Task Groups and Their Impact on Quality of Life for Older Adults

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The value of self-advocacy goes beyond an individual's empowerment to the basic premise of social justice. To empower older adults to advocate for social justice on behalf of all senior citizens provides an avenue for increased self-esteem, improved quality of life, and community contribution (Kee & Merriam, 2014). But more importantly, it means a group of older adults can work towards changing social policy for the benefit of their peers and themselves.

The following discussion is a look at the power of older adults as they raise their voices in the name of social justice. Studies have shown older adults who are involved in promoting the well-being of others and who feel a sense of purpose have a measurably higher quality of life in terms of health and well-being. Involvement on the part of older adults is a way to preserve a sense of community (Kee & Merriam, 2014) while adding to the richness of society.

The Massachusetts Senior Action Council (MSAC) is an advocacy group for older adults whose membership is primarily persons age 65 and older. Following the literature review will be a case example looking at MSAC members' effort to impact the issue of health care. The task group has been successful in changing policy by preventing budget cuts and improving services for older adults, but more importantly, the group provides a place for older adults to feel a sense of purpose, camaraderie, and social connection.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature not only reveals the vulnerability of older adults, but the power of being heard and the importance of task groups,

self-advocacy, and empowerment in adding to their quality of life. The swift pace of change in a high technology era is challenging for older adults; however, research consistently demonstrates the benefits of community involvement and having a sense of purpose. Kee and Merriam (2014) associated this with the necessity to continue one's personal growth and called it lifelong learning and suggested that lifelong learning contributes to both the individual's quality of life and the community's growth and stability.

According to Kee and Merriam (2014), "...the more active, social, healthy and educated older adults are, the less drain they are on a family's and, by extension, a community's resources and services" (p. 131). They noted activities that were social, learning-based, and diverse positively correlated with improved health and ability levels. Kee and Merriam (2014) investigated "active aging, productive aging, and positive/successful aging," (p. 132) which equate to social involvement, full- and part-time work, volunteering, and among other things, mental and physical health.

Numerous examples are provided by Kee and Merriam (2014) to demonstrate the value of lifelong learning and its impact on quality of life and community health. They recommend that policymakers implement programs which emphasize learning, encourage involvement, and provide growth for older adults. They noted older adult programs focus on health and nutrition; and lastly, they feel more learning opportunities should be devoted to support the needs of working adults and/or issues of raising grandchildren (Kee & Merriam, 2014).

Salazar and Singh (2010) explored the history of social justice in group work and the development of social advocacy. One powerful statement was: "...problems previously experienced individually are recognized as part of a larger systemic problem experienced by many" (p. 98). With a reminder that groups start in a common place, with a common emotion and common frustrations, the authors explore group work in advocacy from Jane Addams to Barack Obama (Salazar & Singh, 2010). The authors pointed to the importance of having group leaders who understand the issues of group members. While a single issue may connect a group, there may be others in need of recognition. For example, a group leader who lacks "...diversity competence (is) in danger of doing harm due to lack of awareness of culturally based perceptions, needs and experiences of group members..." (Salazar & Sigh, 2010, p. 101). Salazar and Singh (2010) concluded that group leaders must remember the diversity of the older adult group,

the uniqueness of lives lived, and the value of their experiences, and ask themselves:

> Do we agree that . . .the powerful need to learn not only about
> but from the powerless . . . that [group leaders] need to learn
> . . . not only about but from group members? We have to ask
> these questions, for it is only when we are willing to learn
> from the poor, the powerless, the inarticulate, as well as from
> the non-professionals and lay people and from minority
> groups, that there is in our work a real sharing of control, a
> real sharing of power, and a real sharing of agendas (Salazar &
> Singh, 2010, p. 103).

Sell, Knottnerus, and Adcock-Azbill (2013) looked at the disruptiveness of routine changes, both positive and negative. Using the Theory of Structural Ritualization, Sell, et al. (2013) wrote that, for the successful completion of tasks, a person needs to follow a sequence of events or behaviors. These "ritualized symbolic practices" (RSP) (Sell, et al., 2013, p. 717) are the regular actions which carry people through work routines and social interactions allowing for commonality and predictability in given situations. The authors of this study concluded that positive and negative disruptions cause stress in a group; however, groups with positive disruptions were shown to have a higher level of competence and success (Sell, et al., 2013).

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

This literature review considered three areas of work with an older adult task group: value, impact, and management. That is, it looked at how older adults benefit from learning and a sense of productivity, how leaders of older adult groups can influence social policy, and how stability and consistency improve the quality and success of a task group of older adults.

Kee and Merriam (2014) are clear in stating older adults benefit from continued learning, as do the communities in which they live. A person who is active, productive, and social has less need for social services as s/he remains independent longer, is healthier, and more financially stable. This means community resources and funding are freed up to meet other community needs (Kee & Merriam, 2014).

Salazar and Singh (2010) emphasized the importance of thoughtful

leadership in group work for social justice. Leaders who are well-rounded, experienced, and considerate of their members' experiences and backgrounds are able to lead a cohesive, successful group in implementing change. Strong leaders can be the voice for vulnerable groups who are less able to articulate their own needs (Salazar & Singh, 2010). In their study of task group efficacy, Sell, et al. (2013) make it clear that group consistency results in improved effectiveness. Specifically, the idea of RSP are important to all members of society and are part of daily normal practice. For successful group work, they are essential (Sell, et al., 2013).

CASE EXAMPLE

The Massachusetts Senior Action Council (MSAC) is "…grassroots, senior-run organization committed to empowering seniors and others in Massachusetts to act collectively to promote the rights and well-being of all people" (Massachusetts Senior Action, 2015). In this capacity, older adults and others work as a state-wide task group to set goals, determine interventions, and take action. MSAC has seven chapters and approximately 1,500 members. It has become a powerful political force for policy issues relevant to older adults.

In 2014-15, MSAC focused on health care initiatives. They advocated for state policies that would reduce the out-of-pocket costs seniors incur from Medicare. In the fall of 2014, MSAC members collected more than 4,000 signatures on pre-printed postcards and delivered them to the Massachusetts governor in an effort to alert him to his constituents' concerns. At the same time, MSAC members provided education on out-of-pocket Medicare costs to other members of the Legislature and the governor.

The real coup came for MSAC when Governor Baker was finalizing the 2016 fiscal year budget. The plans were to cut the Personal Care Assistant program (PCA), a program that helps many seniors stay in their own homes. MSAC members lobbied hard, holding a rally at the State House and educating legislators on the implications of losing the PCA program. The Massachusetts state budget retained the program for another year.

It was notable that MSAC members could take part in policy advocacy even if circumstances limited their ability to fully participate. For example, there were members who collected postcards, but were not able to attend the rally. There were others who simply showed up to encourage

the rally attendees. MSAC is a place of learning, sharing, supporting, and doing. It cultivates strong advocacy skills as well as provides a social outlet for seniors.

The success of MSAC was reflected in the policy impact as well as in the strong working and personal relationships of its members. Without the strength of the relationships, the success at the policy level would not have been as impactful.

DISCUSSION

Health and well-being are central to the quality of life for older adults. However, as noted by Kee and Merriam (2014), quality of life is not a matter of luck, it is achieved through social involvement, being productive, and maintaining physical health. Task groups provide an opportunity to meet two out of three of those goals. As mentioned in the case example, MSAC provides an opportunity for older adults to be involved in self-advocacy and share in the camaraderie of a group with a mission.

Older adults often experience vulnerability, fear, and depression, but given a sense of empowerment they can lead a life that is enriched both physically and mentally (Kee & Merriam, 2014). According to Kee and Merriam (2014), programs that increase learning opportunities for older adults through the creation of task groups are providing options for social justice and an improved quality of life. It is this writer's view that if every leader (of older adult task groups) were to consider the ideas of Salazar and Singh (2010), namely, a group leader should learn from his/her members, include his/her members, and know his/her members' issues, then self-advocacy for older adults would be highly successful. Empowerment of older adults on a mission for social justice works in two ways, improving the quality of life for a vulnerable population and improving the quality of life for the advocate.

CONCLUSION

As indicated in the above discussion, there is a strong correlation between high levels of social interaction, productivity, and physical health with the quality of life for older adults. The key is that an older adult must diversify his/her activities to include social interactions, a sense of productivity, and maintenance of physical health (Kee & Merriam, 2014). Task groups provide a place where individuals with a common bond

of interest can be both productive and social. As we saw with MSAC, the common bond of social justice provided older adult members with commonality from the start. They shared this bond and it helped build their success.

References

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