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## CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

# Experiences of Older People Volunteering within a Compassionate Community: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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**Introduction:** The United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030) is a global call to improve the lives of older people, their families, and their communities. A longer life brings opportunities when older people experience good health in a community, which values their contributions and supports them to live the lives they choose. Functional ability is the interaction between an individual's physical, cognitive and sensory capacities, the built environment in which they live and the psychosocial capital of their relationships. This important public health context inspired this study in a compassionate community - a growing social movement that aims to transform attitudes and behaviours around loneliness, social isolation, death, and bereavement - in an area of Scotland with areas of high income adjacent to high levels of disadvantage.

**Methods:** An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as it allows a researcher to make sense of and interpret how people make sense of and interpret their unique experience (Smith, 2009). After ethical approval three individuals over 60 years who were volunteers within this community, consented to participate in semi-structured telephone and virtual interviews conducted in July 2020. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using IPA analytical process.

**Results:** Analysis identified four combined superordinate themes: motivation to volunteer when older; traits of older volunteers; reciprocity and kindness; and features of a compassionate community. Participants felt volunteering provided friendship and connectedness along with a sense of purpose in helping others. Participants perceived this developed inner self-worth and reduced loneliness and sadness. Traits shared by older volunteers included gratitude for good health, commitment, humility and a passion to volunteer well. Participants provided detailed accounts of helping others and of benefits to the recipients, but reciprocity was difficult for participants to express. They felt they had to justify this. Features of a compassionate community that may enable volunteering when older are compassionate and inspirational leadership, opportunities for acts of kindness and people in a community actively helping others in their community, their neighbour, a friend, a stranger.

**Discussion / Conclusion:** Older people appear to have the desire and commitment to participate in their communities and feel privileged in caring for others. Volunteering in later life appeared to have a positive impact for both recipients and volunteers, suggesting it makes an important contribution to healthy ageing. Being actively involved in one's community as an older person could inspire other older people to volunteer, leading to the further development of compassionate communities.

**Lessons Learned:** Older people have experiential knowledge, skills and time. Creating the conditions that enables older people to volunteer may enhance wellbeing outcomes for self, others and for the community. Building social capital through older people volunteering can benefit communities in caring for their people and improve population health.

**Limitations:** This was a small qualitative study in one community. Nevertheless, thorough analysis of the interviews provided some insight into older people's motivations to volunteer and the potential features of a compassionate community.

Future Research: Socio economic status may influence volunteering when older and merits further study.