**Volunteering Benefits Health**

Volunteering has been widespread in the United States for years with people each year giving their time without anticipating reward. While these volunteer activities may be performed with the intent of helping others, there is also a common understanding that those who give of themselves also receive. Researchers have attempted to measure the benefits that volunteers receive, including positive feelings, increased trust in others, and increased social and political participation.

Over the past twenty years there has been an increase in research that indicates volunteering provides individual health benefits in addition to social benefits. The Office of Research and Policy Development for the Corporation for National and Community Service has confirmed a strong relationship between volunteering and health: those who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression later in life than those who do not volunteer. Comparing the health benefits of volunteering for different age groups has also shown that older volunteers are most likely to receive greater benefits from volunteering, either because they are more likely to face higher incidence of illness or because volunteering provides them with physical and social activity and a sense of purpose when their social roles are changing. Volunteers who devote a “considerable” amount of time to volunteer activities (about 100 hours per year) are most likely to show positive health results according to research.

These results are especially applicable today as Baby Boomers, the generation of 77 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964; reach the age most often connected with retirement. Based on census data, the numbers of volunteers age 65 and older should increase by 50 percent in the next 13 years, from just fewer than 9 million in 2007 to more than 13 million in 2020. This number can be expected to rise for many years to come since the youngest Baby Boomers will not reach age 65 until 2029.

Baby Boomers in their late 40s to mid-50s are volunteering at a higher rate than earlier generations did at the same age. The more hours per year that Boomers spend on volunteer activities; the more likely they are to continue to volunteer from year to year. Baby Boomers are a talented and motivated group who can help solve some of our most challenging social problems, including helping seniors live independently. The health benefits of volunteering suggest that attention should also be given to the correlation that the act of volunteering may allow individuals to maintain their independence as they grow older and may face increased health challenges.

Evidence implies that volunteering has a positive effect on social and psychological issues, such as a person’s sense of purpose. These factors are interrelated with lower risks of poor physical health. Volunteering may enhance a person’s social networks to lower stress and reduce risk of disease.

The connection between volunteering, psychological factors, and social networks holds that an individual’s social connections, generally measured by the number of social roles that a person has, can provide meaning and purpose to his or her life, while providing social interaction during difficult periods. Research also proposes that volunteering also provides individuals with a sense of purpose and a satisfaction in life. Research suggests:

* Volunteer activities can strengthen the social ties that protect individuals from isolation during difficult times, while the experience of helping others leads to a sense of greater self-worth and trust.

* Older individuals who volunteer demonstrate greater health benefits than do younger volunteers because volunteer activities by older individuals are more likely to provide a purposeful social role for them.

* Those who engage in volunteer activities are less likely to suffer from ill health later in life and may be introduced into a positive reinforcing cycle of good health and future volunteering.

* Research has found that when individuals volunteer, they are more likely to live longer.

* Individuals must meet a “volunteering threshold” in order to receive the positive health outcomes from volunteering -- they need to commit a considerable amount of time -- at least one or two hours a week to volunteer activities.

* States with higher volunteer rates are more likely to have lower mortality rates and less incidence of heart disease.

Given the significant size of the Baby Boomer population and the fact that the oldest Boomers are in their 60s, the relationship between volunteering and positive health outcomes deserves attention. Most import is the “volunteering threshold,” which reveals that for older volunteers to experience substantial benefits from their volunteering activities, their level of commitment to these activities needs to be considerable or average one or two hours a week. If society connects Baby Boomers and others in substantial volunteer experiences, it may not only help solve community problems, but also improve the health of the growing number of older adults.