

Workshop Presentation

Topic: Social Capital and Volunteering

Retired Persons Volunteer Association: Community Building through Volunteering of Retirees

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Abstract

St. James' Settlement has pioneered retiree services for more than 26 years. In 1979, Retired Persons Society was formed to promote volunteer work and positive and active aging after retirement. Throughout the past 26 years, the Association and their members have been actively involved in improving the quality of life of the retirees as well as all walks of life in the community.

In 2003, with the successful application of the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund, Retired Persons Association was transformed into Retired Person Volunteers' Association. In this transformation, the importance and contribution of volunteer work was more emphasized in the Association. Through training and coaching, the skills and confidence of the retired persons was further developed so as to manage their own association and to contribute sustainable voluntary services to the community. With the cooperation with other parties in the community, they set up different volunteer teams and provided services to the needy people and other deprived groups in the community. Besides helping the deprived people directly, the work was also to build up the strength and mutual relationship of these deprived groups who would thereafter give and serve other deprived persons in the community.

Introduction

Retirement is one of the critical stages in life. Various theories have been proposed to explain adjustment to retirement. According to role theory, work role is one of the most important roles people assume, serving as a strong source of identity. Thus the loss of the work role after retirement is viewed as a major disruption in the life of an older person, and it causes people to feel discontented, anxious, or depressed (Blau, 1973).

Disengagement theorists postulated that older people gradually and inevitably withdraw from the various roles they occupied in middle age and reduce their level of activity or sense of involvement in life. They theorized that elders turn inward and become increasingly preoccupied with themselves (Cumming and Henry, 1961). On the other hand, activity theorists argued that people adjust best to old age, including

retirement, when they maintain high levels of activity and continue levels of involvement similar to those they experienced in middle age (Havighurst, 1963).

Therefore, volunteer work has the values to the retirees in adjusting their elder life: learning and growth, increase of self-esteem, maintenance of relationship with society, and active aging. In addition, volunteering of old people will provide a invaluable resource pool for the community (霍瑞堯, 2000).

Background

In responding to the adjustment needs of retirees, St. James' Settlement has pioneered retiree services for more than 26 years. In 1979, being initiated by 5 retired persons, Retired Persons Society (later changed to Retired Persons Association (RPA) in 1981) was formed to promote volunteer work and positive and active aging after retirement. St. James' Settlement has acted as a consultant of the RPA and provided support in venue utilization, resources, consultation and clerical support. RPA has an object, "Retire but not rest. Serve the self and serve the others" (in Chinese 退而不休, 助己助人). Members of the Retired Persons Association were encouraged to organize their own education and learning activities, as well as to provide volunteer activities to the community, including concern visits, direct services, art and cultural performance, and etc. Throughout the past 26 years, the Association and their members have been actively involved in improving the quality of life of the retired persons as well as all walks of life in the community.

Past Experiences and Achievements

In the past 26 years, RPA has committed in volunteerism in a right direction. It is one of the first retired persons association formed by social service organization in Hong Kong. It has well-structured executive committee and different working groups. Number of members has been steady. Before 2003, it was around 250, and in 2005, it is increased to 800.

The association has developed a vast variety of services and activities. Expertise has also been developed. They included visits and services to elderly homes, visits and services to the home for the visually impaired, and assistance to frail elderly programme. They also provided services in carnivals and festival programme to the community. Also, members of the association had a lot of interests and energy to serve the community by performance. They performance drama, singing and dancing etc, and they can perform very well. The activities and services provided by the association were well appreciated by the community. In the past decades, the association has also received numerous awards from other community organization, e.g. Active Aging Special Volunteer Group Award.

In conclusion, RPA is well established, and is one of the most successful retired persons associations in Hong Kong. Members of the RPA have also demonstrated that

retirees can be excellent volunteers who can make huge contribution to the society. Active ageing and healthy ageing is thus manifested from the retirees.

Recent Development

The society is ageing rapidly. Though RPA is a successful retiree association, it is time to change. The association has to be developed so as to meet the rising expectations of the retirees as well as the society. The retirees nowadays are different from those in the past. They are much younger as a lot of them aged fewer than 60. They are well educated with strong organizing ability. Some of them are professionals and special expertise. At the same time, they have strong personal network. Last but not least, most of them are better off and is able to contribute their time and effort in helping others. Therefore, these retirees do expect differently from the association. They expect more flexibility and more autonomy in running their association. And they request more space for their programme and activities. In addition, they expect more achievement and recognition from the society.

As a mother agency, in view of the limited resources available for elderly services, St. James' Settlement also has some new expectations towards the association. We expect them more involvement in volunteer work as well as in management of the association. That means, more independency and re-distribution of resources from the agency.

This ageing society also expects the retirees to play a new role. As the population is growing older and frail, the retired persons who are "Younger" and "Healthier" are no longer merely the service users. They are expected to "give" and contribute to the society. It is senior volunteerism that the society is promoting. Besides, the contribution should be productive and continuous. In a long run, the retiree is expected to becoming a capital in society.

Transformation

In 2003, the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) was successfully applied from St. James' Settlement and the transformation project of RPA was started. The funded body has expected RPA to contribute sustainable voluntary services to the community, and therefore to be developed as a social capital. Besides, the Association is expected to act as a catalyst of a snowball effect, which would contribute towards building up other "social capital" in the local community.

First of all, a former elderly center was approved by Social Welfare Department to use as the registered office of the Association. It was also served as a place for meeting and programme. In long run, the Association would manage the centre and office on its own. After renovation, the center was opened in July 2003.

Second, the name of "Retired Persons Association" (RPA) was changed to "Retired Persons Volunteers Association" (RPVA). The key word "volunteer" was

added, emphasizing the element and importance of “volunteerism”. At the same time, more in-depth and long-term volunteer work was developed and promoted. Different volunteer teams are formed accordingly.

Besides, the new association, RPVA, has also prepared a new mission statement. There are 4 core elements in the mission. 1. To organize the retired persons to form a volunteer organization, and to serve as a model. 2. To make use of experience and expertise to continuously contribute to the society and to become social capital. 3. To promote life-long learning and improvement. 4. To promote collaboration with other community organizations and parties.

Training is essential in the transformation process. It is provided to the retired persons to improve their skills and increase their confidence, so as to manage their own association and to contribute sustainable voluntary services to the community. And also mindset change is important. 1. The concept of being service user to service provider. 2. The belief that they have potentials and assets to help/ serve the others. 3. To focus more in relationship building besides giving tangible services. 4. Continuity and sustainability in service.

The goal is to develop the retirees as a social capital. Therefore, they can change from service user to service provider, and then able to provide continuous volunteer work to the community. At the same time, they are expected to manage the centre and the activities on themselves.

Beside, the retirees are expected to contribute in building other social capitals. They can make good use of their strengths, such as working experience, education and expertise, personal network, and last but not least, time to contribute to the society. Among the different volunteer work, they are expected to play the role as a mentor for youth and other deprived people.

Future Development and Focus: Mentorship

In this year and coming years, much more energy will be used to develop the mentorship projects, because the retiree is suitable to become a mentor or youth and deprived people.

There are several core elements of mentorship:

1. Reciprocity: make use and share the experience and knowledge of the retired persons and the target groups.
2. Focus in building up strengths of the target groups.
3. Change through interaction and relationship (以生命影響生命).
4. Long-term, no matter in relationship or in service.

5. Sustainability: the target groups will serve the others in need, thus forming a love chain.

Obviously, mentorship can make good use of their potentials and be developed into good mentors.

Several projects are being started in this year, targets including children and women of new arrivals, south-Asian children and the families, children of small group homes, and secondary school students. In these projects, RPVA has developed cooperation with other agencies and service centres. By providing tangible services to the deprived group, such as tutoring classes for the children, learning classes for the women and community services etc, relationship will be built among the retirees and the deprived groups. Retirees are then matched with the children or youth or the family, so that the retirees can provide support and guidance to those people. In the same time, the deprived groups are thereafter motivated and encouraged to involve in community and volunteer services. Inclusion activities with other walks of life are also developed.

Conclusion

The transformation process is a challenge as well as a learning experience. A lot of effort has been spent to increase the confidence of the retiree volunteers, and to motivate their commitment in sustainable volunteer services. But the outcome is also encouraging.

Retirees are an excellent resource for volunteer work and community building. Through training and organizing, retirees can demonstrate themselves a social capital and, at the same time, can contribute in building social capital for the society.

And a non-government organization can play an important role in this transformation process, by contributing in resource identification, providing consultancy, training and administrative support to the retirees.

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