

## Volunteering boosts self-esteem and wellbeing and helps recovery

Volunteering can contribute significantly to the recovery of people who have been mentally unwell, making a real, positive difference to their lives. As Capital Volunteering – a major London-based project that offered a myriad of volunteering opportunities to people with mental health problems – drew to an end in autumn 2008, an evaluation showed that it had enabled people to make friends and develop a social life, often for the first time in years.

Capital Volunteering was launched in 2005 by Community Service Volunteers and the London Development Centre for Mental Health, with £7.3 million worth of funding from the Treasury's Invest to Save budget. The idea was that volunteering would help people learn new skills, gain employment, make a difference to their wellbeing, and reduce their reliance on government-funded mental health services. And the evaluation proved that the scheme's value in terms of social capital was enormous, said Joanna Murray from the Institute of Psychiatry's Health Service and Population Research Department (HSPR), who led the research and sat on the Capital Volunteering Partnership Board.

'Volunteering didn't stop people being mentally ill, or get them a full-time job,' she said. 'But our evaluation showed that people who took part in Capital Volunteering gained self-confidence and met new people. Volunteering gave structure to their lives, something to get out of bed for. People learned new skills and enjoyed helping others. Most importantly, they made friends, started going out, even went on holiday together.'

'Being part of a social network makes people feel valued. They have access to emotional support and practical help if they need it, and this access may help people recover from illness and stay well. What's more, being able to help others – as a volunteer or a friend – helps boost self-esteem and wellbeing,' she said.

Capital Volunteering supported about 100 projects in 11 London boroughs sited within four mental health trusts – Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust, North East London NHS Foundation Trust, Central and North West London Mental Health NHS Trust and South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. The emphasis was on local needs: each borough set up its own steering group in its own way to spend its share of the money on projects which best suited local people. Each of the projects was managed locally and separately, and as well as evaluating the experiences of the volunteers, the HSPR team interviewed a sample of 30 project leaders so future volunteering schemes can learn which models are most successful.

The researchers first interviewed 150 people when they signed up as a volunteer to one of 51 different projects across the participating boroughs between July 2005 and January 2007.

Those agreeing to take part in the evaluation ranged in age from 20 to 81, though the majority were aged between 30 and 59. Their experience of mental illness included bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, personality disorder, autism and Asperger's syndrome, eating disorders and post traumatic stress disorder. The final report describes the experiences of 95 members of that cohort who were followed up after a year. Of those 95, 45 per cent were still involved with Capital Volunteering: a further 19 per cent had still been involved when they were interviewed after six months but had since left.

The majority of the 95 people interviewed continued to be out of work: more than 90 per cent were on benefits at both the first interview and 12 months on.

But 85 per cent said they had benefited from joining a Capital Volunteering project by meeting people and making friends. Other reported gains included increased self-confidence and learning new skills. Ninety per cent of those who continued to be involved past six months said they felt they were supporting other people and therefore making a contribution.

continues...

**Volunteering boosts  
self-esteem and wellbeing  
and helps recovery/2**

The type of volunteering the evaluation team felt had the most impact was placement, said Joanna, where people were given a position with a community or voluntary organisation and offered support from the Capital Volunteering project. Other types of projects launched under the Capital Volunteering banner included befriending and mentoring schemes – in which volunteers either gave or received support; training courses; and social support groups, including gardening and art projects.

Researchers Abigail Easter and Sophie Bellringer also carried out long, in-depth interviews with 18 people who had joined a Capital Volunteering project to gain a wider perspective on their experience. All of them said before they had started volunteering, they had been either depressed, isolated or lonely, had felt discontented and that there was no purpose to their lives. Twelve of them said their lives had lacked activity, and that they felt they were just wasting time.

These 18 individuals all rated new friendships as the top gain from their volunteering experience, and talked about feeling more confident, more motivated and having higher self-esteem and self-worth. 'There is no doubt that Capital Volunteering shows that giving people with mental health problems the chance to volunteer can help them on the road to their personal recovery,' said Joanna.

**■ More than 5,500 people with mental health problems were involved in Capital Volunteering during its lifetime, said Director Claire Helman.** Many of the projects launched under the umbrella of the scheme will continue in future, she said, either independently with new funding or by being 'mainstreamed' into existing organisations' activities.

And a Capital Volunteering Legacy Fund – set up 'through a combination of efficiency gains and additional funding' – will help continue to provide support for people with mental health problems to become more socially included through volunteering, and specifically support schemes that are led by people with experience of mental illness.

The 'principles, approach and achievements' of Capital Volunteering will be promoted in future by feeding into national and regional policy consultations, conferences, and government draft guidelines, she said.

*This article appeared in Towards Mental Health, 2009, published by the Health Service and Population Research Department at the Institute of Psychiatry.*

uploaded onto site 8/2/10