

Enhancing the Deferred Donor Experience: Lessons from Qualitative Research on Temporary Blood Donor Deferral

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Presented by Shana D. Hughes, PhD, MPH; Rishika Mundada, BS; Suzanne M. Joiner, BA, BA

Executive Summary

Temporary donor deferrals are a routine part of blood collection operations, yet they can represent a critical moment in the donor journey. While donor centers often focus on the clinical and operational aspects of deferral, how the experience is communicated may have a lasting impact on donor satisfaction, trust, and willingness to return.

This qualitative study explored how donors perceive temporary deferrals and what factors influence whether the experience is viewed positively or negatively. Findings indicate that the donor experience is shaped less by the deferral itself and more by the quality of interpersonal interactions and communication provided throughout the process.

The research provides valuable guidance for blood centers seeking to strengthen donor retention, improve donor satisfaction, and create more supportive donor experiences during potentially disappointing moments.

The Challenge

Temporary deferrals are designed to protect both donor and recipient safety. However, from the donor's perspective, being turned away after taking the time to present for donation can feel frustrating, confusing, or discouraging.

For organizations focused on donor retention, each deferral represents a potential risk. Donors who leave feeling unsupported may delay future donations or fail to return altogether. Conversely, donors who experience empathy, clarity, and encouragement often remain committed to the donation process despite the setback.

Understanding donor perceptions of temporary deferral is therefore critical to maintaining a healthy donor base and reducing avoidable donor attrition.

Research Approach

Researchers conducted online discussion groups with temporarily deferred donors representing a range of ages, donation histories, and deferral experiences.



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Participants were asked to discuss:

- Their reactions to temporary deferral
- Interactions with collection staff
- Information provided during the deferral process
- Factors that influenced their willingness to return

Analysis of participant responses revealed several recurring themes that distinguished positive experiences from negative ones.

Key Findings

Communication Shapes the Experience

The strongest finding across discussions was the importance of clear, informative communication.

Donors who received understandable explanations regarding their deferral reason reported significantly more positive experiences. They appreciated knowing:

- Why they were deferred
- Whether the issue was temporary
- What actions they could take before returning
- When they would be eligible to donate again

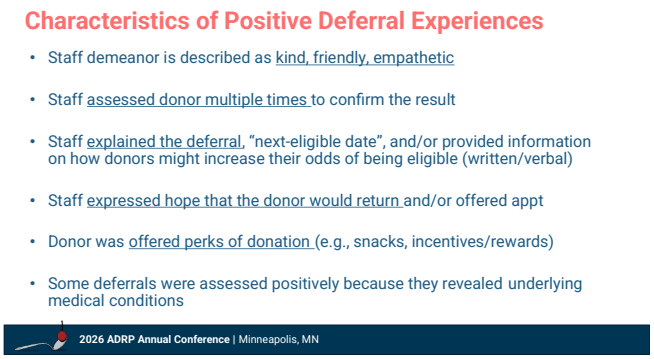
Providing context helped donors view the deferral as a manageable obstacle rather than a permanent rejection.

Empathy Builds Trust

Donors consistently highlighted the importance of staff demeanor.

Positive experiences were associated with employees who:

- Demonstrated compassion
- Listened attentively
- Answered questions thoroughly
- Showed appreciation for the donor's willingness to give

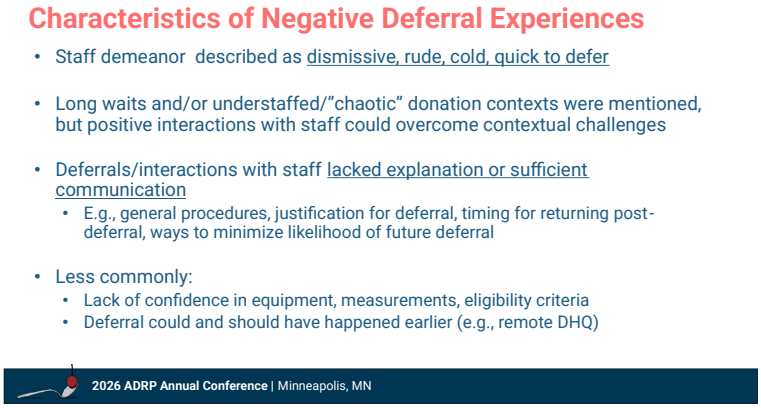


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These interactions reinforced donor trust and helped maintain their commitment to the organization's mission.

Poor Interactions Create Lasting Negative Impressions



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Negative experiences were often linked to:

- Rushed conversations
- Minimal explanation
- Perceived indifference
- Inconsistent information
- Long wait times

Many participants reported that feeling dismissed or uninformed was more frustrating than the actual deferral itself.

Strategic Implications for Blood Centers

The study suggests that donor retention efforts should include a stronger focus on deferral experiences.

Many organizations invest significant resources in donor recruitment, yet relatively small improvements in deferral communication may produce meaningful retention benefits.

Because temporary deferrals are inevitable, blood centers should view these encounters as opportunities to reinforce donor relationships rather than simply communicate eligibility decisions.

Creating a positive deferral experience can help preserve donor goodwill and increase the likelihood of future participation.

Blood centers should consider:

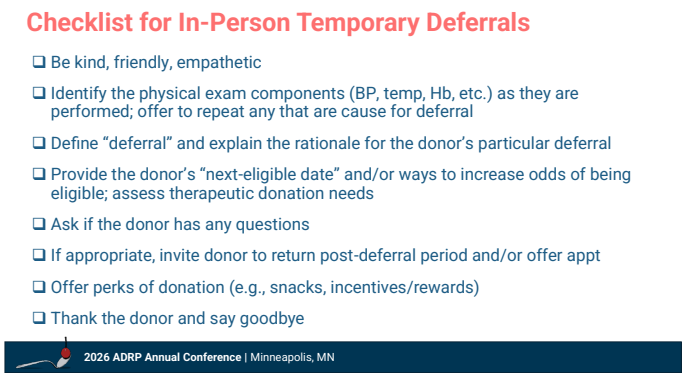
Standardizing Deferral Communication

Provide staff with consistent messaging that clearly explains:

- Why the donor was deferred



- Expected duration of the deferral
- Recommended next steps
- Future eligibility information



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Strengthening Staff Training

Equip frontline staff with techniques for:

- Active listening
- Empathetic communication
- Delivering disappointing news constructively
- Encouraging future donations

Supporting Donor Re-Engagement

Implement follow-up communications that:

- Remind donors when they become eligible
- Offer educational resources
- Reinforce appreciation for their willingness to donate

Evaluating the Deferral Journey

Include deferred donors in donor experience assessments to better understand barriers to return and identify process improvement opportunities.

Conclusion

Temporary deferrals represent a pivotal moment in the donor relationship. While the clinical outcome may be unavoidable, the donor's perception of the experience is largely shaped by communication, empathy, and support.

Organizations that invest in improving the deferral experience can strengthen donor trust, increase return rates, and reinforce a culture centered on both donor care and operational excellence.

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