

## **Age Diversity: Inviting a Wider Audience to Serve**

*By: Liz Eager, Catholic Volunteer Network Board Member*

How can welcoming volunteers from different age groups advance our mission? Although most of our volunteers are recent college graduates, Response-Ability is considering ways to include volunteers outside of our typical age range in the life of our organization. This article shares some of our experiences with age diversity in an effort to invite our network to imagine a purposeful infusion of volunteers of varied ages in carrying out our mission.

### **Baby Boomers and Beyond**

“Envision a future in which nonprofits have a pool of talented, skilled, and passionate individuals on call to build organizational capacity by serving as consultants, strategists, marketing gurus, ambassadors, innovators, mentors, fundraisers, and direct service teammates...this future is here now. This abundant resource is a workforce 78.2 million strong; they are the Baby Boomers.” (From *Boomer Volunteer Engagement Handbook: Collaborate Today: Thrive Tomorrow*, Jill Friedman Fixler and Sandie Eichberg, with Gail Lorenz.)

In 2007-2008, Response-Ability decided to put aside our upper age limit of thirty to welcome three volunteers for our Dominican Republic site, a married couple in their fifties and a retired social worker in her seventies. While focusing on recent college graduates allowed our staff to cater to the specific personal, professional, and spiritual needs of emerging adults, the addition of older volunteers added not only richness to community but also a heightened level of expertise to our service sites. A school nurse, a technology expert, and a social worker, these three volunteers joined us with significant competencies to contribute. With a strong education focus, Response-Ability is also interested in retired educators and those who can give a portion of their time as mentors to younger volunteers, consultants to our staff, and direct service providers.

Of course, challenges accompany the salient benefits of extending the upper age limit. I certainly saw the great sacrifice involved for our more mature volunteers as they sold and left homes, said goodbye to family members including grown children, gave notice to their employers, gave up jobs, moved away from supportive church communities, and exchanged the comforts of their established lives for the opportunity to serve. Calling our staff to shift from our usual training role to one of engagement, our organization was stretched to match their developed skills with needs in the community. I found the role of our staff to be markedly different with older adults who were looking for increased input on their service positions and at times, a more self-directed experience, but those we serve will ultimately benefit if organizations like ours can find ways to connect skills with needs.

### **High School Students**

Our office came to life this summer with the addition of two high school volunteers. Responding to an ad on volunteermatch.org, Alexandra came to us looking for a “fun” place to fulfill her required thirty hours of community service while Jordan’s parents, both educators, thought Response-Ability would be a good place for their son to give some summer hours to positively impact the community. Interviewing both students revealed that Alexandra wanted to overcome her shyness, and Jordan wanted to utilize his knowledge of Excel and Quickbooks. Quite easily, we were able to train Alexandra to interact with our staff and callers while organizing our lending library as Jordan worked with me on setting community house budgets. Both created compact disc’s for our volunteers and staff with reflection music as well as helped with a fun-filled luau summer celebration at the office. The joy and energy they added along with a willingness to do whatever was needed was invaluable!

### **Undergraduate and Graduate Students**

Typically, our recruiting efforts target college seniors for post-graduate service; however a recent visit to University of Chicago challenged us to consider graduate students and third year students for a year of service before their final year. Several university representatives shared that graduate students are a good audience for our volunteer opportunities as they are looking for ways to apply their learning through direct service. We accepted a third year student for a year of international service several years ago, but have not adopted an intentional plan to reach this group of prospective students. It seems tailoring our on-campus recruitment to include both these audiences would be relatively easy to do and worth the intentionality.

### **Part-Time Volunteers**

Response-Ability is exploring the feasibility of offering part-time volunteer opportunities in our service sites as well as our office. As we tell people about Response-Ability, some express interest in connecting directly with the poor, but our current structure only allows for direct service through full-time placements. We tend toward single, unemployed, non-home owners who are able to dedicate themselves full-time for at least one year, but we may be missing others- married people, full-time workers, homeowners, and/or those who want to give on a part-time basis. Part-time volunteers not only provide immediate service but also get to know the organization and can help raise awareness in the community; some may even become donors. Who better to tell the story than someone with a direct experience of service with our groups?

### **Recommended Resource**

Volunteermatch.org is an effective tool for increasing age diversity as nonprofits can post volunteer opportunities and individuals from various age groups can search for openings by geographic location and interests. On the posting, organizations can specify age groups for the positions, including teens and senior citizens.