

Original Research Article

Exploration of Perceived Psychosocial Benefits of Senior Companion Program Participation Among Urban-Dwelling, Low-Income Older Adult Women Volunteers

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Abstract

Background: As the older adult population increases, it is imperative to increase older adults' opportunities for social involvement, thus maintaining their important roles and contributions to society. While there are known health-related benefits of volunteerism among older adults, a dearth of information exists on the perceived benefits of volunteerism among low-income and ethnic minority older adults.

Purpose: To understand the perceived psychosocial benefits of volunteering in the Senior Companion Program and to present findings of focus groups conducted with urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women volunteers.

Design and Methods: Inductive content analysis and the Dedoose qualitative data analysis software were used for analyzing data obtained from 59 older adult women Senior Companions who participated in nine focus groups.

Results: Content analyses of the focus group transcripts identified four major themes: (1) Reducing social isolation; (2) Improving quality of life; (3) Finding purpose and meaning; and (4) Increasing understanding of aging. The majority of our participants (81%) were African American women, with a mean age of 70 years. Approximately 83.1% had completed high school and 62.7% lived below the poverty line.

Discussion and Implications: Findings provided data rich in descriptions of positive psychosocial outcomes, finding meaning and purpose, and a better understanding of aging in urban-dwelling, low-income older women volunteers. The findings also provide support for the need for policies and programs that promote civic engagement in this population.

Translational Significance: While this population is largely underrepresented in the volunteering literature, our results indicate that urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women experience many benefits from volunteering. Our findings underscore the need for increased advocacy and policies to support and extend senior volunteer program opportunities to individuals from a diverse variety of sociodemographic backgrounds, thereby enhancing the potential to promote productive aging in a larger segment of the older adult population.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Volunteerism, Psychosocial Support, Qualitative Analysis, Minority Population, Low-Income, Senior Companion Program

Senior Companion Program

The Senior Companion Program seeks to improve lives, strengthens communities and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering exclusively as caregivers for other older adults. In particular, the Senior Companion Program has been recognized as an important program that helps to “bridge the gaps of geriatric care,” by meeting the nonmedical needs of older adults through assistance provided by other older adult volunteers (Wexberg, 1996). The Senior Companion Program engages adults aged 55 years and older who have incomes at or below 200% of the poverty level in national service (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2017b). The Senior Companion Program is an intra-generational national service model designed to help older adults maintain independence and prevent feelings of loneliness and social isolation, through instrumental activities of daily living, companionship, and caregiver respite (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2017b). Previous studies have shown that the Senior Companion Program is beneficial for clients and their families, including a study by Rabiner et al. (2003), which demonstrated that the Senior Companion Program improves quality of life among frail older adult clients. Companions are carefully screened and receive expert ongoing training to assure quality service and a rewarding volunteer experience. Each Senior Companion volunteer provides 15–40 hr of service each week (780–2,080 hr of service a year), and they typically serve two to four clients. The scheduled time spent with clients allows for one-on-one care while building strong, stabilizing bonds of friendship creating the opportunity for reciprocal benefits. Clients receive in-home friendly visits with planned daily activities including: emotional support, engaging in mental and physical stimulation (e.g., doing puzzles, arm chair exercises), meal preparation, light housekeeping, and escort to doctors’ appointments. Caregivers receive Senior Companion respite care providing time to run errands, take care of personal needs while aiding their frail loved one to age in place. The low-income Senior Companion volunteer is compensated with a small stipend (\$2.65 per hour of service) for their time spent with their client to cover any expenses incurred (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2017b).

Our local Senior Companion Program serves Marion County, central Indiana’s most populated urban county. Marion County has the largest number of persons aged 65 years and older in the state, 110,700 or 11% of the population, of those 12% are living in poverty, 35% are

living with some kind of a disability, thus needing supportive services (STATS Indiana, 2018). Over 50% of volunteers in our local Senior Companion Program have been identified as living *below* the poverty line.

Our local Senior Companion volunteers are committed to and passionate about staying active and engaged in the community as well as serving elders in their community. As noted by Butler (2006), older adults are motivated to volunteer for a variety of reasons. Pertaining to our local Senior Companion volunteers, many have primarily expressed that they were *initially* interested in volunteering with the Senior Companion Program because it provides them with an opportunity to stay active, get out the house, and give back to others. Additionally, several of our Senior Companions have shared that they were *motivated* to join the program after they learned about the positive experiences of their friends, neighbors, and church members who were existing Senior Companion volunteers. One of our volunteers has also shared that she became interested in serving as an Senior Companion after her physician encouraged her to, as a means for combating depression. The current research was undertaken to identify the motivation for and the benefits of participating in the Senior Companion Program by our volunteers beyond the anecdotal reports described above.

Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Older Adults

Decades of gerontological research has focused on the negative consequences of aging, particularly for minority and low-income older adults. Two primary concerns among older adults have been the issues of social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation among older adults has been defined as “a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts and [is] deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships” (Nicholson, 2009, p. 1346). Social isolation has been linked to adverse health outcomes among older adults, including reduced quality of life and depression (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hawkey & Capitanio, 2015). Social isolation has also been found to be a significant predictor of mortality in both men and women over the age of 65 (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Consequently, gerontology researchers suggest that social isolation be included as part of clinical assessments of older adults (Pantell et al., 2013).

Whereas social isolation largely pertains to lack of interaction with or availability of social *contacts*, loneliness relates to individuals’ state of mind, and is a subjective

feeling of emotional isolation (Cattan, White, Bond, & Learnouth, 2005; Routasalo & Pitkala, 2003). Thus, it is possible to be lonely, even in the presence of others. Older adults may experience various types of loneliness, including episodic “transient” loneliness, related to acute and short-lived feelings that arise when doing something alone that previously involved another person; and chronic loneliness, long-lived feelings of emotional isolation for two or more years (Sha’ked & Rokach, 2015). Estimates indicate that for 15%–30% of the general population, loneliness is a chronic state (Theeke, 2009). A recent study by Pikhartova, Bowling, and Victor (2016) found that the prevalence of experiencing loneliness was 24% among older adults. Both situational and chronic loneliness has been associated with increased mortality among older adults (Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2010).

A variety of efforts have been put forth to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older adults. Programs designed to maintain or increase social interaction and social position have been associated with increased life satisfaction among older adults (Sparks, Zehr, & Painter, 2004). In particular, programs that incorporate peer support have been especially effective in with this population, as they promote social engagement and close interpersonal connections. According to Findlay (2003), social support groups that empower older adults and encourage friendship are particularly useful in reducing social isolation. Peer support has also been demonstrated to reduce perceived loneliness among older adults (Cattan et al., 2005).

Volunteerism Trends Among Older Adults

The volunteerism rate for older adults aged 65 years and over has risen steadily over the past three decades, from 14.3% to 23.5% in 2015 (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2017a). Older adults have been found to be more likely to participate in an organized volunteer effort if they have more social capital, such as being highly educated, having higher incomes, working at least part time, being married and have a spouse who also volunteers, or if they are already involved in other social activities such as church, clubs, and organizations (McNamara & Gonzales, 2011; Morrow-Howell, 2010; Population Reference Bureau, 2011; Youssim, Hank, & Litwin, 2015). U.S. volunteerism trends show that rates are increased among adults in their late 50’s and 60’s, and begin to drop after age 80 (Population Reference Bureau, 2011). Racial and ethnic differences also exist in volunteerism, with African American older adults having lower rates of participation than their white counterparts (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2017a). Among African American older adults, females are more likely to serve in volunteering roles than males.

Benefits of Volunteerism Among Older Adults

Older adults personally benefit from the experience of serving as volunteers. In a study by Morrow-Howell (2009), 50% of older adult volunteers indicated that they were better off as a result of the experience, and 30% indicated that they were a great deal better off. In particular, older adult volunteers tend to have greater satisfaction in life and greater quality of life (Anderson et al., 2014; Cattan, Hogg, & Hardill, 2011; Larkin, Sadler, & Mahler, 2005; Onyx & Warburton, 2003; Parkinson, Warburton, Sibbritt, & Byles, 2010). Older adult volunteers also experience other benefits, such as learning new skills and expanding their leadership ability (Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009). Consequently, older adults have reported a greater personal sense of purpose and accomplishment as a result of their volunteering experiences (Miller, 2011).

Health Benefits

Several longitudinal studies have found that volunteerism is associated with better overall self-rated health (McNamara & Gonzales, 2011; Pillemer, Fuller-Rowell, Reid, & Wells, 2010) and lower disability (Pillemer et al., 2010) among older adults. There is strong evidence documenting the relationship between volunteering and positive physical outcomes among older adults (Okun, Yeung, & Brown, 2013; Parkinson et al., 2010). In particular, volunteering has been associated with better functional ability and lower incidence of cardiovascular disease (Miller, 2011). Closely related, volunteering has been linked to longevity (Miller, 2011). Recent longitudinal (Rogers et al., 2016) and meta-analysis (Okun et al., 2013) study findings have indicated that volunteering was associated with lower mortality rates among older adults.

Volunteerism has also been found to improve older adults’ mental health. One large cross-sectional survey study conducted across 14 European countries found that older adults volunteers have significantly lower rates of depression than their nonvolunteer counterparts (Choi, Stewart, & Dewey, 2013). Similarly, some secondary data analysis studies have found that older adults who volunteer and who engage in more hours of volunteering were found to report higher levels of well-being (i.e., self-rated health and depression) and lower levels of functional dependency (Matz-Costa, Besen, Boone James, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2014; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003). Racial differences have been observed in the mental health benefits of volunteering among older adults. In an early cross-sectional study by Tang, Choi, and Morrow-Howell (2012), results showed that African American older adult volunteers had better self-reported health

ratings and less depressive symptoms than their Caucasian counterparts.

Social Benefits

As noted by Miller et al. (2011, p. 90), “volunteering constitutes one of the most important prosocial activities.” Recently, a 5-year longitudinal study demonstrated that volunteering offers an opportunity to increase engagement one’s social network, and is especially beneficial to older adults’, who frequently experience loneliness due to loss and change in life roles (Cornwell & Laumann, 2015). For older adults, volunteerism is an empowering experience as they become engaged in the community and active contributors to society. In a previous survey of older adult volunteers by Morrow-Howell, Hong, and Tang (2009), most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they experienced social benefits from volunteering, including expanding their network of friends and acquaintances and having increased participation in social activities. Findings also indicated that volunteering enhanced older adults’ interpersonal skills, by increasing their ability to interact with different kinds of people. Older adults’ expanded network and increased interpersonal relationships gained through volunteering is a form of social capital that provides informal support, and consequently improves their mental health outcomes (Cornwell & Laumann, 2015; Onyx & Warburton, 2003) and acts as a stress buffer to reduce disease risk (Miller, 2011; Onyx & Warburton, 2003).

Demographic Differences in Older Adult Volunteers’ Perceived Benefits

Stephens, Breheny, and Mansvelt (2015) caution that older people should not be treated as a homogenous group. Instead, they vary greatly in terms of their health, financial resources, and social networks, which may influence the benefits they perceive from volunteering. The perceived benefits of volunteering has been found to increase with age. In a study of differential benefits across the life course, Van Willigen (2000) found that older volunteers experience greater increases in life satisfaction and greater positive changes in their health than younger volunteers. A growing body of literature also suggests that older adults’ perceived benefits from volunteering experiences is influenced by volunteers’ socioeconomic status (SES). Stephens et al. (2015) note that “volunteering is beneficial for older people, particularly those with few resources.” In particular, lower-income and lower-educated older adult volunteers have reported more benefits than their higher income and higher educated peers (Morrow-Howell et al., 2009). Race/ethnicity has not been observed to be an independent predictor of perceived benefits of volunteering among older adults. In a previous study by Morrow-Howell (2009), race

only became a significant predictor of volunteer benefits after controlling for program characteristics, such as stipends and trainings.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceived benefits of volunteering in the Senior Companion Program. Specifically, this paper will present findings of focus groups conducted with urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women who are Senior Companion volunteers. To date, most Senior Companion Program evaluation studies have focused on the program’s impact on client and family outcomes, and most have been quantitative. The few studies that have qualitatively evaluated the experience of Senior Companion volunteers have been conducted with primarily White participant samples (Butler, 2006; Butler & Eckart, 2007; Ulsperger, McElroy, Robertson, & Ulsperger, 2015). The impact of volunteering on urban-dwelling, low-income Senior Companions is largely understudied. Given existing disparities in health outcomes and volunteerism rates, it is imperative to assess the perceived benefits that urban-dwelling, low-income Senior Companion volunteers experience through the Senior Companion Program.

Methods

Institutional review board approval for the study was granted by the Indiana University Human Subjects Office.

Participants and Recruitment

Senior Companions were invited to participate in focus groups to provide insight about their experiences with the program. All active Senior Companions were eligible to participate in the focus group study, regardless of length of time as a Senior Companion volunteer. Prospective participants were recruited via a two-step process. First, a formal letter of invitation was mailed to each Senior Companion, addressed from the study principal investigator (PI) and local Senior Companion Program director. The letter informed Senior Companions about the purpose of the focus groups and emphasized the voluntary nature of the study. A copy of the study informed consent form was also included with the mailed letter. As an additional recruitment strategy, the study PI and the Senior Companion Program director made an in-person announcement about the focus group opportunity at local Senior Companion in-service meetings, and answered any questions that interested Senior Companions had about participating. A total of 72 invitation letters were mailed to all current Senior Companions, with a consent rate of 81.9%. At the completion of each focus group, each participant was given a \$40 gift card to a local grocery store, as a token of appreciation for their time.

Procedures

A total of nine focus groups were conducted between April and June 2016. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 min. The focus groups were held in a private conference room at a local faith-based organization. All focus groups were facilitated by trained members of the research team who were experienced in qualitative data collection and were accompanied by trained observers. All focus groups were audio recorded. Prior to the start of each focus group, the facilitator reviewed the informed consent form with participants, and participants were asked to complete a short written demographic survey which collected basic data, including gender, age, race, ethnicity, education level, and income. The survey also collected information specific to participants' experiences in the Senior Companion Program, including their length of time as a Senior Companion and their history of attending workshops on dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Following the completion of the demographic survey, the facilitator provided each participant with a copy of the questions that would be asked during the focus group.

During the focus groups, participants were asked a total of five open-ended questions, which gathered information about a variety of qualitative domains specifically related to the experience of being a Senior Companion, including *Perceived Benefits*, *Perceived Challenges*, *Suggestions for Improving the Senior Companion Program*, *Suggestions for Improving Client Services*, and *Strategies for Recruiting Senior Companions*. This paper will present our study findings pertaining to the *Perceived Benefits* interview domain, which was assessed by asking participants the open-ended question, "What do you enjoy most about participating in the Senior Companion Program?" A complete list of the focus group questions and the study recruitment materials can be obtained from the corresponding author.

Data Analysis

Focus group recordings were professionally transcribed, and then coded using Dedoose qualitative analysis software (Dedoose, 2017). Emergent themes were identified in the transcripts using inductive content analysis, a systematic and objective approach to analyzing written information (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In our initial analysis phase, open codes were applied to participants' narrative statements that were determined to consist of similar content, and then were compared across all focus groups to reveal primary themes. Next, a nested coding approach was used to identify subthemes that were nested within each primary theme (Saldaña & Miles, 2013). To reach coding consensus, four research team members who were skilled and experienced in qualitative analysis independently reviewed and coded the focus group transcripts. The team members discussed any discrepancies in coding of narrative text, and discussed the selection of exemplary quotes for inclusion in the manuscript. The few discrepancies were discussed until all members were in agreement.

Table 1. Female Senior Companion Focus Group Participant Characteristics ($N = 59$)

Characteristics	N	\bar{x}	%
Age (years)			
55–64	12	70.0	20.3
65–74	29		49.3
75 or older	16		27.1
Unknown	2		3.4
Race			
African American	48		81.4
White	10		17.0
Asian	1		1.7
Education			
Some High School	10		17.0
High School Graduate	29		49.2
Some College	15		25.4
College Degree	4		6.8
Graduate Degree	1		1.7
Monthly Income			
\$800.00	16	943.3	27.1
\$958.00	27		45.7
\$1,072.00	16		27.1
Years of Service as SC		4.2	

Results

Participants

A total of 59 female Senior Companions participated in the focus group study, with each group consisting of six to seven participants. Each focus group was similar in terms of demographic composition (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, education, monthly income, and length of Senior Companion volunteering). Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

On average, female Senior Companion focus group participants were 70 years old (range = 56–94 years). The majority of participants were African American (81.4%) and had attained an education level of high school or greater (83.1%). The average reported monthly income across all participants was \$943.33 (range = \$800–\$1,072). Monthly income is the Senior Companion's social security income and is verified annually. The majority (62.7%) lived below the federal poverty level. On average, participants reported that they had been volunteering as Senior Companions for 4.2 years (range = 0.2–15 years).

Focus Groups

Analysis of focus group data revealed that female Senior Companions view their volunteering experience as being *mutually beneficial* to their clients and themselves. One participant in focus group 9 noted, "For me I enjoy the program because not only am I helping somebody else but I'm helping myself as well." In particular, participants

expressed an appreciation for the *reciprocity* in care and concern that their clients provide.

“...my clients seem to care about me as much as I do for them. I really enjoy that, because they’re always checking on me while I check on them.” (Group 5)

Overall, focus group participants identified a wide variety of psychosocial benefits through their volunteering role. A table of emergent primary themes and corresponding subthemes regarding Senior Companion benefits is presented in [Table 2](#).

As shown in [Table 2](#), Senior Companions’ perceived benefits focused predominately on how volunteering afforded them the opportunity to stay socially connected, engaged, and active. Participants also perceived their Senior Companion volunteer roles to be beneficial regarding their awareness of their own aging process and increasing their knowledge about health issues related to aging. Emergent themes and illustrative quotes are presented below.

Volunteering Reduces Social Isolation Among Senior Companions

Most participants expressed enjoyment for their Senior Companion volunteer role because it gives them an *opportunity to leave their homes*.

“I’m at an age, I’m just sitting there in the house and this way going to meet with them [clients], that’s helping me get out of the house.” (Group 8)

In particular, participants describe getting out of the house to volunteer as a way to gain more *social interaction*, especially among those who are socially isolated.

“What I enjoy about the senior companion program is it helps me get out of the house and maintain a social relationship with the world.” (Group 7)

Table 2. List of Senior Companion Perceived Psychosocial Benefits Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subtheme(s)
Reduces Social Isolation	Opportunity to leave the house Promotes social interaction Facilitates Meaningful Relationships
Improves Quality of Life	Opportunity to stay active Improves emotional well-being
Facilitates Purpose	Sense of accomplishment Feeling needed Daily Motivation Feeling appreciated
Increases Understanding of Aging	Expectations for future

“...[volunteering] helps me, because like I said, I live alone. I don’t have any friends. Don’t nobody come and see me. So just like getting up at 9:00 am and don’t have to be there until 1:00 pm, I’m excited to get there.” (Group 3)

Closely related, some participants expressed that their close interactions with their clients *facilitates meaningful relationships* in their lives. For example, one participant described her relationship with her client as a sisterly bond, and another discussed how Senior Companion volunteering has helped her to develop friendships with her clients. In fact, many Senior Companions viewed their clients as companions for themselves.

“My companion she’s 90 years old. She don’t seem like a companion. She seems more like a sister. We do things together. She gets dressed. We go out to lunch. We go to the beauty shop...it don’t seem like I’m working. It just seems like I’m enjoying a sister or relative...We just have a good time...It just makes me feel like I’m 37.” (Group 2)

“...you’re not just making clients, you’re making friends...I do some people’s laundry, and take them to Walmart, or Target, out to eat, and we all enjoy that, and we play cards together in the community room, and we have a good time. So we are not just clients and Senior Companions, we’re also friends.” (Group 4)

Volunteering Helps Senior Companions to Have a Good Quality of Life

Several participants discussed how Senior Companion volunteering has helped them to *stay active*. For example, one participant described how Senior Companion volunteering has helped to maintain her vitality as a senior.

“I enjoy the Senior Companion program because otherwise I would be couch potato and I wouldn’t be active at 87 like I am.” (Group 8)

Closely related, participants frequently noted that Senior Companion volunteering gives them something to do.

“...I think I see it [volunteering] as a double blessing. I can be of a blessing to help someone else but it’s a blessing to me because it will get my lazy butt up out of the bed and out in front of the TV and give me something productive to do.” (Group 1)

Some participants also mentioned how Senior Companion volunteering has *improved their emotional wellbeing*. Specifically, participants indicated that the social interaction afforded through the Senior Companion Program helped to reduce depression.

“I remember a time when I first moved over there, I got depressed because I wasn’t working. And you just sort of stay in bed, and you think what’s the use of getting up...And then you sort of get in the depressed mode. Well it [Senior Companion volunteering] gets you up. You’ve got to get up and you have to go. You have to be there...And so you’re always going, so you feel so much better.” (Group 4)

“The woman [client] that I’ve got now she’s in wonderful spirits and just keeps me going. I can go and I can be so depressed and mad at my household and when I get there I forget all that crap. So that’s my enjoyment and my get out.” (Group 1)

Volunteering Facilitates a Sense of Purpose Among Senior Companions

Sense of purpose was the most frequently expressed benefit of Senior Companion volunteering among focus group participants, and consisted of four related subthemes, including *sense of accomplishment*, *feeling needed*, *daily motivation*, and *feeling appreciated*.

Many participants described Senior Companion volunteering as giving them a sense of meaning and purpose. In particular, senior companions expressed that helping other seniors made them feel *accomplished*.

“Some families are still working and very busy, and they don’t get a chance to really spend the time. You end up knowing more about the client than the family does, and some of them are just very appreciative, and that makes you feel good. You feel like you’ve accomplished something...” (Group 6)

Closely related, several focus group participants noted that they enjoy Senior Companion volunteering because they *feel needed* by their clients. Participants expressed satisfaction over feeling needed in general. Volunteers also indicated that feeling needed by their clients gave them a sense of youthfulness and purpose, as they themselves were also older adults.

“Well, what I like most about participating in the program is that I just find myself that I feel like that I’m needed.” (Group 1)

“I like the idea of feeling needed even though at my age of 63...it makes me feel young...It makes me feel good...” (Group 2)

Additionally, some participants indicated that volunteering gives them a sense of meaning and purpose because serving their clients is a *motivator* for them to get up each day.

“I really enjoy it. It makes me feel like getting up more of the morning and going and doing for somebody.” (Group 2)

“It motivates me to get up because I know that I’m going someplace where somebody is going to appreciate

what I’m able to do for them. I really enjoy the program.” (Group 2)

Finally, several participants noted that they enjoy being a Senior Companion volunteer because their clients make them feel *appreciated* and recognized for their efforts.

“I enjoy getting up every morning, putting my makeup on, jumping in my car, and going to work. It’s a blessing we are living longer, and it’s a blessing to just be able to still drive and go and be able to do for someone that they really appreciate it. I’m just having a good time.” (Group 2)

“I have one client who’s a kidney transplant...Sometimes he stays pretty sick. So a lot of times, I go and kind of talk him through his misery and prepare meals for him. He swears I’m the best cook in the world. But what makes me most happy about him is how appreciative he is. He said, “I see you come in and I just brighten up.” That really makes me feel good.” (Group 4)

Volunteering Increases Senior Companions’ Awareness and Understanding of Aging

Another benefit expressed by Senior Companions is an enhanced understanding of aging, based on their client’s experiences. Several participants discussed that volunteering has given them a glimpse of *what to expect for themselves in the future*, and has better prepared them for the journey of aging. Moreover, they frequently expressed their awareness of the fact that they will one day need assistance, and also expressed a desire to be treated and cared for in the manner that they serve their clients.

“I have two clients with Alzheimer’s [disease], and I enjoy working with both of them. It teaches me that what maybe I can expect when I’m older and I can expect it more.” (Group 2)

“It’s showing me the steps that I might be taking one day, just getting that age, and hopefully that the love that I give them that I will get it back...So that’s what I’m seeing, that one day that’s going to be me, and I’m going to be needing that, and I hope I get the love that I’m giving out.” (Group 3)

Discussion and Implications

This study contributed to a growing body of literature that promotes the importance of social engagement among older adults, and, in particular, highlights the benefits that urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women experience from volunteer activities. It is also important to note that our sample of Senior Companion Program volunteers *primarily* consisted of African American women (81.4%), affording the opportunity to gather insight from an underrepresented group in the extant literature on volunteering. To date, most studies on the benefits of volunteerism for older adults have

been conducted with primarily White participant samples. A systematic review by [Cattan et al. \(2011\)](#) found that few studies have included sufficient representation by racial and ethnic minority groups. Consequently, findings of previous studies of older adult volunteers have lacked generalizability to racial and ethnic minority groups, such as African Americans. Previous Senior Companion Program studies have also been largely focused on understanding the benefits that Senior Companion Program clients and their families receive ([Butler & Eckart, 2007](#); [Lee & Gray, 1992](#); [Rabiner et al., 2003](#); [Wexberg, 1996](#)), but very few qualitative studies have been conducted to assess the perceived benefits of the experience from the perspective of Senior Companion volunteers. Authors have suggested that more high-quality qualitative studies are needed to explain *why* and *how* volunteering impact older adults' quality of life, as findings would be valuable for informing policy and practice ([Anderson et al., 2014](#); [Cattan et al., 2011](#)). Our qualitative study findings expands the older adult volunteer literature and Senior Companion Program evidence-based, by providing insight about the reciprocal benefits that are experienced by urban-dwelling, low-income older women Senior Companion volunteers.

Our sample of low-income older adult women focus group participants expressed a wide variety of personal benefits that they experience as a result of being an Senior Companion volunteer, and they enthusiastically endorsed the Senior Companion Program. This observation expands our understanding of the individual characteristics associated with volunteerism, as previous studies have associated social capital, such as high education and high income, with increased likelihood of volunteerism among older adults. In this regard, our results mirror similar findings in a New Zealand study by [Dulin, Gavala, Stephens, Kostick, and McDonald \(2012\)](#), where older adults with low economic living standards (ELS) had a stronger relationship between volunteering and happiness than those with high ELS. Similar results were also found in a study by [Tang, Choi, and Morrow-Howell \(2010\)](#), where low socioeconomic status (SES) older adult volunteers were found to have more personal benefits volunteering than their high SES counterparts.

More so than discussing the physical benefits of Senior Companion volunteering, our participants emphasized the positive impact that Senior Companion volunteering had on their emotional wellbeing. In particular, several participants described how Senior Companion volunteering reduced their feelings of depression. Our participants' emphasis on the psychological benefits of volunteering is an especially important finding, as mental health has historically been a stigmatized topic among older adults and especially among racial and ethnic minorities ([Conner et al., 2010](#)). Moreover, our participants' discussion about their reduced feelings of depression resulting from Senior Companion volunteering strengthens the existing literature on the relationship between depression and volunteerism,

as formal volunteering has been associated with reduced depression among older adults ([Choi et al., 2013](#)).

To date, many formal senior volunteer programs have involved older adults working with youth. Studies on Experience Corps (EC), a school-based volunteer program for older adults, have found that volunteering with youth is associated with a perceived increase in confidence and social connectedness among older adults ([Morrow-Howell, Lee, McCrary, & McBride, 2014](#)), a reduction in depressive symptoms ([Hong & Morrow-Howell, 2010](#)), feeling more active in general ([Varma et al., 2015](#)), as well as being more physically active ([Tan et al., 2009](#); [Tan, Xue, Li, Carlson, & Fried, 2006](#)). Our study shows that similar benefits are experienced when older adults volunteer to help other older adults. In addition, these benefits may be more personal, due to the fact that the Senior Companion Program allows Senior Companion volunteers to work with other older adults, who are commonly viewed as peers. Analysis of our focus group data revealed that Senior Companion volunteers' statements largely reflected a perceived personal relevance of working with other seniors, as participants often referred to their own identity as seniors. For example, several focus group participants discussed how volunteering with older adults has increased their own understanding and awareness of aging, such that they are better prepared for what to expect in the future as they age. These findings support the literature on the relationship between future planning and volunteerism among older adults. For example, a recent study by [Shen and Khosla \(2016\)](#) found that the likelihood of having advance care planning and a durable power of attorney was higher among older adults who had volunteering experience in the past 10 years, than those who did not have such experience.

Our findings that the Senior Companion volunteering experience facilitates meaningful relationships supports existing literature on the benefits of peer support among older adults ([Findlay, 2003](#)). While Senior Companions function in a volunteer capacity, the experience affords them the opportunity to interact with other older adult clients who they view as their peers. Thus, several of our participants discussed having close connections with their clients, and described them as having a family-like relationship or being close friends.

Similar to our findings that Senior Companion volunteering facilitates meaning and purpose, a recent quantitative study by [Klinedinst & Resnick \(2014\)](#), found that volunteering is directly associated with feelings of usefulness among older adult residents of a continuing care retirement community. Our findings are also consistent with recent work by [Withall et al. \(2016\)](#) conducted with a Caucasian British sample, showing that older adults are motivated to engage in volunteer activities because they experience personal benefits, such as it gives them something to do, prevents social isolation, and fulfills their desire to feel needed. Similarly, several of our participants

discussed how they were grateful for the opportunity to serve as Senior Companion volunteers, because it gave them something to do. In particular, many women in our study mentioned their adjustment to life after retirement and emphasized how they were used to working and being active, even to the extent that they called their Senior Companion volunteering role “work.” This observation suggests that women are eager to stay active and socially engaged after retirement. Additionally, it underscores the importance of developing programs and policies to support volunteerism among older adults, as civic engagement has been recognized as a retirement role for aging adults in the United States (Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh, & Culp, 2008).

A variety of theories have sought to explain individuals’ motivation to volunteer. First, given our participants’ emphasis on feeling needed, our study findings closely align with “role theory,” which posits that a set of responsibilities, expectations, and one’s identity is associated with specific roles such as a volunteer. As noted by Gammonley (2009), older adult lay volunteers play an important role in the lives of the people they serve by “making use of their life experiences, problem-solving skills, and social skills...” (p.66). Role theory also posits that holding specific roles or positions can enhance individuals’ sense of self-worth, as well as afford them to have social interactions where they receive positive feedback about their performance (Gottlieb & Gilespie, 2008). Thus, our emergent theme that volunteering facilitates purpose among female Senior Companion volunteers was supported by the sub-themes associated with their role as volunteers, such as them feeling a sense of accomplishment, feeling needed, and feeling appreciated. Our focus group participants expressed a strong commitment to their post-retirement Senior Companion volunteer role. Like many other older adults, the role of “volunteer” was especially important to our participants because it helps them to stay engaged as active contributors to society.

Our study findings also closely align with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theoretical constructs of Self-Determination Theory provide guidance for understanding and explaining factors related to human motivation for behaviors, such as volunteering. Self-Determination Theory posits that individuals’ motivation to engage in behaviors is increased through the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (i.e., extent that individuals perceive themselves to have volitional control and self-regulation over their decision making), competence (i.e., overall confidence that individuals perceive themselves to have in relation to effectively performing behaviors), and relatedness (i.e., extent to which individuals perceive themselves to be connected to and cared for by others) (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Of the three basic psychological needs, *autonomy* is considered to be the “master” need, as it is a critical determinant of motivation (Sheldon, Williams, & Joiner, 2008).

The theory posits that individuals’ positive outcomes are primarily achieved through behavior that is autonomous (i.e., intrinsically motivated). The act of volunteering is *highly* motivated by intrinsic rewards (Wilson & Musick, 1999). A previous study by Bidee et al. (2013) observed that autonomous motivation (i.e., intrinsic rewards) was positively associated with volunteer effort, where the more autonomously motivated the volunteer, the more effort he or she put into his or her volunteer work. The literature cites several intrinsic rewards that motivate individuals to volunteer: (1) The experience of volunteering increases individuals’ feelings of *utility*, due to the benefits that others receive as a result of the volunteer’s service. They enjoy seeing the benefits of their work in others’ lives; (2) Closely related, individuals are motivated to volunteer because the act of helping others gives others enjoyment, which in turn makes the volunteer *feel good*; (3) Volunteer opportunities help to fulfill individuals’ needs for *personal enjoyment*, as they volunteer for activities that they enjoy doing and find personally interesting (Meier & Stutzer, 2008). Our sample of urban-dwelling, low-income women Senior Companion volunteers discussed a variety of intrinsic rewards received via their client interactions, such as feeling needed, appreciated, and accomplished. Moreover, participants’ comments suggested that the interpersonal interactions that Senior Companion volunteers have with clients facilitates fulfillment of the volunteers basic psychological need of relatedness, as they frequently discussed the close connection they had with their clients.

Overall, our qualitative study on the perceived psychosocial benefits of Senior Companion volunteering in a sample of urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women produced emergent themes that were similar to other qualitative Senior Companion Program studies. As with our study, Ulsperger and colleagues (2015) observed that their qualitative interview study participants emphasized the reciprocal benefits of the volunteer-client experience, where several of their participants discussed Senior Companion volunteering as “helping themselves and others,” and noted that they Senior Companion volunteering helped to alleviate their loneliness (p. 1463). Similar to our study, participants in Butler’s (2006) study perceived their Senior Companion volunteering experience to be beneficial because it afforded them the opportunity to interact with others and develop meaningful relationships with their clients, an emergent theme she called “companionship.” Also similar to our study, Butler’s participants described Senior Companion volunteering as being beneficial because it “keeps me active.” They also expressed their satisfaction with feeling needed (Butler, 2006, p. 60). While our qualitative findings on the reciprocal benefits of Senior Companion volunteering closely mirrored previous similar studies, we are able to contribute two additional distinct perceived benefits discussed by our participants, including that (1) Senior Companion volunteering *improves emotional wellbeing*, namely by reducing feelings of depression, and (2) Senior Companion volunteering *increases older*

adults' understanding of aging, such that they are better prepared for what to expect in the future as they age.

Strengths and Limitations

A notable strength of our study is the use of qualitative methodology to gain in-depth contextual information about the perceived benefits of Senior Companion volunteering. Additionally, our sample size of 59 participants across 9 focus groups is a considerably large, thus affording the opportunity to collect sufficient data and achieve saturation of emergent themes and subthemes. As previously noted, our study filled an important gap in the Senior Companion Program evaluation literature, by gaining insight into the perceived benefits in a sample of urban-dwelling Senior Companion volunteers, primarily consisting of African American women, an underrepresented perspective in the extant literature. A few limitations to our findings also merit consideration. As our study sample consisted of urban-dwelling, low-income women, our findings may not be generalizable to other older adult female populations. Additionally, demographic data, such as age, race or ethnicity, was not linked to each speaker during transcription. Thus, we were unable to include participant demographics with our exemplary quotes. However, careful consideration was taken to gain the perspectives of a diverse variety of participants, such that exemplary quotes were selected from all focus groups.

Conclusions

Our study findings suggest that urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women view Senior Companion volunteering as being mutually beneficial for both themselves and their clients. Reciprocal benefits discussed by our participants highlight the positive psychosocial impact that volunteerism has on older adults, including reducing social isolation and feelings of depression. Our findings show that urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women volunteers experience a variety of *intrinsic* rewards through their experiences as Senior Companions, such as increasing their perceived sense of meaning and purpose through them feeling needed and appreciated by their clients. Additionally, several of our Senior Companion volunteers perceived that the experience has increased their understanding of the aging process, causing them to reflect upon and prepare for changes occurring as they themselves are aging. The various reciprocal benefits of volunteering presented in our study results underscores the importance of social involvement as a form of "positive gerontology" (Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015; Johnson & Mutchler, 2014). Moreover, our qualitative results on the perceived psychosocial benefits of volunteerism among our sample of urban-dwelling, low-income older adult women underscores the need for increased advocacy and policies to support and extend senior volunteer program opportunities to individuals from a diverse variety of sociodemographic backgrounds, thereby enhancing the

potential to promote productive aging in a larger segment of the older adult population.

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Conflict of Interest

None reported.

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