

Becoming Visible: Jewish Senior Volunteers

by Rachel Aber Schlesinger

This article is excerpted from a research paper originally presented at the "Heritage in Transition" Conference: The Study of Jews in Canada, held at York University in June 1998. The research presented provides us with some insights into the fact that older persons have the time, life skills, and the need to be of use and to contribute. The full paper can be found online at www.caje.org.

Older volunteers make "miracles." They provide loving care to children who are starved for attention; they provide transportation, homemaking, caregiving, and a whole range of other kinds of help to frail elderly; they run cultural programs at museums, theaters, and music centers; they are mentors for university students; they repair leaky faucets for poor people; and the list goes on. Older citizens working as volunteers make enormous contributions to their communities, to charitable and cultural organizations, and to individuals who depend on their help.

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Senior Volunteers: Background Information

"Downsizing" was the buzz word in most health and social agencies in the late 1990s. More and more do the various institutions depend on senior volunteers to help them out in offering the multi-services to a diverse population in the life cycle. Table 1 indicates the reasons that seniors are recruited.

Table 1. *Why Recruit Senior Volunteers*¹

talent	motivation
skills	energy
experience	new ideas
wisdom	values to share
time	

Their life experiences make them eligible to act as volunteers. In studies related to senior volunteers,² a picture emerged that shows us the major variables associated with volunteering.

Table 2. *Who Volunteers as Seniors*³

persons with higher incomes	those with more education
those with professional types of occupations	women more than men
married persons more than non-married	persons in good health
those still in work force more likely than retired	
those who volunteer through religious organizations	

It is possible that middle class persons have more time to offer for volunteer activities. The motivations to volunteer are important issues to examine. Fischer and Schaffer⁴ summarized the findings related to existing studies. Table 3 contains the factors which relate to the reasons that seniors volunteer.

Table 3. *Motivations for Senior Volunteers*⁵

to help others	for self-fulfillment
to do something useful	out of altruism
to contribute to the community	out of a sense of social responsibility
because the cause is worth while	because of a high capacity for empathy
because of religious concerns	to feel needed and validated
to maintain professional skills	because they find it meaningful
to meet other people	to make good use of spare time
because "free" time is available	due to multiple motivations for volunteering

Quite a few of the factors relate to the personal satisfaction that volunteering offers to the seniors. As they live in the "third age," they still want to feel needed and self-fulfilled.

*Rachel Aber Schlesinger is an Associate Professor in the Division of Social Sciences at York University in Toronto, Canada.
rachels@yorku.ca*

The benefits of senior volunteering can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Benefits Derived From Volunteering (from studies)⁶

better off physically	less lonely
healthier than non-volunteers	new friendships
lower mortality	increased social skills
higher life satisfaction	new roles
higher self-esteem	better social resources

It appears that the benefits mostly relate to a “renewal of life,” and a continued socialization with other persons.

Review of the Literature

The work by Fischer and Schaffer⁷ included a review of 350 articles and monographs on volunteering, not just senior volunteering. This paper includes some of their findings, especially in the tables. In Canada, Chappell and Prince⁸ interviewed 1,569 seniors. They found that seniors volunteered for reasons of obligations and social value. Among their sample, there were high rates of volunteering, on average two hours per work. In their voluntary work, they were more likely to do “service provision” (food preparation, care, etc.). The dominant volunteer activity for seniors included organizing, providing information, office work, sitting on a board, and recruiting volunteers. In Israel, Gidron⁹ studied volunteers in that country. His findings included the following trends.

- 72% of the Jewish population volunteer to various causes
- 14.1% were seniors (65 years and over)
- 20% volunteered their time on an average of 16 hours per month
- 63% contributed to social services, 57% to health services and 35% to religious services.
- women volunteer at a higher rate (23%) than men (17%)
- volunteering increases with age
- married persons volunteer more than unmarried
- in the senior volunteer group, persons spend 32 hours per month volunteering

The Focus Group

There were 11 seniors in the focus group in Canada who were all widows volunteering at a non-residential senior center. They felt that they looked forward to the routine of an organization. The benefits of volunteering at the center included:

- higher life satisfaction
- less loneliness
- more self-esteem
- increased social skills
- better social resources
- making new relationships
- making a contribution to society

The women wanted to feel needed, to see people, and to be involved in an activity. They needed a “job,” a “function.” They replaced loneliness with group activity. Many of the widows cited the center as a point of transition, a bridge. They came when other roles were no longer available to them, they were widowed, they moved to a new city, and they were retired. The volunteer connection revitalized them, and, in the case of Mrs. G., she found her “boyfriend” in the volunteer setting. He is 91, she is 80, and ... in the middle of winter he stays in Florida, while she remains in Toronto: “so I have more time to volunteer while he is away.”

Some volunteers sat at the welcome desk. This is a special job of high status. If you are the greeter, the first person others meet, then this is a position of responsibility. The greeter needs to be alert, outgoing, and remember the people who come on a regular basis. There is also the person who sits near the entrance, to refer people to the proper rooms, to take money for programs, and to direct traffic. This, too, is a high status position.

While most of the focus group members were pleased with their positions as volunteers, some eventually shared that they are not always welcome. When they come forward and respond to a call for volunteers, they are told that there are really no positions open right now. This is a great source of frustration. Volunteer needs and agency needs have to be in tandem; if they are not, then one or the other party is dissatisfied or frustrated.

One recommendation to come from the focus group was to make more volunteer positions available. Regular members want to have a daily reason for coming to the center and they need to feel they are performing a valued service.

One woman in the group repeated often that she was willing to do anything -- put stamps on letters, file, anything. She claimed she did this willingly, but, after some discussion, she admits that doing even boring jobs is better than having no job.

Two other women, who were more than eighty years of age, told us about the social aspects of volunteering. They met people and didn’t want to play bridge. Both been in the paid work force -- one as a teacher, the other as an accountant -- so they felt the loss of their jobs as loss of prestige, loss of a role. Attending programs was not enough for them, they had to have a role, a job, and a function.

Portraits of Senior Volunteers

The following seniors were among the persons interviewed and represent some of the fascinating human interest stories found among senior volunteers.

Marie

Marie was one member of the group who was not outgoing and did not even speak much English, yet made great contributions. She is skilled in handicrafts. She spoke in French and was not always attentive to what was being said, yet she has a reputation at the centre. She creates things to be sold in a raffle. She is proud that her last sweater brought in \$375.00 in a raffle. She is isolated by language, and social custom.

She came to Canada from Morocco, and joined her family in Toronto, after leaving family in Montreal. She is new to the community; she has language difficulties and a degree of dementia. She wanders, and staff need to be alert regarding her whereabouts. She retains her handicraft abilities and is proud of her contributions to the center with the work of her hands. She attended the focus session because someone brought her to the group, but she proudly shared, in French, her own work that helps “us all.”

Anna

“Anna” is a different kind of volunteer. She visits schools and tells elementary classes about what it was like to grow up in Canada in the 1930s. She is a widow. Her husband was very

active in the Jewish community and was a labor organizer. A socialist from Russia, he worked with labor groups and served the Canadian government as a consultant in his later years, using his experiences as a tailor, a foreman, and an advocate for workers' rights. As long as he was alive, her home was filled with people of all ages, coming to meet her husband. When he died, she fell into a hole. "No one came to see me, I had been my husband's helper, now I was only a woman on her own". So, with the help of friends, she began to volunteer in schools. She was never a volunteer before. It had been an assumption that active volunteers had spent years over their life spans as volunteers or involved in organizations. Not this woman. She entered a new world as a widow, and loneliness and a need to be with others drove her out of her home into new settings.

One day, she saw a notice about a meeting to be held to organize a group at a community center. She went, and, without knowing how it happened, she was voted program chair of this new group of seniors. This came about because she told the group that if she belonged, the programs would have to be interesting. She said that when she first came to the meetings, she was dressed in her best suit; she was, after all, going on an outing. The others, however, were in pants, sweatsuits, and very informal dress. She stood tall, at her full four-feet-eleven-inches, and told them that if they were out as a group, they should dress up, not dress down. Anna has "STANDARDS" to maintain.

She has been the program chair of this group for several years. There are approximately one hundred members of the group; they meet every week, all year long. This has been a major activity for Anna, and she sees it as a mission "... to get those women interested in culture and education. When they want a program of fashion, of games, of light entertainment, someone else arranges it."

Sally

She was a former social worker, and, when she retired, she took her professional interests into the volunteer realm. She joined together with other newcomers to Toronto to form a seniors group, which began as a support group. Gradually the group evolved into two sections, one for couples, the other for older women without partners. Sally and her co-volunteers began to apply for various grants, from various agencies, to help support the programs and activities of the groups. At this point, grants cover a meal when the group meets, monies for paid speakers, the running of a clothing exchange, and special projects during the year These groups keep a Jewish identity, bring in programs of Jewish content, celebrate holidays together, and generally have formed a large "extended family of friends." They raise money for Israel and for activities of a Jewish nature in Toronto.

Sara

Sara goes weekly to hold babies and young children who are hospitalized. They either have no contact with their mothers or very limited contact. Sara goes to hold, to feed, and to talk to babies. She says "I am a Jewish grandmother, but I have no children of my own. These are my children." She continues ... "they are sick, some die. Here I am an old woman, but it is the babies who die. At least I can hold them, help them."

In each of these settings, the needs of the agency must be matched with the abilities and skills of the seniors. Older persons have the time, life skills, and the need to be of use and to contribute.

Conclusions

Glicksman¹⁰ points out that Jewish seniors, as a unique group, have been neglected as an area of study and that in the field of social gerontology there seems to have been a lack of interest in the Jewish elderly. Jewish seniors are an ever-increasing portion of Canadian Jewry.

Senior volunteers have played an important role in delivering a wide range of social and health services. Many seniors wish to repay society by helping out as volunteers. Older adults fulfill needed roles in the Jewish community in Canada. Their work opens up opportunities for socialization and potential friendships for themselves. They also develop interpersonal and other skills and they have opportunities for their own personal growth. They play an important role in Jewish continuity and share their roots in inter-generational programs. The community needs the talents of the seniors to be able to continue to offer their services to an ever-growing population of elderly persons.

The present exploratory study has focused on senior volunteers in three settings in Toronto, Canada. An attempt has been made to show the important contribution seniors make in their voluntary work for existing institutions. The present effort is just a beginning. Further studies can examine in depth the lives of Jewish seniors who give of their time to ameliorate the lives of diverse populations in our community.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh he said "With our young and with our old we will go out of Egypt." Moses knew then what we know now – that to have a real community, both the young and old must be included in its life, its activities, and its destiny. We now are realizing that our Jewish senior volunteers are becoming visible. ❁

ENDNOTES:

1. Adapted from Ontario Ministry of Citizenship. *A Guide to Recruiting Senior Volunteers in Your Community*. Toronto: Queen's Printer of Ontario, 1995.
2. Adapted from Fischer, L.R. and K. B. Schaffer. *Older Volunteer: A Guide to Research and Practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993.
3. Ibid, pp. 18 - 24.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, pp. 49 - 50.
6. Ibid, pp. 178 - 188.
7. Ibid.
8. Chappell, N.L. and M.J. Prince. "Reasons why Canadian Seniors Volunteer" in *Canadian Journal on Aging*, vol. 16: issue 2 (1997), pp. 336-353.
9. Gidron, B. *Patterns of Giving and Volunteering in the Israeli Public*. Beersheba: Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 1997.
10. Glicksman, A. (1990). "The New Jewish Elderly" in *The Journal of Aging and Judaism*, vol. 5: issue 1 (1990), pp. 7-22.

