

# **The Role and the Future Development of the Meals-on-Wheels Service for Older People in Ireland: Staffing Issues**

**Ciara O'Dwyer**

NCAOP Meals-on-Wheels for Older  
People Seminar,  
Athlone, Co. Westmeath  
Thursday, 6<sup>th</sup> November



# Outline

- Overview of Literature on Recruiting and retaining volunteers
- Findings from study:
  - Current staffing levels
  - Recruitment
  - Retention
  - Training
  - Challenges for the Future
  - Volunteers' Views
- Implications of staff shortages on service provision
- Recommendations/Suggestions for Irish services

# Who volunteers?

- Married
- More highly educated
- Church-goers
- Those with free time
- Those already actively involved in their community

## Understanding the Motivations of Older Volunteers

- To help adjust to retirement
- To give back to the community
- To make new friends/maintain social contact
- To help others
- To use existing skills or develop new ones
- For personal development

## Recruiting and retaining male volunteers

- Utilisation or learning of skills/knowledge
- Physical activity
- Contributing to the lives of others



# Survey Methods and Results



# Methods

- Findings from postal survey (N = 280), RR 69%
- In-depth interviews with
  - 15 co-ordinators
  - 6 paid staff
  - 9 volunteers
- from 13 services in 8 counties throughout country.

## Aims of Meals-on-Wheels

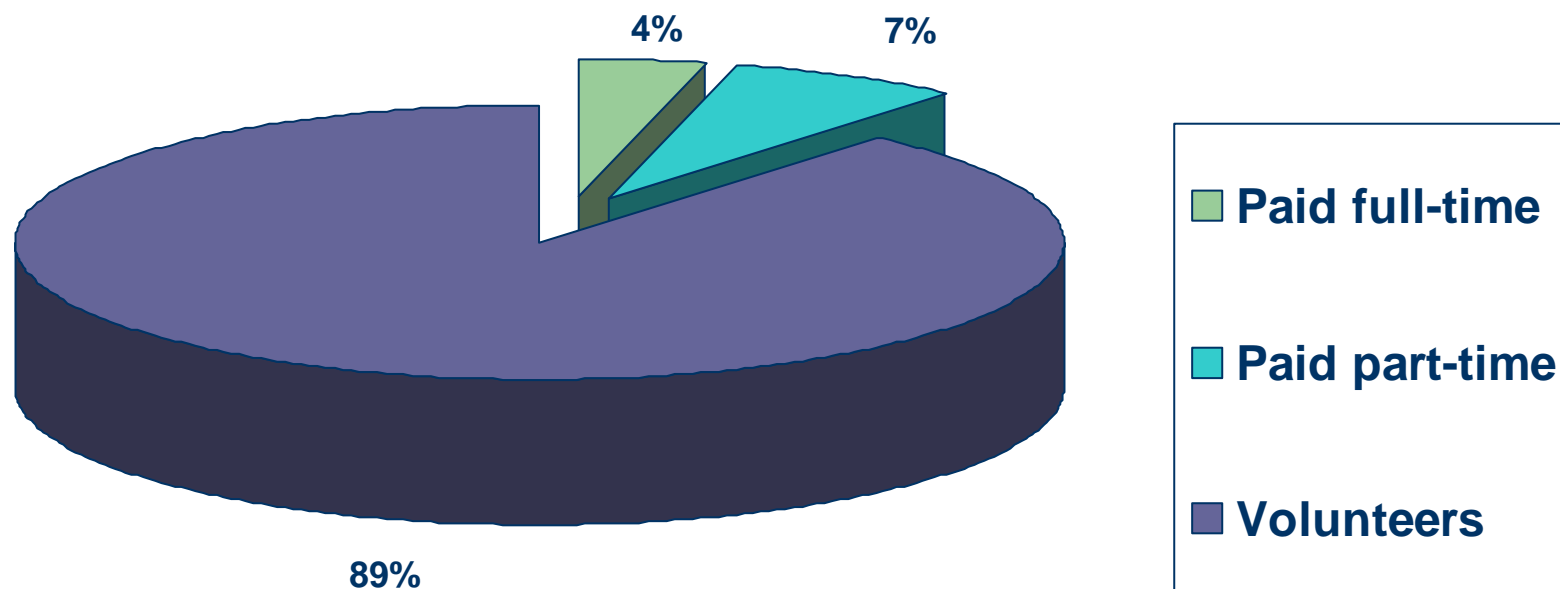
- To contribute to achieving and maintaining a good nutritional status among recipients (76%)
- To provide recipients with some social contact (30%)
- To act as a 'gateway' to other services if recipients' care needs increase (8%)



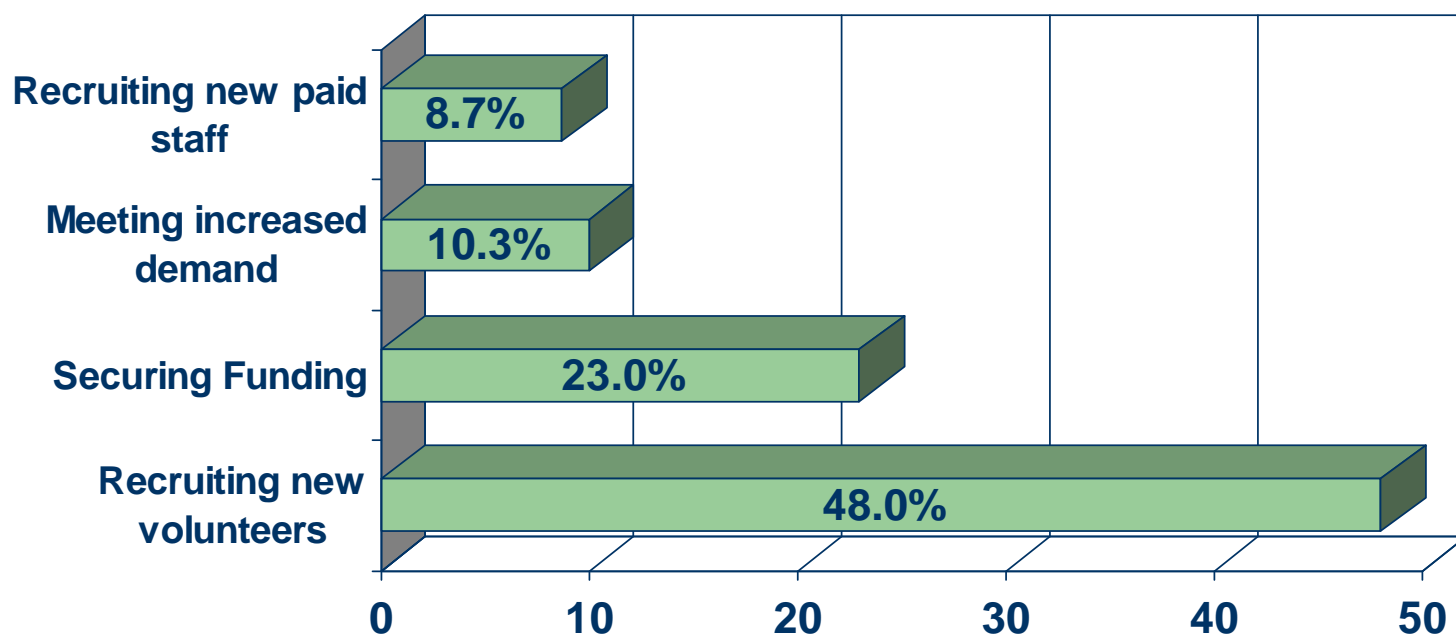
## Average Staffing Numbers

- 49% employed part-time staff; of these, 57% employed 1-2 people on a part-time basis.
- Less than half of all organisations employed full-time staff; of these, 58% employed one or two full-time staff.
- FAS' Community Employment Scheme was a significant resource within many services.

# Current Staffing Levels



# Challenges for the Future



## Qualitative Comments

*We fear meals on wheels is in a state of crisis.  
There is great difficulty in getting funding.  
There is a great difficulty in recruiting new  
volunteers.*

[Co-ordinator, large, rural meals-on-wheels  
service]

# Interviews with Co-ordinators



# Roles of the Co-ordinator

- Source funding
- Organise training courses for staff
- Organise routes
- Ensure food is nutritious, of a high standard
- Maintain a relationship with clients
- Liaise with referral sources
- Ensure health and safety standards met
- Recruit (and vet) new volunteers
- Deal with emergency situations

# Recruitment of Staff

- Recruitment one of most common problems mentioned by co-ordinators
- Common recruitment methods:
  - CE scheme
  - Through friends
  - Parish newsletters
  - Local advertisements

⇒ Informal rather than formal methods used



## Recruitment of Staff, cont'd

*I'm touting for drivers everywhere, everybody I know I'm asking "have you any time? Even at bus stops and all I do be asking people!*

(Co-ordinator, large urban meals-on-wheels service)



## Retention of Volunteers

*What we do is twice a year we bring all the drivers out for a meal... Just to say thank you. We usually go just after Christmas and around about July, we bring them all out for a meal and you have a night out and they appreciate it and they really are...we couldn't operate without them. They're worth that and more...*

(Co-ordinator, large urban meals-on-wheels service)

# Challenges of Utilising Volunteers

*We have a new driver and I believe she is lovely. I haven't met her, she is just retired I think – and she loves this but – the girls were waiting for ages for her to come back. [laughs] The girls finish at half one...*

(Co-ordinator, small urban meals-on-wheels service)

# Training and Up-skilling of Staff

- Health and Safety
- CE Scheme
- Very little training for voluntary drivers
- Unclear whether provision of training was low or whether there was a reluctance among drivers to undergo training

# Interviews with Volunteers



# Reasons for Volunteering

*When I retired I was home all the time. I got to the stage where I said one day “I’m going to go down to the Social Services and see if they want me for anything or other”. It’s a case of giving something back rather than what you’ve got...And they welcomed me with open arms... [The co-ordinator] said: ‘My God, Heaven must have sent you!’*

*(Male voluntary driver, urban meals-on-wheels service)*

*About six years ago they were looking for volunteers...so [the co-ordinator] asked me would I do a day or two so I volunteered one day a week...and [I’m the same as] all [other] volunteers – you don’t want to be committed to something for a full week, I’d much rather be out playing golf!*

*(Male voluntary driver, urban meals-on-wheels service)*

## Overall level of satisfaction

*Well they're so delighted, they'd make you feel you're doing marvellous work and I do try to be in and out with some of them. My last person I might talk to for a while and then I might change my route and not have the same person last all the time. I've kind of got to know them now. I went to visit one of the ladies in the nursing home because she had given me a present, a Christmas present...*

(Female voluntary driver, rural meals-on-wheels service)

## Overall level of satisfaction, cont'd

*One morning I went in and there was an old lady living in an apartment on her own and she'd had a fall...she fell out of the bed and she couldn't get up. I got in touch with her daughter. But the lady was there for about...she was about four or five hours on the floor and I was talking to her all the time.*

*(Male voluntary driver, urban meals-on-wheels service)*

## Longevity of Service

*There are only old people volunteering...I don't really want to do it any more but they're stuck for drivers [and] what else would I be doing? It gets me out and about and out of the house...Most of the people I deliver to are younger than me!*

(Male voluntary driver, rural meals-on-wheels service)



# Interviews with Clients

# Attitudes of Clients towards Drivers

*It is nice to see someone coming in... after being in an office for so many years and meeting so many people every day, it can be very lonely. It's a great idea to have somebody coming in and having a bit of a chat even for a few minutes...*

[Female meals-on-wheels recipient, aged 79]

*[They] came with my dinner... but, I couldn't get up, and I was sitting there at that door...I said "I can't get up". I was frightened... I was worn out and I think I had kind of laid down during the night...I was lucky... Only for [them] I would have had to wait longer...*

[Female recipient, aged 86]

## Overview of Findings

- Recruitment, retention of staff is a significant problem for many co-ordinators
- Provision of training for volunteers is low
- Appears to be a mismatch between volunteers' original motivations and the individual tasks they carry out

# Implications of Staff shortages

- Proportion of males aged 65+ projected to increase from 9.7% in 2002 to 13.9% in 2021; females from 12.5% to 15.8%
- Proportion OP living alone predicted to double
- Accelerated increase in 'old age' dependency ratio after 2011
- OP living alone one of groups most at risk of poverty

# Improving the Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers



# Volunteerism in Ireland: 2006 Census

- 16.4% of the population aged 15 and over were involved in at least one voluntary activity
- Volunteering among people aged 65+ grew between 2002 and 2006



# Retaining Volunteers

- Highlight value of meals-on-wheels to potential volunteers
- Provide training/up-skilling (where appropriate)
- Ensure volunteers feel valued and that their skills and resources are being utilised
- Recognise the individual motivations of each volunteer

# Additional Suggestions

- Work together to recruit volunteers:
  - Focus on ‘selling’ positive aspects of volunteering work
  - Tap into local/national resources
  - Plan ahead
- Focus on satisfying needs of volunteers
  - Make note of what they hope to achieve
  - Encourage socialisation with recipients where possible
  - Provide training to allow drivers to ‘monitor’ the status of recipients
- Show volunteers recognition for their work
  - Monthly coffee mornings
  - Annual dinner
  - Phonecalls/thank you cards
- Be optimistic!



## Contact Details

Ciara O'Dwyer

Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre,  
School of Social Work and Social Policy,  
Trinity College

Email: [cmodwyer@tcd.ie](mailto:cmodwyer@tcd.ie)