

10-1-2005

Volunteering: An Untapped Impact

LJ Osborne

South Dakota State University, Cooperative Extension Service, osborne.lj@ces.sdstate.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Osborne, L. (2005). Volunteering: An Untapped Impact. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(5), Article 24.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss5/24>

This Tools of the Trade is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



October 2005 // Volume 43 // Number 5 // Tools of the Trade // 5TOT2

← PREVIOUS ARTICLE ↑ ISSUE CONTENTS → NEXT ARTICLE +

Volunteering: An Untapped Impact

Abstract

Extension and other volunteer-based organizations have relied upon the number of volunteer hours as a way of reporting the organization's volunteer value to society. With the current legislative focus on the "Aging in America" issues, we are in a unique position of promoting a different type of impact for Extension's volunteer efforts. This article is based upon the efforts of Johns Hopkins researchers and earlier published works on how volunteering can reduce the three key risk factors of aging.

L. J. Osborne

Extension Specialist/Assistant Professor
South Dakota State University, Cooperative Extension Service
Brookings, South Dakota
osborne.lj@ces.sdstate.edu

Introduction

Conventional wisdom has held that volunteering is good for the volunteer. There has been a tremendous amount of published information on the benefits of volunteering. This has ranged from the dollar value for each hour of volunteering to reducing psychological stresses to improving self-esteem to improving physical health. Most of these "published" materials have relied on opinion surveys in reporting the benefits to the volunteer. The most significant of these studies was recently published in the *Journal of Urban Health*. In this research study, the lead researcher, Linda Fried, utilized control groups to measure the impact of volunteering on the volunteer.

Methodology

Fried et al. (2004) used a 2-year control study of 128 participants between the ages of 60 and 86. The participants volunteered at six local public schools in Baltimore, assisting classroom teachers via direct student contact for a minimum of 15 hours per week. The researchers measured the three key risk factors of aging: physical, social, and cognitive activity. They measured these key risk factors by the number of falls, strength, balance, blood pressure, insulin resistance and changes in brain structure and function (Glass et al., 2004).

Results

The Fried study found a significant improvement in the physical activity, social interaction, and cognitive stimulation of the participants. A summary of the findings appears in Table 1.

Table 1.
Change in Risk Factors Associated with Aging for Both Groups

Issue	Volunteers	Non-Volunteers
Feeling Stronger (Better Health)	44% Increase	36% Decrease
Blocks Walked	31% Increase	9% Decrease
Stairs Taken/Walked	19% Increase	8% Increase
Support Network	17% Increase	25% Decrease
Kilocalories Expended/Week	25% Increase	5% Decrease

Television Viewing	4% Decrease	18% Increase
Mental Stimulation (no baseline data)	More	Less
Grip Strength	21% Decrease	26% Decrease
Falls	50% Decrease	30% Increase
Cane Use	50% Decrease	20% Decrease

In summary, volunteers had a larger support network, reported feeling stronger, increased physical activities, used more calories, watched less television, read more, had fewer falls, and used a cane less than the non-volunteer group. Fried et al. (2004) stated that volunteers increased their physical, social, and cognitive activity levels and "(e)ach is an independent predictor of important health outcomes in late life, including disability, dependency and dementia" (p. 73).

Application to Extension

I will be the first to admit that it is dangerous to make the leap from this excellent, researched-based but narrowly focused study to other audiences. However, there are several common threads that can be applied to the Extension program community when taken in context with other studies. In an earlier study, Luks and Payne (2001) identified some factors critical in improving the health of the volunteer.

The first critical factor is the need for the volunteer to work with strangers. Helping family members and friends had little impact on the health of the volunteer. Extension offers volunteers the chance to interact with a wide range of individuals.

The next critical factor identified was the need for personal contact. Extension will utilize volunteers in mundane office-related projects or tasks; however, most of our volunteers have direct contact with individuals, ranging from youth to seniors. The greatest benefit to the Extension volunteer is from close, personal contact with others.

Finding the right fit is the third critical factor. The volunteer position needs to match the personality and interests of the volunteer. Extension can offer the volunteer a variety of opportunities ranging from working with youth in a classroom type setting to training adults on daily living tasks.

Additional research may be needed to record the actual health benefit for the Extension volunteer. However, research suggests that increasing physical activity through lifestyle changes is an effective health promotion strategy for older adults (Anderson, Blair, Cheskin, & Bartlett, 1997; Anderson et al., 1999). Using these guidelines, Extension could easily promote a secondary impact of our educational programming: The benefit to the Extension volunteer.

Richard Suzman, National Institute for Aging, stated that these kinds of "programs can reduce disability and raise cognitive awareness" (Olson, 2004). This leads to lower healthcare costs for seniors. Given our lawmakers' current interest in the aging of America's population, this becomes another avenue of reporting our value to society.

- Are Extension volunteers getting these benefits?
- Does this also aid us in reporting this secondary impact to our funding bodies?
- Does Extension already have in place an effective healthcare program for individuals in the last third of their life so those living longer are healthier?

Extension impacts are everywhere. We need to utilize current research and creative thinking when selling the total Extension story to our funding bodies.

References

- Andersen, R. E., Blair, S. N., Cheskin, L. J., & Bartlett, S. J. (1997). Encouraging patients to become more physically active: The physician's roll. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 127,395-400.
- Andersen, R. E., Wadden, T. A., Bartlett, S. J., Zemel, B., Verde, T. J., & Franckowiak, S. C. (1999). Effects of lifestyle activity versus structured aerobic exercise in obese women: A randomized trial. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 281,335-340.
- Fried, L., Carlson, M., Freedman, M., Frick, K., Glass, T., Hill, J., et al. (2004). A social model for health promotion for an aging population: Initial evidence on the experience corps model. *Journal of Urban Health*, 81(1), 64-78.
- Glass, T., Freedman, M., Carlson, M., Hill, J., Frick, K., Jalongo, N., et al. (2004). Experience corps: Design of an intergenerational program to boost social capital and promote the health of an aging society. *Journal of Urban Health*, 81(1), 94-105.

Luks, A. & Payne, P. (2001). *The healing power of doing good: The health and spiritual benefits of helping others*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.

Olson, E. (2004, April 13). Testing the idea that helping out is healthy. *The New York Times*.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the [Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org](#).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)