Volunteering of Older People in Hong Kong

Executive Summary

22 March, 2016
**Introduction**

The Hong Kong Institute of Volunteers (HKIoV) commissioned the Social Sciences Research Centre (SSRC) of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) to undertake a small scale qualitative study on older volunteering (aged 55 or above).

**Methodology**

HKIoV arranged recruitment of participants for four focus groups. All focus group discussions, which were audiotaped, took place at the HKIoV office. The facilitator and the observer were research staff of the Centre. Each focus group interview lasted for about 120 minutes with 5 to 10 participants. 29 older volunteers and staff from 24 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) participated in the focus groups. The SSRC research team designed semi-structured interview guidelines, in consultation with and approved by the HKIoV, in both Chinese and English, selected to fully and adequately cover the topic of interest.

**Focus groups with older volunteers**

Two focus group discussions were held with older volunteers from NGOs/ charities in different fields, one with less educated and one with more educated volunteers.

**Focus groups with NGOs**

Two focus group discussions were held with staff in NGOs of different service fields to ascertain good practices for engaging older volunteers, one with NGOs who frequently recruit older volunteers and one with NGOs who seldom recruit older volunteers.
Conclusion

Strengths and weaknesses of older volunteers

Strengths:
- committed and serious about volunteering
- tough and would not easily give up
- experienced and might teach staff how to improve the team spirit
- keen to discuss among themselves how to make things better
- punctual
- devoted with sense of responsibility
- passionate
- could understand impairment
- could educate children who would like to listen to their experience
- newer elders were better educated
- all seemed to be equipped with performance skills
- good communication skills.

Weaknesses:
- take time to adapt
- need to adjust their values and thoughts about volunteering
- sometimes like to gossip
- physical constraints & may have health problems arise
- may need to look after family members (e.g. grandchildren)
- newer elders less happy to be directed
- difficult to integrate lower with higher educated because of different expectations.
- Time: flexible, weekday mornings most suitable, otherwise before 5pm on weekdays
Recruitment

Motivations to volunteer initially:

- contribute to society
- share experience with others interested in volunteering
- happiness gained from helping others
- communicate and gain respect through helping those in need
- sharing both happiness and sadness was of great importance
- sharing knowledge and skills with others
- effective lifelong learning, through connection to other communities
- acquire communication skills
- change social stereotype of elderly
- increase manpower and lower economic burden hence benefit society
- keep busy after retirement
- encourage others with optimistic attitude
- inspired by TV programme
- sense of satisfaction, ownership and self-affirmation, self-understanding
- gain understanding of life and the society
- learn different kinds of skills
- learn to face problems optimistically and be thankful
- build a close bond with the elderly in the neighbourhood
- help communication with own children
- make new friends from different social classes
- build bonds of family and community with fellow volunteers

Obstacles:

- some might think volunteering wasted time
- some might not have the chance to volunteer,
- very laidback staff dampen the mood to volunteer
- if no work or no mentor they felt lost
- volunteering not widely advertised
- lack of social acceptance
- too costly if they needed to pay for their own transportation costs weekly
- complaints from family that they did not pay enough attention to them
Recruitment strategies:

- become role model to friends by sharing happy experiences
- bring spouses to volunteer
- many retired peers could not fully let go of work so volunteering may be good substitute
- target websites dedicated to older people or social media accounts of alumni and organisation groups
- encourage those who enjoy singing & dancing not to waste talents by performing
- matching process is important as there are some would like to contribute frontline work and do not want to attend organisation meetings and have added responsibilities
- reimbursement such as meal and transportation allowance for volunteers as tokens of appreciation
- target passionate first, who would bring friends later
- banners for recruitment and newspaper advertisement were effective but expensive
- Internet was effective in recruiting volunteers from different regions, as some volunteers might want to try different types of volunteer service.
- allow them to bring their grandchildren to the service centre when volunteering so that the children could be looked after and learn in the service centre.
- service recipients often have potential and time to be volunteers, so encourage them to join as volunteers, pair up with an existing volunteer with them and assign simple tasks so that they would have a sense of achievement and build confidence
- organize interest classes that arouse people's interest, followed by keeping them
- contact the media and arrange radio interviews
- target those living in the district as they were more likely to participate in the long term because they had a closer bond with the neighbourhood
Training:

Needed coverage:

- Nature and duties of the task and physical limitations to avoid accidents and failures
- Standards, ethics and rules, e.g. punctuality, no links with service targets outside service
- Organization culture and mission
- On-job training to make improvement
- Emotional training to sustain their mental health
- Self-protection training
- How to communicate with clients
- Leadership programmes and training for those who show interest and commitment

Suggested methods:

- Formal training methods not very useful as they might already know the content from other organizations, often deterred by the term “training” as they thought they had much more experience, so use new terms to make them less reluctant in the beginning
- PowerPoint presentation is too boring, can use role-playing by visiting the service targets, but need to convince them that role-playing helps them to acquire the skills
- Diversified training, e.g. games
- Workshops for groups interested in a particular aspect of volunteering
- Adapt to their ability, time, and physical strength - can shorten the training time, give regular breaks, provide graphics and simple notes to make it easier or organize revision classes

Communication:

- Transparency and fairness must be ensured, e.g. by having committee meetings conducted frequently with decisions or discussion properly recorded and shared among all members
- NGOs with few permanent staff may employ a one-to-many style of communication so lack of connection between volunteers, hence need activities to connect the volunteers together
- Use smartphone apps, e.g. WhatsApp, for efficient communication
- Survey to work out their schedules and expectations
- Ask for their opinions as they could give amazing ideas
- Need to talk with the unhappy to find the problems and formulate solutions
together
• usually listen to the staff with whom they are close to
• better to clarify things in an occasion that everyone was present to avoid gossip
• a volunteer who was easy-going, uninvolved in gossip, and maintained good relationships could act as intermediary between staff and volunteers
• more willing to speak up when not in service centre, so going to “yum cha” could help
• volunteers should be allowed to discuss the arrangement of activity with the staff in order to compromise between the practical experience of the volunteers and the requirements of the staff

Relationships, recognition and support

Building relationships:
• first 3 months crucial for retention so need to show their care and respect in this period and assign simple tasks to establish their confidence and stimulate their initiative
• might leave if the staff did not contact them regularly
• organise different kinds of activities to gradually develop a sense of affiliation
• regular services help familiarize with the services but non-regular services might be more interesting
• Publicize future plans so that they could know when they could volunteer again

Recognition:
• show regular recognition to all volunteers to fairly respect their contribution
• not excessive but provide motivation
• use social media as a way of recognising their contribution.

Reimbursement:
• Those with better financial capability seldom cared about reimbursement while the less well-off would consider the cost first, so this must be made clear

Debriefing:
• Important to help evaluation and improvement and to help volunteers establish better relationships among themselves and with the NGO

Facilities:
• plan access to the activity site by going there beforehand to prepare
Management:

- need supervisor present initially as only listen to the junior staff after become familiar
- like to form groups, so newcomers leave if they cannot integrate into existing social circles
- sense of hierarchy was strong so educating them about the division of labour and allowing teams allocating works to their members could help
- risk management plan should be prepared especially in activities with physical work
- staff need to be devoted and believe in the cause they were working for and be there for more than just salary
- many events and functions could be organised and coordinated by volunteers themselves
- sometimes staff have less education than volunteers so need to achieve respect
- need to make the regular services interesting by frequently adding new elements
- pair experienced with novices so that they could have a sense of responsibility and self-affirmation
- Reward with e.g. overseas exchange, after they had fulfilled certain requirements

Future directions:

- It is clear that in future, there will be more highly educated older volunteers, who will be more capable, but will be less happy to be directed and will expect a more participatory role that values their opinions and suggestions.
- It is important to take advantage of popular social networking tools, e.g. Whatsapp, to facilitate communication within volunteers, not just from the NGO to the volunteers.