

Volunteering in an ageing population: The benefits of volunteering for the well-being of older persons

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Abstract

New Zealand is a leading nation in the contribution made by volunteers, with 41% of its population engaged in volunteering (Charities Aid Foundation, 2017). Volunteering is central to the social development, economy, and environment of New Zealand. Over one out of every five New Zealanders regularly undertake volunteer work contributing a total of around 60 million hours of volunteer labour each year. People aged 65 or older are a major source of volunteers with a significant contribution to volunteering activities; for instance, this demographic devotes triple the time on unpaid activities than people aged 12–24 years.

Participation in volunteering activities has been linked to positive effects on the elderly. Through these activities, older volunteers assist others, attain self-affirmation, enhance their emotional and physical health, including decreased mortality, reduced hypertension, and improved mood (Dulina et al., 2011). Therefore, volunteering has a significant impact both on communities and society as a whole and on the well-being of older volunteers (Haski-Levethal, 2009; Ho, 2017).

Given the importance of volunteering for the New Zealand society and economy, Volunteering New Zealand (VNZ) has been tracking the State of Volunteering over the years. The findings of the surveys on volunteers and volunteer-involved organisations highlight significant changes in the volunteering trends. Considering the importance of seniors for the volunteering sector, further discussion is warranted on the impacts of an aging population on the volunteering hours, the number of volunteers, and the benefits of volunteering for the well-being of seniors.

About Volunteering New Zealand

Volunteering New Zealand is the kaitiaki of Mahi Aroha, empowering volunteers to enrich Aotearoa New Zealand.

So what does Volunteering New Zealand do?

- Our strategic focus is for volunteering within New Zealand to be inclusive, impactful, ethical and meaningful.
- We value, advocate and lead volunteering within New Zealand.
- We do this through: Advocacy and Research, Best Practice Guidelines, an Annual Conference, Workshops, free Webinars and a range of communications.
- We are a membership organisation with 100 members who have 10,000 organisation members; and there are 17 Volunteer Centres nationwide.
- We also work with other peak bodies to achieve collective change for the wider community and voluntary sector.

What is volunteering?

Volunteering is broadly defined as an action that is undertaken freely, for reasons other than financial gain, and done to benefit our communities.

Volunteering has been described as to the two sides of a coin, one benefits the society and communities, and the other benefits the volunteer, who gains a sense of “doing well by doing good” (Wilson, 2012).

Volunteering in New Zealand

Volunteering is central to the social development, economy, and environment of New Zealand.

We are the fourth most generous country in the world in terms of time spent volunteering. There are more than 1 million volunteers who give 159 million hours of unpaid labour per annum.

These formal volunteers are vital to our tangata whenua, community and voluntary sector. To illustrate, there are 115,000 not for profits in New Zealand, 89% are powered entirely by volunteers.

According to the latest available national data collected in 2018, these organisations, collectively, contributed \$8.1 billion to GDP. In the same year, the value of (formal) volunteering was estimated to be \$4 billion. The sector’s overall contribution to GDP was 4.2%.

We know this is not the full measure of the contribution of volunteers though. When we count both formal and informal volunteering, almost 2.5 million of us contribute our time and energies to our communities. This gift is priceless.

Recent trends and changes in the voluntary sector

The New Zealand volunteering landscape has changed in the past few years. The number of volunteer hours worked at NPIs in 2018 was 159 million (1,008,000 volunteers) compared with 157 million hours (1,229,054 volunteers) in 2013. The number of hours has remained stable while the number of volunteers has dropped from 29% of the population in 2013 to 21.5% in 2018. This indicates there are fewer people volunteering but they are working more hours.

As different age cohorts contribute differently to volunteering activities, the changing demographics of New Zealand has impacted the volunteering sector. The proportion of the population in the age group 60+ years is growing faster than any other age group, and is estimated to double by 2050.

According to the results of the 2018 National Census, 20.75% of New Zealand's population are 60+ years old. This equals to almost 1,000,000 older adults.

People aged 65 or older are a major source of volunteers with a significant contribution to be made to our communities through volunteering activities. We know that this demographic devotes triple the time on unpaid activities than people aged 12-24 years.

Time spent volunteering provides a triple win, for the community, organisations and to the individual.

While our older populations volunteer the most, our community and voluntary sector has traditionally had a heavy reliance on older volunteers. This reliance creates some challenges for organisations, particularly so during the initial Covid-19 lockdown.

State of volunteering in Aotearoa

A key piece of work that Volunteering New Zealand drives and delivers for the sector is the State of Volunteering in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our latest report was released in 2020, with our survey and data captured just before the pandemic hit our shores. This report is the first one to include the voice of volunteers, as well as those of organisations.

You can find the full report on our website: <https://www.volunteeringnz.org.nz/state-of-volunteering/>

Findings from the SOV 2020 regarding older volunteers

The survey provided some interesting findings about our older volunteers.

Ageing Volunteers:

- 31.2% of all survey respondents were 65 years or over
- 70.8% were over 45 years old
- 35.8% of survey respondents identified ageing volunteers as their primary concern in the current state of volunteering.

When asked volunteers to rate their experiences with their current volunteer roles. The majority (84%) of older volunteers provided a rating of 4.5 or higher out of 5 for the following volunteering parameters:

- **Enjoyment** – they enjoyed volunteering with their current organisation.
- **Inclusion** – they felt included in their current role.
- **Connection** – they feel connected with the communities they work with.
- **Fairness** – they felt like they are treated fairly.

Other interesting points to note:

- **Skills:** Where our older volunteer participants were asked how they felt about their skills and experiences being valued by their organisation, they rated this less than 4 (out of 5). It is interesting to reflect on how we make best use of our older volunteers, how we meet them where they are at in terms of their skills and experiences.
- **Commitment:** our survey showed that those aged 65+ are generally very committed to their volunteer roles. An overwhelming majority (89%) of older volunteers envisage continuing to volunteer long-term with the organisation they currently volunteer with. This is higher than the survey's overall average, which was already high at 82.3%.
- **Length of Service:** Volunteers 65+ tended to be among the longest serving members of the organisation. The majority (56%) of those 65+ have been involved in their current organisation for 8-10 years, with 27% being there for 10 years or more. [This is compared to the whole survey mode (most frequent answer) of 1-3 years served in the current organisation, stated by 28.6% of volunteers. In this regard, the 65+ group shows a significant difference from the survey average].
- **Word of Mouth** is the most popular method of finding out about volunteering roles. 67% of volunteers 65+ heard about their current role through Word of Mouth. This is significantly higher than the survey average of 46.4%.
- **Positive overall:** those 65+ tend to view the state of volunteering more positively than the survey average. The average rating amongst 65+ for the 'State of Volunteering' is 7.4 (out of 10) compared to the whole survey average of 6.8.

Volunteering and Covid-19

Our State of Volunteering report 2020 is unique in that it captured the state of play prior to the pandemic hitting our shores. However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has changed things across the sector. We've worked hard, and collaboratively, to get a handle on what the impact has been on volunteers and volunteering.

Covid research to date

- During the first lockdown we collated sit-rep reports from a range of stakeholders and members. Findings were captured in our Voluntary sector sit-rep reports: April – May 2020.
- We collaborated with Philanthropy NZ, Centre for Social Impact and Hui E in mid-2020 to deliver the comprehensive Time to Shine research report in Aug 2020

- We also delivered our own Status of the Volunteering Sector: Post-COVID Recovery and Resilience, May 2021
- Most recently we have been collaborating with Hui E Community Aotearoa to deliver a Covid Wellbeing/Hauora organisation survey: due out in Nov 2021.

Summary of what we know

- Older volunteers and older adults were amongst groups that were significantly influenced by the pandemic and lockdowns. Older adults play a critical role in the volunteering sector as they constitute a significant portion of active volunteers and, at the same time, they are clients of services provided by volunteers and some experienced difficulties during the lockdowns in accessing supplies and support.
- Some older volunteers stopped volunteering, and some are prevented from volunteering because they have more life commitments (such as looking after grandchildren). Although older volunteers can return to volunteering in lower alert levels, there is uncertainty about what this will look like in a post-Covid environment.
- Regional differences have become bolder, and the demographics of some local communities are changing, including our volunteer demographics.
- Some community organisations have experienced an increase demand for their services, and funding is tracking as one of the biggest issues across the sector.
- Many organisations and volunteers embraced new technologies and online ways of volunteering.

We have an ageing population: We know that the proportion of the population in the age group 60+ years is growing faster than any other age group, and the number of people over 60 years is estimated to double by 2050.

Active and healthy ageing is increasingly important: We need to be thinking about how we can prolong good health in later life in order to increase our ageing populations' quality of life. Volunteering can keep older adults active and socially engaged and may then help with some of the challenges (and opportunities) of retirement.

Motivations of older adults for volunteering

Looking more broadly at the extensive array of research on older adults and volunteering we can comment on older adults' motivations to volunteer, the wellbeing benefits that accrue to older adults through volunteering, and what older volunteers self- report as the key benefits of volunteering.

The most common personal explanations for older adults' engagement in voluntary work relate to motivations such as being helpful to others (Tang and Morrow-Howell, 2008), "paying back" to society, and feeling a sense of obligation to the future generations (Narushima, 2005).

Drilling down, motivations of older adults for volunteering are diverse and include the wish:

- to use their time productively;
- to contribute to local community development;
- to foster positive relationships with their peers and/or across generations;
- to consciously build social networks at a time in life when social isolation may present a challenge;
- and to develop new knowledge and skills.

Wellbeing benefits for older people in volunteering

Research also shows that volunteering also has positive personal wellbeing outcomes for older adults who volunteer. Such as:

- **Enhancing physical, mental, and social well-being:** While volunteering often has a certain positive impact on the volunteer, such as social recognition and self-esteem, this is especially true in older adults, when volunteering fills important social gaps and roles.
- **Mental health and well-being:** Volunteering is associated with better outcomes for older volunteers' mental health and well-being.
- **Increased perceived physical health:** Volunteering can help develop social networks that buffer stress and reduce disease risk. Research indicates that volunteering, especially for more than one organisation, can result in a 63% increase in perceived health and significantly reduce the mortality rates of older adults.
- Volunteering can **enhance self-esteem**, change stereotypes, and promotes social and political consciousness.
- **Health benefits** for individuals include reduced symptoms of depression, improving self-reported health, and lower rates of mortality. Older adult volunteers also enjoy psycho-social benefits such as self-worth and socialization, as well as increased levels of self-rated life satisfaction.

Benefits experienced by older adults who volunteer

Older adults who volunteer generally report three key benefits from their volunteering:

- 1. Active participation in society:** volunteering gives them the opportunity to participate in society, to have meaningful content in their everyday life, and to contribute to society in times of role transition.
- 2. Meaningful fellowship:** volunteering enables them to access the fellowship of their co-volunteers who are generally in the same life situation. This fellowship expands their social networks and gives them a feeling of social support.
- 3. Personal growth:** growth and adaption resulting from volunteering gives older volunteers a feeling of empowerment, helps them to forget about the challenges of ageing, and facilitates active ageing (Berg and Johansen, 2017).

Conclusion and recommendations

In the light of Covid-19 and its impact on older volunteers, some changes in the volunteering environment are called for.

Volunteering New Zealand recommends that:

- Some of the existing roles, parameters, and activities be restructured and reformatted in order to align with the new volunteering environment. This will ensure that older volunteers feel safe to return to the volunteering front line.
- Volunteer-involving organisations take the opportunity to transform the volunteering landscape and make it more inclusive, appreciative of older volunteers (amongst all volunteers), and impactful. For example, offer flexible roles matched to the skills, abilities and motivations of older volunteers.

Volunteering gives older adults an opportunity for significant social participation. Collaboration with other volunteers, who share the same interests and priorities, and meaningful and positive social connection and a sense of collective identity and sense of belonging. Older adult volunteers consistently report an improvement in their quality of life resulting from feeling appreciated, having a sense of purpose, and giving something back to society.

What volunteers say:

“Volunteering keeps me connected to people and gives me personal satisfaction. It gives me a sense of connection and purpose in the community.”
