

The Corporation for National and Community Service: The Senior Companion Program

“The Final Report of the Senior Companion Quality of Care Evaluation” finds that by pairing senior volunteers with homebound seniors in frail health, the Senior Companion Program improves the quality of life and care for both the clients and primary caregivers being served. It also builds the capacity of the organization sponsoring the program.”

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:

Donna Rabiner, Ph.D.
RTI International
3040 Cornwallis Road
PO Box 12194
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194

Partner Agencies:

Senior Corps
AmeriCorps

General Description :

The Senior Companion Program provides grants to organizations that partner low-income senior volunteers with homebound elderly people in frail physical and/or mental health, most of whom live alone.

The “Final Report of the Senior Companion Quality of Care Evaluation” examines the impact of the Senior Companion Program on quality of life and quality of care outcomes for clients and families/caregivers served. The study also examines the value of individual Senior Companions to organizations serving to older Americans . To obtain a well-rounded understanding of the program’s impacts, the study surveyed clients, clients’ families/caregivers, and volunteer supervisors.

To examine the impact of the Senior Companion Program on quality of life and quality of care outcomes for clients and the client’s families/caregivers, interviews were conducted

over three time periods (at program entry, after three months, and after nine months). Interviews were also conducted with two comparison groups, one composed of potential clients on the Senior Companion Program waiting list, the other of adults who received care with other agencies, but not from Senior Companions.

Overall, nine-month results reported by clients and/or family members over time included:

- The relative increase in Senior Companion Program client self-reported health improvements
- The reduction in the number of depressive symptoms reported by clients;
- The reduction in client unmet needs for assistance with various activities of daily living;
- The increased ability of family members/caregivers to remain employed as a result of having Senior Companions care for their frail relatives at home.
- Fewer unmet needs for transportation services, according to families/caregivers;
- The relative increase in the likelihood of families/caregivers being very satisfied with the reliability of their Senior Companion.

Surveys of volunteer supervisors found that Senior Companions played an important function in enabling organizations to expand services to clients. Supervisors valued the assistance that the Senior Companions provided to their staff, and they were “very satisfied” with the roles that Senior Companions performed at their various locations. Supervisors also felt that other senior service providers, as well as the broader community-at-large, valued the Senior Companion Program.

Finally, the “Final Report of the Senior Companion Quality of Care Evaluation” submits recommendations to address qualitative feedback from those surveyed. Recommendations include improving the overall quality of service by refining existing training and screening programs. Additionally, clients and family members perceive there to be a shortage of Senior Companions who are available to serve. The report recommends recruiting additional Senior Companions to serve the increasing number of frail older adults who are eligible for program services.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

The impending retirement of the Baby Boomer generation has created an impetus for policies that meet health, social, transportation, and other needs of the aging population. The “Final Report of the Senior Companion Quality of Care Evaluation” finds that Senior Companions improve the quality of life for the clients they serve, as well as the quality of care that their host organizations are able to provide.

The study, conducted by RTI (Research Triangle Institute), is one of the most rigorous studies ever conducted on the impacts volunteering has on the health and independent living ability of older Americans. To measure the benefits received by clients, it compares outcome data for a sample of Senior Companion clients with data collected

from random samples from two comparison groups – individuals on the SCP wait list and individuals who received care from other providers – and followed up with these groups over time. To measure client impacts, the study examined “adjusted” differences in several outcome measures, controlling for prior health status and many other factors. To measure program impacts on other beneficiaries, the study also surveyed Senior Companion participants, family caregivers, and SCP host agencies.

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

The Senior Companion Program enables low-income persons aged 60 and over to remain active through continued participation in needed community service. It also provides support primarily to homebound seniors with physical, emotional, or mental health limitations, most of whom live alone, in an effort to achieve and maintain their highest level of living. With the large Baby Boomer population reaching retirement age, the Senior Companion Program provides an opportunity for well intentioned, low-income seniors to provide necessary support for seniors who are homebound, typically live alone, and often have mental and physical health problems.

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

Overall, the evidence suggests the Senior Companion Program is responsible for a number of positive benefits, controlling for other factors. The program has helped many senior citizens retain their dignity and independence in spite of failing health or disabilities. This program gives seniors the opportunity to continue to live in their home with only periodic assistance. Additionally, homebound seniors can build social connections with other seniors, a very important aspect of strong mental and physical health.

The “Final Report of the Senior Companion Quality of Care Evaluation” also demonstrates the need for more volunteers in the program, and recommends extending the Senior Companion Program so more seniors can benefit from it. As the population ages, the number of available volunteers aged 45 to 64 is expected to increase by 34 percent over the next two decades. By offering individuals new and expanded opportunities to serve their communities, larger numbers of Baby Boomers would begin to participate in this service program.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

With the number of Americans over age 65 projected to increase from 4.2 million in 2000 to 8.9 million in 2030, there is a pressing need for policy makers to meet the needs of frail seniors in the community. The Senior Companion Program is part of the solution; it is composed of over 200 volunteer stations around the country that support 15,000 Senior Companions and 61,000 elderly clients. This rigorous study examines the impact of this

program and finds that its relatively low-cost and “low-tech” approach has had a positive impact on the agencies, clients, and family members/caregivers served by the program.