



The Value of Volunteer Engagement by Older Americans

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Understandings of older adulthood are fast changing. One in seven American adults are already aged 65 or older – and that share of the U.S. population will expand over the next two decades. Retirement, once considered a period of rest and relaxation, is now a time for new careers, self-exploration and expanded civic engagement. Given longer lives in good health, it is not surprising that interest and participation in formally organized voluntary activities is growing among older Americans. Nearly a third of adults 55 and older participate in some kind of formal volunteerism, which adds up to more than 20 million older people nationwide donating about three billion hours of service.

What does this surge of older civic engagement mean for participants, and how can communities effectively tap the new energies? Here I summarize lessons in the research literature and from studies done at the University of Maine Center on Aging about the Encore Leadership Corps program, which provides support and leadership development for older volunteers.

Important Personal Benefits for Older Volunteers

Older adults volunteer for many reasons, but the motivations often include the personal benefits service activities can bring – such as individual enrichment and learning, social participation, and a renewed sense of meaningful productivity in later life.

- **Individual growth** can be a key motivating factor for older adult volunteers. Of those older volunteers surveyed through Encore Leadership Corps, 81% identified the opportunity for skills building and personal development as reason why they became engaged as volunteer leaders. An additional 48% expressed an interest in learning more about the kinds of work other volunteers are doing in the community.
- **Working with others** is an important benefit for older adults, and may be especially important for those who live in isolated geographical areas. In their survey responses, participants in the Encore program said they found it very valuable to be socially connected to other volunteers and more engaged with their communities overall.
- **For older adults who have fully or partially retired, volunteering offers opportunities to replace lost roles and renew a sense of purpose.** Baby boomers in particular want to remain productive and active, and volunteer activities help them do that.

Research reveals that volunteer activity among older adults is linked to improved health and increased life spans, an improved sense of personal wellbeing, greater satisfaction in life, and a reduction in use of health care services. Volunteering is clearly a healthy activity that slows declines in mental and physical health for older people. Maine data reinforce this conclusion, with 21% of Encore volunteers reporting that involvement has helped them feel better physically and 39% reporting it has improved their emotional wellbeing. Half of the respondents said they have forged new social connections as a result of their participation in the volunteer program.

Barriers to Voluntary Engagement

Despite the many benefits volunteers can gain while contributing to their communities, many older adults face barriers to engagement. Competing obligations and lack of time and money hinder individuals; and many communities have insufficient capacity to use volunteers optimally.

- Given current family and economic realities, many older U.S. adults keep working beyond their mid-60s. Continued full or part-time employment coupled with family caregiving duties leaves many older people

with little time to volunteer. The time squeeze will become increasingly acute, because the majority of baby boomers plan to delay retirement and extend workforce participation. Communities and organizations that need volunteers must find ways to provide meaningful opportunities that allow older adults to combine volunteerism with family and work obligations.

- Financial costs can be a real deterrent for many people. Donated time and effort can compete with income-generating activities. And even if time is available, volunteer activity may require people to pay for costs such as transportation, supplies, and meals. Resources to pay small stipends to volunteers can help to defray such costs and help organizations to recruit and retain older volunteers who are getting by on low incomes. Overall, older adults with low incomes are more likely to leave volunteer service than their higher-income counterparts. But when lower-income volunteers get stipends to support their service, they become more likely to stay engaged.
- According to the best estimates, many communities have more potential older volunteers than they can effectively deploy. A key cause of this gap is lack of organizational capacity to attract and engage older adults. Nonprofit groups, churches, civic associations, and public agencies vary greatly in their capacities to reach out – to let older people know about opportunities and provide appropriate training and ongoing support.

Facilitating New Volunteer Pathways

In 2009, Congress passed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act to expand service opportunities through the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Serve America Act also created the opportunity for more flexible part-time volunteer service within AmeriCorps, allowing baby boomers and older adults to participate in service while still pursuing other interests such as paid work or family obligations.

As increasing numbers of older Americans look for volunteer opportunities, local communities and nonprofits also need to beef up their capacity to engage these seasoned adults as volunteers. Baby boomer volunteers, unlike their predecessors, will demand meaningful, personally fulfilling volunteer roles; and many will need flexible schedules and some support. States and localities need to help organizations learn to make optimum use of new waves of older volunteers, whose needs, motivations, and potential contributions are different from the past.

Read more in Lenard W. Kaye, David C. Wihry, and Jennifer A. Crittenden, “[Encore Leadership Corps Evaluation Report](#),” Encore Leadership Corps Program, May 2013.