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Vying for Time: How Programs Engage and Support a Busy Cadre of Baby Boomer and Older Adult Volunteers

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Overview

Older adults are increasingly occupying multiple life roles, including working, caregiving, and volunteering, creating the opportunity for role conflict. Such conflict occurs when stress and strain created by the demands of multiple life roles outstrips an individual's resources to successfully manage such demands.

A two-phase research study was completed with 1,697 Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) volunteers (ages 55+) drawn from 55 RSVP program sites across the country (Phase I) with a follow-up survey of RSVP programs conducted with 21 sites (Phase II). Grounded in role theory, the Phase I volunteer survey explored role conflict in addition to self-reported strategies used to mitigate the experience of role conflict. The Phase II program survey gathered responses from volunteer managers and staff about the strategies used by programs to help volunteers avoid role conflict and better manage multiple life roles.

The survey instrument consisted of a program profile form and a questionnaire.

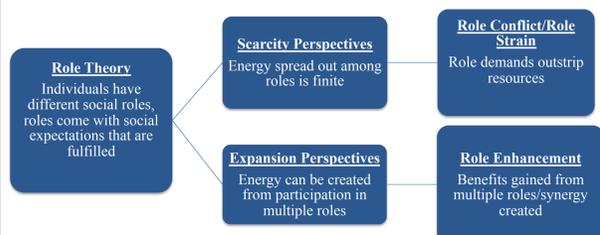
Program Profile (10 Questions):

- Covered program size, scope, volunteer pool and host organization characteristics.
- Quantitative/closed choice
- Analyzed in Qualtrics
- Provided contextual data for the study

Questionnaire (7 Questions):

- Open-ended questions designed to collect information on how RSVP programs support volunteers who are also caregivers and workers
- Organized in an Excel database by question and analyzed using a basic inductive content analysis approach with two coders.
- Sample Questions:
 - In what ways has your program supported those older adults who are working and volunteering with RSVP simultaneously?
 - In what ways has your program supported those older adults who are caregiving and volunteering with RSVP simultaneously?
 - What advice would you give to other volunteer managers about supporting older adult volunteers who are also working?

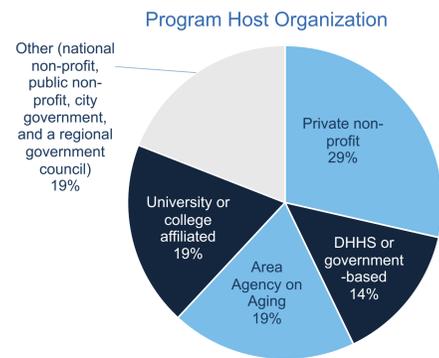
Full-Study Theoretical Framework:



Results: Program Profile Data

Program and Staff

- 21 completed surveys with an additional five incomplete surveys returned but not included in the final data analysis, representing a 38% response rate
- Participating programs had been in operation for an average of 35 years (SD = 14) at the time of the survey, with a range of 3-47 years overall.
- Individual respondents had been employed with their RSVP program for an average of 7.5 years (SD = 7) with a range of 1-29 years of experience across the sample.



- 14 states represented across the sample
- The programs served an average of 438 volunteers (SD = 197.84), with a range of 85 to 900 through an average of 73 program sites (SD =56.82)

Results: Overlapping Strategies for Used to Support Caregivers and Workers

- Overlapping strategies that were noted in responses for both caregivers and workers included flexible and accommodating volunteer arrangements and offering breaks from volunteering. Breaks from volunteering were intermittent or, for some, involved a complete cessation of volunteering altogether. Responses suggest that both caregiving volunteers and working volunteers seek out flexibility and assignment accommodations that allow them to schedule their limited time accordingly.

Assignment Accommodation /Schedule Flexibility

- *"Utilizing flexibility in the times for volunteering. Picking volunteer opportunities that are more accommodating for the volunteer's needs."* ID #1
- *"Job-sharing their volunteer position."* ID #11

Breaks from Volunteering

- *"Some [volunteers] stop completely and go inactive."* ID #4
- *"I also have one volunteer that has asked for an extended leave of absence from her volunteer position until she is no longer a full-time caregiver. I know she will be back as soon as she is able."* ID #5

Results: Strategies for Supporting Caregivers and Working Volunteers

Caregiving Volunteers

- Caregiver-specific strategies focused on supportive approaches for both the caregiver and their care recipient including: inclusion of care recipient in the volunteer assignment, referral to caregiver supports, and a caring and supportive approach from staff.

Caring/Understanding/Patience:

- When discussing how to best support caregiving volunteers, a majority of the program responses (10 of 17 responses) identified an intentional focus on providing a more personal and caring approach in staff interactions with caregivers as follows:

"Most of the time a phone call or a card in the mail goes a long way in supporting someone." ID #2

"As volunteer coordinator, I maintain contact via occasional emails and phone calls to let the volunteer know they are thought of by our organization during their time of caregiving. Thinking of you cards and notes are sent to the caregiving volunteer, likewise the person the volunteer is caring for, as appropriate." ID #4

"Volunteer managers must be patient and understanding. Sending cards once in a while to let the volunteer know they are on your mind." ID #5

Referrals to Supports and Services:

- Six of the 21 programs discussed connecting volunteers who were known to be caregivers with resources and supports that could assist them in their caregiving. For some programs, this entailed in-house connections and supports and for others these referrals and connections were made with external organizations:

"Perhaps the way that we best support the caretakers is by sharing information about resources available in the community." ID #1

"... we have volunteers that as part of the Healthy Futures performance measure, serve as respite volunteers so that other volunteers can be supported and provided some relief." ID #9

Care Recipient Inclusion:

- Three of the 17 programs that responded reported that their caregiver volunteers bring care recipients with them during volunteer assignments:

"...one of our volunteers takes her husband with her to a food distribution. He sits there in a wheelchair and watches while she works. She says they both enjoy getting out." ID #21

"I always say - bring that person along and we would love to have them join us. Make them feel welcome and give them an appropriate task." ID #3

Working Volunteers

- The two primary strategies noted for supporting working volunteers were offering volunteer opportunities during off-work hours, such as nights and weekends, along with offering intermittent and one-time volunteer opportunities. One additional strategy focused on hours of operation and leveraging electronic communication to extend reach to working volunteers.

Volunteering During "Off-Work" Hours:

- Examples of responses that illustrate volunteering during off-work hours included (9 out of 21 responses):

"We also have a list of outside agencies that need volunteers on evenings and weekends. Most of these volunteer stations are listed in 'other community priorities'. They give volunteers working full-time a chance to volunteer." ID #10

"We have a number of non-profits who need volunteers to deliver their marketing posters around town - that can be done over lunch hours or after work - when people may be off work, but the retail businesses are still open." Program #4

Short-Term or Intermittent Volunteering:

- The provision of short-term or intermittent volunteer assignments was a strategy most frequently cited by programs as supporting working volunteers (7 out of 21 responses):

"For example, one man who is working and volunteering has one special project he does each year. He is active a few times a year, but his main focus is this one project." ID #1

"We also offer a number of events that the volunteers can participate in that are only 1-day events that are broken down into hour increments with 2 hours or 4 hours being the most popular." ID #15

Extended Program Hours and Online Communication:

- Programs intentionally maintained extended hours of operation and leveraged electronic communications to connect with volunteers outside of traditional office hours (4 out of 21 responses).

"We have office hours from 7:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. and we don't close at lunch." ID #14

"We communicate by email to mitigate the problem of not being able to reach folks during our office hours." ID #11

Discussion

- Study findings support the growing body of literature around strategies that programs and organizations utilize to facilitate formal volunteer participation. A flexibility mindset or approach by the volunteer program is a cornerstone principle of older adult volunteer support.
- Findings underscore the need for volunteer assistance that moves beyond the boundaries of traditional volunteer management and provides support for the volunteer's overall health and well-being. Of note are volunteer management staff in this study who framed their role as one of connector and conduit through which caregiver support can be provided