Little attention has been given to the severely handicapped older person who is not likely to improve sufficiently to be placed in an occupation in the community. Interviews over a period of 6 months with a group of disabled elderly men participating as unpaid volunteers in a bi-weekly sheltered workshop indicated that being able to help others, getting out of the house, and sociability were important reasons for their interest and participation.

Money Isn’t Everything: Opportunities For Elderly Handicapped Men in a Sheltered Workshop

Alfred P. Fengler, PhD and Nancy Goodrich, BA

Background
A modality favored for severely disabled younger persons is placement in a sheltered workshop setting (Black, 1965). There are about 800 such workshops in the United States, only a handful of which serve aged clients, even though the statistical probability of being severely disabled rises sharply with age (Reingold et al., 1971).

Previous research on sheltered workshops designed exclusively for the elderly has suggested that such environments can provide meaningful roles and enhance an individual’s self-esteem; may preserve the ability of the person to live at home, at a cost saving to public budgets; but seldom result in community job placement outside the workshop. (Barshop, 1965; Jewish Vocational Service, 1966; MacDonald & Settin, 1978; Reingold & Wolk, 1974; Wovich, 1967).

All sheltered workshops including those designed exclusively for the elderly are committed to the principle of paid work. And much debate about sheltered workshops centers about the question of wage scales and payment periods (Black, 1965; Wieder & Hicks, 1973).

In spite of this emphasis on remuneration, one of the more thorough studies of the significance of paid work in sheltered workshops found that “the most common stated reason was to ‘pass the time’” (Reingold et al., 1971). Some two-thirds of the respondents, including a majority of males, replied that they would be willing to work in the workshop without pay.

By contrast, little attention has been given to the role of the handicapped elderly volunteer in the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and other ACTION programs. In a pre-ACTION study, Carp (1968) felt that volunteer programs in general are not effective substitutes for paid employment, and that such benefits as increased sociability and flexible time scheduling have been overemphasized. Other studies of elderly volunteer programs indicate that volunteers do benefit through new social contacts, better health, and a feeling of usefulness (Smith et al., 1976; Stein, 1966). Moreover, there is data to suggest that long term volunteers show improvement in morale over non volunteers, with a majority of respondents preferring volunteer to paid work (Sainer & Zander, 1971). Still other studies suggest that the work ethic is not all-pervasive, and that few people experience retirement crises (Atchley, 1976; Streib & Schneider, 1971).

This paper describes a unique RSVP-sponsored sheltered workshop for severely disabled men in Burlington, Vermont, based on the philosophy that every person, no matter how limited or disabled, is capable of being useful and of service to others. Participation, it is predicted, should enhance life satisfaction and, more importantly, should facilitate a shift in self-image from “help-receiver” to “help-giver.” Previous efforts by the local RSVP program to recruit dis-
abled senior volunteers had met with more success among disabled elderly women, who appeared better able to utilize previous skills (such as knitting or crocheting) without change of environment or status. This project focused on disabled older men, who were seen as bitter and despairing, and more in need of outside-the-home activities, not only to revive past skills, but also to provide masculine companionship and camaraderie formerly found in the workplace.

The men selected were all homebound, with a variety of severely handicapping conditions arising from strokes, heart disease, arthritis, hearing and/or speech problems, mental depression and alcoholism. Most lived at home, but two were residents of a skilled nursing home facility. All were able to leave their place of residence with the help of special transportation.

The Workshop

The workshop began operations in April 1975 at a local Boys’ Club, which had the advantage of having woodworking and machine shop equipment, with which most of the men were familiar from past work experience. Projects were solicited from local agencies and community groups, and were varied in nature. For example, a child-size house was painted for a Head Start program, and sleds were mended for a center for emotionally disturbed children. A quilting frame and individual small weaving looms were made for a local nursing home. Boot racks were built for a school. Rehabilitation devices to transfer paralyzed people from beds to wheelchairs were designed for the hospital and for the Visiting Nurses Association.

Two male home health aides were made available and were responsible for assigning work projects, as well as overseeing the work process and the mechanical equipment. They also helped with emergency health and mobility problems, and with the use of the bathroom facilities. Student volunteers were also present, in addition to the Specialized Outreach Worker and the RSVP director.

The workshop of 10 men met for 2 hours every other week. Transportation was provided by a special van; a senior meal hot lunch was served. In all, the men spent a total of 5 hours every other week in the program, including transit and eating the noon meal.

Funds, primarily from local sources, did not permit more frequent meetings until November of 1976, when new funding allowed a second workshop with a different group of men to be started. At this time RSVP undertook an evaluation of the project, to ascertain its value as perceived by the participants and their spouses, and in particular whether there was a significant increase in life satisfaction.

Study design; Sample Characteristics

The initiation of the second group of participants offered an opportunity to do additional interviewing and before-after assessments. Both the original participants (the first 10) and the new participants (initially 9) were interviewed by the same persons (senior nursing students) at three different times approximately 2 months apart. Participants were interviewed once more about 1 year after the third and final wave of initial impact interviews.

The instruments used were the Neugarten et al. life satisfaction scales A and B (Neugarten et al., 1961); a group of inquiries about recreational life, health status and social interaction; and a battery of questions for participants on their feelings about the workshop experience.

The median age for participants was 72, with the youngest being 60, and the oldest 83. All were laborers or skilled workers, with only one who had held an office white-collar job. One-half of the participants were married. All of the spouses and caretakers were also interviewed, to ascertain whether they perceived any changes over time.

A major research problem with such a high risk group is the turnover and drop-out rate. Three participants died during the course of the study. There was also resistance to the repetition of interviews at three-month intervals. Since some of the subjects were asphasic, short answers and indirect methods had to be employed and interpretations of the husbands’ responses by their wives, although suspect, were occasionally included.

Impact on Life Satisfaction

Scores from the old and new workshop participants were compared at all three time intervals, in addition to the fourth or follow-up interview. Results show that the life satisfaction of both old and new participants ranged from .93 to 1.15 with no apparent difference in the scores of the first and second groups. Since LSI scores for the average population over 65 are 1.36
(Harris & Associates Inc. 1976), these ratings are significantly lower for both groups. Other indices measuring mobility, recreational habits, dress, sleep and eating patterns showed no consistent changes as a result of workshop participation.

Although the directors of the program had hoped for a decisive impact on general morale, this did not occur. Indeed, it would have been rather surprising if a program which met only once every 2 weeks had had such an effect. Previously studied sheltered workshops, where a measurable impact was found, met for several hours each day and for several days each week (Gottesman, 1965; Reingold & Volk, 1974).

Motivation to attend. — In spite of the limited impact on overall morale, there was evidence that the workshop was highly valued by the participants, and that many desired more frequent meetings, a total of about two-thirds at times 2 and 3. This increased to 90% at T4, with more than one-half responding that they would like to meet at least twice a week.

When asked whether they had ever considered dropping out of the workshop, all but one responded with a strong "no"; (he stated that he might consider dropping only because his wife does not like him to go.) The men also think about the workshop during the week when they are not there. They think about their work and the men with whom they work.

The wives of the participants reported that their husbands (in about two-thirds of the cases) volunteered information about the workshop. Another 15% talked about it if asked. The most frequent topic was the other men at the workshop, with discussions about project and staff less frequently mentioned.

One man continues his work by bringing projects home to work on. Another respondent stated "I work there and I like it. It gives me something to do and when you're in my condition, you can't do much, and when you can, you do it!"

One-half the men stated that their mood the morning of the workshop was one of "anxiousness to get going" and anticipation. One used the phrase, "I get primed for it." Most of the men were transported by a special private bus for the handicapped, but one of the participants who was driven by his wife said that he always worried that his wife wouldn't get him there on time.

Evaluation of the Workshop Experience

When asked to describe their feelings about the workshop almost all the participants gave positive comments. Among the negative comments, one older worker, who was also the only member with a white collar business background, found the work "uninteresting" at the time of the initial interviews. At the time of the follow-up he had changed his mind. In the case of two other participants, staff in their nursing home were so impressed by the workshop that a woodworking area was set aside at the home for the two participants. Having their own personal workshop they became slightly less enthusiastic about the sheltered workshop.

Participants rated the workshop staff very positively, with 90% stating that the staff was excellent. The lack of complaints attests to the sensitivity of the male aides in matching tasks closely with a person's ability and interest. Only two of the men could think of anything different they would like to do instead of woodworking. One wanted to work on guns and the other would like to do leather work.

Although the work itself was important, an equally important function was the chance to socialize with others. The men were asked at T4 to rate the importance of a list of factors in their workshop experience on a 6 point scale, with 6 being "very important." Their ratings were:

1. Getting out of the house 52
2. Being able to help others 51
3. Being with others 51
4. Something to do 39
5. Having a chance to do woodworking 33

The highest score for 10 men would have been 60. A number of men lumped together several items as of equal importance. It is interesting, that, although the men enjoyed working on the projects, when it came to rating its significance, "being with others" ranked higher. These results are comparable to findings obtained from regular able bodied volunteers in the same Vermont community. It is extremely significant that these severely disabled homebound people receive the same satisfaction from their community service and yet have almost no chance to express what appears to be a basic need to socialize and to help others.

In the T2 and T3 interviews the men were asked an open ended question "what they liked best about the workshop." Socializing or being
with others was mentioned by 40% while the next most frequent entry, the work itself, was mentioned by only 27%. Thirteen percent mentioned “everything” and the remaining 21% mentioned the bus rides, meals, passing time, helping someone and getting out of the house.

Almost all the men “felt good” about the other men. They were “all good people” and “I feel right at home with them.” Two thirds of the men said they “... liked to be around other people,” and about one-half said they see workshop participants outside the workshop.

A chance to get out of the house is obviously very important for many. Since they are limited in their mobility, this interlude can take on great significance as a change of pace. “Something to do,” as a main reason is very similar to the most commonly stated reason given by Reingold’s (Reingold et al., 1971) paid participants’ response: “passing the time.”

Almost all the men enjoyed the bus ride and the meals, and the staff noted that much social interaction went on during these occasions as well as during the workshop. Some men rarely leave their homes and they frequently encourage the bus driver to vary the route to the workshop, noting with interest the development of a new housing complex or shopping center. The bus ride also serves as an environment in which the men can talk with each other.

It should also be noted that the wives of the handicapped men were very grateful for the time their husbands spent at the workshop (Fengler & Goodrich, 1979). One wife commented that “Thursday is the only time when I get a day to myself.” Another said: “It’s a day I can call my own. You can do what you want. It’s a pleasure to have some time for myself. I can relax and let go.” Thus, the workshop is not only good therapy for the husband but for the wife as well. Interestingly, from the husband’s point of view, one study of disabled workers found that “complaints of having to spend too much time with wife” was correlated with employability (Jewish Vocational Service, 1966).

Finally, it was somewhat surprising that the volunteer function, “being able to help others,” was rated as high as it was. Much of the research discussed earlier, stresses the importance of paid work as tangible proof for a man of his contribution to society. During the second and third interviews all of the workshop participants responded positively to the question of how they felt about volunteering. They used such words as “great,” “wonderful,” “best thing that ever happened,” and “it’s a wonderful thing,” to describe their feelings. However, none of them spontaneously mentioned volunteering as a reason for attending the workshop or why they liked the workshop.

Initial reasons and motivations for attendance may change over time as Reingold, et al. (1971) found. Although not the primary consideration, payment for services became more important the longer the men worked there. When the men in our workshop during T4 were asked, after giving a positive feeling about the workshop, why they felt positive, four of the 10 men mentioned that they liked the idea of doing something to help other people, a response which grew stronger over the time covered by this study. It is possible that the longer the men participated in the workshop the more likely they were to assume the values and goals of the project directors. If one is rewarded repeatedly through services by payment, this will become the anticipated reward. If, on the other hand, service to others without recompense is the stated objective of the project, this norm will become increasingly accepted and valued by the participants.

About three-quarters of the men knew for whom their project was being done, with about half able to name the place or agency for which their present project was destined. However, some 40% had no idea that the Retired Senior Volunteer Program was one of the main sponsors of the workshop.

Conclusion

Obviously, we are not concluding, from the results of this evaluation, that payment for sheltered workshop participants is unimportant. Rather, we are suggesting that the volunteer role is a significant and meaningful role for many elderly people in our society and this is no less true of those participating in a sheltered workshop. Further research could compare the effects of payment for services with non-payment on similarly disabled groups of men.

It appears from our earlier review of gerontological workshops that many of the most important rewards of workshop participation are non-monetary. Sociability, the work itself, and simply getting out of the house and having something to do were highly valued by the men. In addition, the jobs they did were not repetitive such as they might have been if doing contract work; thus the work itself is more creative and
meaningful. Finally, the workshop was not attached to a long-term care institution, but was placed in the Boys' Club of the larger community. Not only were institutionalized and non-institutionalized, married and unmarried men interacting with each other but young boys occasionally would wander in and talk to the men.

The workshop also functioned as an outreach program for many of these men, who had serious needs and problems in their personal and family lives. The aides who assisted the men in their shop work were not only good listeners, but provided information on available services and in some cases acted as intermediaries by arranging for the service providers to directly contact the clients.

However, even if general morale was found to be unaffected, one must question whether therapeutic results should be the only measure of success. Perhaps the quality of life as a normative goal should be equally valued. If the men find enjoyment and escape from a depressing condition for only a few hours a week should we therefore claim it is not useful or important? Perhaps the young people who see these disabled older men enjoying a few hours together are learning something valuable about a community's concern and caring for its less advantaged members.

Certainly, there is little evidence from a review of the rehabilitation literature that the elderly handicapped will receive much attention as long as vocational placement remains the overriding goal. The "restorative approach" which assumes that a handicapped person can lead an independent and fulfilled life in the outside occupational world is probably not relevant for much of the elderly population (Scott, 1969; Sink, 1977; U.S. Comm. on Civil Rights). The "accommodative approach" which argues we should provide environments to which the handicapped can accommodate with a minimum of effort is a more realistic guiding philosophy for many of our handicapped elderly. To be sure, some older disabled persons can be prepared for and placed in competitive industry and they should be encouraged to do so if they choose. But given the demands of time and performance of most companies, the long-term sheltered workshop is more likely to provide the flexibility needed by the elderly disabled.

It is important to recognize that it is not enough to wait for these men to volunteer. More than one-half our men needed lengthy encouragement to join the workshop initially. The role of professional workers (visiting nurses, physical therapists, doctors) as well as friends and relatives, was crucial in overcoming the initial depression and inertia.

Finally, rehabilitation does not need to have a wage attached to it. Everyone regardless of physical condition or disability can provide services for others. Through volunteer activities for the disabled, the community acquires important new resources while the volunteer gains a new understanding of his own capabilities and usefulness.

References


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