

**Article by Heather Nicholson as appeared in Times 2 on 12 July 2005.**

## **Help! We need somebody...**

There is a dearth of over-65s doing good works. Is this due to hyper-regulation or apathy?

People over 65 do not do as much voluntary work as they would like to, according to research carried out on behalf of the Home Office. To this end, the department is funding a two-year project, Volunteering Initiative for the Third Age (Vita), to find out why. Needless barriers such as age discrimination on the part of voluntary organisations, poorly targeted information, an inappropriate offering of opportunities and using insurance as an excuse for not engaging older volunteers are all identified in research as contributing to the problem. Vita claims that the voluntary work of one million people is lost to the UK economy, at a cost of more than £2.4 billion a year.

To find out what it is like to be a volunteer and to try to become one, I visited two organisations. The first was the well-known meals-on-wheels service run by the WRVS (Women's Royal Voluntary Service), the other a small local group, Southwark Churches Care (SCC), an ecumenical organisation founded in 1994 to provide volunteers to befriend isolated elderly people in the South London borough.

Being told that I would have to attend a training session in how to push a wheelchair struck me as risible at first, but I appreciate that a disabled person would worry about being tipped out of one by an untrained volunteer. Fair enough. I sort of understand the need for police checks, confirmation of where you live in triplicate and personal references from trustworthy citizens, but I do think they are tiresome. A management mantra is that if you make it easy for people, they will do it, buy it, flock to it, and I imagine that all this hyper-regulation plays a part in turning off prospective do-gooders.

Once over these hurdles, I can see why joining a meals-on-wheels team would appeal. At the Southend branch, run by the project manager Brenda Bowers, there are as many men as women and the atmosphere is jolly. They chomp on sausage rolls and roast potatoes rather than on biscuits, and gossip while waiting for their marching orders.

Fred Spring, 73, (pictured centre) who used to run a pub, has been helping out for three years. "I wanted to put something back into the community that I have earned my living out of over the past 50 years," he says. This is a typical sentiment. Spring drives one of the charity's cars with a paid helper and has a clipboard containing essential information such as "the key is on a string" or "Mr Bloggs has a hospital appointment and does not need a meal today". They record the temperature of the first and the last meals on their round — they must not fall below 63C (145F).

It takes them up to an hour and a half to deliver all the meals and they are not allowed to talk to clients. "It's a shame because often I am the only person they will see all day," Spring says, "but if you talked for five minutes to each one, the last person would get their lunch at teatime."

His experience as a landlord helps him to deal with difficult customers, particularly one who is notorious among the group — and who has reduced another volunteer to tears. "She is a miserable old cow," he says. "But sometimes if a person is a mental bully, you have to get in first. I tell her, 'don't start moaning' before she starts on whatever it is she is going to have a go about and she is really a pussycat with me. You have to make allowances."

In contrast to the purpose-built complex from which the meals-on-wheels are run, the SCC offices are in a Baptist church surrounded by a secondary school, pre-built homes for key workers and run-down council flats. The interview room is shabby and I have forgotten my paperwork, but that does not matter as there is also a two-hour induction course to endure before I can be accepted as a volunteer.

Linda Caputa, who has been with the SCC scheme for ten years, has about 90 volunteers on her books and a waiting list of clients. "For many the visit of our volunteer is the highlight of their week," she says. "One of our clients died and when the police broke in they found that the only name in her address book was our volunteer's." I am not sure that I am patient enough or altruistic enough to do what might turn out to be a boring job, but I suppose there is only one way to find out. And with a growing number of people living longer, well into their eighties and nineties, and with no relatives who can, or will, care for them the need for befrienders is urgent.

"We offer assertiveness training because some volunteers find it difficult to say no and they can't get away," Caputa says. "Or they are asked to do things such as shopping, which we don't do. I and two other part-time workers encourage volunteers to raise any concerns with us and we organise social events so that they can get to know each other and don't feel isolated. One woman who lost her best friend visits three clients because it stops her feeling lonely herself."

Some older people may want to do voluntary work to fill in their day or feel that it is pay-back time, but Sheila Windsor, the director of Vita, acknowledges that most people have plenty of other ways of occupying themselves. "We sometimes have the mistaken idea that people are sitting around thinking, 'what shall I do to fill my time?', when increasingly they are engaged in education, involved in child care or doing more of the things that they have always wanted to do such as play golf and go on holiday," she says.

"Some may also think that the Government is getting people on the cheap, but the voluntary sector has been good at providing innovative services, of thinking outside the box to help people who would not get government money anyway.

"What we are trying to do is to make it easy to volunteer. For instance, an organisation had its buildings insurance put up because it employed an 80-year-old receptionist who was sitting behind a desk. Rather than sort out the insurance muddle, voluntary organisations introduce a cut-off point at which everyone has to go."

One of the first conferences Windsor is organising will involve charities, politicians and insurance companies. "There is such a stereotypical attitude to what older people are capable of," she says. "Insurance companies make life difficult, they make assessments based on age, not on health. Yet age has nothing to do with it, people may be in perfectly good health. Assessments should be based on that."

A similar picture of non-involvement with volunteering is predicted for the US in a report by the Harvard School of Public Health, *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*. "Compared with their parents' generation, baby boomers have done less by every measure of civic engagement, including rates of voting and joining community groups," the report states.

"Although close to a third of boomers say they expect to participate in community service after retirement, there is a difference between intentions and actions, and boomers may need a push if they are to fill their parents' shoes."

The Harvard report suggests that existing voluntary or charitable institutions may need to be revamped to absorb the new type of volunteer, taking account of their interests and preferences as well as their clients'. Many local agencies will not have the resources for professional volunteer management, so new mediating institutions, or third parties, may be needed to handle recruitment, training and referral.

There are agencies to supply nurses, teachers and secretaries, so why not volunteers? Volags, they could perhaps be called. But I can't help thinking that the Treasury might hold the key. There is nothing like earning untaxed pin money to motivate an older material girl with limited time on her hands.

By HEATHER NICHOLSON

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