
Civic Engagement Work Group

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Work Group roster:

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Overview of our work:

Our work group formed in the spring of 2007 with three specific goals:

- ∞ Complete a report with recommendations on opportunities for enhancing civic engagement by older adults.
- ∞ Raise overall awareness of older adults as resources by publicizing and making the final report available to the public and other community stakeholders.
- ∞ Create a cohort of institutions and organizations to create specific civic engagement opportunities for older adults.

The roles of Work Group members were defined as:

- ∞ Research national and local best practices and prepare those findings for inclusion in the final report
- ∞ Help to organize the cohort of institutions and organizations
- ∞ Share resources and information that individual members may have access to or knowledge of in their particular world with other members of the Task Force and/or Work groups
- ∞ Be ambassadors for the final recommendations to their organization and other community stakeholders in their network.

The Work Group held formative meetings in the spring and summer of 2007 and broke out to conduct research in the fall of 2007. A survey of Oregon nonprofits was also created and disseminated in late fall 2007. Work Group members also shared best practices and resources via Google Group.

Results of our research:

Work Group members researched successful models for engaging older adults in the community, with particular interest in the generation of older adults who are at or near retirement – the so-called “Baby Boomer” generation. Work Group members researched national studies, local studies and successful programs. We also conducted our own survey of nonprofit organizations in Oregon to gauge their interest and success in engaging this new generation of older adults.

We found several consistent themes in our research of what is working to engage Boomers in the community:

Opportunity

Foremost, older adults will continue to be valuable sources of volunteer help for nonprofits, schools and community organizations that are working to meet critical needs and enhance the quality of life.

Leadership and impact

What's different is that this new generation of older adults will seek leadership opportunities in their volunteering that is different from generations before. Certainly, volunteers from previous generations have excelled as volunteer leaders. But Boomer volunteers are less interested in filling volunteer roles that serve an organization as they are interested in having a direct impact on that organization's mission. Evidence can be found in the sharp decline in membership, in Multnomah County and in the nation, in the traditional volunteer service clubs, such as Elks, Lions or Kiwanis. Instead, older adults are finding traction in volunteer roles that have what they feel is a more immediate impact. The SMART reading program is an excellent example. This Oregon-wide nonprofit has greatly increased its volunteer ranks at a time when traditional volunteer service clubs have lost membership.

Flexibility

The trend in volunteering in the United States over the past 20 years has been toward flexible volunteer roles that accommodate today's unpredictable lifestyle. A generation ago, volunteering typically consisted of ongoing support roles at nonprofit organizations or within service clubs. Today, volunteers are less likely to commit to ongoing volunteering in favor of flexible opportunities over which they have control. programs that offer "episodic" volunteering have become the preferred way for volunteers of all ages to engage. Older adults are no different. Retirement no longer means that older adults are available to fill ongoing volunteer roles. In fact, older adults express flexibility as they pursue travel and other pursuits.

Incentives

The unspoken value in traditional volunteering is that individuals ought to put aside personal needs in service to the greater cause. While this type of selflessness remains a key motivator, volunteering today is best when it blends altruistic with personal motivations. Incentives are an effective way to motivate volunteers with very real personal needs. In our research, we found that incentives can vary and do not to carry a high value. At the same time, the best incentives are those that meet the specific needs of individual volunteers. While plaques, awards, and recognition events are effective, they are incomplete ways of creating effective volunteer programs. What seem to be equally as effective are incentives that provide modest stipends or even some level of health benefits. For example, our research also showed that older volunteers are drawn to national service programs such as AmeriCorps, traditionally thought of as a young person's volunteer opportunity, because of the generous incentives included in the program.

Employment:

The blending of the lines between volunteering and employment is emerging as a new and promising trend. Terms such as quasi-volunteers were unknown just a few years ago. AmeriCorps is evidence of this trend. But the distinction between volunteer and employee does not necessarily need to focus on incentives. Our research shows that the status that a volunteer holds at an organization is also important. In traditional nonprofit organizations, volunteers have ranked low on the hierarchy – save the volunteers who served as Board members. Older adults today are seeking to be recognized for their efforts with appropriate status within organizations.

In terms of gaps and needs, we found one consistent theme in our research: nonprofit organizations, the rock bed of volunteer engagement, are largely not ready for today's new older adult volunteer. Older adults themselves express high levels of interest in civic engagement.

Simply put: nonprofits have not had the opportunity to adjust to the changes in older volunteers. Our survey of more than 200 nonprofits in Oregon revealed few specific examples of organizations that have been able to accommodate the needs of Boomers. Less than half surveyed indicated that they have been successful, although about 44% said they had experienced some success. A lack of staff capacity was most often cited as the barrier that nonprofits face. Our research also shows that many organizations are unaware of the trends in Boomer volunteers and would benefit from opportunities to learn more and create meaningful volunteer roles within their organizations.

Best practice examples

The Work Group discovered several local and national efforts that have successfully engaged this new generation of older adults in the community. They are unique because they are employing new models that accommodate the cultural differences of the Boomer generation.

Local examples:

Metropolitan Family Service
Portland, Oregon
www.metfamily.org

Largely through the national Experience Corps program, Metropolitan Family Service (MFS) has created excellent models for engaging older adults in the community. Experience Corps was created to provide new adventures in service for Americans over 55. It now counts 1,800 members in 19 cities. It works to solve serious social problems beginning with literacy. Their members serve as tutors and mentors to children in urban public schools and after-school programs. The volunteers serve 5-15 hours per week. At MFS, older adults find several, meaningful ways to volunteer in programs that also work to meet their needs. Through the use of stipends and other incentives, MFS has been ahead of the curve in its innovation around engaging today's older adults.

Life By Design Northwest
Portland, Oregon
www.lifebydesignnw.org

Led by PCC, Life By Design is the first effort in the region that is specifically working with Boomers who are at or near retirement to help them create success in their retirement years. The partners include AARP, Hands On Greater Portland, Multnomah County Libraries, Portland State University, and others. A key focus of the project will be engaging older adults in the community.

National examples:

ReServe Elder Service: New York
<http://www.reserveinc.org/>

ReServe is nonprofit organization that recruits retirees and matches their skills and expertise with jobs in nonprofit and public sectors. ReServe taps into expertise of professionals and asks them to do professional work. ReServe pays \$10/hr for maximum of 15 hours/wk; nonprofit pays retiree at this rate or ReServe will take on payroll and charge nonprofit \$14/hr; retiree can explore new areas of interest or serve in area of expertise; jobs are ongoing or project based. Pay for work provides several benefits for retirees of this generation. Boomers are retiring with prospect of decades of active, healthy life ahead of them. Stipend reminds employers and ReServists that their work is

valuable and valued. Boomers want certain standard of living and health insurance and ReServe pay can help with these things. Stipend from ReServe helps laid off older professionals find a way to get meaningful work and pay.

Wisdom Works: National Council on Aging (NCOA)
www.columbiatribune.com/2007/Nov/20071119Feat003.asp
<http://www.volunteersolutions.org/acvo/org/1148217.html>

Wisdom Works addresses questions such as how Baby Boomers can re-connect with local communities after leaving full-time careers, how to transition into new community roles, where to find out about volunteer and employment opportunities, and where to find others sharing similar interests. WW is a national initiative of NCOA. Six senior centers have been selected to develop offerings that mobilize newly retired older adults to address community needs by working in self-directed teams with minimal staff support.

Recommendations:

Our Work Group has developed the following key recommendations that we feel will go a long way toward mobilizing this new generation of older adults in the community:

Provide training and support for profit organizations:

Older adults promise to impact our community in profound ways over the next decades. The problem we are facing, however, is that too few organizations are aware of the changes that are taking place or how to accommodate this new generation of older adult volunteers. Quality volunteer placements, those that work for the individual and the organization, remain a challenge for any segment of the population as nonprofits face competing priorities for their time and resources. The particular needs of older adults provide a particular challenge. What is needed is resources to help nonprofits, and others, begin to find meaningful volunteers roles for the new generation of older adults. The resources include trainings, workshops and technical assistance. Those organizations that have participated in such activities express that they are better equipped for success.

Creation of a learning community:

Concurrent with training and support, organizations would benefit from forming learning communities that share best practices and experiences. One of this Work Group's hopes is that a cohort of organizations will emerge in Multnomah County to create this type of learning community. Experience Corps provides a useful national model. Members engage in programming in their respective community, but gather and share information to learn from one another. Innovations become shared among the group. Individual participants accelerate their success as part of this group much more than they would alone.

Support centralized volunteer recruitment:

This Work Group recommends that we maximize the already established volunteer recruitment efforts that are underway so that older adults find easy-to-access opportunities to volunteer or otherwise get involved in community work. One example is Life By Design Northwest. This effort will help older adults get access to information and opportunities that will enhance their lives. In many cases, Life By Design will refer older adults to existing resources in the community. This referral feature is a basic function in practice, but will go a long way toward connecting older adults with the many, valuable



resources available in the community. In particular, Hands On Greater Portland provides an infrastructure to connect older adults with volunteer and civic engagement opportunities across the region. Working with 300 nonprofits, schools and community organizations, Hands On provides an obvious linkage for older adults. It will also provide support and resources to help older adults maximize their volunteer impact.
