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
Funding for this study was provided by a grant from Woodmen of the World/Omaha Woodmen Life Insurance Society and a Faculty development Grant from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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

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

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:
- Semi-structured interviews
- Participant observation
- Ethnographic methodology
- Quantitative descriptive methodology
- Short Form 12 Health Survey (SF12v2™)

RESEARCH QUESTION
What is the health of these older persons and how do they function during a Habitat for Humanity build?

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Older Participants</th>
<th>General Elderly Population†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mean=68.64</td>
<td>SD=27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male 24 60.0</td>
<td>Female 16 40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/others</td>
<td>37 75%</td>
<td>7 14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35 70.0</td>
<td>Widowed 5 12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Some college 7 17.5</td>
<td>High school graduate 22 55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Status</td>
<td>Full-time employed 8 20.0</td>
<td>Part time unemployed 28 70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Status</td>
<td>Under $24,999 8 20.0</td>
<td>$25,000-49,999 3 12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$50,000-74,999 11 28.2</td>
<td>$75,000 and above 5 14.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Population norms are calculated based on data from the SF-12 scoring manual (Ware, et al., 2005, pp. 84 – 85)

HEALTH AND FUNCTIONING THEMES

Theme 1: "I’m still healthy"
Participants had major disease conditions, but perceived themselves healthy. They perceived their condition as an inconvenience rather than presence of any type of illness.

“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 hip operation when I was 19 years old with tuberculosis. Ah, I’ve had open heart surgery. I’ve had by-passes done. I’m 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 hip operation when I was 19 years old with tuberculosis. Ah, I’ve had open heart surgery. I’ve had by-passes done. I’m healthy.

Theme 2: Adjusting to limitations.
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.

“Sometimes I mentioned not walking the walls anymore when your knees start getting a little weak and you have to pry yourself up with your hands. Ah, it’s kind of hard to have the ability to walk up there anymore. And I get a little short of breath due to some heart problems. And ah, as I said, I’m only 100 years dash anymore! Um, I might walk fifty. But oh, he, he, the thing is, staying with it until you get it done.”

Theme 3: Everyone contributes.

Every participant contributed in his/her own way. Some participants painted, some framed, some put up siding, some worked on walls, some worked on windows and doors. Waffle was placed and painted. Sometimes the participant’s health conditions placed some significant restrictions on their ability to participate in the Build. But everyone found a way to be of help.

“I was diagnosed with throat cancer and had radiation. March, I had lung surgery and they removed 40% of my right lung. It slowed me down a bit. I couldn’t do much of the heavy work. I just assisted, carried water, picked up trash or I call it ‘be a gopher’. I tried to be of some 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 people. The older volunteer for Habitat executive director summarized 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 them stop at all.”

Comparison of the Participants Age 65 and Over (N=30) and the General Elderly Population† with regard to Chronic Health Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronic Health Condition</th>
<th>Research Participants</th>
<th>Older Americans</th>
<th>Percentage of Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthritis</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Disease</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Cancer</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Reference data based on the Older Americans Update 2005, which reports data only for persons age 65 and older.

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 on conditions may be under-reported.

These older adults (Ages 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 southeastern 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 working for Habitat for Humanity.
- Studies of each build in other parts of this country.
- Studies of other builds in other communities.
- Studies of older persons who have volunteered for hurricane relief efforts or other disaster relief activities.

In conclusion, the findings of this study were consistent with the findings of other research studies that have reported that elders are more capable for such activities.

Longevity is often a benefit of volunteering, and it is possible that the health gains and ability to remain active contribute to a longer life span. However, more research is needed to determine the extent to which volunteering directly contributes to longevity.

This study found that the older adults interviewed were able to continue participating in activities that benefit their communities.

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 people. The older volunteer for Habitat executive director summarized 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 them stop at all."