

More Work Needed to Get More Volunteers to Help Seniors

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“I don’t usually apply makeup ... I did so only on my wedding day, when I was a bride,” chuckled the older woman gleefully.

The elderly resident in Singapore’s Dakota Crescent area was a participant at a makeover photography session for seniors above the age of 60 from low-income households that my friend Jo had organised.

The event was a success. The seniors were delighted with the attention, while the volunteers, comprising professional makeup artists, hairstylists and photographers, were moved by the impact of their contributions.

As Singapore’s population ages rapidly, there is a need to raise the awareness of this vulnerable section of a greying society. The National Population and Talent Division said 12.4 percent of the nation’s citizens were aged 65 and above in 2014 and this proportion is expected to increase rapidly in the future.

Without some means of monitoring the welfare of the elderly, particularly those living alone, seniors who fall or faint at home may go unnoticed.

During the Committee of Supply debate in 2012, then Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports Halimah Yacob said there were currently 35,000 elderly living alone in Singapore. She added that this number was expected to rise to 83,000 by 2030.

Currently, lower-income seniors can tap government-initiated financial- and social-assistance schemes offered by voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs). With the burgeoning need and limited resources, more has to be done to build up and retain a regular pool of volunteers to reach out to vulnerable seniors.

Meanwhile, the volunteer rate among Singapore residents and non-residents has fallen. The National Volunteer and Philanthropy Center’s (NVPC) Individual Giving Survey 2014 showed a drastic fall in volunteerism from 32.3 per cent in 2012 to 17.8 per cent last year. This decline can be attributed to people having “no time” — the top reason cited by the NVPC survey respondents.

While the pool of volunteers is shrinking, what is interesting is those who volunteer are spending more time on their cause. The NVPC reported that the average number of hours each volunteer puts in a year grew from 72 hours in 2012 to 93 hours last year.

This amounts to eight hours a month, equivalent to a full working day. More volunteers also reported volunteering on a regular basis, with those helping out at least once a month rising from 11 per cent in 2012 to 18 per cent last year.

These trends raise two questions. First, what can be done to boost volunteer rates, particularly in eldercare? Second, how can we promote regular volunteering and greater volunteer engagement with seniors?

ENGAGING NON-VOLUNTEERS

Falling volunteer rates suggest the need for VWOs to revamp their outreach programmes to reach out to a wider network of potential volunteers.

Admittedly, volunteer work involving helping the elderly may be daunting to some. There is the language barrier, as many seniors do not speak English. They may also be frail and require home-nursing care, which volunteers may not be equipped to provide unless they have received prior training.

Compared with, say, socially disadvantaged youth and abandoned pets, the eldercare sector may be a less appealing option for occasional volunteers looking to devote their spare time to a good cause.

Ground-up initiatives, such as the one led by my friend Jo, are good starting points. Such ad-hoc programmes tap a diverse range of talents and have a specific niche.

The benefits of regular volunteering are, however, significant. Regular volunteering builds trust between volunteers and beneficiaries. Over time, seniors become more willing to reveal personal difficulties and seek help from their volunteers.

Regular volunteering also benefits volunteers. The NVPC Individual Giving and Subjective Well-Being survey in 2013 found that regular volunteers had shown higher levels of subjective well-being — which refers to a person's assessment of his happiness and satisfaction with life — than occasional volunteers.

Given many Singaporeans' busy lifestyles, VWOs that allow flexibility in volunteering schedules are likely to attract more recruits. To retain volunteers, VWOs should focus on providing a meaningful experience and structured programmes to develop volunteers' knowledge and skills.

Policies to improve volunteer-management systems would help. Many VWOs run their own outreach programmes, which may result in duplication of effort. A more coordinated approach to harness the drive of individual schemes and provide financial and organisational support would be ideal.

Professionals such as Jo rely on their social networks and resourcefulness to initiate community projects. A one-stop integrated volunteerism portal that can identify areas where needs are the greatest and provide information about such volunteering opportunities would be useful.

It is good news that plans to launch a similar resource centre for budding social enterprises have been announced this week by Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing. It is high time for VWOs to get their act together.

There are several portals — such as SG Cares — that list volunteering opportunities segmented by area of interest or name of welfare group. A suggestion is to broaden the

platform to include a wider network of VWOs and interest groups to cater to those who lack support and resources to operate on their own.

By pooling resources and expertise, niche self-help groups can benefit too. Similarly, potential beneficiaries can browse the portal to learn what services each welfare group provides.

In the case of the eldercare sector, the portal can connect like-minded professionals and volunteers, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, befriender volunteers and end users. Such multidisciplinary care teams are best equipped to address the physical, psychological and social needs of seniors who live alone.

From a policy standpoint, such a volunteerism portal would enable tracking of volunteer rates and types of volunteer work. The portal can collect data to help project welfare needs for the medium to long term and enable policymakers and VWOs to respond to the needs of an ageing population on a timely basis.

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