

FAST FACTS: Civic Engagement and Older Americans -- Volunteerism

Demographic Shift and Interest in Volunteering

- *Eight out of ten Americans over the age of 55 work, volunteer, or care for family members. Six out of ten Americans over the age of 75 participate in such activities.
- *Americans age 55 and older contributed between \$97.6 billion and \$201 billion to society in 2002 through volunteer activities and time spent caring for family members.
- *In 2000, there were over 27 million volunteers over the age of 55 in the U.S., totaling 7.5 billion hours of time given.
- *Compared with a U.S. median commitment of 52 volunteer hours annually, individuals 65 and older contributed 96 hours.
- *Many recent studies document older adults' interest in remaining actively engaged.

Potential Benefits of Increased Volunteerism Among Seniors

- *Data shows that baby boomers have high levels of interest in volunteering—in the coming years older Americans will continue to be an untapped resource that can be a tremendous asset at the community level.
- *Studies show that civic and social engagement is beneficial to individuals' health and has the potential to keep health care costs to society at a minimum.
- *Given that data shows that older volunteers contribute billions of dollars to society through their service, increasing the numbers of volunteers will have an even greater financial impact for communities.

Barriers: Real and Perceived

- *In American society there is a certain level of ageism and negative thinking regarding the abilities of older individuals to assist those in need.
- *The value of volunteerism is not often recognized, and for those volunteer opportunities that do exist there is insufficient public awareness about them.
- *It is difficult to link “supply and demand”—and connect the individuals interested in volunteering time with the situation where there is a real need.
- *Social service agencies often lack the resources for volunteer training.
- *Lack of financial incentives for potential volunteers (Ex: federal tax law does not allow deduction of hours spent volunteering)
- *For those volunteers who are members of the paid workforce, it is relevant that few companies have flexible policies in place to encourage employee and retiree volunteerism.
- *Many individuals face challenges with finding sufficient transportation to allow them to get to the sites where services are needed.

Existing Models and Promising Practices

- ****Senior Corps Program***: Consists of three programs--Foster Grandparents; Retired and Senior Volunteer Program; Senior Companions--utilizing the skills and experience of more than 500,000 volunteers age 55 and older to meet a wide range of community needs.

***Experience Corps**: Headed by Civic Ventures, program places volunteers in schools and other community youth-focused organizations.

***University of Maryland Center on Aging Retired and Senior Volunteer Program International**: This center works to increase the number of older Americans actively engaged as volunteers and develops public-private partnerships to expand and enhance volunteerism.

***National Council on the Aging RespectAbility Program**: This initiative seeks to help non-profit organizations make more effective use of older Americans in their community-based efforts.

***Senior Community Service Employment Program**: Provides job training, employment and service opportunities to low-income adults.

***The “Silver Scholarship” program**: Designed to train and deploy 10,000 seniors to tutor young children in exchange for \$1,000 scholarship that can be transferred to grandchild or other young person.

Potential Role for States

*Create visibility and public awareness about potential opportunities and the value inherent in volunteerism, helping to create supply as well as demand, and facilitate the linking of existing programs in need to willing volunteers at the local levels.

*Incentivize service through education credits or award programs.

*Create a competitive grant program to elicit new volunteer opportunities in the community and to establish demonstrations in states to explore existing innovative models in communities.

*Create a needs and assets inventory at the community level, to match skills and talents of willing volunteers with those programs in need.

*Help inform the corporate sector about the benefits of employer-supported volunteering that flow back to the employer.

Additional Resources

Civic Ventures *Experience Corps*: <http://www.civicventures.org>

Urban Institute Retirement Project: <http://www.urban.org/retirement>

The National Council on the Aging *RespectAbility* Project: <http://www.respectability.org>

National Academy on an Aging Society: <http://www.agingsociety.org>

Sources: *Urban Institute: “Perspectives on Productive Aging,” Gerontological Society of America, Civic Ventures, National Council on the Aging, Corporation for National and Community Service, University of Maryland Center on Aging.*