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Staying connected during a global pandemic: telephone support for vulnerable populations

Staying Connected During a Global Pandemic: Telephone Support for Vulnerable Populations

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Abstract

This qualitative organisational ethnography explores and analyses the ways in which a local government provided volunteer telephone support program for vulnerable and older members of the community, quickly adapted to continue working during the pandemic. Thematic analysis of data collected through researcher participation in 26 weekly zoom debrief sessions with local government staff and volunteers captures the experience of providing telephone support during a pandemic. Three key themes emerged as integral to the shaping and re-shaping of the service. First, the importance of care and relationships in service provision. Second, the need for flexibility to make service change. Third, like a beating heart, the regular calls became part of the rhythm of life, providing certainty for staff, volunteers and those they called. This program offers a model for best practice in low cost, low risk, place-based interventions that can increase social connection for vulnerable community members.

Implications

▶ Organisational flexibility and a focus on care and relationships underpin best practice human service delivery – this is emphasised in times of crisis

▶ Volunteer engagement, commitment and performance is enhanced by positive and caring relationships with paid staff.

▶ Befriending schemes can provide a vital means of social support that contributes to maintaining the health and wellbeing of the ageing population

Key Words
Volunteers, social isolation, pandemic, local government, telephone, support, ageing

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government responses including social distancing and restricted population movement increased distress for many older Australians already suffering from social isolation and loneliness (Hansel, 2020; Bergman et al., 2020; Keddell & Beddoe, 2020; Patel, 2020). Many vulnerable people went without much needed support as services and interventions, aimed at preventing social isolation and loneliness, closed or drastically changed their mode of service delivery. Local organisations were challenged to respond to at risk community members in prompt and innovative ways (Keddell & Beddoe, 2020).

Almost a third of the Australian population is aged 50 or above, and addressing loneliness and social isolation for vulnerable and older people in the community is a significant social issue and a policy priority (COTA, 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Rather than an attribute of individuals, loneliness may also be place based with UK research suggesting that social isolation and loneliness are more common in areas of deprivation (Victor & Pikhartova, 2020). Targeted and localised strategies that take into account the unique characteristics of each community can increase social connection and reduce loneliness (Victoria Government, 2020; Yeboah, 2005). Local government, with its proximity to community residents, is well situated to provide relational opportunities for people who are isolated in their own homes.

In recent years, community groups and local government bodies have used various interventions and activities to reduce social isolation and increase social connection in an effort to enhance health and wellbeing (Farmer et al., 2019). Gardiner et al.'s (2016) review of 38 studies reporting interventions to reduce or prevent social isolation and/or loneliness in older people found that the more successful interventions demonstrated adaptability to the

local context, and involved services users in the design and implementation of interventions focused on productive social engagement (Gardiner et al., 2016).

The formulation of new friendships is the aim of some interventions aimed at reducing social isolation and loneliness. Befriending interventions may be in the form of home visits, telephone conversations, or through hybrid forms of service delivery and there is increasing evidence that befriending services can alleviate social isolation and loneliness (Gardiner et al., 2016), create a sense of belonging (Cattan et al., 2011; Wiles et al., 2019), and provide a source of emotional support giving recipients "a source of strength to tackle difficult issues they may be facing in their lives" (Lehane, 2017, p. 10). Volunteers are an essential part of many befriending services with volunteering recognised for its capacity to promote a sense of community, and increase feelings of helpfulness and self-worth (Bailey et al., 2003). COVID-19 disrupted many volunteer services designed to increase social connection, suddenly leaving community members with a sense of increased isolation.

Our research examined the ways in which one Australian local government provided volunteer telephone support program adapted to the sudden onset of COVID mitigation strategies and citywide lockdowns and continued its work during the pandemic. We investigated in real time the experience of providing a volunteer program designed to increase social connection for vulnerable community members during a pandemic by addressing two key research questions:

1: What are the ways in which a telephone support program mitigates feelings of fear, loneliness and isolation for vulnerable community members during a global pandemic?

2: What factors enable the provision of sustainable volunteer support programs in times of community crisis?

Methods

The Council were keen to understand the organisational processes and experiences of those involved as the volunteer telephone support program underwent significant change due to the pandemic. A qualitative study was designed by our small team of social work researchers (AV, WR, TK) who had previously partnered with Council to evaluate the telephone support program; a sociology researcher with expertise in loneliness (KW), and a social sciences research assistant (VA). Having an established connection with Council staff was integral to the research, with one researcher (AV) welcomed into the role of participant observer for the project. We took an organisational ethnographic approach which encompassed close observation of, and involvement with, the key players in the program and focused not only on words spoken and on practices observed, but also the social and cultural milieu of the community in which they occurred (Rosen, 1991; Watson, 2012).

Setting and Participants

The study focus was the local government telephone support service known as the Community Register program. The Community Register, established in 2009, is available to local residents who are over 50 or have a disability. Volunteers are central to this program, a key component of which is provision of regular phone calls. These calls offer consistent friendly contact, and aim to enhance the social connection and safety of people on the Community Register. A significant number of call recipients rely on the telephone as their primary means of connection with others. In 2019, over 300 people received a regular weekly phone call from approximately 20 trained and supported volunteers.

The Community Register services a rapidly growing, culturally diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged Local Government Area (LGA); which arguably includes the groups most vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness during periods of pandemic restrictions. This LGA in Melbourne, Victoria, was at the epicentre of the Australian COVID-19 second wave crisis in mid 2020. Victoria experienced a long and stringent lockdown from July to October 2020 and restrictions meant no visitors to private homes, limited activities outside the home, and compulsory wearing of masks for activities such as grocery shopping. At this time, many local community members turned to digital communications for support and connection, but some of the already vulnerable and older members of the local population did not.

Government lockdown restrictions affected Community Register service provision. Work from home orders meant that the volunteers were stood down in late February 2020 and local Council staff commenced calling those on the Community Register in an effort to ensure social connection in a time of crisis. With staff required to work from home, weekly staff debriefing meetings were instituted via zoom as staff grappled with delivery of the service.

With ethnography taking a "process based understanding of organizational life" (Rosen, 1991, p. 12), our aim was to understand and interpret the organisational processes underpinning the changes to the telephone support service. We observed and recorded interactions at the weekly debriefing meetings in real time. Participants were council staff involved in coordination and delivery of the service, volunteers (as they re-emerged to continue to deliver the service), and one university researcher (AV). These weekly meetings, even though conducted by electronic means, provided a direct and regular involvement between the researcher and Council staff and volunteers. Attendance at the weekly zoom

meetings fluctuated between 6 and 15 participants but in total comprised seven council staff and 11 volunteers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected during the lockdown period, with the final three weekly meetings conducted as restrictions were easing, but while work from home directives were still in place. Data consisted of audio recordings of 26 weekly debriefing meetings, field notes, and a separate interview with the two local Council staff with overall responsibility for the Community Register: the program coordinator and her team leader. The university researcher was an active participant in the research process, often facilitating discussion via asking questions of participants (similar to focus group processes), and, as was evident in transcripts, was welcomed into the group as an 'insider', even though she was outside the group. On occasion, as a result of her questioning, group members set themselves a task to report back, and this set the agenda for the following week. Thus, the richness of the data collected was emblematic of an ethnographic and recursive approach to understanding the intricacies of the organisational experience (Watson, 2012). Participant observation over an extensive period of time, also meant that she 'blended in' to the group, and growing familiarity with the group members and the Community Register was an advantage rather than a disadvantage. While this may be critiqued as reducing 'objectivity', the purpose of ethnographic research is to understand from the perspective of those being studied, rather than seeking objective truth, and gaining trust of the group was imperative to open discussion in the meetings. At the same time, regular reporting back to the other academic research team members also provided a vehicle for ongoing 'curious engagement' with the research topic..

The meetings were audio reorded and transcribed verbatim; but importantly, the university researcher also took detailed fieldnotes from each meeting. Using both fieldnotes and the

transcriptions, data were analysed thematically. Transcripts were coded by one team member and then codes (and field notes) were discussed with the research team, and themes generated. The analytical focus was both the organisational processes and decision making, as well as the experiences of group participants as they debriefed about how telephone contact with vulnerable community members underwent change during the pandemic. The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee (HRE19-021).

Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged local government to change the way the Community Register worked. It had to quickly find new ways of operating that on the one hand, ensured the safety of staff and volunteers, and on the other hand, provided continuity of care for the vulnerable local residents who relied on the service. In response to public health directives the initial organisational response was to remove volunteers from service delivery and redeploy staff from other parts of the organisation to deliver the service. While stood down, several volunteers expressed their desire to return to the program. They were concerned about the wellbeing of the people they called, they too felt lonely, and since lockdown had been experiencing a sense of loss and lack of meaning in their own lives. Consequently, after only a few weeks absence, a small number of experienced volunteers were invited back to the program, and were supported to 'work' from home including joining the weekly zoom debrief meetings with the Council staff. The organisational shifts required were both logistical (moving from paper to computer based records) and relational (working differently with a volunteer workforce). By the end of April 2020, three volunteers had commenced making calls from home using their personal telephones, increasing to seven by July (coinciding with the beginning of Melbourne's second and most severe COVID-19 restrictions).

Three key themes emerged as integral to the reconfiguring, re-shaping and delivery of the service. First, the importance of care and relationships in service provision. Second, the need for flexibility to make service change. Third, like a beating heart, the regular calls became part of the rhythm of life, providing a sense of certainty for the staff, the volunteers and those they called.

Care and Relationships in Service Provision

Decisions taken about the service focused both on the centrality of care to call recipients, and then extending this notion of care to the relationships between council staff and volunteers. While implicit in the establishment of the telephone service prior to COVID-19, the valuing of genuinely listening to one another, exchanging experiences and heeding ideas, became an explicit focus as Council grappled with the rapid changes in service delivery. Reprioritisation required flexibility on the part of Council staff:

> *"*The priority was making the calls and your workload came second in a sense which was a challenge for everyone, given that everything else was happening very rapidly at that time" (Program Coordinator, interview).

However, as staff and program leaders stepped into the roles of volunteers and began making calls, they directly encountered and observed, for the first time, community social isolation from the volunteer caller perspective. Staff new to this work expressed their shock at the advanced age of many of the people they were calling and were unprepared for the level of loneliness experienced by some of the local residents; loneliness which was substantially heightened by the pandemic.

"This morning my first call was pretty bad in terms of the way the community member was feeling. … I mentioned before this chap… about three, four weeks ago talked about kind of being found dead on his floor and no one there for him. You know, those kind of calls are really tough and take it out on you" (Redeployed council staff member).

Alongside caring for call recipients, staff recognised the extent of the emotional, and potentially traumatic, care work with which the volunteers had been engaged, acknowledging the high level of resilience it demanded: "Well, actually it's a boot up the backside really, but its sort -of - it's a reminder that we need to stop and look at the welfare of [the volunteers]" (Team Leader, interview). This was echoed by staff who were redeployed:

"I do have a lot more respect for our volunteers now which I didn't have beforehand. So, I don't mean that in a negative context. I do actually love everything I've volunteered to do, but I didn't realise how much energy they put into this."(Redeployed Council staff).

Council staff initially undervalued the impact the absence of the regular volunteers might have for the call recipients. It was only when people began asking after the volunteers and expressing fears for their health and wellbeing that Council staff acknowledged that they had overestimated the functional nature of the call and underestimated the importance of the relationship between the volunteers and community residents.

"It was a real learning for us council staff …. We didn't say that we've taken over from the volunteers and I felt really awful about that. … They did miss the volunteers

and they did miss the interaction that they had developed" (Redeployed Council staff).

"But it is a thing for people, isn't it, that they don't just - it's not just that we're a nameless face. They've got a relationship. If somebody else just turns up, they can't just turn on that same relationship with a different person, you know?" (Volunteer).

Enabling the volunteers to return to the Community Register and recommence making calls was important for their sense of shared social connection and self-worth but it was also similarly important for the wellbeing of Council staff due to a significant increase in their usual workload. The following quote from one of the redeployed staff members offers an example of the esteem staff developed for the volunteers and their relief at having them return.

"It's hard work. It gave me a really strong understanding of the skillset that's required and the strengths that you guys have, and also the connect that you guys have as a team as well. So, all of that was really lovely to see from my perspective looking out and in, but really pleased you're back. Yay." (Redeployed staff member).

The centrality of care and relationships drove necessary changes to ensure service continuity and the provision of appropriate support for the volunteers. Staff listened to what the volunteers needed to stay involved with the program, actively creating a space in which the volunteers were free to express issues that were challenging or troubling for them, such as personal issues, triggers in relation to difficult past memories/experiences, and the level of emotional strain experienced.

Operational Flexibility

The decision to enable volunteers to resume work with the Community Register was taken in the context of suspension of all Council volunteering activities and after discussions addressing issues such as occupational health and safety, privacy, confidentiality, and the financial burden associated with volunteer use of their own phones. Bringing back volunteers to the service required logistical and operational flexibility.

Digitalising the Community Register's data (call sheets with contact details and additional information about each participant) was one of the first steps enabling the Community Register to operate in a remote service delivery context. Prior to COVID-19, all Community Register data was paper based; a deliberate decision to ensure that volunteering in the program was not limited to those with digital skills. In the shift to remote delivery Council staff expressed initial concern about the volunteers' ability to work with a new and digitalised system: *"Volunteers bring many skills with them but a lot of them don't have computer literacy or are extremely slow"* (Program Coordinator, interview). However, having made the decision to bring the volunteers back and after discussion with the volunteers all decided to "give it a go" (Program Coordinator, interview).

Volunteers kept telephone conversation sheets to record important events in the lives of those they called, noting hobbies, interests, and issues of concern. This information was then emailed to the program coordinator (or relayed via phone message if the volunteer did not have access to a computer) for inclusion in the database enabling easy transfer to subsequent volunteers and other staff. As one volunteer explained, such information was important to the relationship between caller and call recipient:

"It just shows me how important it is that we do remember them, you know, that we do have the call sheet when we ring and see, you know, such and such has happen - her granddaughter has started school or she's gone to buy a dog or whatever. So, we've got it written there so that the next person, you know, can keep that relationship going a bit." (Volunteer).

Flexibility was required to bring the volunteers into the weekly zoom debrief sessions.

"Then what we recognised by having those weekly meetings was the need to bring the volunteers. What we didn't realise or what I didn't recognise or acknowledge was the value that those volunteers had after each of their shifts, that they would naturally debrief themselves and then walk away from whatever calls they were making each day." (Team leader, interview).

Again, Council staff and Community Register program leadership were initially unsure about engaging volunteers in an online platform due to a feared lack of digital skills. However, they soon discovered that volunteers embraced the challenge, quickly learned and adapted together with and through the help of Council staff. Staff accommodated the volunteers' needs and found creative and thoughtful ways to include those who expressed the desire to be part of the debriefing sessions, as is evident in the following meeting excerpt where a volunteer is introduced to the group by the program coordinator:

"Can I just introduce - I've got xxxxx (volunteer) on my phone. She doesn't have access to Zoom so, I've just phoned her in and xxxx is going to be participating that way. Xxxx has been doing a few calls on a Thursday, so, I thought it was a good opportunity for her to come to the meeting as well. So, yeah, she'll chime in every

now and then. I said feel free to interrupt us. We can mute our self xxxx so you just

go for it." (Program Coordinator).

The lockdown restrictions presented Council with the opportunity to think differently and the weekly debriefs were used as a forum to consider which of the changes made for remote service delivery could be carried forward into a post-COVID-19 world. For example, for those volunteers living with disabilities, working from home proved to be a very positive and welcome experience, particularly on days they were struggling with their health. Thus, new, hybrid and flexible work structures have the potential to create a more inclusive environment.

Like a Beating Heart - Creating the New Rhythm

In the face of uncertainty, the regular calls formed part of the rhythm of life for the staff, the volunteers and those they call. The telephone conversations offered real time insight into the changing mood and sentiment of a significant part of the local community. Council leadership began to describe the Community Register as the "saviour of Council" as it was one of the few local volunteer programs able to continue its work during the pandemic.

> "The weekly catch ups became more than just how we were - the trends - because ultimately I was getting it from Council. "So, what are the things, what are the things that the clients are saying? Let's get some - you know, from the ground, I want to hear it, I want to hear it. You know, report it, report back. How many people are you calling?"" (Team Leader, interview).

Through the weekly debriefs, the Council received regular updates about their local community and used this information as an opportunity to respond to the needs of these and other community members. For example, feedback was important in the process of linking

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the Community Register to other (Council) services and in identifying which services or links between services would be of ongoing use for the community.

The regular calls not only 'tapped into' the key concerns within the community, as was evident when volunteers and staff described the 'theme' of the week in the debrief meetings, but also spoke to a growing need to connect with others due to increased social isolation. In many instances, the relationships between volunteers and those on the Community Register became more personal during the lockdown period. Volunteers were acutely aware that the calls played a particularly important role during the global pandemic as most of those they rang were experiencing high levels of social isolation. Calls were longer than they had been pre pandemic and often touched on topics of a more personal nature.

> "The calls are a lot longer because they want to talk. They've got no one to talk to. So some of the volunteers might be doing only 10 calls, like xxx only does 10 calls on a Tuesday but it takes her all day." (Program Coordinator, interview).

The volunteers, often themselves vulnerable community members, engaged with the Community Register participants as equals, building personal relationships that enhanced a sense of social connectedness for all. Volunteers often reflected that making the calls gave them a reason to get out of bed, lifted their mood and took their mind off some their problems.

> "I think the important thing is that although the people that we call get a lot out of it, I think the important thing is that we get something out of it as well. I know I do personally. You know, if I'm not having a real good day and you

can get into a conversation with people, it takes my mind off some problems

and things like that. So, it's definitely beneficial both ways." (Volunteer).

Staff and volunteers were adamant that the calls were not just a welfare check; they were

about "someone" (Volunteer). All highlighted the significance of the connection that comes

from being a part of the same community: "It flavours the conversation. You know, you're

not on a call centre from somewhere, you know, in an overseas country" (Program

Coordinator, interview). Shared points of reference allowed for the discussion of the

changing neighbourhood or local events. For example, one week in June the volunteers

remarked that many call recipients were concerned about a missing boy, an event well

covered by the media. Another week, a spike in local COVID-19 cases occupied the minds of

most. These regular and personal calls opened up a space for vulnerable community members

to share their feelings of fear, loneliness, isolation, and resignation, as well as their personal

and heartfelt stories.

Discussion

This study explored the ways in which a Council run volunteer telephone support program

responded during the pandemic and ensured continuity of care and connection for the socially

isolated local residents reliant on the service. Ethnographic studies seek to make everyday

meanings and practices visible, and this can be challenging in organisations because 'most

routine work is conducted in a swift or silent manner, without thinking or reflecting about it'

(Schubert & Rohl, 2019). Thus examining organisational processes as they unfolded during a

period of disruption provided an ideal opportunity to make visible, meanings and practices

that may not have otherwise been apparent. We found that a commitment to care in

relationships and operational flexibility emerged as the central principles of practice

informing Council's responses to changes to service delivery brought about by the pandemic.

These underpinning principles enabled Council leadership to swiftly adapt the model of delivery, ensure service continuity and address and redress social isolation and loneliness (Smith & Lim, 2020) experienced by the call recipients and exacerbated during the pandemic.

Our findings illustrate particular strengths of this place-based local government service. The capacity for openness to new ideas and hence flexibility to implement new and unfamiliar processes and service delivery models provided certainty for staff and volunteers, and comfort for call recipients through the continuation of a valued community service where isolation was exacerbated and service delivery disrupted by the pandemic. This commitment to operational flexibility, and consideration of the perspectives of volunteers, call recipients, Council and service managers, contributed to a sense of the service becoming a "saviour of Council". It established a constant and consistent work rhythm and was one of the small number of volunteer programs to remain working and importantly, expand capacity and improve processes during the pandemic.

This study supports earlier research arguing that flexibility is key in order to meet the needs of older adults when running a befriending intervention (Kime et al., 2012; Cattan et al., 2011), and highlights the level of operational flexibility required to adapt to the new circumstances, restrictions and changing community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that operational flexibility was enabled by an overt focus on care for all associated with the program. Interestingly, the embedded culture of care between volunteers and call recipients was paralleled in the relationships between volunteers, and between volunteers and the program coordinator.

The Community Register's successful adaptation to the challenges posed by the pandemic show that effective responses to mitigating loneliness and social isolation are very possible

when a philosophy of 'caring – for' (Bauman, 2000) is understood as a guiding principle. Furthermore, acting in this way required courage amongst decision makers involved as well as a humility to adopt the 'caring-for' approach evident amongst the Community Register volunteers as their own guiding principle. The importance of caring work has been identified as undervalued (Tronto, 2010) and the contribution of formal and informal care work for the wellbeing of societies and economies is also not well understood (Carers Australia, 2015). We argue that a commitment to care can be a valuable organising principle for local community organisations concerned with loneliness and social isolation amongst vulnerable groups.

Our findings build on research about the value of befriending services (Wiles et al., 2019; Lehane, 2017). Participants highlighted the importance of regular, reliable, reciprocal, caring and meaningful relationships as key characteristics of a good telephone service. They further appreciated when conversations had an informal and ordinary character (Wiles et al., 2019; Cattan et al., 2011) and valued the transformation of transactional relationships into genuine friendships based on mutual interest and reciprocity (Wiles et al., 2019). These findings resonate with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) concept of belonging and their argument that a sense of belonging has the potential to create feelings of social connectedness. These are exactly the characteristics that call recipients valued in their relationships with volunteers.

Befriending services are increasingly recognised as a low-cost and low risk intervention to mitigate experiences of social isolation and loneliness of older adults; the success of the intervention heavily reliant on the relationships between volunteers and call-recipients (Wiles et al., 2019; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2017; Cattan et al., 2011; Kime et al., 2012). Our study goes further than this, also highlighting the beneficial relationships between volunteers and council staff. We argue that positive and caring relationships between volunteers and paid

staff are key in contributing to volunteer engagement, commitment and performance. This in turn can have a positive effect on the success of programs and organisations.

Limitations

While immersion in a single case example is a strength of this study, further examination of local government provided befriending services during the pandemic may shed light on how other organisations responded to the challenges of the pandemic. As the focus of this study was organisational change, we did not seek the input of the call recipients, and again this would enhance the findings and inform local government practice.

Conclusion

The role of volunteers providing a service to socially isolated community members has benefits for both call recipients and volunteers themselves. Further, the unintended insight into volunteers' roles by Council staff when they were redeployed into staffing the Community Register, meant greater appreciation of the emotional and relational work undertaken, and shifted focus from primarily the functional aspects of social connection. As social work practitioners, we understand the importance of meaningful relationships in peoples' lives and the implications this has for building cohesive healthy communities. Enabling "relational opportunities" (Rollins, 2019) between individuals who are experiencing isolation and their local community services is an important step in reducing loneliness, isolation and vulnerability as well as for increasing affinity with one's community for all involved.

Disclosure Statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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