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## Supporting Older Workers and Caregivers: Tips for Volunteer Managers

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# Supporting older workers and caregivers

## Tips for volunteer managers

Volunteering has been linked to a number of positive outcomes for older adults such as good health and mental health, social connections, and a sense of purpose. However, older adults are increasingly giving their time to paid work, caregiving, and other important endeavors. For many older adults, especially those who are employed and those who are caring for loved ones, finding the time to volunteer can be a challenge. Volunteer programs can encourage older adults to volunteer by offering flexible and appealing program options for these two groups.

A recent study was carried out with older adult volunteers and volunteer managers across the country to understand how busy older adults can successfully manage their multiple commitments. Based on that survey, as many as one out of every seven older adult volunteers are working for pay in addition to their volunteer work. As many as a third of older adult volunteers are also serving as a caregiver to a loved one.

## Benefits of volunteering

Both older workers and caregivers reported that volunteering provided benefits to their different roles. In particular, volunteering:

- Gave them new skills and knowledge that they can use in their paid employment or caregiving.
- Provided them with information on different programs, services, and resources that could be tapped in their paid or caregiving roles.
- Provided an opportunity to meet new people and build a network that helped them in their paid work or caregiving.
- Provided a valuable opportunity for stress relief or respite.



“

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 Director

“

RSVP gives me peace and a chance to **escape from my caregiving** of my mother with dementia.”

Volunteer

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## Helping volunteers juggle their obligations

Workers and caregivers were more likely to report role-related strain than volunteers who did not work or those who were not caregivers. However, both groups of older adults found volunteering to be rewarding and beneficial. Volunteer programs that participated in the survey research identified strategies that they used to help support workers and caregivers. These strategies included:

- **Offering volunteer opportunities where caregivers can volunteer alongside their care recipients:** Programs identified opportunities that allowed caregivers to incorporate their loved one into the volunteer work or allowed them to volunteer in settings where the loved one would otherwise be welcome to participate in programming. Examples included meals delivery volunteering, food box preparation, or volunteering at a senior center.
- **Develop volunteer activities that create the opportunity for learning and building social connections:** In particular, programs can develop volunteer opportunities with working and caregiver older adults in mind. This might include volunteer jobs where caregivers can socialize with other caregivers to complete their work or a volunteer opportunity where individuals learn a special skill that can be applied in the workforce or other settings.
- **Using a caring and understanding approach with caregivers:** Volunteer managers discussed the need to express care and concern when interacting with caregiving volunteers. Staff did this by sending cards or inquiring about a volunteer's loved one, when appropriate.
- **Offering volunteer opportunities on nights and weekends or “off-work” hours for working volunteers:** Volunteer programs can effectively engage older workers by offering opportunities outside of the normal workday hours. Examples include delivering meals during the lunch hour and posting educational flyers with local businesses after work.
- **Offering flexible arrangements:** Some volunteer programs offer flexible arrangements for volunteers like job sharing, per diem volunteering, and volunteering for one-time or special events. These options make it easier for workers and caregivers to volunteer.
- **Offering extended hours and using online communications:** Program staff discussed the importance of offering different options for working volunteers to connect with their programs including offering office hours that extend past the typical work day, remaining open during lunch hours, and offering online volunteer tools that allow volunteers to stay in touch with the program during “off work” hours.

Recent research suggests that even older adults who have multiple commitments, like working and caregiving, can benefit from volunteer work in their community. With some creative approaches, volunteer programs have been able to overcome the challenges of engaging a busy population of older adults. Use these tips to spark ideas for supporting older adult volunteers in a way that will benefit them across the different roles in their lives.