Janice Airhart

VOLUNTEERISM AMONG OLDER ADULTS

Enrichment through Serving Others

Aging Studies

Collection Editor
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LLP

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Abstract

This book presents documented research findings showing that older adults who volunteer enjoy better longevity, improved physical and emotional well-being, and wider relationship networks. It also includes firsthand stories about older adults (55+) who are active volunteers. Stories were obtained through interviews with those who engage in a broad range of volunteer services. Each story describes volunteers' motivations and perceived benefits to themselves and those they serve. Challenges to volunteering are also explored. The intent of sharing these stories is to inspire professionals who work with older adults to encourage volunteering to promote well-being among their clients or patients.

Key words

Loneliness epidemic; formal volunteer; informal volunteer; intermittent volunteer; well-being; longevity; volunteer fit; volunteer benefits; volunteer challenges; altruism

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Introduction

The goal of this book is to encourage those who work with older patients or clients to support volunteerism as a strategy to decrease loneliness and depression and increase physical and emotional well-being. Volunteer work has a positive impact on both the volunteers and those persons or communities who are impacted. The stories included here describe diverse individuals in a variety of roles that illustrate the widespread benefits of volunteerism.

Approximately one in four older adults, those 55 and older, engages in volunteering. Rates vary, depending on which source you consult and when you consult it. That rate has fluctuated greatly in the last several decades. According to the 2006 *Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974* report by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), there was a steady rise in volunteerism from the 1970s to the mid-2000s. The COVID-19 pandemic induced a severe drop, but the number of older adults who engage in volunteering within their communities has seen a rebound (CNCS, 2006).

The CNCS funds several volunteer programs, which are reported to Congress via the Congressional Research Service. Some of the opportunities for senior volunteers funded by the CNCS are the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), the Foster Grandparents Program, and the Senior Companion Program (Congressional

Research Service, 2023). The latter two programs provide a modest stipend of $3 an hour and an annual physical free of charge, but they are largely volunteer based.

Adults in the 55+ age group have amassed skills and knowledge that can benefit others, and volunteering provides a way to use those skills after they leave professional careers. The rate of older volunteers who are still working is also quite high. Volunteering allows individuals to make use of the skills they *prefer* using, rather than those they are *required* to use in their careers, and it is geared toward a population or cause that is important to them. This is a freedom their professional employment often doesn't provide. However, in many cases, retired individuals enjoy utilizing well-honed expertise from their previous careers in their volunteer work as well.

Because I believe that personal stories add weight to data and facts that may be imparted in an educational program, I've chosen to interview and tell the stories of multiple older volunteers: What motivates them, what the perceived benefits and challenges are, and how their volunteer activities help them apply what they've learned in life. I also spoke with those who manage or organize volunteers to discover the perceived benefits and challenges from their perspective.

This chapter introduces a research perspective on the perceived benefits and challenges of volunteering for older adults, including a discussion of the sense of loneliness and disconnection senior adults often feel, which volunteering may remedy. Other topics in the chapter include types of volunteering (*formal vs. informal*), a picture of what age groups are most likely to engage in which type of volunteer activities,

the advent of new opportunities for *virtual volunteering*, physical and emotional benefits of volunteering to older volunteers, and consequent benefits to their communities. I also discuss the value of stories in understanding how older adults are affected by their volunteer service in increased longevity and well-being and include a brief summary of my own volunteer history. The stories are varied and demonstrate that what engages volunteers in serving others is as unique as each individual interviewed.

Loneliness epidemic

In 2023, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory titled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). While *epidemic* may be a strong word to describe the impacts of a variety of factors on elders' emotional well-being, the report found that roughly one in three older adults reports significant loneliness, which has strong negative health impacts. Older adults are at elevated risk of loneliness due to several interrelated factors, discussed in various sources:

- Social and emotional changes associated with aging, such as living alone, the conclusion of a professional career, loss of a spouse or friends, loss of sensory faculties, and declining mobility, often have negative impacts (Gerlach, Solway, and Malani, 2024);
- Socioeconomic factors such as the end of gainful employment and the consequent lowered income prompt higher rates of loneliness (Malani et al., 2024); and

- Racial/ethnic, neighborhood, and institutional stressors lead to perceived discrimination and stressful life events. Changing neighborhood characteristics were associated with loneliness among older adults (Tsuchiya, Thierry, and Taylor, 2025).

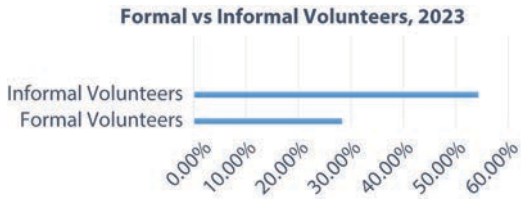
The Surgeon General's advisory discusses the value of volunteerism in helping individuals create connections with their neighbors and their communities, among other helpful solutions. It lists six pillars of advancing social connection, one of which offers recommendations for strengthening community infrastructure and includes expansion of volunteer organizations. Among the benefits mentioned are improved individual health and economic improvements to the community. For older adults specifically, loneliness dramatically increased dementia onset and decreased cognitive function. Feelings of depression and anxiety were also increased.

Conversely, the Gerlach report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* contends that social connection among older adults can lead to longer life, as well as better emotional and physical health. Loneliness and social isolation have been linked to increased risk of mortality, cardiovascular disease, stroke, dementia, depression, and worse physical functioning. One of the authors' many recommendations is for seniors to volunteer with local organizations (Gerlach, Solway, and Malani, 2024).

Framing loneliness among older adults as an epidemic highlights the urgency of responding by public health professionals and community agencies. Encouraging volunteerism among this group of adults is a key strategy for ameliorating the ill effects of loneliness because it necessarily develops human connections.

Formal vs. informal volunteering

Many seniors engage in *formal* volunteering, defined as voluntary service with a program or organization that provides service guidelines, oversight, or training. Difficult to quantify are the numbers of older adults who engage in *informal* volunteering. This may consist of activities that benefit friends, neighbors, or family members and are unregulated by a program or organization. Bringing a meal to a sick friend, offering to babysit for grandchildren to relieve their parents of childcare costs, or providing transportation to and from doctors' appointments for a friend with mobility issues constitute informal volunteering.



Data from US Census Bureau and AmeriCorps reports showed that 28.3 per cent of the US population aged 16 and over volunteered with an organization from 2022 to 2023. During the same period, an estimated 54.2 per cent volunteered informally to assist friends and neighbors. The age group that accounted for the greatest rate increase in formal volunteering over the survey period was millennials, although all groups saw an increase. The majority of informal volunteers were Baby Boomers, born from 1946 to 1964 (Schlachter and Marshall, 2024).

Health and mobility issues often prevent older adults from regular, scheduled, and structured volunteering and lead them to prefer informal activities. Responding to the needs of those with

whom they already have a relationship is more likely to engage them. In addition, closer proximity to friends or neighbors poses less of a challenge to those with limited mobility.

Intermittent volunteering

In addition to seniors who volunteer formally and informally, I interviewed a category of volunteer I call *intermittent* volunteers. These individuals may serve formal organizations from time to time, but inconsistently. They may also serve their neighbors informally through one-time catastrophic events, such as a natural disaster or a death. They may keep a less structured schedule or choose to only occasionally help with a time-limited outreach program. Their commitments are more fluid than the typical formal volunteer.

The chapter entitled *Intermittent Volunteers* includes a collection of shorter stories of those who may engage in less structured volunteering. Each individual was asked to respond to four items only:

1. Briefly describe the volunteer work you engage in.
2. Why/how did you become involved in it?
3. How does this service benefit you and/or your community?
4. What challenges does it create?

Who Is volunteering?

Volunteer data is skewed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a dramatic decrease in volunteering in 2020 and into 2021. Post-pandemic numbers have rebounded, however. According to figures published by Activate Good, in 2025 the largest increases

in volunteers since the COVID-19 pandemic are from millennials (ages 27–42), people with incomes under $25,000, individuals without a high school diploma, and Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic Americans. Breaking down volunteers by age, the group reports that the two older generations, Generation X (ages 45–60) and Baby Boomers (ages 61–79) account for almost 86 per cent of volunteers. The former typically volunteer through formal channels, while the latter is more likely to volunteer informally, as was the case before the pandemic (Activate Good, 2025).

Survey results from the US Census Bureau reported in 2021 that, despite a dip in formal volunteering during the previous year, women continued to volunteer more than men, as was the case prior to the pandemic. They also found that informal volunteering rates remained largely the same during that period, or around 51 per cent for all age groups. There was some variation by US state, with Montana leading the nation in informal volunteering (68.8 per cent) and Utah leading in formal volunteering (40.7 per cent) (Activate Good, 2025).

Recommendations from Activate Good to encourage volunteerism in the long term include creating flexible short-term opportunities, recruiting via social media and email, making messages inclusive, emphasizing virtual opportunities, and tracking of data to determine success of strategies. These strategies apply to recruitment of any age group (Activate Good, 2025).

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) devotes a significant portion of its online member services to volunteerism. Their bi-monthly bulletin often includes stories of member

volunteers, who serve their communities in a wide range of capacities. Their online publication "The Power of AARP Volunteers" celebrates volunteers who volunteer for the benefit of other AARP members. They act in such diverse roles as advocates for political actions that benefit seniors, driving tutors for older persons, postcard or phone call campaigns to other seniors, scam prevention, and helping seniors preserve financial security. The publication boasts that two million Americans have been served by approximately 58,000 volunteer AARP members, donating more than 8.8 million hours, valued at $280 million (American Association of Retired Persons, 2024).

One study, published in *Lifespan Development*, an open online textbook published by the Minnesota Libraries Publishing Project, contends that about 40 per cent of older adults who volunteer are involved in formal volunteer work. About 60 per cent of volunteering seniors engaged in informal volunteerism in their survey. Surprisingly, older adults who do formal volunteering also tend to be employed, at least part-time. After retirement, older adults are less likely to feel they have anything to offer. At around age 75, formal volunteerism falls off greatly, but informal volunteering may increase (Hazen and Mazur, 2021).

Volunteering: In person vs. virtually

One of the values of volunteerism is that it helps seniors form relationships with others. Some feel the benefits are eliminated if there is no face-to-face, in-person interaction. However, health concerns, access to transportation, or other challenges can

prevent seniors from engaging in volunteer activities if they need to travel to do so. One way to overcome these challenges is to volunteer virtually.

The *Lifespan Development* text mentioned previously reports that there are new opportunities for older adults to become virtual volunteers, using online resources to connect with others. Virtual volunteering increased dramatically in the early 2000s and appeals to many seniors with mobility issues but who enjoy interacting with others from their own communities, other states, or across the world. They might offer students help with completing writing assignments, tutor international students in English, or relieve loneliness for others of any age, near or far. Virtual volunteering opens a wide range of new avenues for older adults to serve others (Hazen and Mazur, 2021).

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) organizes or promotes dozens of opportunities on their website for virtual volunteering, including advocacy on behalf of other older adults, community events volunteers, digital fraud fighters, tax counselors, friendly voice volunteers, and many more (American Association of Retired Persons, 2024). One report from Hong Kong describes the positive results of a study in which they created an activity called RemoteChess, using virtual reality to help seniors play chess with others remotely and form connections in the process (Wei et al., 2025).

An example of a successful pivot from in-person to virtual volunteering in St. Louis was reported in a 2022 study of online tutoring and pen pal programs during the pandemic. Responses were generally favorable to remote experiences, despite a few

challenges. Some volunteers found the online environment allowed for a more expansive reading list when tutoring students in reading. Others were less impressed with the pen pal program because written communications are slower and eliminate face-to-face interaction. While participants agreed that in-person volunteering was preferred over virtual volunteering, they felt virtual was better than no volunteering at all (Sun, Morrow-Howell, and Pawloski, 2022).

One significant challenge of virtual volunteering among older adults is their degree of ease in using technology. Another 2022 study of seniors who volunteered in person through the Oasis Intergenerational Tutoring program for students prior to and virtually during the pandemic, demonstrated a range of attitudes toward volunteering that required use of technology. An overwhelming percentage of survey respondents (90.3 per cent) had access to a computer, a smartphone, or home internet technology. However, almost a quarter of them (22.8 per cent) felt uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with using the internet. Those who were least likely to participate in the virtual program had a lower level of education and greater discomfort with using the internet. Some also expressed doubts about the ability to establish personal connections with students online (Sun et al., 2020).

Motivation to volunteer

The reasons older adults choose to volunteer are as varied as the stories included here. However, there are several common motivations that can be derived from them. Most volunteers

noted that as they've aged and perhaps retired from active employment, they have more time than in the past. They feel volunteering to serve others is a good way to spend that time. Many said volunteering was modeled to them by family members and they hope to pass on that impulse to their descendants.

Other common themes include service as an extension of spiritual practice or a desire to form new relationships. Whatever the impetus, once an individual begins to volunteer and recognizes positive effects of their efforts on those they serve, the benefits they receive typically keep them involved. All volunteers acknowledge there are challenges in fulfilling their commitments, but the benefits outweigh them. If not, most are motivated to find an area of service that better fits their circumstances.

The human urge to help others is strong. As one volunteer I interviewed told me, "If you can do something, and others need that something, why not do it? I think it's innate." She may be right. There is research evidence from studies with children to support her statement (Barragan, Brooks, and Meltzoff, 2020).

Benefits to older volunteers

Studies that demonstrate the benefits of volunteerism for older adults vary and are occasionally contradictory. But there are still a few clear benefits for seniors. Longevity has been the greatest and most consistent benefit documented in studies. There are also suggestions that general health outcomes are better for volunteers. Improved mental and physical well-being has been

reported. Senior volunteers also feel an increase in social connectedness, a renewed sense of purpose, and cognitive stimulation (Kim, et al., 2021).

Sae Hwang Han and colleagues from the University of Texas studied longitudinal data provided by the U.S. Health and Retirement Study (1998–2020) to discover what links exist between formal and informal helping behaviors and later life cognitive function. They determined that both types of volunteering were associated with greater cognitive function and that, over time, the benefits accumulated. Older adults involved in prosocial helping behaviors for approximately 2–4 hours per week showed not only a slower cognitive decline, but also increased cognitive function (Han, Burr and Zhang, 2025).

One 2003 study analyzed data from the Americans Changing Lives Study and concluded that older adults who engage in more hours of volunteering have higher levels of well-being than those who spend less time volunteering. Their reported sense of life satisfaction is unaffected by gender, race, or social integration, according to the authors. It also didn't matter what type of volunteering they did (Morrow-Howell et al., 2003).

Further, Huo and Kim documented that seniors who continue in their volunteering efforts over time feel greater life satisfaction than do seniors who never volunteered or who volunteered for a time but stopped. Their study followed older adult volunteers, former volunteers, and non-volunteers for four years. Survey participants' perceptions of their life satisfaction

were affected by their positive or negative attitudes toward aging, regardless of group. Subjects who continuously volunteered during the study period and who held generally positive attitudes toward aging reported the greatest life satisfaction (Huo and Kim, 2022).

Benefits to communities

While volunteers themselves benefit from improved life satisfaction and health outcomes, these in turn benefit communities because they promote cohesion and trust among community members. All are results of effectively utilizing *social capital*. When older volunteers utilize the value of their individual networks, which consist of personal or professional relationships and the synergies those create, they are building social capital. Shared resources such as support, information, and opportunities increase the value and contribute to more effective goal achievement through trust and cooperation, rather than individual effort alone.

Several sources report improved social cohesion, expanded capacity and services, improved community health outcomes, enhanced economic stability, enriched cultural and community life, and greater community resilience. Ralitsa Veleva contends in the *Journal of Management Sciences and Applications* that these are elements of social capital, which emphasize the development of volunteers' skills—both personal and professional—and lead to social productivity (Veleva, 2025).

Longitudinal data from 2008 to 2018 demonstrated that volunteerism had wide-reaching effects on the individual, their

communities, and society at large. The study analyzed various factors, such as age, race, socioeconomic position, and health status, to conclude that the rate of volunteerism was most strongly related to participants' perceptions of safety in their neighborhoods and was possibly strongest among females. Females were more likely than males to feel unsafe in some neighborhoods, which affected their participation in volunteer programs. Authors suggest a significant economic value from older adult volunteers and elaborate on the association between volunteerism and civic engagement, community resilience, and social cohesion (Grinshteyn and Sugar, 2021).

Additional support for the economic value of older volunteers is provided by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACL receives federal funding for program services through the Older Americans Act (OAA). ACL estimated that volunteers who assume roles in OAA Title III programs such as meal delivery, serving food at meal sites, teaching disease prevention, legal assistance, supporting family caregivers, and much more contributed more than 62 million volunteer hours in 2019. Total federal funding for their services was $1.49 billion in 2019, but volunteers provided an economic value of $1.7 billion (Administration for Community Living, 2021).

Challenges to volunteering

Very few worthwhile endeavors are undertaken without challenges. This is true of volunteerism as well. There are several studies documented in the literature about volunteer challenges in

specific settings, like mental health, sports, teaching, or conservation, to name a few. Most of these deal with the challenges of recruiting and retaining volunteers. Fewer studies document general barriers to those considering volunteer service.

A global view of challenges to those who engage in volunteering is presented by Harun Aslan and Tarik Tuncay in the article "Advancing and sustaining volunteerism: Investigating the multifaceted challenges and obstacles to volunteer engagement." The authors present four categories of challenges to organizations in sustaining volunteer engagement: Specific and varied personal experiences, individual familial backgrounds, organizational structures, and the socio-political environment in which they operate. They suggest that organizations coordinate stakeholders and practices to minimize these challenges. (Asian and Tuncay, 2023).

Barriers to volunteering can affect every older adult but are intensified in disadvantaged seniors. A study in the UK found that disadvantaged groups find many volunteer opportunities discourage or exclude them. A large body of research touts the benefits of volunteering as improved physical and emotional well-being, but for those whose physical or emotional health are compromised, there are greater obstacles to their participation. This means that "those who potentially have the most to gain from volunteering are the least likely to participate" (Southby, South and Bagnall, 2019).

In general, there are four categories of obstacles facing potential volunteers themselves. They include access barriers, organizational weaknesses, sustainability issues, and lack of fitness. The

individuals I interviewed cited many of these factors as detriments and helped provide examples of each category.

1. Access barriers—time, cost, or logistics, such as distance or mobility, required to volunteer.
2. Organizational weaknesses—poor training, lack of clarity in roles, and lack of support or appreciation for volunteers.
3. Sustainability issues—volunteer burnout, emotional or physical strain, or unrealistic expectations.
4. Lack of fitness—opportunities do not match a volunteer's preferences or skills.

Why use stories?

Data from research studies are important in understanding how volunteerism has changed in recent decades, who engages in it, and how it impacts older adults' lives. However, it is sometimes more impactful to hear and understand individual stories of those who volunteer. Personal narratives are often viewed as more trustworthy than statistics. Use of stories from the perspective of the volunteers themselves generates data that is derived *from* their lived experiences, rather than external research that is collected *about* older adults. When encouraging clients or patients to engage in volunteer activities, social workers, gerontologists, health providers, and others who work with seniors may find it much more convincing to cite individual cases, told from their peers' perspectives. Clients may relate to those perspectives more directly than a nonspecific urge to volunteer.

Cynthia, a friend and retired professional counselor, told me that she recommended to many of her clients—of every age—that serving others could help ward off depression. "They almost

always refused," she said. "When someone is having trouble getting out of bed and dressed in the morning, thinking of going out of the house to perform acts of service is unthinkable."

Success in prompting someone to serve others may improve if concrete examples of volunteer service are suggested. Stories of others who have overcome similar attitudes and obstacles are much more likely to be attended to. Additionally, providing clients with community resources or links to organizations that utilize volunteers can generate greater interest.

My volunteer history

I have been inclined toward volunteer activities from as early as my twenties. As a young mother in Louisiana, I was passionate about the well-being of young children. I attempted to create an organization in my community to address the problems of child abuse and neglect but found I didn't have the skills to do so. It was embarrassing and disappointing. However, the experience motivated me to develop skills and a broader perspective.

In later years, as I developed maturity, organizational skills, and wisdom, I contributed to programs in three states that supported at-risk children and youth. I participated in a year-long Kids Count Leadership Team, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in the 1990s, and created a third-grade writing curriculum based on principles I gained from the educational elements of the program. As a "Special Friend" volunteer in Oklahoma, also in the 1990s, I mentored a teen who was in foster care and ensured she attended weekly counseling sessions with her therapist. In the early 2000s, I mentored teen moms at a special school campus designed for them and their children. I later was a science

teacher at the same school, where I used my knowledge of their challenges to promote deeper engagement in their academic study. Though I was employed by the school district, my efforts often went beyond teaching to advocacy for my students.

Consistent with studies cited earlier, I was an active volunteer throughout my working career. Serving others in my community was an important value, and this value continued after my retirement. After retirement and moving to Texas, I have volunteered with my county's child advocacy center and volunteered with an organization that provides training and job opportunities for youthful offenders. I now read with elementary school children through an Austin organization called Education Connection, in a Title I school to help students gain reading skills. When an opportunity presented itself several years ago to devote a few hours each month to a program that prepares and serves sandwiches to homeless or disadvantaged citizens in Austin, I began serving there as well.

One of the benefits of such service in my community is the development of relationships with people and community resources, particularly in cases where I serve the same individuals on an ongoing basis. In each of the past five years, for instance, I have helped struggling readers develop their reading skills and discover the joy in reading. Finding books about topics of specific interest to each child is key, and doing so develops relationships with them. I appreciate being a part of their positive journeys.

It can be difficult to tease out all that compels people to serve others, but feeling that I've made someone's life better is primary. Whether it's a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich with potato

chips or the newfound ability to read Dr. Seuss, each small contribution I can make gives me great satisfaction. When that difference is made within a group I care deeply about—children and youth—it leads to a sense that I've provided value toward a societal concern.

It's sometimes difficult to know the range of impacts volunteer efforts have on individuals or communities, but even subtracting those personal satisfaction benefits, forming deeper relationships within volunteer organizations is satisfying. One of the best ways, in my opinion, to grow closer to a group of people is to share in work that matters to everyone in the group.

I participated in three medical mission trips to Guyana, South America in the late 90s and early 2000s and with each trip, our days began with group conversation and reflection. Group leaders often asked unifying questions like, "What are we doing here? What do we hope to accomplish?" Committing to a common goal deepened our commitment to the project and drew us closer together, but even informal volunteering as an individual has benefits.

I've prepared and delivered meals to those recovering from injuries or surgery, provided rides to those with mobility issues, and dropped everything to comfort a grieving friend. However, my inherent need to efficiently manage my time and energy leads me toward formal volunteering. I appreciate the organization and training provided by a well-established program. An added bonus is sharing the journey of service to others with volunteers who share my dedication to a cause. Some of them have become dear friends as a result.

This sense of shared purpose is strengthened through formal volunteering.

Interview process

The following are the results of interviews with individuals, 55 or older, who devote a significant amount of their time and energy each year toward serving others. Interview subjects were chosen to represent several different roles and structures, as well as a variety of beneficiaries of their efforts. Each story elicits reflection on the perceived benefits and challenges of their experiences.

A Questionnaire was created as a basis for each interview (see Appendix I), but each individual's experience required additional inquiry. When interviewing, I allowed subjects to interject what they believed to be important for others to know about their motivations and rewards or about the deep concerns they have for their neighbors or social conditions. Following the stories is a brief description of the organizations mentioned by interview subjects, if they work within a formal program structure (Appendix II).