniors CAN program could be included on the PERS web site or sent to beneficiary recipients in the envelope with their monthly checks or deposit confirmations.

² According to Ann Cates of the Public Employees Retirement System in a personal conversation on 6/19/02 the number of retired school teachers is not readily available although 42 percent of the active members of PERS are school district employees.

Retired federal employees might be another good source of instructors. The Nevada Test Site and Nellis Air Force Base require a highly educated workforce and many continue to live in Southern Nevada after retiring. Both instructors and Seniors CAN participants could be identified through these organizations as well as the Veterans Administration hospital and clinics.

In addition to public employees, there are a number of retired senior volunteer programs available in the cities of Las Vegas, Henderson and Boulder City. Contacting these agencies might also be worthwhile.

Churches

Churches are cited as the organizations where seniors are most likely to volunteer (AARP, 2001). Recruiting instructors from the faith-based community and having the instructors teach members of their own church, may be both a way of obtaining instructors and of providing a familiar setting for the educational process while instilling confidence that they can teach. Churches serve as ideal recruiting areas for both instructors and class participants because they are usually located in the community they serve. In some cultures, the church may also have a greater ability to draw participants from the community than other organizations.

Health and Fitness Clubs, Older Adult Specific Organizations and Health Insurance

Company Senior Programs

Healthy seniors are more likely to volunteer than those who have some medical problems (Kincade, Rabiner, et. al, 1996). Older adults attending fitness or exercise classes (many clubs often have programs specifically for seniors) could be recruited to teach the program. A number of local HMOs, such as Sierra Health Services and Senior Dimensions, and the hospital affiliated Senior Friends organization, have senior wellness programs, and recruiting instructors through these programs might be useful. Since the Seniors CAN program has been operating for five

years, knowledge of the local senior associations and groups is available. The program has been offered at several Senior Friends offices and it makes sense to look to these same groups for instructors. Groups such as the AARP should be relied on for their contacts in the senior community. Since Las Vegas has a growing number of upscale senior-only housing, it might be worthwhile to make contacts through these agencies. The program already uses paid staff in the Las Vegas Housing Authority and Nevada Hand as volunteer instructors to teach the program.

Community Centers

Community Centers offer recreational and educational programs in both urban and rural Clark County where they serve as community focal points for older adults. People who seek recreational activities that include learning opportunities, such as lifelong learners, see community centers as an educational resource. Volunteers have been utilized to teach the Seniors CAN program in urban areas, while staff at the UNCE Logandale office have taught the program on a part-time basis to reach the rural areas of Overton and Mesquite, near the Utah border.

Just as important is that community centers often serve specific ethnic groups which might not have access to the program elsewhere. Recruiting from those ethnic groups for instructors will help to expand the program into areas that might not be covered otherwise. One excellent example of this is the current Spanish-speaking volunteer instructor who was recruited from a community center. Although the former engineer's, background is not in teaching, he has readily taken on the role of volunteer instructor for other Spanish-speaking groups in the community. At 78 years old, he volunteers for a number of organizations, is in good health, and has a good income. Since he travels by (bus)public transportation, he also helps to underscore some of the transportation issues for older adult volunteers who do not drive.

Web Site

Older adults are becoming more computer literate and many local libraries and senior

centers have computers with web access. Having a Seniors CAN web site would allow the Seniors CAN program to advertise for volunteers and have material available about the advantages of becoming an instructor along with the training opportunities.

Staff of Human Service Agencies

In addition to older adult volunteer peer-educators who could be recruited from the variety of sources outlined above, another option for recruiting volunteer instructors would be paid staff in human service agencies. Many such organizations have requirements to provide health and wellness related educational programming for older adults. Since the program curriculum is so comprehensive that need could be met with minimal training of existing organization staff, especially for those already providing services for the elderly. The Seniors CAN program is already using this option through its collaboration with the Las Vegas Housing Authority and Nevada Hand. The LVHA, recognizing the program would be a good fit for its residents, requested the University provide the course at their older adult housing sites. However, the scope of the proposed program was too large for the limited staff of the Seniors CAN program. Consequently, the recommendation was made to have staff from the Housing Authority train to teach the program, utilizing the train-the-trainer model. In 2002, five employees were trained to instruct the Seniors CAN program, allowing the Las Vegas Housing Authority the opportunity to present the program to multiple sites.

Nevada Hand, a non-profit organization that builds and operates senior low-income complexes in Las Vegas also has requested that their staff be trained to teach the Seniors CAN program. The benefits of having paid staff of other organizations teach the Seniors CAN program are multiple: it makes the program available to the numerous organizations serving senior populations in Clark County, it broadens the teaching capacity of the trained staff of these

organizations for other instructional opportunities, and it brings in a broader array of the underserved population into the program.

Using other agencies' paid staff to teach provides a method of co-production in which each side provides a certain portion of the effort. The agencies provide their staff to attend instructor classes and facilitate the program. The Seniors CAN program provides ongoing supervision, printed lesson materials, and program related give-aways (meat thermometers, insulated lunch bags, water bottles, etc). The "give-aways" serve as incentives that help enhance the learning experience assisting program participants to incorporate the information from the lessons into their everyday lives.

Development and Support of Instructional Program

If Delaware AARP volunteers are broader indicators (representative) of reasons older adults volunteer, the fact that the Seniors CAN program helps seniors improve their lives, and the community as a whole, should be promoted in any literature utilized to attract volunteers. Perhaps the volunteers themselves should be tested on life satisfaction, and three scales: loneliness, perceived stress and mastery. Clearly students who have gone through the course are also prime candidates for recruitment as peer-instructors or coaches. In trying to determine the level of interest by students to instruct, this researcher found that there was some lack of confidence among students about their ability to teach the class. Such reticence could be overcome by providing "instructor" training in not only the subject matter, but also information on teaching methods and how to facilitate small groups. This method was successfully used in training employees of the Las Vegas Housing Authority and Nevada Hand to teach the wellness program.

Once instructors have been recruited, adequate training and supervision of lesson delivery becomes critical in insuring that the wellness education program continues to meet its objectives.

The Seniors CAN program has also moved to incorporate two areas that may make the difference in providing the best training and support possible: (1) an instructor's training class which provides not only program content but also assistance in facilitation techniques and (2) on-going support for the instructor with access to University resources once the program begins.

The first area, the instructor's training class, goes a long way in educating the volunteer to teach the class. Each attendee receives the full curriculum manual, which provides class objectives, hand-out materials, and background materials for each of the 15 sessions. One proposal to overcome the reluctance on the part of seniors or paid staff who have not been involved in teaching is to provide basic training in teaching skills for conducting and facilitating a class. The future instructors would mock teach in front of the other volunteers and the Seniors CAN staff. Such instruction would build the confidence of recruits who might not be comfortable speaking in front of large groups or who are hesitant to present themselves as "experts."

A crucial part of train-the-trainer instruction includes having the future program teachers observe a regularly scheduled class session taught by Cooperative Extension staff or a trained volunteer instructor. The future instructors have the opportunity to observe a class session in action, objectively view the interaction among students and instructor, and obtain an actual example of how to conduct the session. There is also the opportunity for questions about lesson content, teaching style and techniques.

A second issue is that of on-going support for the instructors. Instructors teaching such a course for the first time may need both confidence building and assistance in dealing with the myriad of questions that often arise from instruction with such relevance to everyday life. As previously pointed out, the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension resources, such as nutrition professionals and aging researchers, are available to provide answers to program-related

questions. The individual confidence building is another issue, but one that is being addressed by regular support from the current staff of the Seniors CAN program. Once an instructor begins to teach Seniors CAN, UNCE staff attend the first few classes and address any area of concern for the new instructor, almost as a “student teacher.” Having someone who has taught the class present helps the first-time instructor alleviate some of the “first day jitters.” Priscilla Ramos, facilitator for the Las Vegas Housing Authority program, noted one of her staff members was particularly pleased to have the Seniors CAN program manager attend the first several classes. She believed that this support should be continued for all instructors (conversation of June 5, 2002). She noted that most of her staff were initially uncomfortable with facilitating group discussion and the Extension staff presence provided “moral support.”

Recruiting Efforts

Recruiting instructors will take many of the same efforts already used to recruit students for the classes. Possibilities include sending letters to older adult organizations or utilizing a website. By attracting seniors to a website containing “FAQs about senior wellness issues,” the program could also recruit instructors. While some of the older established methods of posting on a bulletin board, especially at congregate sites such as senior centers, will always work, wider dissemination could be achieved by recruiting through a website.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the issue of recruiting instructors for the Seniors CAN program by reviewing the literature on volunteering, and its effect on well-being, and life long learning. Two potential recruiting pools have been identified; volunteer instructors over the age of 55 and staff from social service organizations who are seeking to provide wellness programs to their clients. Several methods of recruitment have been proposed and areas where these volunteer instructors can be located have been identified. Train-the-trainer instruction and continuing support with Extension resources are crucial to the retention of such instructors. The

Seniors CAN program has taken a number of critical steps in development during its first five-years. Finding and retaining effective and reliable volunteer instructors will greatly complement the expansion of this program to provide wellness education to the large and rapidly growing older adult population.

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