



How to Recruit and Retain the Most Appropriate Volunteers for Health Programs

Executive Summary

Volunteers support health programs in communities around the world, and research has shown the patterns and impacts of volunteering. However, understanding volunteer recruitment and retention within programs can be challenging. In a pair of studies about volunteers with a health-related program aimed at older adults, Health TAPESTRY (Health Teams Advancing Patient Experience, Strengthening Quality), our research team explored important influences on volunteer retention and the impacts of the program on volunteers. Our findings highlight three key areas to focus on: the importance of knowing the core factors of your program; of including volunteers' personal, professional, and altruistic needs in volunteer planning; and of having ongoing and transparent communication with volunteers throughout the program.

Summary of Recommendations

To optimize volunteer <i>recruitment</i> in health-related programs we recommend:	To maximize volunteer <i>retention</i> in health-related programs we recommend:
Considering, given the core factors of your program, what influence and outcomes your program may have on volunteers themselves	Regularly updating volunteers about the progress and milestones of the program at various stages.
Clearly describing the positive benefits for both clients <i>and</i> volunteers in any volunteer opportunity materials.	Ongoing communication to volunteers, including examples of client benefits of the program using stories and data.
Targeting volunteer with characteristics most likely to align with the aims of the program for personal or professional reasons.	Paying close attention to continuously improving logistical aspects of the program from a volunteer perspective.

Context

Volunteers support programs focused on people's health and wellbeing in communities around the world, but the nature of the unpaid role means that they may leave their positions at any time. Each departure leaves gaps in service delivery and taxes the resources (time, money, human) that go into training and managing a volunteer pool.

Ideally, a program would simply recruit the most suitable volunteers for a program at the outset and retain them. However, understanding who the most suitable volunteers are and how to retain them is complex. Research has explored the nature of health care volunteers: who volunteers, why they volunteer, what leads to their satisfaction, and what impact volunteering has on them. However, there is a gap in our understanding of



the strategies an organization needs to implement to recruit and retain the best volunteers for their particular program. In our research, we explored this gap.



What We Did: The Background

Health TAPESTRY is a community-based intervention rooted in primary care. In the program, trained volunteers visit older adult clients at home where they use a custom app to gather information about clients' life and health goals and needs. Volunteers also help connect clients to community programs. Clients' responses go to their interprofessional primary care team members who further support clients with their health needs.



As one part of a large evaluation, we sought to understand the experience of Health TAPESTRY volunteers. To do this, the research team collected various types of data, including focus groups and interviews, surveys, volunteer-written narratives, and program implementation information. The team then used these data to describe the volunteer pool.

To understand impact on volunteers, we looked at differences in self-reported variables such physical activity and quality of life before and after volunteering, as well as volunteers' responses to open-ended questions about perceived impacts on them.

To understand retention, we explored differences between characteristics of volunteers who stayed with the program and volunteers who left. Examples include demographics, self-reported reasons for volunteering, qualitative responses to what was working well or not well.



What We Discovered: The Findings

We found impacts on volunteers that could be attributed to volunteering in general, as well as particular changes that might be specifically related to aspects of the Health TAPESTRY program. As often found in volunteer programs, there were small increases in volunteers' quality of life scores, and volunteers reported other general benefits such as opportunities to meet new people, feelings of meaningful contribution, and building or maintaining career skills. Related more specifically to Health TAPESTRY, we found a small increase in volunteers' own vigorous physical activity. Volunteers also reported planning their own healthy behaviour changes, valuing seeing new places (clients' homes and new areas of their cities), and learning about older adults and their health needs.



We found characteristics associated with retention of Health TAPESTRY volunteers: those who stayed were more likely to be a little older (averages of 43.1 years versus 38.3 years) and had slightly more years of volunteering experience (averages of 7.7 versus 6.4 years). Volunteers who stayed were also slightly more likely to describe reasons for volunteering related to personal growth or social connections, while those who left were slightly more likely to describe reasons related to gaining career-related experience or learning/using skills. When asked what worked well, volunteers who stayed were more likely to describe logistical aspects worked well (e.g., scheduling, training) and feeling that the program was reaching clients in need. Volunteers who left were more likely to describe issues in connecting to other program elements (such as primary care teams and community resources).

Recommendations for Volunteer Program Coordinators

For **volunteer recruitment**, we recommend that volunteer program coordinators:

- Consider any beneficial outcomes your specific program could have on volunteers.
 - For a program like Health TAPESTRY, which included goals of healthy behaviour change for older adult clients, potential volunteer outcomes to be mentioned in volunteer recruitment materials could include healthy personal behaviour change and opportunities for learning about older adults.
- Describe both the volunteer opportunity and its potential impacts on clients *and* volunteers in recruitment materials.
 - People volunteer for various reasons, and therefore, it is important to promote potential internal and external impacts. Internal impacts may include a sense of purpose or “giving back” with the work, which is why including potential client impacts in volunteer recruitment materials is important. External impacts may include career experience or learning certain skills.
- Target volunteers who are most likely to align with the aims of the program.
 - Consider volunteers’ personal and professional goals.

For volunteer **retention**, we recommend that volunteer program coordinators:

- Inform volunteers of the program’s progress as it moves forward.
- Communicate any client impacts throughout the lifespan of the program back to volunteers using both stories of success and data, to reinforce that their work is meaningful. Continually inform volunteers how their work is helping others.
- Ensure logistical aspects of the volunteer role (e.g., training, scheduling, and technology use) run smoothly. Continuously assess and improve these elements (Continuous Quality Improvement). If the administrative components are burdensome, even the benefits of a meaningful program will not outweigh this burden for volunteers.

Further Reading

Gaber J, Clark RE, Lamarche L, Datta J, Talat S, Bomze S, Marentette-Brown S, Parascandalo F, Di Pelino S, Oliver D, Price D, Geoffrion L, Wayne D, & Mangin D. (2022). Understanding volunteer retention in a complex, community-centered intervention: A mixed methods study in Ontario, Canada. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30 (6), pp 2259-2269. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13775>

Gaber J, Parascandalo F, Di Pelino S, Datta J, Lamarche L, Begum H, Clark RE, Gagnon C, Oliver D, Price D, & Mangin D. (2025). Exploring the effects of community-based volunteering to support older adults on volunteers: A mixed methods study in Ontario, Canada. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 111: 102617. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2025.102617>

Author Details and Acknowledgements

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