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# **Managing Volunteer Retirement among Older Adults: Perspectives of Volunteer Administrators**

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A large body of quantitative evidence demonstrates a link between volunteering and improved well-being, especially among older adults. Yet the research evidence pointing to the purported benefits of volunteering does not adequately address the unique experiences of older volunteers, nor does it address the ways in which working with them impacts the work of volunteer administrators. As the proportion of those aged 65 and older increases, older adults are poised to play an even greater role as volunteers than ever before, representing both unparalleled opportunity and potential new challenges for volunteer administrators. One such challenge includes how to manage older adults' decisions to withdraw or retire from volunteering, which has an impact on the succession planning of the volunteer workforce. This article presents the results of a recent survey of volunteer administrators who share current policies and perspectives about volunteer retirement. These practitioner viewpoints provide important insights for both volunteer management and future research.

Keywords: Volunteering, Volunteer Administration, Volunteer Management, Older Adults, Volunteer Retirement

In the United States, approximately 25% of the adult population aged 16 and older engages in some type of volunteering annually (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). According to 2015 estimates, 23.5% of adults aged 65 and older volunteer, with the majority volunteering through religious organizations or social and community service groups (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2016; classified according to Bureau of Labor Statistics categories). While national survey data and scholarly research have indicated that volunteering tends to be negatively associated with age, older adults tend to volunteer more hours than those from other age groups (Greenfield, Scharlach, & Davitt, 2016; Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003). For example, while college students volunteer at a slightly higher rate than older adults (25.7%), their median contribution is 34 hours per volunteer versus the median contribution of 90 hours per volunteer by older adults (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016).

The total value of all time that older adults volunteered for nonprofits, churches, and other formal organizations has been estimated to be around \$45.4 billion each year (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2016). Thus, older adults' participation in formal volunteering contributes significantly to American society, not only as an integral part of civic engagement

and community life but also as a valuable economic resource. As such, the volunteer experiences of this age group emerge as an important topic for consideration, especially for practitioners who work with volunteers.

Increasingly, policymakers and researchers have been preoccupied with the aging population and the impact of this phenomenon on social, economic, and political life. One solution has been to encourage older adults to engage in “productive” activities as they age, especially in their post-retirement years. Indeed, extensive empirical evidence demonstrates a link between volunteering and improved well-being, suggesting that this activity may have positive impacts on individuals as they age (e.g., Jenkinson et al., 2013; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Okun, Yeung, & Brown, 2013; Piliavin & Siegl, 2015). Likewise, given nonprofits’ ongoing reliance on the efforts of volunteers to complement the work of paid staff (Handy, Mook, & Quarter, 2008) and contribute unique skills and assets to their work (Handy & Srinivasan, 2005), volunteering has emerged as one of the hallmark activities of so-called productive aging and retirement.

At first glance, the promotion of volunteering as a healthy part of aging and older adulthood appears to offer mutual benefits to organizations, older adult volunteers, and society at large. Indeed, it is widely recognized that older adults bring a richness of experience, skills, talent, vibrancy, and consistency to volunteer programs (Henkin & Zapf, 2007; Lee & Brudney, 2012). Nevertheless, working with this group of volunteers can also give rise to unique challenges and concerns for practitioners. One such challenge includes how to help older adult volunteers navigate not only their transition into volunteering with an organization but also their transition *out of* volunteering. While there is substantial scholarship on how to recruit, retain, and manage volunteers at all ages, less research (if any) has investigated the circumstances in which older adults come to end their long-term volunteering and how this transition has an impact on their well-being and the functioning of volunteer programs. As longtime volunteers embedded within organizations age, they begin to consider if and when to retire or withdraw from their volunteering. Given their job responsibilities as well as their often-close relationships with volunteers, volunteer administrators must face the challenge of assisting older volunteers when this sensitive and sometimes stressful decision arises.

Furthermore, when we consider the social, physical, and psychological benefits of volunteering, which research has demonstrated are greater for older adults than their younger counterparts (Tabassum, Mohan, & Smith, 2016; Van Willigen, 2000), the decision to retire from volunteering also implies the withdrawal of these benefits. This decision therefore becomes a critical one for older volunteers, who often build strong personal and social identities around their volunteer roles. As the general population ages, it is probable that volunteer retirement will become a salient issue for volunteer administrators. The question facing practitioners is how to manage volunteer retirement by older adults in a sensitive manner that protects the well-being of their older volunteers. Other related questions are: What, if any, is the responsibility of organizations and their staff toward retiring volunteers? How should organizational staff assist older volunteers in their decision-making regarding their retirement, especially in the absence of close friends or family to assist with the process? What policies, trainings, and practices would help prepare staff for these inevitabilities? These considerations align well with the previously recognized responsibilities of volunteer administrators, who are tasked with both identifying changes in their volunteers’ preferences and suitability to assigned tasks over time and, subsequently, adjusting when necessary (Ellis, 1999).

The present study seeks to address these questions using findings from a survey of volunteer administrators. Our purpose is to introduce the topic of retirement from volunteering—a topic that, thus far, has not received much attention—and to begin to explore practitioners’ perspectives and current organizational policies that relate to the management of this phenomenon. To do this, we first examine the current literature on the topic of older adult

volunteering to provide the policy and practice context in which to situate the topic of volunteer retirement. We then present our methodology and findings and conclude by discussing the implications and recommendations for future policy, practice, and research.

## **The Issue: Retirement from Volunteering**

### *Volunteering in Retirement: Resources, Roles, and Well-Being*

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (2016), in 2015 nearly 11 million adults aged 65 and older devoted 1.9 billion hours of their time to volunteering. Not surprisingly, many scholars have focused on the study of volunteering and especially on older volunteers. Researchers and practitioners have recognized these older adults as a valuable volunteer resource for organizations. They are often retired from paid work, and they have a wealth of experience and skills as well as available time to volunteer (Rozario, 2007). With the baby boomer generation at or nearing retirement age, there are increased numbers of highly skilled individuals with free time available for organizations to recruit (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012; Einolf, 2009; Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009; Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015; Wei, Donthu, & Bernhardt, 2012).

Although there are many possible frameworks for understanding the phenomenon of volunteering in retirement and older adulthood, scholars have frequently conceptualized it in terms of role theory. This theory suggests that, when individuals face periods of transition throughout the life course, they cope with these transitions by taking on new roles or by prioritizing existing roles differently, thereby mitigating the impact of the loss of earlier roles (Biddle, 1986; van der Horst, 2016). In the context of volunteering, older adults often regard their volunteer roles as an important source of self-esteem, social support, community belonging, and personal meaning. These features of their volunteer experiences may help them navigate other transitions in their social roles, such as the aging of adult children, widowhood and retirement from paid work (Cho, Kim, Park, & Jang, 2018; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Rotolo, 2000).

In a recent study of volunteering in older adulthood in the Netherlands, Van Ingen and Wilson (2017) focused on this concept of role-making, which they termed “volunteer role identity.” According to the authors, “Roles are an important source of self-identity,” the salience of which is strengthened by the intensity of exposure to the role (Van Ingen & Wilson, 2017, p. 30). They found that the salience of volunteer role identity was greater among older adults in retirement from paid work, noting that, when individuals chose to reinvest their newly freed time into volunteering, it increased the intensity of their volunteering and functioned as a “compensation strategy” for the loss of paid work roles (Van Ingen & Wilson, 2017, p. 29). The relationship between retirement from paid work and engagement in volunteering in older adulthood is empirically supported and theoretically justified using role-theory.

Another important body of research centers on the link between volunteering and well-being. An extensive literature exists demonstrating that volunteering improves physical and mental health, overall well-being, and quality of life, especially for older adults (e.g., Baker, Cahalin, Gerst, & Burr, 2005; Barron, Tan, Yu, Song, McGill, & Fried, 2009; Kail & Carr, 2017; McDonald, Chown, Tabb, Schaeffer, & Howard, 2013; Okun, Yeung, & Brown, 2013). The purpose of this article, however, is not to summarize this literature, but rather to note its importance for understanding what happens when volunteers retire. Given policymakers’ and practitioners’ interest in recruiting and retaining older adults as volunteers (e.g., Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012; Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015; Hudson, 2007; Morrow-Howell, 2010), the positive outcomes of volunteering are noted to justify the promotion of volunteering in older adulthood.

*Retirement from Volunteering: What Is It?*

As noted above, a variety of literatures focus on volunteering in retirement, often in the context of role theory or amidst broader discussions about the potential benefits of this activity for volunteers and society. However, we can also conceptualize another transition for older adults, which we refer to as volunteer retirement. Volunteer retirement is the decision on the part of older adults to withdraw from their volunteering; although the decision is reversible, the concept as we use it implies permanent withdrawal from all volunteering activity. As with retirement from paid work, the reasons for volunteer retirement vary from person to person and may range from completely voluntary (e.g., simply no longer enjoyed it) or involuntary (e.g., declining health). Retirement from volunteering may be initiated by the volunteer, or friends and family, medical professionals, or the volunteer administrator may encourage it. The term “retirement” is purposefully used to convey the connection that exists between retirement from paid work and retirement from unpaid work (i.e., volunteering) in older adulthood (two important transition points) and to highlight the ways in which volunteering has been understood as both a form of work and a substitution for paid employment as suggested by role theory (e.g., Sherman & Shavit, 2012).

To illustrate some examples of how volunteer retirement manifests in the field of volunteer administration, we offer the following vignettes:

(1) Mr. A (age 88) was a long-term volunteer at a hospital for over 20 years. He served as a greeter and escorted patients and guests around the hospital. He was told that he could no longer live independently and was moved out of his apartment into a nursing home. Mr. A struggled to adapt to his new home, and the volunteer department became creative about his assignment in order for him to continue volunteering. Because Mr. A served as a greeter at the hospital, the director of volunteers and the social worker thought perhaps he could serve as an informal volunteer greeter at the nursing home. But because his scooter was taken from him, this option did not appeal to him. Despite these efforts, Mr. A never volunteered again; his health rapidly declined, and he passed away five months later.

(2) Mrs. B (age 86) was a long-term volunteer for 27 years. She served in various roles from the information desk, health administration, and director’s office. Mrs. B had a fall in her home and was moved in and out of hospitals and rehab facilities. Her family had to look after her around the clock. Each time the volunteer administrator called, Mrs. B. stated that this was just a minor setback and she planned to return to volunteering soon.

(3) Mr. and Mrs. C, married for over 60 years, were long-term volunteers for 16 years at an outpatient clinic associated with the hospital. They provided administrative support to the staff for filing, answering phones, and mailings. Recently, Mr. and Mrs. C decided to move out-of-state to be closer to their children. In conversations with the volunteer administrator, they mentioned that as they were getting older, they anticipated declining health and wanted to be closer to where their children could help them. They were not sure if they would continue volunteering in their new home.

(4) Ms. D was a long-term volunteer in a hospital. She provided administrative support to various departments and assisted the staff at the information desk. In her late 90s she was still driving and occasionally had accidents in the parking garage. Ms. D was forgetting how to get to the cafeteria so instead of staff notifying the volunteer department, staff would slip directions in her uniform pocket so she would not get lost. After several observations of this behavior, the volunteer administrator consulted Ms. D’s physician and family. It was “time” for her to retire. Ms. D was acknowledged for her years of service and her dedication by the staff and volunteers who loved her.

These are all actual scenarios reported by volunteer administrators of how volunteering has an impact on older individuals and how retiring from volunteering can come about. Such retirement not only has an impact on the volunteers but also on the organization. Depending on the situation, volunteer administrators may need to re-evaluate their management approach for working with older volunteers. When and how should volunteer administrators initiate conversations with older volunteers regarding the future of their volunteering and possible retirement from volunteering? Research has demonstrated that older volunteers in particular express altruistic or other-oriented motivations for their volunteering rather than self-oriented motivations (e.g., Misener, Doherty, & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010). These volunteers want to contribute to their community and to society. They want to leave a legacy of giving back and often devote many hours and years to their volunteering. Now, they may feel compelled to retire from that life of giving back, which may not be especially pleasant or desirable for many retiring volunteers.

### *Working with Older Adults: Considerations for Volunteer Administration Practice*

Thus far, we have discussed the issue of volunteer retirement in the context of its impact on the volunteers. However, from a management perspective, volunteer retirement is one of the many unique aspects of working with older adult volunteers that has implications for volunteer administration practice. Volunteer administrators oversee volunteer programs and operate in all sectors and at all levels of organizations (Machin & Paine, 2008). Volunteer administrators carry out a wide variety of tasks. These tasks include serving as consultants to staff who work alongside volunteers; engaging in outreach to recruit new volunteers; screening, interviewing, training, and assigning tasks to new volunteers; and, monitoring volunteers' activities and effectiveness. In addition to recognizing and appreciating volunteers, volunteer administrators must also ensure that volunteers who can no longer perform their assigned tasks are managed in an appropriate way (e.g., reassignment to a new task) (Ellis, 1999).

Recognizing that volunteer administration differs from the management of paid staff, researchers have focused on developing a list of best practices that reflects the unique challenges of this field (e.g., Brudney & Meijs, 2014; Hager & Brudney, 2004; Hager & Brudney, 2015). These practices reflect general recommendations for working with all volunteers and are not specifically targeted toward working with older adults. Such an oversight could become increasingly problematic, first because the number of older adult volunteers is increasing. This increase has been spurred in part through policy and research that has continued to actively promote volunteering among older adults. Second, many individuals participate in volunteering throughout their lives; as they age into retirement and beyond, these volunteers may need to make difficult decisions about the future of their volunteering. Third, older adults are unique from their younger volunteer counterparts, both in terms of the assets they provide and the ways in which they engage in and experience volunteering.

A literature search for research on volunteer management practices for older adults did yield some results. However, these results tended to focus on recruitment and retention (e.g., Devaney, Kearns, Fives, Canavan, Lyons, & Eaton, 2015; McBride, Greenfield, Morrow-Howell, Lee, & McCrary, 2012; Sellon, 2014). Several studies examined volunteers' reasons for quitting (e.g., Allen & Mueller, 2013; Hustinx, 2010; Willems, Huybrechts, Jegers, Vantilborgh, Bidee, & Pepermans, 2012), but many of these studies included volunteers of all ages. For older adults, the reasons for beginning, continuing, and ending their tenure as a volunteer may be unique from those of the general population. For example, Tang, Morrow-Howell, and Choi (2010) found that conflict with another activity or priority, health, and conflict with program administrators were common reasons that older adults chose to stop volunteering. Similarly, Butrica, Johnson, and Zedlewski (2009) reported health concerns, residential moves, and changes in marital status as factors having an impact on older adults'

decisions to continue volunteering. They also noted that, for older adults, the odds of withdrawing from volunteering declined over time, such that the longer a person had volunteered, the less likely for that person to end his or her volunteering.

A recent study by Dury (2018) examined this topic in the context of a Belgian care bank. Analyzing qualitative focus group data from a sample of mostly older adults, Dury (2018) found that their motivations to begin, continue, and terminate volunteering activities associated with the care bank were dynamic and changed over time. Many volunteers initially expressed social and altruistic rather than economic motivations for participating in the care bank. Over time, however, the volunteers also shared anxiety about a lack of appreciation or a feeling of being overloaded by their assignments. Although the care bank was able to address these espoused concerns through training, information sessions, and other forms of organizational support, these findings highlight how the motivations of volunteers influence their behaviors over time and suggest the importance of staff awareness and involvement to support the changing needs of volunteers.

While these studies have been important for understanding the volunteering behaviors of older adults, none of these studies have examined the transition out of volunteering and its impact on the well-being of volunteers or volunteer administrators. Rather, the focus has remained on recruitment and retention from an organizational or strategic perspective. Thus, we see a critical gap in current research and policy that needs to be addressed.

Thus far we have examined the phenomenon of volunteering in older adulthood, situating it within the broader context of current research and policy. More specifically, we have suggested that volunteer retirement, an understudied concept, may have increasing importance for volunteers and volunteer administrators. Older adults' transition out of volunteering often creates sensitive and stressful situations for volunteers and volunteer administrators. These situations need to be examined to discover, develop, and implement best practices and policy recommendations. To begin to explore this topic from a practitioner perspective, we turn now to our research design and methodology. We follow this with a discussion of our findings and implications of our findings for volunteer administrators.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This research was embedded within a larger project around volunteering and well-being among older adults. The project represents a collaborative effort, demonstrating how research and practice mutually inform one another in exciting and fruitful ways. Composed of both academic and practitioners, the study team complemented one another by fostering new ideas for research; improving study feasibility, rigor, and reach; and, ultimately, producing clearer implications for practice.

The full research project also incorporated the perspectives of other groups involved in older adult volunteering in organizational settings, such as paid organizational staff and the volunteers themselves. In keeping with the theme of current issues in practice, this article focuses on volunteer administrators' perspectives.

### *The Volunteer Administrator Survey*

There is a persistent and growing interest in the topic of volunteering among older adults; and, with the continued recruitment of older adult volunteers, there is an increased need to focus on the topic of volunteer retirement. Given the lack of literature to guide our examination of the topic (and to understand the challenges and issues arising in volunteer retirement), we turned to practitioners. Practitioners deal with these issues, and so we build on their expertise to set the agenda for our ongoing research in this area.

To this end, we conducted a survey of volunteer administrators in the fall of 2017. We designed the survey to capture overall impressions (or a kind of “state of the volunteer administrative practice” around working with older adult volunteers), gather practitioners’ perspectives in a systematic and purposeful way, and determine to what extent organizational policies existed to assist practitioners in navigating and facilitating their work with older adult volunteers (and, consequently, what areas needed changing).

The survey was written collaboratively by the research team and implemented using Qualtrics software. Data were collected regarding the ways in which volunteer administrators encounter and manage the issue of volunteer retirement/withdrawal in their organization. Questions were designed to help identify the prevalence of this issue in volunteer administration practice. The survey was distributed electronically using professional volunteer administrator listservs with support and permission from the listserv administrators.<sup>1</sup> The survey was open to any volunteer administrators on the listservs in either the United States or Canada.

The main goal of the survey was to begin to explore the broader policy and practice context of working with older adult volunteers, with a specific focus on volunteer retirement. Further, the survey functioned as a means to starting conversations with practitioners who were working with older adult volunteers. These conversations served as a way to guide future directions for practice.

The survey was kept short (12 questions) and was intentionally designed to be of interest to busy volunteer administrators. In addition to basic demographic information, questions included the following:

- “How concerned are you about volunteer retirement and/or aging out of volunteers in your organization?”
- “Does the organization have a policy in place to help manage the aging out, or the retirement, of older volunteers?”
- “How often do you have to intervene to encourage a volunteer to retire from volunteering from your organization?”

#### *A Note on Incomplete Responses and Inclusion Criteria*

Data from the survey were primarily descriptive in nature and analyzed in Excel. Because the focus of the survey related to challenges around volunteer retirement, responses were recorded only for those participants who indicated that they had previously encountered volunteers who had aged out of, or retired from, their volunteering. Those who indicated that they had never come across volunteers who had aged out of, or retired from, volunteering were excluded from responding to subsequent survey questions. Of the respondents with completed surveys, five respondents indicated that they had never encountered this phenomenon. The final sample size, after deleting incomplete responses and these five respondents, was 69. The number of volunteer administrators who had never encountered the phenomenon of volunteer retirement and/or the aging out of volunteering was relatively small (five out of 74, or about 7%).

## **Findings**

### *Participant Demographics: Tenure and Organizational Field*

To keep the survey length and time to a minimum, demographic information was limited to questions about respondent’s tenure at their current organization as well as the field or service domain in which the organization operates. As expected, given the nature of the listservs through which the survey was distributed (a limitation of the survey, as discussed in more

detail later), and the fact that certain sectors (e.g., healthcare and health services) are more likely to have well-established volunteer programs with professional volunteer administrators (Rogers, Rogers, & Boyd, 2013), the majority of respondents (74%) indicated that their organization was in healthcare or health services. The remaining respondents indicated that their organization operated in human services (6%), education (3%), arts and culture (6%), or other (11%). Some responses in the “other” category included public library, museum, government, military, and community relations.

In terms of tenure, our respondents worked with their current organization for some time. Over half (52%) of the respondents had worked at their current organization for longer than 10 years. Another 30% had worked there for six to 10 years. A much smaller proportion of respondents indicated having worked for their organization for between one and five years (15%) or less than one year (3%). The majority of respondents had worked at their current organization for at least six years. This suggests a certain level of experience with the organization and knowledge of its policies and practices.

### *Perspectives on Volunteer Retirement*

The first set of questions asked participants about volunteer retirement and their level of concern about volunteer retirement at their organization. Of our respondents, over three-quarters (79%) were either very concerned or somewhat concerned about volunteer retirement or aging out. This finding suggests that the majority of volunteer administrators were not only aware of volunteer retirement as a phenomenon but also concerned about its implications for their volunteers, volunteer programs, and organizations. This also points to the timeliness and importance of the present inquiry for volunteer administration practice.

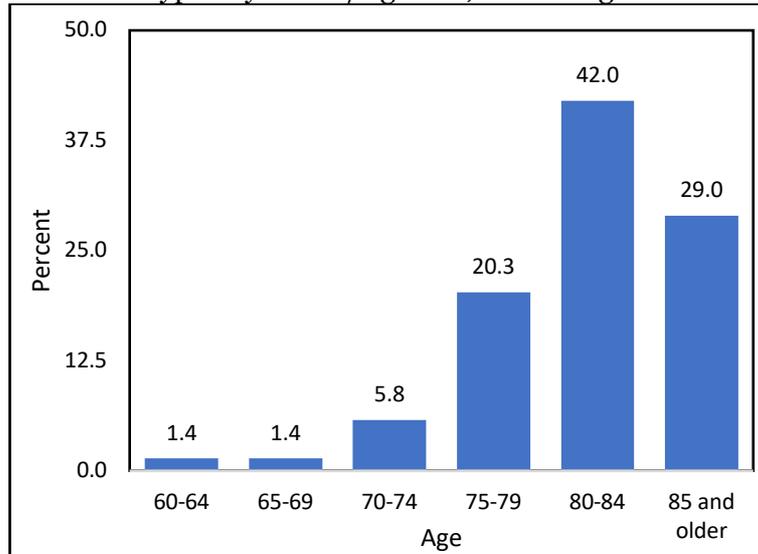
Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of ages that volunteers typically retired from our respondents' organizations. As shown, respondents reported that few individuals retired from their volunteering before the age of 75, with a significant proportion of them (71%) waiting until at least 80 or older to do so.

Additionally, respondents were asked about the reasons their volunteers typically gave for retiring from their volunteering. Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers. Table 1 displays reasons reported by respondents. As shown, the top-three reasons given for volunteer retirement or aging out included personal health, logistical concerns (such as transportation or accessibility), and family obligations. Respondents chose to write in other reasons why older adults might choose to retire from their volunteering. Among these reasons were moving to live closer to family or to warmer weather, specific health concerns (such as dementia and physical disabilities that prevented them from carrying out their volunteer assignments), and death.

### *Current Organizational Policies around Volunteer Retirement and Withdrawal*

The second set of questions dealt with current organizational policies and practices about how to handle volunteer retirement and aging out. Respondents were asked about the frequency at which they have had to intervene to encourage a volunteer to retire from volunteering at his or her current organization. Respondents were also asked about how prepared they felt to handle such situations. Most respondents indicated that they rarely had to intervene (41%), or that they had to intervene only occasionally (38%). Only 7% indicated that they had to intervene very often, while the remainder (14%) indicated they never had to intervene. Because all respondents included in the survey indicated that they had encountered volunteers retiring in their current organization, these responses suggest that the volunteers themselves often make the decision to retire or leave their volunteering without specific intervention from volunteer administrators. Indeed, among our respondents, 59 of them (86%) reported never having to intervene to encourage a volunteer to retire. Among those who did have to intervene

**Figure 1.** Age Volunteers Typically Retire/Age Out, According to Volunteer Administrators



Note:  $n=69$

at some point, most felt somewhat prepared (46%) or very prepared (25%) to deal with the situation. Another 15% felt neither prepared nor unprepared, while the remainder was split equally among somewhat unprepared (7%) or very unprepared (7%).

Of particular interest to us was whether or not organizations tended to have policies in place for helping volunteer administrators and other employees who work with volunteers handle volunteer retirement. When asked about whether their organization had a policy in place to help manage volunteer retirement, the vast majority of respondents (86%) indicated that their organization did not currently have such a policy. Only 10% indicated that their organization did have such a policy, while 4% were unsure.

We asked those whose organizations did have a policy to describe the nature of the policy. Five respondents gave us additional information about these policies. One respondent reported the presence of a “fitness for duty policy.” Others alluded to the use of “distinguished volunteer,” “honorary volunteer,” and “volunteer emeritus” designations to honor older volunteers who were not able to carry out their volunteer duties but who retained a celebrated status with the organization. These titles were accompanied by other benefits, including invitations to organizational events (such as volunteer appreciation and other special events); communication with the organization through ongoing newsletters, birthday cards, and other mailings; and free parking at the organization. These designations, then, function as more than just empty signifiers—they also facilitate ongoing connection with the organization and the community with which the individuals used to volunteer. Another respondent indicated that s/he handled volunteer retirement in the organization by transitioning volunteers into less strenuous activities as needed, which enabled the volunteers to remain involved for as long as possible before “retiring” to emeritus status.

### Implications and Future Directions

Lee and Catagnus (1999) suggested that today’s “senior” needs to be approached by level of activity not just by date of birth. Volunteer administrators who screen volunteer applications may look at date of birth as an indicator for longevity and consistency for volunteering in an organization. The results of this study reveal, however, that tenured volunteer administrators evaluate the importance of looking at seasoned and experienced volunteers with their skill, talent, and knowledge—not just their reliability for showing up to their volunteer assignment.

**Table 1.** Reasons for Volunteer Retirement/Aging Out

Reason	Count	Percent
Personal health	57	48.3
Logistical concerns (e.g., transportation or accessibility)	27	22.9
Family obligations	17	14.4
Other reasons	8	6.8
Want to spend time doing other activities	6	5.1
No longer satisfied with the volunteer assignment	2	1.7
Feel unappreciated	1	0.9
Total	118	

Volunteer administrators are very or somewhat concerned about volunteer retirement and do have to get involved at some point to keep the process moving. The lack of established policy does not prepare the volunteer administrator to have such challenging and difficult conversations with individuals who have given their time and talent to an organization only to be told that it is time to stop volunteering.

In addition, volunteer engagement practices do not stop for many volunteer administrators when the volunteer leaves. As indicated by our findings, volunteer administrators may still call the retired volunteer, send cards, invite to social gatherings, and even honor the volunteer as “emeritus” for time spent within the organization. There are close bonds developed with volunteers, and just because they may no longer have a physical presence in the organization, does not mean that they are forgotten. These realities of working with older adult volunteers may not be included in the formal job description of a volunteer administrator, but they are well-known and acknowledged by practitioners.

In linking our findings to practice, we examined professional competencies from the field of volunteer administration. The Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration (CCVA) issued the 2015 CVA Competency Framework, which provides professional management and volunteer engagement practices of volunteer engagement. The Association for Healthcare Volunteer Resource Professionals (AHVRP) also adopts these competencies for the Certified Administrator of Volunteer Services (CAVS) but targets volunteer administrators in healthcare. Both certifications (CVA and CAVS) are administered by CCVA, but AHVRP manages renewals and continuing education. These competencies can be adapted to managing situations with older volunteers. Some of these competencies include but are not limited to:

- 1) Plan for strategic volunteer engagement (which includes policies and procedures for volunteer services, risk management, and evaluation plan);
- 2) Advocate for volunteer involvement;
- 3) Document volunteer involvement;
- 4) Manage volunteer performance and impact (e.g., coach volunteers and monitor progress on volunteer performance objectives); and
- 5) Acknowledge, celebrate, and sustain volunteer involvement (e.g., develop a retention plan).

We are particularly intrigued by the second competency, calling volunteer administrators to advocate for volunteer involvement. Volunteer administrators want what is best for their organization and for the volunteer workforce within that organization, despite the resource challenges they often face. Individuals are encouraged to volunteer because of the health benefits, but there may come a point when the volunteer administrator needs to speak to, or counsel, a volunteer who is no longer able to volunteer. To that end, this competency should encompass not only advocating for volunteer involvement but also promoting and protecting volunteer well-being at all stages of their service.

These findings confirm those in a recent study by Brudney and Meijs (2014) that suggests social workers increasingly need to learn volunteer management skills in their practice. Our findings indeed suggest that volunteer administrators often take on social work-oriented tasks, such as volunteer advocacy and even counseling, when working with older adult volunteers. Thus, social work practice may offer valuable insights for offer volunteer administrators moving forward as, for example, Brudney and Meijs (2014) and Sellon (2014) have already noted.

Often, topics that relate directly or indirectly to age in the workplace, be it paid or unpaid work, are uncomfortable for everyone involved. Administrators may be reluctant to talk about age or they may be fearful of establishing policies that could be viewed as discriminatory. We agree that any best practice or policy must tread carefully and must be sensitive to the dignity and needs of all involved, especially the volunteers themselves. Nevertheless, we must stress that organizations can and should do more to better prepare themselves to manage volunteers, at any age, who are struggling to fulfill their tasks or meet the needs of the organization. Organizational policy, sensitivity training, and professional best practices can all be revisited and retailored to incorporate the concerns of volunteer administrators outlined in our findings. Such efforts, far from being discriminatory, could stand to enhance the experience of volunteering for older adults, as well as better prepare organizational staff to manage and collaborate with this valued group of volunteers.

The current lack of policy and inconsistent practice, while enabling us to avoid having difficult conversations about the realities of working with older volunteers, inevitably adds a layer of risk in the volunteer department. This risk could be reduced, though, through better preparation or, at the very least, a more focused conversation and awareness of these challenges. These considerations may also affect organizations that do not have a dedicated employee to manage and lead their volunteer workforce. According to Hager and Brudney (2004), only three out of five organizations have someone to lead volunteers. But, for organizations who do not have a volunteer administrator, or for those organizations where staff have the role as a secondary duty, it can become even more challenging to manage the case-by-case scenarios of older volunteers. There is a level of experience and poise that comes with being tenured in the field of volunteer management. While the role of the volunteer administrator is unique (Ellis, 1999), the competencies for the profession must be embraced.

By incorporating both volunteer administrator and volunteer perspectives, our research seeks to open this conversation and to widen the focus to include not only recruitment and retention but also volunteer retirement. Future research should further investigate the impact of volunteer retirement on volunteer well-being to better understand this phenomenon and to provide further insight and direction for practice. Although the present findings are limited in scope and exploratory in nature, it is our hope that they will nevertheless prove insightful for researchers who study older adult volunteering and the practitioners who work with them each day.

## **Notes**

1. The listservs were from the Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement (ALIVE), the Delaware Valley Association for Volunteer Administrators (DVAVA), and the Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS). ALIVE is a national membership organization of leaders and professionals in volunteer engagement (ALIVE, 2018). DVAVA is a local membership organization serving volunteer engagement leaders in the five-county area around and including Philadelphia. Finally, VAVS is one of the largest centralized volunteer programs in the federal government that is serving United States veterans.

## Disclosure Statement

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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