Corporation for National and Community Service: The Health Benefits of Volunteering

Numerous studies have found that when older adults volunteer, they not only help their community but also experience better physical and mental health in later years. These findings suggest Baby Boomers and older Americans who volunteer may be more likely to maintain their health and independence as they age.

Lead Agency:

Corporation for National and Community Service

Agency Mission:

The mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

Principal Investigator:

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General Description:

A growing body of research finds that volunteering provides individual health benefits to those donating their time. This research has found that those who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression later in life than those who do not volunteer. "The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research," describes some key findings from this research, along with a state-level analysis of the relationship between volunteering and incidence of mortality and heart disease.

To produce the report the CNCS Office of Research and Policy Development conducted a literature review of peer-reviewed studies that have researched the relationship between volunteering and health. These studies were analyzed and summarized for the report. Additionally, the office obtained state-by-state data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Center for Disease Control to conduct an analysis of volunteer rate in comparison to mortality rates and incidences of heart disease

for each state. The CPS is a monthly national household survey that is the primary source of employment information on our nation's labor force. The CPS volunteer supplement provided up-to-date data on volunteering behavior among American households for each state.

Some of the key findings of "The Health Benefits of Volunteering," include:

- States with a high volunteer rate have lower rates of mortality and incidences of heart disease. Health problems are generally more prevalent in states where volunteer rates are lowest.
- Individuals who volunteer have greater functional ability and better health outcomes and lower mortality rates, even after controlling for physical health, age, socioeconomic status, and gender. Additionally, when chronically or seriously ill patients volunteer, they appear to receive some benefits beyond what can be achieved through medical care.
- The health benefits of volunteering, including improved physical and mental health and greater life satisfaction, are more pronounced among older volunteers than among younger volunteers.
- Volunteering often enhances the social networks of citizens of all ages reducing stress and the risk of disease.
- Volunteering and health are positively reinforcing. One study found that those who volunteered in 1986 reported higher levels of happiness and physical health in 1989, while those in 1986 who reported higher levels of happiness and physical health were more likely to volunteer in 1989.

These findings are particularly relevant today as Baby Boomers reach retirement age. Baby Boomers are volunteering at a higher rate than earlier generations did at the same age. With their demonstrated commitment to volunteerism combining with medical advances that keep them serving later into life, Baby Boomers may develop exceptional life expectancy over the next three or four decades. Efforts should be made to keep Baby Boomers serving in the future to enhance the health of the growing number of older adults.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

A number of studies have evaluated the correlation between health and volunteering, but this report is a comprehensive review of research that illustrates the robustness of the findings. This report determines that many previous studies have found a positively reinforcing relationship between health and volunteering. Clearly, those in better health are more likely to volunteer, but these studies demonstrate that volunteering also leads to improved physical and mental health: volunteering keeps healthy people healthy. Several studies show that volunteering also can improve health of those battling chronic or serious illness.

This study also is the first to compare mortality rates and incidences of heart disease to volunteer data for every state. Using the volunteer supplement to the monthly Current

Population Survey data produces reliable volunteering information that can display the relationship between volunteering and health. Breaking the data down by state allows the researchers to graph these variables and use a line of best-fit to display this relationship. This study demonstrates yet another method to determine that volunteering has a positive correlation to better health for older Americans.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

These studies find that older volunteers are more likely to receive significant health benefits from volunteering than younger volunteers. As Baby Boomers become eligible to retire, the U.S. will have to find ways to care for the health of the aging. This report suggests that volunteering may constitute a low-cost solution to maintaining health among seniors. For older adults, volunteering each week may be just as effective as other recognized preventive measures to ensure a healthy retirement. Additionally, seniors can volunteer to aid other seniors, creating a double positive effect. This ethos provides numerous positive effects for society as a whole.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

This research demonstrates the importance of engaging Baby Boomers in volunteering activities as they reach retirement age. With the costs of healthcare rising, these studies show that volunteering is one of the most cost-effective ways to stay physically and mentally healthy while also participating in public service. Seniors looking for a healthy activity should consider volunteerism. Organizations in need of volunteers, particularly nonprofits, can utilize this information to target volunteer management programs towards senior citizens that will engage them in service while also meeting organizational needs. Independent living, indentified by CNCS in other studies as a salient concern among seniors, can benefit from seniors serving with each other to ensure those dependent on others are not without aid.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

Evidence suggests the possibility that the best way for Baby Boomers and older Americans to remain physically and mentally healthy as they age is to volunteer. While there have been studies about the health benefits of volunteering, this document assembles recent significant studies in an easily comparable format and finds that they are constant in their conclusions: there is a strong relationship between volunteering and health benefits, particularly lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression later in life among those who volunteer as opposed to those who do not. For those interested in adopting volunteering as a method to stay healthy, this report summarizes the theorized "thresholds" that a person must cross to receive health benefits. There is also information that finds state volunteer rates are strongly connected with the physical health of the state's population, and this fact may spark interest from localities around the nation.