

# Engaging Older Adults in Volunteer Opportunities: The Benefits for Residents of an Assisted Living Facility

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## BACKGROUND

Volunteering is the act of doing something for others willingly and without being forced or paid to do so (1). While the concept of volunteering is far from new, conceptualizing the benefits of volunteer engagement on the participant, remains a novel task. Specifically, the benefits of volunteering for older adults remain largely unknown and under utilized(1). With the population of adults 60 and older anticipated to exceed 110 million over the next decade, many are searching for both practical and meaningful activities to promote the continued wellbeing and health of this age group (1). The existing literature shows potential benefits of volunteering among older adults to include increased physical activity(6), cognitive improvements (3), decreased depressive symptoms (4) and overall improved socioemotional well being (7). With much of this research being conducted among community-dwelling older adults, Project Seniors Active in Volunteer Efforts (SAVE), was developed to explore these potential benefits among residents of an assisted living facility (ALF).

## PROGRAM DETAILS

Project SAVE was developed and implemented at Hillcrest Mable Rose Assisted Living (AL) and Memory Support Care (MSC) facility.

Originally, it was planned to be held once a month over a three-month period on pre-determined days that had an open activity. However, the third event was cancelled due to activity restrictions put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Criteria for the program's activities included any project that included service for an individual or an organization. Activities included creating valentines for a 104-year-old veteran and making self-care kits for those in need at the local shelter.

The funding for the program was included in the existing recreation budget and many of the supplies were either already purchased or donated to the facility.

Potential participants included 46 residents of AL and 28 residents of MSC. For the first activity, 14 residents of AL participated in creating valentines for the veteran. In the second activity, eight residents of AL and two residents of MSC engaged in making kits.



## FOCUSED QUESTIONS

1. What benefits can be seen in older adult residents of an assisted living facility post-engagement in Project SAVE?
2. How do the benefits of volunteering found among residents of an assisted living facility, compare to benefits found in community-dwelling older adults?

## METHODS

To begin, a literature review was conducted to determine an appropriate protocol for working with older adults. For recruitment, the activities were advertised on the large daily activity board in the community spaces and on cards placed on tables in the dining room. The literature review revealed face-to-face contact is another beneficial recruitment protocol when implementing a group session with older adults (5). Therefore, on the day of the event, group facilitators went door to door and personally invited each resident to the activity. Group protocol also included a group discussion prior to, and upon completion of the activities. It was deemed, through the literature review, that a semi-structured interview was the most appropriate form for the group discussion. The semi-structured format provided guiding questions while also allowing for natural discussion and topic progression (7). Five open-ended interview questions were asked during the discussions and each discussion lasted between 15-20 minutes. Each activity had three to four group leaders facilitating participation and completion of the project. Group leaders included an occupational therapy student, a director of recreational activities, a recreational activities leader, and/or student volunteers. Themes from group discussions were recorded and are reflected in the results section. A final program evaluation was conducted to assess the benefits and overall quality of Project SAVE.

## RESULTS

Upon completion of all four discussions, a qualitative data analysis following the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL) was conducted (2). First, a content analysis was completed, and initial codes were created. Following the coding process, a concept analysis was implemented, and the essential structure or themes emerged. There were six main themes that emerged from the data analysis. Each theme is detailed below.

- ❖ **Connection:** Increased sense of connection, or bond with their fellow residents, staff and volunteers.
- ❖ **Creativity:** Increased opportunities to express themselves through drawing/writing or other creative outlets.
- ❖ **Purpose:** Increased sense of purpose or meaning in what they are doing, increased perception of being needed.
- ❖ **Doing good and feeling good:** Increased feeling of helping others, giving back and overall improved moods.
- ❖ **Community:** Increased perception in having a role in, or being a part of the local community again, and a decreased sense of isolation.
- ❖ **Gratitude:** Increased feelings of gratefulness and thankfulness for what they had and an increased appreciation for what others do for them.



## BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

As indicated in the results, older adults residing in an assisted living facility (ALF) do stand to benefit from a volunteer-based activity program like Project SAVE. The benefits relate largely to the emotional and social components of overall quality of life. Increased sense of purpose, connectedness to others and contribution to the community can all positively effect those dimensions of one's quality of life. It is difficult to directly compare the benefits found among older adults residing in an ALF to the benefits found community-dwelling older adults as different protocols, measurements and data collection methods were implemented. However, this program does demonstrate that just as their community-dwelling counterparts, older adults residing in an ALF, do benefit from volunteer-based projects, and overlapping areas of benefits include improved socioemotional well being and a decreased sense of social isolation and loneliness (7&8). With the potential for benefits, occupational therapists both in the ALF and community settings, should consider volunteer-based activities as a possible intervention. As the evidence supports it, volunteering as an intervention may increase both physical and emotional health among older adults and aids in the overall increase in quality of life for this population (6&7). Volunteering as an intervention is cost-effective, as it can be completed with supplies the therapist already owns. It is also easily adaptable to all ability levels and can be graded on-spot. Volunteerism is neither novel nor complex yet, it is often overlooked as a potential intervention to promote functional and emotional health maintenance throughout the lifespan. Based on these findings volunteer-based activities should be considered as an intervention in both community and ALF settings.

## REFERENCES

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