Health and functioning of older adults volunteering for Habitat for Humanity

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The Health and Functioning of Elders Volunteering for Habitat for Humanity

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FUNDING
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BACKGROUND
24.8% of older persons ages 65 and over volunteer in some capacity: 16.2 million (U.S Dept of Labor).

Elder-volunteering literature to date has focused on elders volunteering for activities that require little physical strength or endurance.

Little is known about elders who volunteer for physically tiring volunteering activities.

It is not clearly known if only healthy elders volunteer or if volunteering contributes to greater elder health.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore the health and functioning of elders participating in an organization sponsored Habitat for Humanity blitz build.

METHOD
Mixed methods study including:

- Quantitative descriptive methodology
- Demographic profile
- Short Form 12 Health Survey (SF12™)
- Ethnographic methodology
- Participant observation
- Semi-structured interviews

FINDINGS
Who are these Older Persons?
Woodmen of the World members from nine states (N=40) gathering for a Habitat for Humanity Build in Maryville, Tennessee, summer of 2006.

Woodmen of the World’s Online Woodmen Life Insurance Society is a for-profit life insurance agency that supports needed causes and encourages members to participate in activities that benefit their communities.

Few participants had worked in construction or related field as a profession.

Participants had major disease conditions, but perceived themselves healthy. They perceived their conditions as an inconvenience rather than presence of any type of illness.

Theme 1: “I’m still healthy”
I’ve had a lot of problems, but I’m still healthy. If you look on there (survey), you’ll see. I’ve had tuberculosis. I had a kidney out when I was 19 years old with tuberculosis. Ah, I’ve had open heart surgery. I’ve had by-pass done. I’m 69 years old. I had colon cancer ah, about 18 months ago, something like that. Went back for my check up this year…

Theme 2: Adjusting to the demands
Each participant recognized the limits of their physical abilities and worked safely within those limits. They adjusted their pace and the amount of work that they did. There were no injuries during the week despite the rugged and steep lot site and the complexity of the work accomplished.

Theme 3: Everyone contributes
Everyone found a way to be of help.

Theme 4: Working hard
Research team members expressed surprise at the intensity and duration of the work performed by the older volunteers stating that they had difficulty “keeping up” with the younger volunteers and that a “holding the fort” position for the Habitat Executive directorsummarized this hard work in the following statement:

“...they have health issues but they don’t let those health issues put limitations on them. They work as hard as they can for as long as they can. And sometimes they work a little harder than they should and they pay the price the next day, but they don’t let it stop them at all.”

HEALTH CONCLUSIONS
Although it may appear that these older adults were physically healthier than the general population based on reported disease conditions, they were not healthier physically for their age groups according to SF-12 category scores.

Self-reports of health conditions as a measure of health may not be reliable as conditions may be under-reported.

These older adults (Age 65+) were mentally healthier than the general population for their age groups according to SF-12 category scores.

DISCUSSION
Perceived health is a better indicator of functioning than presence of disease conditions.

Elders can provide valuable services beyond “traditional” volunteering activities.

Elders should be recruited for more volunteer activities that are physically challenging.

LIMITATIONS
All participants were members of the same organization.
Sample limited southern geographic location.

FUTURE STUDIES
This is the first study of its kind and will be used as a pilot study for future research exploring health of older persons who volunteer for physically taxing activities.

- Studies of older persons volunteering for Habitat for Humanity.
- Studies of elder builds in other parts of this country.
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