

**Faith in Action:  
Using Interfaith Coalitions to Support Voluntary Caregiving Efforts**

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Between 1993 and 1999, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded 1,091 \$25,000 grants through Generation II of “Faith in Action”—a grant program supporting voluntary caregiving efforts across the country. Successful applicants needed to (1) recruit volunteers to care for community residents, (2) offer these services at no cost to clients and (3) create an interfaith coalition (including faith-based congregations) to support the program. The Foundation believed that the interfaith coalition would be an invaluable resource in garnering community support and identifying prospective volunteers to provide caregiving services.

In 2001, Public/Private Ventures mailed surveys to all 1,091 Generation II grantees to learn more about ongoing program operations, challenges to service delivery and program characteristics that improve grantees’ ability to sustain their program. Surveys were completed by 787 grantees (86% continued to serve clients; 14% were closed), providing a large dataset that is being used to answer many questions of interest to the field (see Herrera and Pepper, forthcoming). In this paper, we focus on the following:

- What types of care can community volunteers provide?
- How do interfaith coalitions help sustain these programs?
- What program characteristics contribute to sustainability?
- What challenges do voluntary caregiving programs face?

## **Services**

Counter to concerns that programs might be unable to find volunteers willing to provide the kinds of services needed by chronically ill clients, the wide range of services provided by the programs suggest that volunteers are, in fact, willing to provide many services for community members. Ninety-three percent of the organizations provide basic services, encompassing three key areas often provided to the elderly: home visits and telephone calls; transportation; and

shopping and household chores. Care for ill or disabled clients is provided by 71 percent of programs and includes respite care, personal care (such as grooming, bathing and feeding) and hospice care. Other services include a wide range of types of assistance such as home improvements, advocacy and referrals, health-related care and financial assistance. The vast majority of programs offer two or more services, and in 70 percent of cases, Faith in Action programs report that they are the only agencies in their service areas providing these services at no cost to the client.

The wide range of services provided and program retention rates (close to 60% of Faith in Action volunteers contribute for more than a year) attests to the versatility of volunteers. Yet, programs that provide services such as housekeeping or transportation, those requiring very specific skills, and those working with clients needing more intensive care occasionally experienced difficulty finding or keeping volunteers. To overcome these challenges, the programs used strategies ranging from educating community members about the specific illness they serve to providing extra training, support and encouragement to volunteers.

### **Coalition Composition and Help**

The compositions of the coalitions suggest Faith in Action generally represents the religious diversity of Americans. On average, 80 percent of coalition members are congregations, and the faiths and denominations most frequently represented in the coalitions are those represented by the largest percentages of U.S. adults. For example, Catholics make up the largest percentage of the U.S. population and are represented in the largest number of coalitions.

Although most coalitions cross denominational boundaries, for example, involving more than one type of Christian congregation, only 39 percent involve both Christian and non-Christian members. The remaining 61 percent include only Christian congregations. On

average, coalitions represent two faiths.<sup>1</sup> Protestant congregations are most prevalent, appearing in 91 percent of coalitions with an average of 3.9 denominations in each coalition, followed by Catholic congregations in 73 percent of coalitions and Jewish congregations in 25 percent.

As the Foundation hypothesized when creating Faith in Action, the coalitions have provided crucial assistance to these programs. More than three-quarters develop community support, recruit clients or volunteers. About two-thirds of the programs rely on the coalitions for help with fundraising.<sup>2</sup> By serving such critical roles, congregations may help to sustain these programs and may even contribute to cost efficiency. Quantitative analyses show that programs with coalitions active in volunteer recruitment and fundraising experience more success in these areas giving them a better chance of survival. Programs with more congregational recruitment also serve more clients with a given budget.

Programs added an average of 1½ new members to their coalitions annually. However, many programs encountered challenges in recruiting congregations, encouraging their active involvement, and sustaining their interest. Representatives of 47 percent of closed programs cited their inability to achieve these goals as a primary reason for their programs' demise.

### **Sustainability**

Quantitative analyses suggest that programs may increase their chances of survival by implementing several critical program practices associated with developing a strong volunteer and funding base. Although we were unable to confirm causality because most variables were collected at one time point, our findings are consistent with associations found in other studies

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<sup>1</sup> Following the definition of the Faith in Action National Program Office, Catholic and Protestant are included as separate faiths.

<sup>2</sup> When holding coalition size constant, the composition of the coalition is not associated with the extent to which it helps the program in these areas.

between strong program practices and program success as well as common wisdom about what makes a program succeed.<sup>3</sup>

To increase their likelihood of survival, programs should recruit at least 15 volunteers annually and retain at least 20 percent for more than a year.<sup>4</sup> In efforts to recruit and retain volunteers, past research has stressed the importance of three aspects of volunteer infrastructure: screening, training, and supervision (Grossman and Furano, 2002). Our analyses similarly support the importance of strong volunteer infrastructure as well as several other key practices in contributing to successful recruitment and retention. To meet the outlined recruitment and retention goals, programs should:

- **Provide multiple services to clients.** Programs that provide multiple services to clients also provide multiple service opportunities to volunteers, possibly reaching recruits with various interests.
- **Enlist the help of collaborative partners in recruitment.** Programs that received active help from coalitions recruited more volunteers than programs without this help.
- **Match some volunteers in teams.** Programs that match volunteers in teams are also able to recruit more volunteers annually.
- **Require pre-training of volunteers.** Programs that train volunteers prior to service provision recruit more volunteers each year.

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<sup>3</sup> The findings presented in the sustainability section are based on a series of sequential regressions. While many program characteristics were examined simultaneously in the analyses, we present only those characteristics with statistically meaningful effects. All analyses hold constant the size of the community and whether the program served clients prior to receiving the grant. In addition, some program characteristics, such as the size of the coalition, the number of volunteers and the size of the budget, are likely to be greater the longer a program has operated since receiving the grant. Thus, when we predict these program characteristics, we hold constant the number of years the program has served clients post-grant.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly the number of new volunteers needed to sustain a program's current service level depends on how many clients the program is trying to serve. However, the specific 15-volunteer threshold continues to predict program *survival* even when holding the number of clients constant.

- **Supervise volunteers at least quarterly.** Programs with at least quarterly supervision of volunteers retained more volunteers than those with less frequent supervision.
- **Choose a director carefully.** Directors with prior experience in voluntary caregiving and, more specifically, in training and supervising caregivers were more likely to implement effective program practices.

Ninety-five percent of programs that met the recruitment and retention goals as well as the six sub-goals were still serving clients at the time of our survey, compared to only 19 percent of the programs that met none of these goals. Four of these goals emerged as most crucial in predicting a program's chance of survival: using the coalition to recruit volunteers, providing two or more services, retaining at least 20 percent of volunteers, and recruiting at least 15 new volunteers per year. Only 25 percent of programs meeting none of these four goals served clients when surveyed compared with 93 percent of programs meeting at least three.

In addition to creating a strong volunteer pool, programs must establish a solid funding base. To increase their likelihood of survival, programs not only need to raise sufficient funds but to attract funding from multiple sources. Focusing some fundraising on community resources such as private donations, congregations and local agencies appears to be particularly important. To raise sufficient annual funds (i.e., \$25,000 – enough to replace the original Faith in Action funds) from at least three sources, programs should:

- **Provide multiple services to clients.** Programs that provide multiple services to clients have stronger funding bases than those providing fewer services.
- **Enlist the help of leadership—both coalition and board—in raising funds.** Help from both sources is effective in achieving the funding threshold.

- **Have at least quarterly board meetings.** Boards that meet frequently are more likely to help raise funds.
- **Increase the size of the coalition.** Larger coalitions are more likely to help raise funds.
- **Choose a director carefully.** Directors with prior experience working with the faith community have larger coalitions.

Ninety-seven percent of programs raising \$25,000 from at least three sources and achieving the five sub-goals continued to serve clients at the time of our survey, compared to only 47 percent of programs meeting none of these goals. Three of these goals emerged as most important: enlisting coalition help in fundraising, providing three or more services, and raising at least \$25,000 from three or more sources. Sixty-two percent of programs meeting none of these three goals served clients when surveyed compared with 95 percent of programs meeting at least two.

## **Challenges**

The biggest challenges reported by Faith in Action programs center on those areas most critical for program survival: fundraising and volunteer recruitment and retention.

**Fundraising.** Raising funds was reported as the most critical factor contributing to programs' success or demise, cited by almost two-thirds of both closed and open programs. Programs reported difficulty creating a diverse funding base and finding ongoing, unrestricted support that could cover administration and operating costs, supplies and equipment, transportation, recruitment and building community awareness.

**Volunteer recruitment and retention.** Although programs were successful in involving volunteers in a wide range of activities and retaining most of their volunteers for over a year, directors of almost half of closed programs and more than a third of open programs reported

difficulty recruiting volunteers. These difficulties seemed to be especially common in programs based in small, rural communities. Close to a quarter of directors of open programs also mentioned retention as key.

**Involving faith-based organizations.** Although faith-based organizations were key in the success of these programs, gaining their support and sustaining their interest often proved quite challenging. Directors of about half of closed programs cited a lack of support from congregations and other faith-based organizations as leading to their closing; 17 percent of open programs similarly mentioned congregational support as critical. Congregations were occasionally resistant to providing volunteers to serve people from outside of their congregations. Many were overtaxed with providing for their own congregants or with involvement in other community initiatives. Coordinating the involvement of several congregations was also challenging; some reported that churches of different denominations had difficulty working together.

**Building community support and awareness.** Having a community that is aware and supportive of the program was mentioned as a critical accomplishment by 42 percent of closed and about a third of open programs. Programs that were successful in this area reported developing this support through publicity efforts such as news articles, radio announcements, presentations and fundraising events. Also important were ongoing efforts to assess community needs by holding community forums, attending community events, and networking. Making such efforts on an ongoing basis enabled programs to adapt to changing community needs.

**Hiring staff.** Hiring a sufficient number of qualified, dedicated and consistent staff is critical to program operations, mentioned by almost 40 percent of closed programs and about a quarter of open programs. Having a director with these characteristics who was also visible,

active in the community and had administration, management, public relations and leadership skills was particularly helpful. The directors' flexibility and willingness to work part time or, at times, without pay, also helped some programs survive.

Other findings point, more specifically, to the importance of the director's prior experience when starting the Faith in Action position and suggest that this is an area in which many programs have difficulty. For example, although experience working with faith communities and training and supervising caregivers may help directors develop strong funding and volunteer bases for these programs, only a little over half brought these skills with them prior to running the program. And less than half came to the program with experience in fundraising or board development. Recruiting directors or other staff members with these skills is likely very difficult given the limited budgets of these programs.

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this study support those of other studies outlining program practices essential to supporting high-quality programs. Strong leadership from a director is critical; active support from a board of directors and community collaborations in key areas are also helpful. Directors with prior experience working with volunteers are more apt to implement strong practices in their program, and directors with experience working with the faith community are better equipped to enlist the participation of local congregations. Fundraising help from both the board of directors and community collaborators make program survival more likely, as does enlisting the help of congregations in recruiting volunteers.

Volunteer training and supervision is critical. In this study, training offered prior to service provision was particularly valuable in contributing to program survival. In addition to creating a competent volunteer pool early training is also associated with more successful

volunteer recruitment. Supervising volunteers as little as once a quarter was also associated with higher volunteer retention.

Successful Faith in Action grantees have implemented many of these practices important for the growth of strong programs. As social service agencies continue to increase their collaborations with faith-based organizations and their use of volunteers in filling critical service gaps nationwide, the successes and challenges of these programs can serve as valuable models.

## References

**Grossman, Jean Baldwin and Kathryn Furano**

2002 *Making the Most of Volunteers*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

**Herrera, Carla and Sarah Kathryn Pepper**

Forthcoming *Using Interfaith Coalitions to Support Voluntary Caregiving Efforts: The Case of Faith in Action*.