



Retaining Older Volunteers Is Key to Meeting Future Volunteer Needs

Barbara A. Butrica, Richard W. Johnson, and Sheila R. Zedlewski

The 2005 White House Conference on Aging called for new and more meaningful volunteer opportunities for older Americans (Morrow-Howell 2006). Such opportunities encourage older adults to contribute their time and energy to society, which in turn appears to enhance volunteers' health and well-being (Corporation for National and Community Service 2007). Much is known about the characteristics of older volunteers, but not about the dynamics of volunteerism. What proportion of volunteers pitches in for many years? What prompts older individuals to move in and out of volunteer activities? And how do changes in family status, health, and employment affect decisions to start or stop volunteering?

Answers to these and related questions would help nonprofits understand and, in some cases, change the forces affecting volunteers' availability. Good information would also help policymakers appreciate the long-term importance of volunteering in older people's lives and design ways to expand older Americans' productivity and engagement.

This brief uses longitudinal data from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) to examine

entries into and exits from formal volunteer activities, and the factors that affect them.¹ The analysis uses information collected from a sample of adults age 55 to 65 in 1996 who were reinterviewed in 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004. In this study, formal volunteering means any volunteer work for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past 12 months.

While older adults usually stick with their original decision to volunteer or not, we find that they are more likely to stop than to start. Volunteers who contribute intensely and for many years and who are married to volunteers are the least likely to quit. And nonvolunteers are more likely to take the leap if they have been uninvolved for few years and their spouses volunteer. These results point to the need to focus

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efforts on retaining older volunteers to maximize volunteer engagement during later years. Recruiting older adults in volunteer activities early on, ideally before they retire, could fill any remaining gaps in volunteer needs.

Duration of Formal Volunteer Activities

Many older adults volunteer. Three out of five adults age 55 to 65 in 1996 volunteered at some point between 1996 and 2004 (table 1). They stick with volunteering too: nearly two out of five adults age 55 to 65 who volunteered in 1996 stayed the course through 2004, and another one out of five reported volunteering at four of the five interviews. Even so, older adults are less likely to start than to stop volunteering. Only one-third of nonvolunteers in 1996 started volunteering by 2004, but about three-fifths of 1996 volunteers stopped volunteering at some point



TABLE 1. Percentage Distribution of the Duration of Volunteer Activities Among Adults Who Were Age 55 to 65 in 1996

| | Obs | Periods Volunteering (%) | | | | | | All |
|-----------------------|-------|--------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| | | None | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| All | 5,872 | 40 | 15 | 10 | 9 | 10 | 16 | 100 |
| Volunteers in 1996 | 2,363 | 0 | 15 | 12 | 15 | 19 | 39 | 100 |
| Nonvolunteers in 1996 | 3,509 | 67 | 16 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 100 |

Source: Butrica, Johnson, and Zedlewski (2007).

Notes: The sample consists of adults who were age 55 to 65 in 1996 and responded to the 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004 Health and Retirement Studies. Volunteers are those who reported volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year.

by 2004. Nearly half of those who began volunteering after 1996 (16 percent out of the 33 percent who began) volunteered in only one period.

Interruptions in Formal Volunteer Activities

Declines in physical and mental health impede volunteer retention (figure 1).² Volunteers are 10 percentage points more likely to quit if they are depressed in both the current and previous survey years than if they are not depressed in either year, and 7 percentage points more likely if they become depressed in the current survey year. Becoming disabled increases the probability that a volunteer will quit by 5 percentage points. Volunteers who say they are in excellent or very good health in both the current and previous survey years are less likely to quit.

Changes in caregiving activities, marital status, and location also affect volunteer transitions. For example, volunteers are less likely to interrupt their activities when they stop caring for a disabled spouse, but more likely when they continue caring for frail parents. Working for pay while volunteering has little effect either way, but breaks in volunteering are 11 percentage points more likely if the volunteer becomes divorced or widowed. Moving also increases the likelihood that a volunteer will quit.

These influences notwithstanding, continued participation in volunteer activities depends most on whether the older person has volunteered intensely and for many years and has a spouse who volunteers. Volunteers who con-

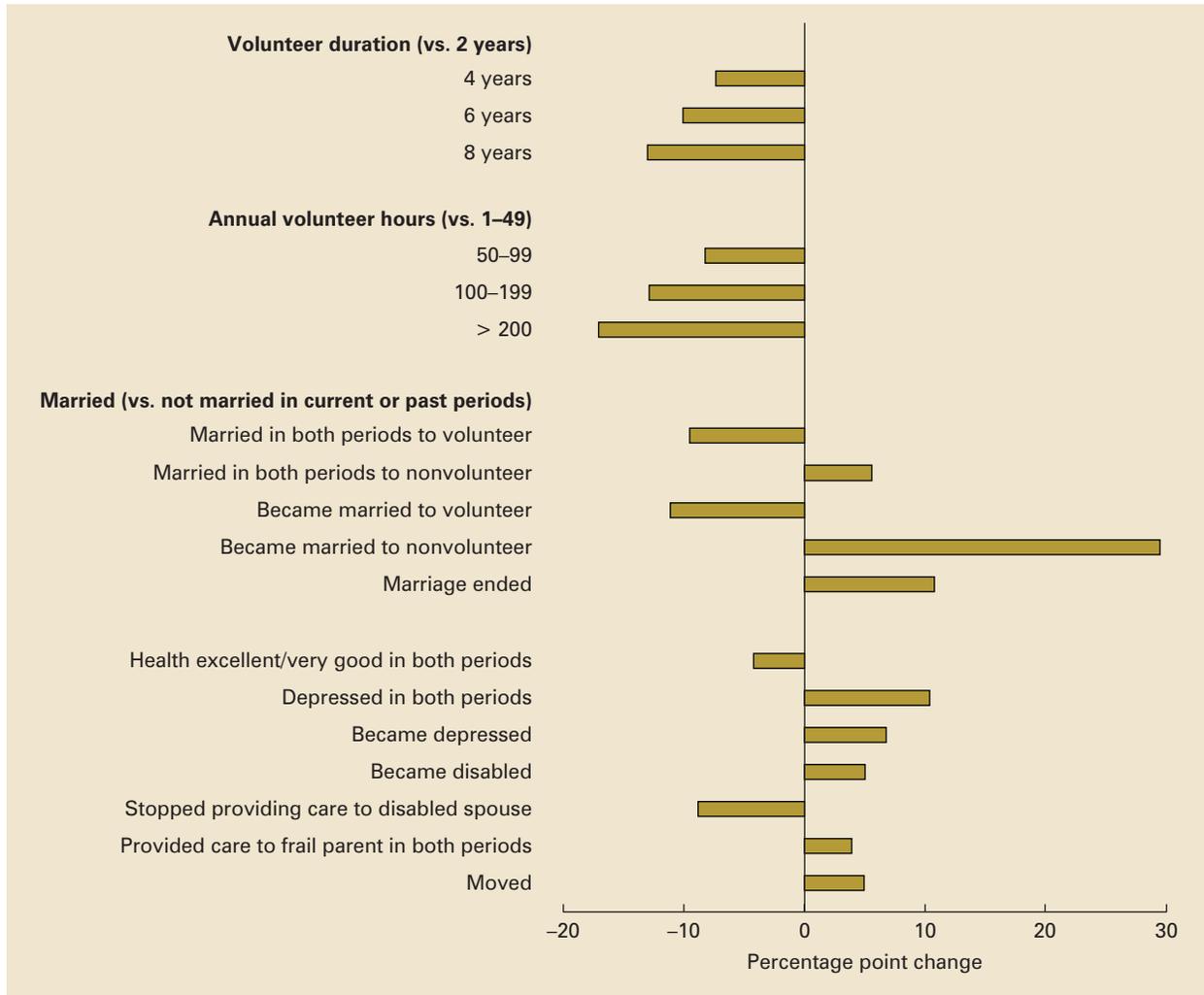
tributed 200 or more hours of their time in the previous year are 17 percentage points less likely to quit than those who contributed less than 50 hours. Volunteers in their eighth year of volunteering are 13 percentage points less likely to stop than those in their second year. Meanwhile, volunteers who marry another volunteer are 11 percentage points less likely than single volunteers to quit, and those who stay married to a volunteering spouse are 10 percentage points less likely to quit. On the other hand, volunteers who marry someone who doesn't volunteer are 29 percentage points *more* likely than single people to quit, and those who remain married to a nonvolunteer are 6 percentage points more likely to quit. In short, married couples seem to volunteer together or sit out together.³

Why Volunteers Get Started—or Don't

The reasons that volunteers quit have opposite—though weaker—effects on the probability that nonvolunteers will start (figure 2). Thus, it may be more difficult to persuade older adults to volunteer than to keep them from quitting.

Strong physical and emotional health encourages nonvolunteers to get involved. Those who self-rate their current health as excellent or good are 2 percentage points more likely to begin volunteering than those with worse health in both the current and past periods. Being disabled in the current and past periods reduces the probability that a nonvolunteer will start volunteering by 3 percentage points, and becoming

FIGURE 1. Contribution of Factors to the Probability of Interruptions in Formal Volunteer Activities, Volunteers Who Were Age 55 to 65 in 1996



Source: Butrica, Johnson, and Zedlewski (2007).

Notes: The sample consists of 6,448 respondents in the Health and Retirement Study who were age 55 to 65 in 1996 and reported volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year. All reported effects are statistically significant ($p < 0.1$).

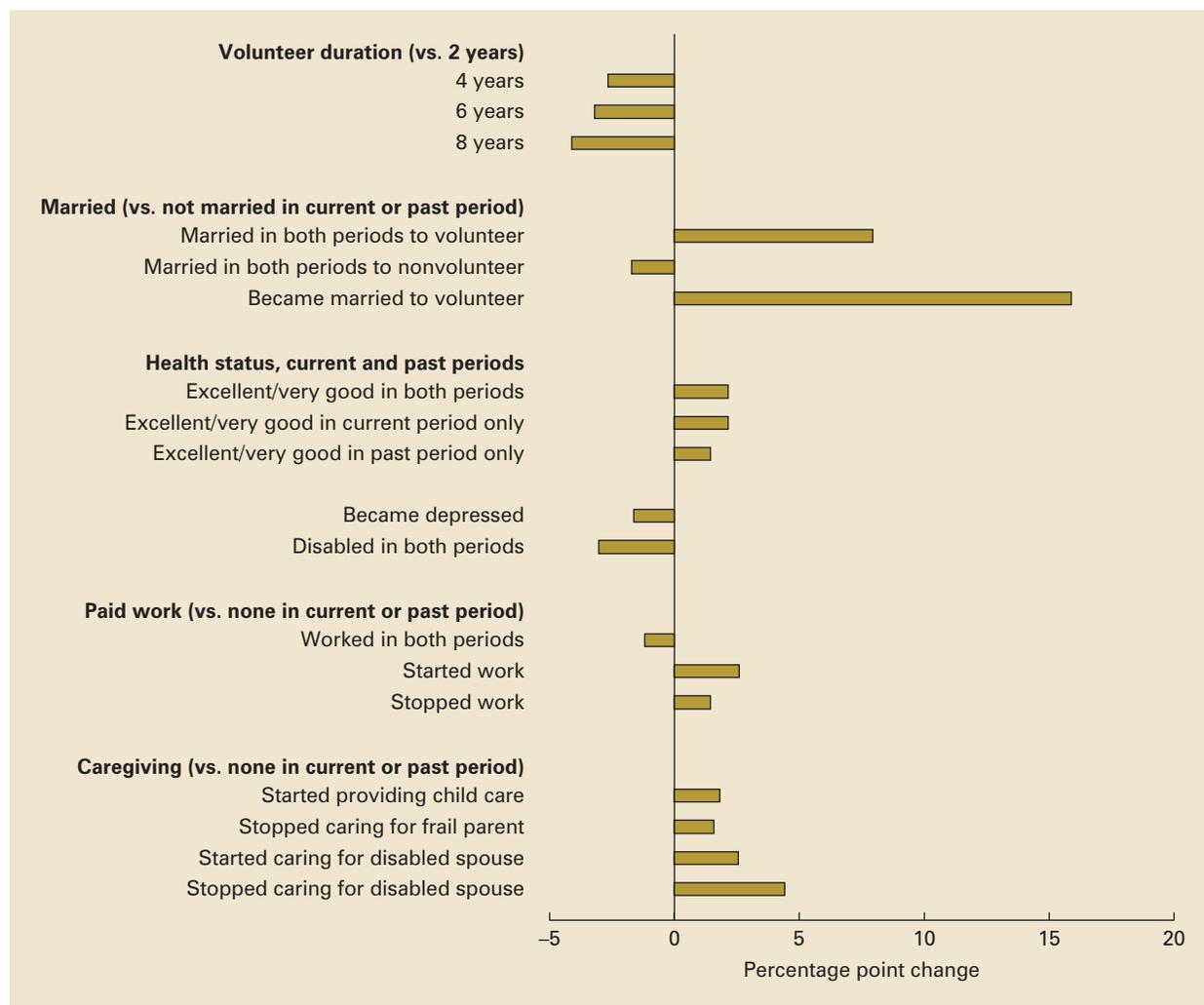
depressed reduces the probability by 2 percentage points.

Starting paid work, child care, and spouse care all increase the odds of volunteer starts, indicating that busy adults tend to take on more. Then, too, some active people may have more time to volunteer once paid work or caregiving responsibilities end. Nonvolunteers who stop working are more likely to start volunteering than those who never worked in either the current or previous periods, and nonvolunteers who

stop caring for a frail parent or disabled spouse are more likely to get involved than those who provided no care in either period.

As with retaining volunteers, what matters most in recruiting volunteers is how long they have abstained from volunteer activities and whether their spouse volunteers. For example, the probability that nonvolunteers will start volunteering is 4 percentage points lower in the eighth year that they did not volunteer than in the second. Nonvolunteers who marry a volun-

FIGURE 2. Contribution of Factors to the Probability of Starting Formal Volunteer Activities, Nonvolunteers Who Were Age 55 to 65 in 1996



Source: Butrica, Johnson, and Zedlewski (2007).

Notes: The sample consists of 12,810 respondents in the Health and Retirement Study who were age 55 to 65 in 1996 and did not report volunteering for religious, educational, health-related, or other charitable organizations in the past year. All reported effects are statistically significant ($p < 0.1$).

teer are 16 percentage points more likely than unmarried people to start volunteering, and those who stay married to a volunteer are 8 percentage points more likely to start.⁴

Discussion

The baby boomers' impending retirement raises the challenge of harnessing their productive energies to benefit society. Public charities report a critical need for volunteers (Urban Institute

2004), and engaging retired boomers could help fill this gap. Understanding potential barriers to volunteerism may help nonprofits find new ways to engage older adults.

Volunteers and nonvolunteers alike tend to stick with their past choices. Over half of volunteers continue for four or more periods, while about two-thirds of nonvolunteers never get started. Although changes in physical and mental health, and time demands from work and caregiving responsibilities all drive volunteer

transitions, the factors that matter most may be ones that organizations can do something about.

Interruptions in formal volunteer activities depend mainly on how long and how intensely volunteers serve and whether they have spouses who volunteer. Organizations can make volunteering more rewarding to prolong volunteers' passion and commitment. Matching older adults with volunteer opportunities that mesh with their personalities, experiences, and goals might help build stronger and longer-lasting connections. One study found that recognition, training, professional development, and well-suited assignments all promote volunteer retention, leading the authors to conclude that "retention appears to be very much a product of what charities do directly for their volunteers" (Hager and Brudney 2004).

Although recruiting new volunteers is harder than retaining volunteers, recruitment efforts could fill remaining gaps in volunteer needs. Recruiting initiatives may have a higher payoff if aimed at adults who haven't yet retired. Also, workplaces can provide promising pools of new talent. Zedlewski (2007), for example, shows that more than three-quarters of older adults who volunteer while working keep it up once retired, while only one-quarter of adults begin volunteering after they retire. Employee volunteer programs that continue to engage retirees can encourage volunteerism among older adults (Burns and Gonyea 2005). Opportunities for couples could also encourage people to start volunteering and help reduce volunteer turnover.

Notes

The authors are indebted to Simone Schaner for constructing the data used in this analysis.

1. The HRS is a longitudinal survey of older Americans conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan for the National Institute on Aging. For more information, see <http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu>.
2. We use discrete-time multivariate hazard models to examine the factors affecting older adults' volunteer transitions between 1996 and 2004. The models control for health status, religiosity, household income and wealth, age, gender, race, education, marital status, participation in other productive activities, spousal volunteerism, hours devoted to volunteer activities at the previous interview (for those in the volunteer sample), whether the respondent has relocated since the previous interview, and whether the respon-

dent lives in an urban, suburban, or rural area. For more information, see Butrica, Johnson, and Zedlewski (2007).

3. Corroborating earlier work by Zedlewski and Schaner (2006), our results also show that well-educated volunteers and those who place substantial importance on religion are less likely to interrupt their volunteer activities than other volunteers.
4. Other factors that significantly increase the probability that nonvolunteers start volunteering include education, age, and rural residence. Additionally, women and those who place high importance on religion are more likely to start volunteering than other people.

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About the Authors

Barbara A. Butrica is a senior research associate, **Richard W. Johnson** is a principal research associate, and **Sheila R. Zedlewski** is the director for the Urban Institute's Income and Benefits Policy Center.

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As America ages, older adults are getting more attention. Gone (or at least fading) is the stereotype of the retiree who is unable to work and who makes relatively few social contributions. Increasingly, older Americans are seen as a vibrant group with wisdom and energy to offer society and their families. *Perspectives on Productive Aging* will enhance the dialogue on the engagement of older Americans, documenting the current value of engagement among older adults and highlighting the best ways for society and policymakers to support and encourage the full engagement of older Americans.

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