

Academic Hospitals Experience a Shortage of Adult Volunteers

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Abstract

This research was designed to study the potential shortage of adult non-student volunteers at hospitals across the nation. A telephone survey of ten questions was created and administered to the director or coordinator of Volunteer Services at 26 hospitals. The questions asked about the number of volunteers, any shortage of student or adult volunteers, the hours volunteers contribute, how long volunteers stay with the hospital, the average age of volunteers, areas that are affected by any shortage, and any difficulties recruiting volunteers. The results of the study indicate that the number of volunteers has increased over the past five years, but there is a shortage of adult non-student volunteers. The results also suggest that the hours that volunteers are contributing has remained steady and that there is a slight decrease in the length of stay of volunteers. The average age of the volunteer force showed an even distribution between "decrease" and "steady." Lastly, there were slightly more hospitals that reported no difficulties in recruiting adult non-student volunteers than those that reported a difficulty. The conclusions from this study are that there is a shortage of adult non-student volunteers, and because these volunteers are so valuable to the hospital, there must be an increased effort to recruit them.

INTRODUCTION

Hospital volunteers are a valuable resource for the healthcare community. The adult non-student population of the volunteers is especially critical because of their commitment and skills they have acquired throughout their life. Hospitals are complex organizations with many responsibilities, but due to a lack of funding they are not able to employ people to fulfill every task. Adult non-student volunteers, therefore, provide a reliable source of talent that hospitals can draw from.

The objective of this research study is to determine the extent of the shortage of adult non-student volunteers at teaching hospitals across the nation. This phenomenon has been witnessed at UCLA Healthcare. UCLA has a total of 1700 volunteers, 1200 of which are students and 500 of which are adults. Although it has not been difficult to recruit students, there has been trouble recruiting new volunteers to replace older volunteers who have left.

In order to establish whether this shortage was a contained problem within UCLA Healthcare or a symptom of a greater nationwide dilemma, a variety of articles and journals were examined. Only one article, based on a study conducted in Ontario, Canada, discussed the topic of hospital volunteer

shortages. ¹ Although nearly half of the hospitals surveyed indicated a shortage, the study is limited in its relevance to United States hospitals because of its geographic location.

As a result, UCLA initiated a study, within the United States, to test the hypothesis that other hospitals across the nation were experiencing a shortage of adult non-student volunteers. Based on UCLA's trends, it was expected that hospitals will have an increase in the total number of volunteers over the past five years, but a shortage of adult non-student volunteers. It is also expected that hospitals will have a decrease in the hours that volunteers are contributing and in the time that volunteers are staying with the hospital. Other anticipated results are that the average age of the overall group of volunteers will have increased over the past five years and that hospitals will have problems recruiting adult non-student volunteers.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

The target was to contact the directors or coordinators of volunteer services from 48 academic hospitals across the nation (See Appendix A). The hospitals were randomly chosen from the Association of American Medical Colleges' list of members. ² The total number of hospitals contacted

was 26 (See Appendix B). A response rate of 54.2% was achieved.

The contacted hospitals are as follows:

1. Children's Hospital of Los Angeles
2. George Washington University Hospital
3. Georgetown University Hospital
4. Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania
5. Johns Hopkins Hospital
6. Northwestern Memorial Hospital
7. Tufts-New England Medical Center
8. UC Davis Medical Center
9. UC Irvine Medical Center
10. UC San Diego Medical Center
11. UC San Francisco Medical Center
12. University of Arkansas Medical Center
13. University of Colorado Hospital
14. University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center
15. University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics
16. University of Kansas Hospital
17. University of Kentucky Hospital
18. University of Louisville Healthcare University Hospital
19. University of Maryland Medical Center
20. University of Massachusetts Memorial Healthcare
21. University of Michigan Medical Center
22. University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview
23. University of Mississippi Medical Center
24. University of Missouri Healthcare
25. University of Virginia Medical Center
26. Yale-New Haven Health System

APPARATUS

The instrument used during the research study was a series of questions that were designed to be quick and easy to answer based on the director/coordinator's knowledge. The apparatus is attached as Appendix C.

PROCEDURE

Four interns at the UCLA Healthcare Volunteer Services department collected the data for this research study through the use of telephone calls. From February 17, 2006 through March 23, 2006 the interns spoke with people who identified themselves as the director or coordinator of Volunteer Services at their respective organizations.

A script was designed to ensure that the interns delivered the survey in a uniform manner. The use of this script minimized any bias on the part of the intern in the delivery of the survey and guaranteed a consistent impact on the representatives. The following script was used to converse with the Volunteer Services representatives:

To the director/coordinator: Hello, I am calling from UCLA Healthcare. We are conducting a survey on the potential shortage of volunteers at teaching hospitals across the nation. Your institution has been chosen to participate. We have some short, easy questions to ask you. Can we have five minutes of your time? If it is not convenient for you now, we can call you back... when would be a good time for you?

Closing remarks: Would you be interested in receiving the results of the survey after it has been completed? Who should we send it to? Thank you for your time! We appreciate your help!

RESULTS

The results of the survey indicate that 61.5% of the hospitals contacted are experiencing a shortage of adult non-student volunteers. 46.2% of the respondents said they were having difficulties recruiting new adult non-student volunteers.

The total number of volunteers at the hospitals contacted ranged from 45 to 1600. The average number of volunteers at the hospitals was 539. The hospitals have been categorized into four groups depending on the number of volunteers currently active (See Table 1). 42% of the hospitals have between 301 and 600 volunteers. Of those hospitals, the majority are in the 400 range.

Figure 1

Table 1: Categorization of Hospitals by Number of Volunteers

Category	Number of Hospitals
Less Than 100 Volunteers	1
100 to 300 Volunteers	7
301 to 600 Volunteers	11
Greater than 600 Volunteers	7

The majority of hospitals indicated an increase in the number of volunteers over the past five years. Only 12% stated that they saw a decrease in the overall number of volunteers. When asked if there was a shortage of volunteers, however, 61.5% indicated they had a shortage of adult volunteers (See Tables 2 and 3).

Figure 2

Table 2: Change in the Number of Volunteers Over the Past Five Years

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Increase	13	52%
Decrease	3	12%
Steady	9	36%

Figure 3

Table 3: Stated Shortage of Volunteers

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Student	2	7.7%
Adult	16	61.5%

Most of the respondents expressed no significant change in the hours contributed by volunteers (See Table 4), with the average contribution per year being 191.24 hours. Of those that did see a change, the distribution between those who saw an increase or a decrease was relatively equal. There were more hospitals experiencing a decrease in how long volunteers are staying with the hospital (See Table 5). However, most hospitals responded that the length of stay of the volunteers was steady.

Figure 4

Table 4: Change in the Hours Contributed by Volunteers Over the Past Five Years

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Increase	7	28%
Decrease	7	28%
Steady	11	44%

Figure 5

Table 5: Change in How Long Volunteers are Staying with the Hospital Over the Past Five Years

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Increase	5	20.8%
Decrease	9	37.5%
Steady	10	41.7%

Very few hospitals indicated an increase in the average age of volunteers over the past five years. There was an even distribution of hospitals expressing a decrease or no change in the average age of volunteers. The representatives were asked the average age of the adult non-student volunteers, and the average of the responses was 51.29 years.

Figure 6

Table 6: Change in the Average Age of Volunteers Over the Past Five Years

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Increase	3	12%
Decrease	11	44%
Steady	11	44%

The following question only applied to those who expressed a shortage in adult volunteers. Therefore, there was a total of only 16 respondents. Of those who had a shortage in adult volunteers, most indicated that the workload of staff or patient satisfaction was most affected.

Figure 7

Table 7: Area Most Affected by Any Adult Volunteer Shortage

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Essential Services are Cut	3	18.8%
Workload of Staff is Affected	6	37.5%
Patient Satisfaction is Affected	7	43.8%

There was a relatively even distribution between the number of hospitals that have trouble recruiting adult non-student volunteers and those that do not (See Table 8).

Figure 8

Table 8: Difficulties Recruiting Adult Non-Student Volunteers

Category	Number of Hospitals	Percentage
Yes	12	48%
No	13	52%

DISCUSSION

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS

Based on the research, a substantial number of hospitals are suffering from a deficiency in adult non-student volunteers. Although the majority of hospitals indicated an increase in the total number of volunteers over the past five years, it was stated by some that this was due to a large influx of students. It is much easier for these academic hospitals to attract

students because most are located on or near the university the students attend. Regardless of the number of student volunteers the hospital may have, it does not diminish the need for adult non-student volunteers. There are certain niches within the hospital that require the unique resources of the adult non-student volunteers. One reason why some hospitals may not have indicated a shortage of adult volunteers is the reluctance to disclose such information. The construction of the survey required the open identification of each party, which may have prevented honest responses. Considering the nature of the position of Director or Coordinator of Volunteer Services, any shortage of volunteers or problems recruiting volunteers reflects poorly on the performance of the individual and the hospital. The competition between hospitals for the best reputation affects their willingness to be open about their situation. As a result, it might be valuable to conduct this survey anonymously at a later time in order to extract more credible responses.

COMMITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

Although it was predicted that there would be a reported decrease in the number of hours volunteers are contributing, the survey suggests no significant trend in either direction. The reasons for such an outcome cannot be determined.

It was also hypothesized that there would be a decrease in how long adult non-student volunteers are staying with the hospital. While this prediction was not fully supported, a relatively large percentage of hospitals indicated such a decrease. The decrease in the total length of stay of the adult non-student volunteers at the hospital might be credited to the departure of many older, long-term volunteers and an increase of transitional volunteers. Many long-term volunteers are leaving the hospital because of health reasons or because they are moving away to live in assisted living or with family. Many transitional volunteers are giving their time to the hospital in order to gain a certain goal. For example, one group of transitional volunteers are people who are thinking about a career move into the medical arena. This group volunteers at hospitals in order to experience first-hand the environment in which they hope to work or to be able to accomplish an activity that they can place on their resume. Once they have received what they came for, these volunteers move on. Unlike the traditional volunteers who are usually retired and devote ten years of their lives to volunteering at hospitals out of a sense of philanthropy, these transitional volunteers are relatively short-term. The implication here is that volunteer programs will have to

change the way they use volunteers. Volunteer programs are having to be more flexible with the volunteers in terms of where and when they can work.

More hospitals, however, indicated that the length of stay had remained steady over the past five years. This outcome could be attributed to the great number of older volunteers who have been with the hospital for many years and have not left yet.

AGE OF ADULT NON-STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

The hypothesis that the average age of volunteers would have increased over the past five years was not supported. This question pertained only to adult non-student volunteers. When the prediction was made, it was believed that the majority of the volunteer force was of the same age group and aging together without the arrival of a younger segment of the population to balance it out. Therefore, the average age of the overall group was expected to have increased over the past five years. Even though it was specified that the question only applied to adult non-student volunteers, many of the respondents may have included students in their calculation of their average age, thereby significantly lowering the mean.

RECRUITMENT OF ADULT NON-STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

Although a majority of hospitals reported no difficulty in recruiting adult non-student volunteers, a significant number did express a problem. One respondent initially stated that they did not have difficulties recruiting adult non-student volunteers, but upon clarification indicated that the reason they did not have trouble recruiting was because they did not recruit. This may be the case for other respondents who indicated “no.” Therefore, this may account for the gap between the number of hospitals that stated they had a shortage of adult volunteers but no trouble recruiting these adult volunteers.

Furthermore, many of the hospitals may not engage in many recruiting activities because it is not part of their organizational culture. In the past, it was more popular to volunteer at hospitals, so hospitals did not have to put a lot of effort into generating interest. Today, there are many factors that have changed the significance people place on volunteering at hospitals. One factor is the growing number of women in the workforce and the resulting decrease in their availability. This is one segment of the population that used to comprise a significant portion of the volunteers. The increase in competition between organizations that need

volunteers is another factor. With a decrease in the number of accessible volunteers, the companies that utilize volunteers are fighting harder to get them.

CONCLUSION

A significant number of hospitals across the nation are experiencing a shortage of adult non-student volunteers. Hospital volunteers are a vital part of the healthcare system, and adult non-students are particularly valuable because they add a level of dependability and maturity that student volunteers are not able to dedicate. As evidenced from this survey, the shortage of adult volunteers has negatively affected the organizations. In most situations, the ability of the adult non-student volunteer to develop a relationship with and assist the patient is fundamental to the patient's well-being while at the hospital. Without these valuable resources, the satisfaction of the patient is severely diminished. Also, they support the staff by providing them with an environment in which the employees can work efficiently and be productive. Because of the value that volunteers provide, it is important to employ effective recruiting practices.

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APPENDIX A

TARGET HOSPITALS BY REGION

WESTERN UNITED STATES

- Children's Hospital of Los Angeles
- Scripps Health
- University of California Davis Medical Center
- University of California Irvine Medical Center
- University of California San Diego Medical Center
- University of California San Francisco Medical Center
- University of Colorado Hospital
- University of New Mexico Hospital
- University of Southern California University Hospital
- University of Utah Hospital

- University of Washington Medical Center

MIDDLE UNITED STATES

- Baylor University Medical Center
- Loyola University Medical Center
- Northwestern Memorial Hospital
- Ohio State University Hospitals
- Ohio University Medical Center
- University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences
- University of Chicago Hospitals
- University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center
- University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics
- University of Kansas Hospital
- University of Kentucky Hospital
- University of Louisville Health Care University Hospital
- University of Michigan Medical Center
- University of Minnesota Med Center Fairview
- University of Mississippi Medical Center
- University of Missouri Health Care
- University of Nebraska Medical Center
- University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics
- Vanderbilt University Hospital

EASTERN UNITED STATES

- Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center
- Duke University Hospital
- Emory University Hospital
- George Washington University Hospital
- Georgetown University Hospital
- John Dempsey Hospital, University of Connecticut Health Center

- Johns Hopkins Hospital
- New York University Hospitals Center
- State University of New York Health Science Center, Stony Brook
- Temple University Hospital
- Tufts-New England Medical Center
- University of Maryland Medical Center
- University of Massachusetts Memorial Health Care
- University of North Carolina Hospitals
- University of Pennsylvania Hospital
- University of South Carolina Medical Center
- University of Virginia Medical Center
- Yale-New Haven Health System

APPENDIX B

CONTACTED HOSPITALS BY REGION

WESTERN UNITED STATES

- Children's Hospital of Los Angeles
- University of California Davis Medical Center
- University of California Irvine Medical Center
- University of California San Diego Medical Center
- University of California San Francisco Medical Center
- University of Colorado Hospital

MIDDLE UNITED STATES

1. Northwestern Memorial Hospital
2. University of Arkansas Medical Center
3. University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center
4. University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics
5. University of Kansas Medical Center
6. University of Kentucky Hospital
7. University of Louisville Healthcare University

Hospital

8. University of Michigan Medical Center
9. University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview
10. University of Mississippi Medical Center
11. University of Missouri Healthcare

EASTERN UNITED STATES

- George Washington University Hospital
- Georgetown University Hospital
- Hospital of University of Pennsylvania
- Johns Hopkins Hospital
- Tufts-New England Medical Center
- University of Maryland Medical Center
- University of Massachusetts Memorial Healthcare
- University of Virginia Medical Center
- Yale-New Haven Health System

APPENDIX C

LIST OF SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Can you give us an estimate of how many volunteers are currently active at your institution?
2. How many of those are students and how many are adults?
3. Over the past five years, have you seen an increase or decrease in the number of volunteers?
4. Is there a shortage of student volunteers?
5. Is there a shortage of adult volunteers?

AT THIS POINT, THE REMAINING QUESTIONS REFER ONLY TO ADULT NON-STUDENT VOLUNTEERS.

1. Have you noticed an increase or decrease in the last five years in how many hours volunteers are contributing?
2. Have you noticed an increase or decrease in the last five years in how long volunteers are staying

with the hospital?

3. Has the average age of your volunteers increased or decreased over the last five years?
4. What is the median age of your adult non-student volunteers?
5. Which was most affected by the volunteer shortage?"essential" services are cutworkload of staff who had come to rely on volunteers patient satisfaction
6. How many hours, on average, is the individual

volunteer contributing each year? Are you having any difficulties recruiting volunteers?

References

1. Handy, Femida and Srinivasan, Narasimhan. (2002). "Hospital Volunteers: An Important and Changing Resource." Retrieved February 2, 2006, from International Association for Volunteer Effort Web site: http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/files/iyv/handy_sr2_english_web.pdf
2. Association of American Medical Colleges http://services.aamc.org/memberlistings/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.search&search_type=TH&state_criteria=ALL
3. Some hospitals were not able to answer every question. Therefore, the total number of respondents for each question may not always be 26.

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