

HOSPITAL VOLUNTEERS:

An Important and Changing Resource

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Hospital Volunteers: An Important and Changing Resource

Introduction

The total number of hours Canadians volunteered declined between 1997 and 2000, according to the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001), but this decrease did not extend to volunteering for health organizations. In fact, Canadians contributed more volunteer hours to health organizations in 2000 than they did in 1997.

This report looks at trends in the volunteer programs in one type of health organization in Ontario: hospitals. Ontario hospitals have faced many challenges in the past decade. There has been a sharp increase in the demand for healthcare services combined with major cutbacks to hospital budgets by government. Hospitals have had to reorganize themselves and find new ways of raising revenues and cutting costs. This has had an impact on the demand for volunteers and the ways in which volunteers enhance the quality of care provided by hospitals.

Hospital volunteers at a glance

- Seventy-four percent of hospital volunteers in this study were female; 57% were over the age of 54; 75% were not in the labour force.
- Fifty-two percent of hospital managers of volunteer resources reported a decrease in long-term volunteers (who stay for more than five years) and an increase in short-term volunteers (who stay for three months to one year).
- On a scale of 1 to 10, hospital staff rated volunteers' contribution to the quality of patient care as 8.43.
- On a scale of 1 to 10, hospital staff rated volunteers' contribution to helping with staff workload as 7.91.

The research process

This research project for the International Year of Volunteers set out to understand trends in hospital volunteer programs. We surveyed 31 hospitals in Metro Toronto and the regions of Durham, Peel and York. Our study was restricted to hospitals with volunteer programs consisting of 100 volunteers or more and at least one paid staff person to manage volunteer resources.

We conducted in-depth personal interviews with the professional manager in charge of volunteer resources at each hospital. We also surveyed, by telephone, an average of two staff who work closely with volunteers at each site. In addition, we surveyed volunteers at each hospital using a self-administered survey, to which we received a total of 805 responses. This report describes the findings that relate to trends in volunteering as reported by managers of volunteer resources and by volunteers themselves at each hospital.

Profile of the hospitals surveyed

The 31 hospitals in this study had an average of 468 beds each. Two-thirds of the hospitals described themselves as acute and general hospitals. The rest described themselves as providing long-term care, rehabilitation, or psychiatric and other services.

The number of volunteers at each hospital ranged from 125 to 3,240, with an average of 700 volunteers per hospital. These figures include volunteers who are active every day or several times a week, and those who volunteer only occasionally. Each hospital received an average of 70,515 volunteer hours annually.

Profile of the volunteers surveyed

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the 805 volunteers who responded to the survey were women (Table 1). They tended to be middle-aged or older; 57% were over the age of 54. Half (50%) had at least some post-secondary education. Seventy-five percent were not employed. Sixty-five percent of those not employed were retired.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of volunteers surveyed

Sex	
Female	74%
Male	26%
Race	
White	76%
Asian	17%
Black	3%
Other	4%
Primary language	
English	85%
Cantonese	3%
French & Italian	1%
Other	10%
Age group	
Under 21	17%
21-24	6%
25-34	5%
35-44	6%
45-54	9%
55-59	7%
60-64	11%
65-74	25%
Over 74	14%
Income group	
Under \$20,000	16%
\$20,000-\$39,999	26%
\$40,000-\$59,999	24%
\$60,000-\$79,999	14%
\$80,000 or more	20%
Education level	
Less than High School Diploma	16%
High School Diploma	34%
Some Post-Secondary	16%
Post-Secondary Diploma	13%
Bachelor's Degree	14%
Graduate Degree	7%
Labour force status	
<i>Employed</i>	25%
Full-time	39%
Part-time	61%
<i>Not Employed</i>	75%
Retired	65%
Student	16%
Searching for Work	6%
Voluntary	6%
Workfare	3%
Other	4%

Findings

Is there a shortage of hospital volunteers?

The hospitals surveyed involved volunteers of all ages. Younger volunteers, who often help with clerical and computer-related duties, make up 17% of the volunteer pool at the hospitals studied. Older, more mature, adult volunteers bring greater life experience to their volunteer involvement and, with their typically sympathetic ear, help to improve the quality of care for patients and their families.

Managers of volunteer resources were asked about the supply of student and adult volunteers. Nearly half (46%) said there was a shortage of adult volunteers, while an equal number said that the supply of adult volunteers met their demand. Only two managers of volunteer resources (7%), both in large teaching hospitals, said that there was an excess of adult volunteers.

The picture is somewhat different for student volunteers. Only three managers of volunteer resources (10%) said that there were not enough student volunteers to meet their needs. The rest reported an excess of student volunteers (52%) or said that the supply met their demand (38%).

When asked how they would respond to a shortage of volunteers, 97% of managers of volunteer resources said that they would try to recruit new volunteers rather than take steps to increase retention or ask more of existing volunteers. Questioned about the impact of a volunteer shortage, 41% of managers said that “essential services” would have to be cut; 38% said that the workload of staff who had come to rely on volunteers would be affected; and, 20% said that patient satisfaction would suffer.

Managers of volunteer resources were also asked how they would respond if faced with a volunteer surplus. Over one-third (34%) said that they would

develop new roles and responsibilities to accommodate the surplus; 17% reported that they would create a waiting list. One-third of managers of volunteer resources, however, said that they would turn away new volunteers because they were not in a position to increase the size of their volunteer pool. This was true despite that fact that over 75% of managers reported a demand for more volunteers from various units and programs in their hospital. Meeting this demand is a struggle for most hospital managers of volunteer resources. Nearly 60% said they did not have enough resources to recruit, train, supervise, and manage a larger pool of volunteers. Nearly all (97%) agreed that other reasons, such as capacity and union issues, were deterrents to increasing the volunteer base in hospitals.

Are volunteers staying longer and giving more?

The volunteers in our study contributed an average of 101 hours each per year, considerably more than the 77 hour average contributed by volunteers to health organizations in Ontario in 1997 (Heinz, 2000). This may be because health organizations is a broad label that includes rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes, mental health and crisis intervention centres, and other health services such as public health, wellness education, rehabilitative medical services and emergency medical services, in addition to hospitals. Our study included only hospitals. Moreover, the hospitals studied all had formal volunteer programs, that often require a greater level of volunteer commitment.

We asked managers of volunteer resources if they had noticed a change in the last five years in how long volunteers are staying with their hospital and how many hours they contribute. Their responses suggest that the percentage of long-term volunteers (those who remain with the hospital for five years or more) has decreased. This was reported by just over half (52%)

of managers (see Figure 1). At the other extreme, the percentage of short-term volunteers (those who remain for between three months and one year) appears to be on the rise. Eighty-one per cent of managers reported an increase in short-term volunteers; 63% reported an increase in volunteers requesting assignments of less than three months. Indeed, the majority of managers (72%) said that they thought volunteers had less free time due to family and paid work responsibilities and were, in general, willing to volunteer smaller amounts of time. The picture is a little more stable for middle-term volunteers (those who have stayed with the hospital for one to five years). Fifty-five percent of managers reported an increase in this group, 13% reported a decrease, and 32% reported no change.

No clear trends emerged on the average number of hours contributed by volunteers in the last five years. Over one-third (36%) of the managers of volunteer resources reported an increase, an equal number reported a decrease, and 28% reported no change. Managers who reported an increase attributed it largely to the hours contributed by long-term volunteers (those who had volunteered for five years and more) and said that all other groups (short- and middle-term volunteers) showed no change (see Figure 2).

This suggests that although long-term volunteers may be becoming a smaller percentage of the volunteer pool, the hours they contribute are increasing relative to the hours contributed by short-term and middle-term volunteers.

Is the face of hospital volunteers changing?

Managers of volunteer resources were asked about any changes they had seen in the age, source, and expectations of volunteers.

While hospital volunteers are fairly evenly spread among all age groups, the majority (57%) are over the age of 54. This is in contrast to the volunteer population in general (and health volunteers in general, excluding hospital volunteers) where the 35–54 age

group dominates. Managers of volunteer resources were asked whether the age distribution of their volunteers had changed over the past five years. Their general impression was that while the percentage of volunteers under age 35 had generally stayed the same or increased, the percentage of volunteers aged 55 and older had stayed the same (55% of the sites) or decreased (38% of the sites). Nevertheless, the 55 and older age group remains the largest age group volunteering in hospitals.

Figure 1

Trends in length of volunteer commitment

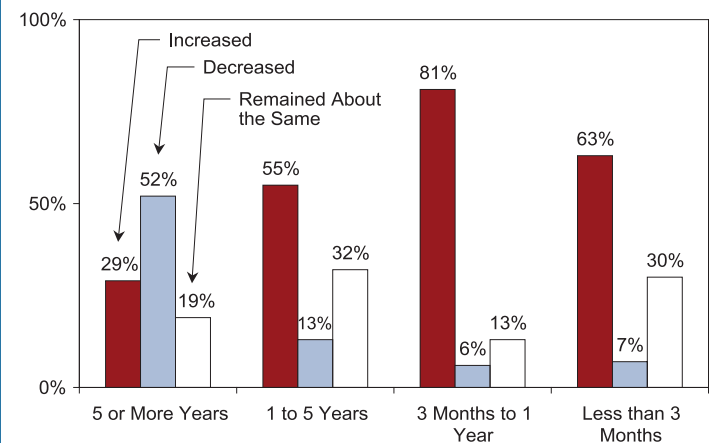
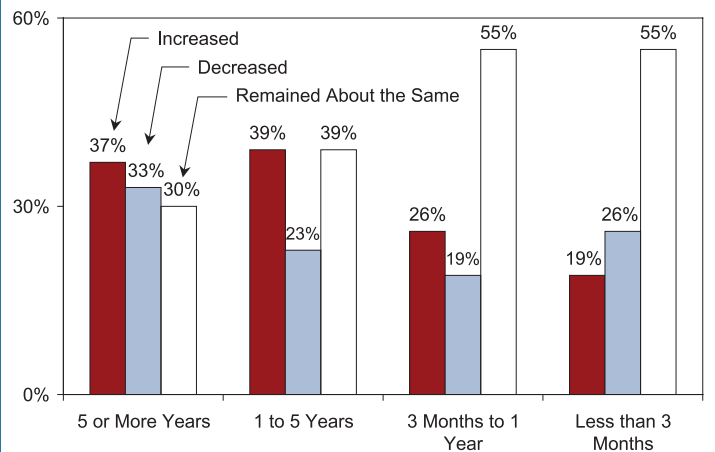


Figure 2

Trends in volunteer hours contributed, by length of volunteer commitment



Hospital Volunteers: An Important and Changing Resource

Ontario society is increasingly multicultural. This is especially true of the region in and around Toronto. Nearly all of the managers of volunteer resources surveyed (97%) said that more people from diverse cultures wanted to be volunteers, and that they were accepting volunteers from many more ethnic backgrounds than had been the case in the past. Seventy-nine percent of managers reported that language problems were often a barrier to volunteering for new Canadians.

More than 90% of managers noted that volunteers had high expectations that their own needs be met and wanted skill-building opportunities. Over 83% reported that volunteers were looking for greater variety in volunteering.

Finally, it should be noted that there has been an increased interest in volunteering at hospitals in the past three to five years, from participants in Ontario's "Workfare" program, student placements, and corporate employees. Although such individuals may not fit the traditional definition of a volunteer, they are integrated into the volunteer pool at the hospitals.

Hospital volunteering: A satisfying experience

The volunteers surveyed for this study appeared very satisfied with their volunteer experience. On a scale

of 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), they ranked their satisfaction at 8.70. The overwhelming majority of volunteers (88%) said that they would continue to volunteer at the hospital indefinitely.

These volunteers reported receiving benefits from their volunteer involvement. We asked them to rank these benefits. Among those they ranked highest were the opportunity to learn new things, making social contacts, obtaining references for employment, and job and career opportunities (see Figure 3).

Benefits to hospitals

The hours contributed by volunteers provide great benefits to hospitals, not only because the labour of volunteers costs very little, but because volunteers play an important role in enhancing the quality of patient care and in reducing staff workload. Hospital staff were asked to rank the overall contribution of volunteers to patient quality of care on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means not at all and 10 means indispensable. Their average rating of the contribution of volunteers was 8.43. When asked to rate the overall contribution of volunteers assisting staff with their workload on the same scale, their average rating was 7.91.

Volunteers also donate money to hospital fundraising campaigns. In 86% of the sites in our study, volunteers were also donors, and 68% of volunteers made a donation to their hospital foundation.

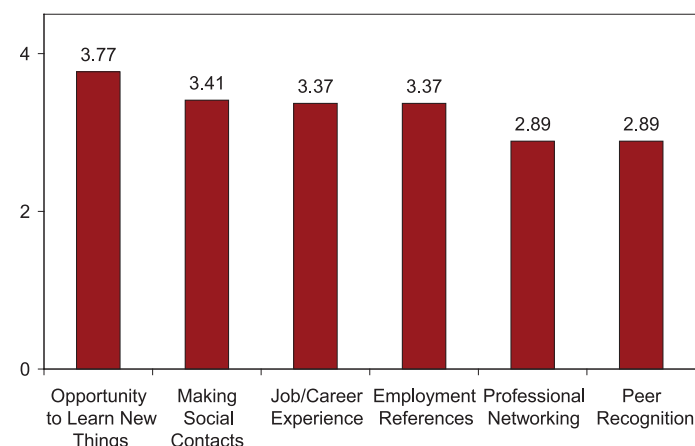
Attracting and keeping volunteers: Best practices and challenges

Given the importance of hospital volunteers to the quality of patient care and staff workload, we asked managers of volunteer resources what their office did best in volunteer administration. The three items listed most frequently were:

- volunteer recognition;
- matching volunteers to positions; and,
- providing volunteers with a satisfying experience.

Figure 3

Reported benefits to volunteer involvement



Volunteer recognition and satisfaction contribute to retention. Matching volunteers to positions based on volunteers' skills and abilities helps to reduce the time staff must dedicate to training and supervision.

We also asked which areas required additional effort and posed greater challenges. The top three items mentioned were:

- getting staff to work better with volunteers;
- keeping better records on volunteers; and,
- developing a statistical base; and increasing retention and motivation among volunteers.

Managers of volunteer resources also identified the need to increase professionalism within the field of volunteer administration and achieve the kind of recognition given to human resources departments.

Conclusion

Faced with growing healthcare needs and reductions in budgets, hospitals will do best by building a healthy volunteer base. Volunteers, especially active, long-term, dedicated volunteers enhance the quality of patient care and help to reduce staff workloads. Building and maintaining an effective volunteer pool, however, will require a commitment to increasing the volunteer management, recruitment, and retention capacity, so that more volunteers can be used more efficiently. Furthermore, the volunteer pool itself is changing. There are greater expectations from

volunteers that their specific needs be met. This has been accompanied by a decrease in long-term volunteering and an increase in interest in volunteering by students, new Canadians, Workfare participants and corporate employees. These changes suggest that careful attention must be given to creating volunteer experiences that meet the needs of both the volunteers and the hospitals. Hospitals that make this commitment will see benefits in the areas of patient satisfaction and staff workload.

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