

Testimony of Tess Scannell
to the Policy Committee
Of the White House Conference on Aging
Community Service and Older Adults mental Health and Well Being
January 24, 2005

Good Morning, and Thank you, Madam Chairman, and Mr. Blancato, and Ms. Hunt, members of the Policy Committee, for your time. I'd also like to thank our host, the National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging, for allowing us this opportunity to discuss service and volunteering as beneficial to the mental health of older adults.

As you well know, we are learning more about the mind/body connection -- there is an abundance of research that supports what those of us in the volunteer world already know -- there is healing power in helping others. Numerous studies now document the value of volunteering for all segments of the population (and I have cited some of it in the written version of my testimony). But, older adults, in particular, reap tremendous physical and mental health benefits in their own lives by reaching out and giving to others. And the mental health benefits gained through helping others are as important as the physical.

Older adults who volunteer remain part of the social fabric and stay connected to others which helps them feel part of a greater community. This feeling -- this connection -- is an important factor in fighting depression and promoting healthy aging. Studies show that volunteers release brain endorphins that lower blood pressure and relieve pain and stress, much the same way as a good physical workout.

Spending time tutoring and mentoring a child, delivering meals to the homebound, or helping out in the community through some other activity, keeps older adults involved and helps them to maintain their intellectual abilities. So, there is an unmistakable connection between volunteering and enhanced mental health.

And, beyond the mental health benefits to the individual volunteer, are the contributions that older Americans make to their communities through their volunteerism. Seniors who volunteer are the most active volunteers within the community. According to a recent survey by the Independent Sector, almost 44 percent of all people age 55 and over volunteer at least once a year and more than 35% reported that they had volunteered within the past month. These volunteers (approximately 26.4 million of them) give an average of 4.4 hours per week to the causes they support in their communities. This is a total of approximately 5.6 billion hours of their time -- a current value of \$77.2 billion to nonprofit organizations and other causes in this country.

Many of these volunteer hours by older persons have been used to enhance care and help build closer ties between the community and the mental health system. Throughout the country, Departments of Mental Health rely on older volunteers to provide extra "hands" and emotional support to clients and their families. These

volunteers enhance their own mental health while they are helping to dispel the stigma and misconceptions about mental illness.

It is widely acknowledged that volunteering contributes to one's sense of self-worth and well-being. But lesser known, is the duality of volunteering. That is, that volunteering benefits those who are served by it – clients, communities, and society as a whole – while it, at the same time, contributes to the emotional health of those engaged in it. And, volunteering is an effective way to support and extend the delivery of human services.

So, where do we go from here with all of this information? When you consider that about 76 million baby boomers will be winding down their careers with combinations of work, volunteering and leisure activities, it seems self-evident that increased emphasis should be placed on collaborations among aging, health, advocacy groups, professional organizations and government agencies and others to promote volunteerism as part of the process toward healthy aging and healthy communities. I believe this country's new mantra should be, "Exercise, Eat Right, and Get Involved."

Again, Thank you, again, Madame Chairman, Mr. Blancato, and Ms. Hunt for your time.

Relevant Research

1. The Effects of Volunteering on the Physical and Mental Health of Older People, Terry Y. Lum and Elizabeth Lightfoot, University of Minnesota, 2005 Sage Publications.
2. Senior Sense: Getting Back by Giving Back: Healthy Aging through Volunteering, Mary McCallum, Council on Aging of Southeastern Vermont, March, 2002.
3. The Healing Power of Service, Edward V. Brown, MD, Oregon, USA, SelfGrowth.com/health-healing, 2002.