



ALTRUISTIC VALUE

VOLUNTEERING, SAYS JOHN LORINC, IS A LOT MORE THAN STUFFING ENVELOPES. A NEW STUDY AIMS TO MEASURE ITS IMPACT ON OUR HEALTH AND ECONOMY

VOLUNTEERS

Are more satisfied with life
Have fewer hip fractures
Have more self-esteem
Are less depressed
Live longer

Ask me how you
can volunteer

www.baycrest.org

1 (From left) Tony Fattal, BRAVO volunteer, Dr. Suzanne Cook and Dr. Nicole Anderson of the Rotman Research Institute; 2 Syrelle Bernstein, Director Volunteer Services; 3 (from left) Adelle Herman, Baycrest volunteer, with Raquel Heayn, Volunteer Services Secretary; 4 Elaine Harris, BRAVO volunteer; 5 Bernstein with Evelyn Weinrib, Baycrest volunteer; 6 Lesley Miller, volunteer chair BRAVO; 7 Fattal brings business experience to BRAVO; 8 Dr. Anderson and 9 Dr. Cook both think volunteering can help seniors gain a sense of renewal and redirection.

TIME, AS THE OLD SAYING goes, is money, but philanthropically minded Canadians tend to be more forthcoming with the latter than the former. According to a 2007 Statistics Canada survey on giving and participating, 84 per cent of us donated to charity, but only 46 per cent got off the couch and actually helped out at our places of worship, with the local school or through social service agencies. The participation rate – it translates into 12.5 million Canadian adults – didn't grow between 2004 and 2007, yet all those volunteers put in 2.1 billion hours, which is equivalent to roughly 1.1 million full-time jobs, or about 166 hours per individual per year.

But now that the first baby boomers have finally arrived at the official retirement age, Canada could be on the cusp of a volunteering revolution as history's largest demographic cohort tries to figure out what to do with itself. And here's an intriguing twist on this social tale: a research team at Toronto's Baycrest Hospital is hard at work studying whether volunteering could help contain health-care costs for seniors. Policy-makers would be wise to take note.

The two-year-old Baycrest Research About Volunteering in Older Adults project, known as BRAVO, is the brainchild of cognitive psychologist Nicole Anderson and the hospital's dynamic director of volunteering, Syrelle Bernstein. While most Canadians likely haven't heard of Anderson and Bernstein, the implications of their pioneering research could be transformative in a country with an aging population, a shrinking labour force and staggeringly large health-care bills.

Anderson's goal is to prove scientifically that volunteering can lead to measurable gains in physical and mental health among older adults – that it's about way more than just fulfilment and passing the time. BRAVO could also potentially re-wire Canada's volunteer sector. To show that they practise what they preach, Anderson

and Bernstein have recruited a team of retirees to actively manage, market and oversee the project, a unique arrangement for scientists, who usually prefer not to take their marching orders from lay people. "We think [the study] will serve as a great impetus to creating more challenging volunteer solutions for seniors," Anderson says.

Since joining Baycrest, Anderson, 44, has given frequent talks on how older adults can protect their mental faculties with a mix of physical and cognitive activity and social engagement. Four years ago, Bernstein invited Anderson to talk to Baycrest's volunteers, the topic being Volunteering Is Good For Your Health. Perhaps preaching to the choir, she stressed the benefits of volunteering and how

sult in improved quality of life or are healthier, happier people simply more likely to be volunteers? "The longitudinal studies suggest there's more than just a correlation" between volunteering and health, she observes. "The problem with those studies is that there's little objective testing." And, she adds, the findings aren't connected to the nature of the volunteer activities themselves. In other words, are the benefits of stuffing envelopes comparable to the benefits of a position that allows an individual to make use of their career skills or other life experiences? "No one's ever paid attention to [these distinctions] before," she says.

When they began, Anderson and Bernstein decided to put together a steering committee of seniors who



it could actually help stave off problems like memory decline. After she finished, Anderson said to Bernstein, "Someone should study this."

BERNSTEIN AGREED. Within two years, they had secured a \$500,000 grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for a four-year investigation.

A literature review revealed a number of studies conducted in the U.S. and Europe, based on census data, questionnaires and even a few control trials. They showed that when compared to more sedate retirees, volunteers tended to report better health, improved self-esteem and a greater sense of social support. Other research has shown that the degree of mental stimulation involved in a given job is associated with a diminished risk of certain types of dementia.

But, as Anderson points out, there's a chicken-and-egg problem embedded in such findings: does volunteering re-

would oversee the project, ask tough questions, generate publicity and find participants. The group, which meets bi-weekly in a Baycrest boardroom, is in effect a high-powered board of directors and includes people with marketing, business and legal backgrounds. "There's no way to do the study without volunteers," Anderson says. "It's a great example of what we're trying to get across."

Anderson's volunteer-run team is now looking to sign up more than 200 seniors to be measured and interviewed before, during and after their volunteer experiences at Baycrest. The researchers are looking to track if and how volunteer work improves memory, executive function and physical well-being. Research shows that the additional activity – walking to and from the job, for example – and the cognitive challenges of learning new skills can bring benefits, Anderson notes. "There's good reason to think that a → Continued on page 129

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relatively small amount of physical activity associated with volunteering will add quality to someone's life." But besides the health aspects, the BRAVO researchers are also aiming to assess the nature of each volunteer job, with an eye to linking these positions to the federal government's employment classification codes (which provide the government with a way to order, maintain, analyze and compare data about different types of jobs).

This isn't just an exercise in number crunching. By making such connections, Anderson wants to accomplish two goals. First, the BRAVO team wants to be able to estimate the economic value of each volunteer's work. In a place like Baycrest, where volunteers (more than 2,000 of them) outnumber paid staff, those figures are significant. Second, by cross-referencing the content of a volunteer job with the health data of the individual who does that work, BRAVO researchers may be able to draw conclusions about how to best match people and volunteer jobs in not-for-profit organizations that rely heavily on unpaid work.

Indeed, one of Anderson's investigators, Suzanne Cook, did her thesis on the question of how some volunteer jobs can help seniors gain a sense of renewal and redirection in the wake of the loss of identity often associated with retirement. For many, she concluded, the opportunity to use career skills and previous life experiences was an important factor in maximizing the gain from volunteering and ensuring they remain engaged.

While the BRAVO study is far from complete, Anderson and Cook both point out that their research could raise some trenchant public and social policy questions. For example, if seniors have the opportunity to do meaningful volunteer work, the not-for-profit sector could become a vehicle for easing the pressure on

health budgets. After all, if volunteering is an intrinsically healthy pastime, then it makes sense for policy-makers to devise incentives to encourage charitable organizations to recruit and retain volunteers. But should public sector organizations pitch in by establishing ambitious volunteer recruitment targets in coming years as a way of addressing labour shortages?

As for linking volunteer jobs to employment classification codes, Anderson's team is aiming to put a precise dollar figure on the value of all that non-paid work, which is essential to many not-for-profits but tends to get overlooked by policy-makers and funders.

They're not the only ones undertaking this kind of analysis. The United Nations just passed a resolution asking all member states to report their country's number of volunteers, the number of volunteer hours and the occupational code of each volunteer. The goal is to discover the economic value of volunteering across all countries, which they hope will shed light on whether greater complexity in a volunteer's position is associated with greater health benefits.

Quite apart from the scientific issues and the connections to volunteering research efforts elsewhere in the world, the BRAVO team is also convinced it has built something that could be rolled out across Ontario and even Canada. Steering committee member Tony Fattal, a semi-retired management consultant and business professor, believes the BRAVO project is a model for a new type of high-impact volunteering and therefore could be "franchised" to other organizations looking to get more out of their volunteer resources. As he declares, "I can see tremendous legs to this." ■

FOR INFORMATION ON PARTICIPATING IN BRAVO, CONTACT SYRELLE BERNSTEIN, DIRECTOR OF VOLUNTEER SERVICES AT BAYCREST, 416-785-2500 X2577, OR EMAIL BRAVO@BAYCREST.ORG.

ATTITUDE:
VIEWPOINT

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ATTITUDE:
BEAUTY

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ATTITUDE:
GROOMING

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