

Special Lecture

Volunteerism in Later Life

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Background. Most countries are experiencing population aging, with growing numbers and proportions of older adults. Older adults represent an important resource that can make significant contributions to society through formal and informal volunteering. However, not all older people volunteer. Nor do organizations and governments have enough information to promote volunteering and effectively manage older volunteers.

Purpose. This lecture explores several questions about volunteering in later life. Among older adults, who volunteers? What theories help us understand volunteering? What are the benefits of volunteering? What are some creative volunteer programs? How can organizations best recruit and retain older volunteers?

Methods. Information presented in this lecture comes from a review of the scientific literature, with a focus on “best practices,” and from a population-based survey of older adults in Hawaii about volunteering.

Findings. Activity, continuity, developmental, and socio-emotional selectivity theories have been used to examine volunteering. Research on best practice volunteer programs, like the Experience Corps in the US, suggest that high-commitment volunteers in well-run programs realize social, physical, and cognitive gains. Research also suggests that it is easier to keep older adults in volunteer roles than get those who never have volunteered to start. Thus, social policies should promote volunteering across the lifespan, and worksites should encourage volunteering among workers approaching retirement. Volunteer turn-over, estimated at about 30%, can be reduced through good volunteer management practices, including good communication with volunteers, screening and matching volunteers to jobs, training volunteers, and recognizing volunteer contributions.

Implications. Although more research is needed, findings to date suggest that social policy should encourage volunteering across the life course and that organizations that want to engage volunteers should follow best practice guidelines for volunteer management.