

Prompt: What can we do individually and collectively to raise the visibility and opportunity for older adults' civic engagement?

American Society on Aging National Forum on Civic Engagement
Monday, March 16, 2009: 8:00 am - 3:00 pm
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Structural

☒ Shift Definitions/Concepts

- We need a new currency—time credits or service credits—to honor the work it takes to build family, strengthen community, fight for justice, preserve the planet.
- View coordination & management of volunteers as “strategic” talent management
- Need to pay attention to changing culture and perception of volunteers from the organization’s position
- Call it what it is: volunteering
- Develop new volunteer models using career-experience and expanded/new interests
- Don’t have to donate money. We can donate time

☒ Clearinghouse/Connector Organization

- Establish a clearinghouse to match volunteers to organizations
- Connect organizations and share resources/interested parties
- Develop a national website collecting the different organizations and people together
- We need a central repository of information, a clearinghouse to go to see who is doing what in this area
- Support for connector organizations (broker function) (added to volunteer centers or separate)
- Work with civic connectors to build trusting relationships with older adults
- Community organizations need to learn how to become community organizers. There needs to be financial support for this as change follows funding.

☒ Use and Build on Existing Organizations

- Don’t abandon existing programs like senior centers and RSVP who want to and are in fact reinventing themselves and doing some exciting civic engagement projects but have trouble getting enough infrastructure/administrative funding to do these things.
- Stop recreating initiatives—consolidate resources

☒ Start Engaging Early in Life

- Community service in high school: use this mandatory requirement or engage younger people
- Mentor/tutor programs to encourage volunteering among younger groups
- Model behaviors that exemplify volunteerism (be an example to the next generations)
- Start with children volunteering to build a life long commitment to civic engagement
- Reverse buddy system of intergenerational relationship: children will connect with older Americans and build relationships, e.g., through schools, outside of academic curriculum

- Fund more state intergenerational network programs, e.g., Long Island chapter of NYSIgN developed last year better utilization of resources and community connectors

Support Aging-in-Place

- Volunteer with organizations helping older adults age in community
- If funding increases, more volunteers could provide substantive services to people in their homes
- Programs that support middle-income seniors so that they can stay in their own homes and communities must be encouraged. Examples are San Francisco Village, Beacon Hill Village, and Capitol Hill Village. These are grassroots, community-building efforts that are being built by those (mostly volunteers) who will lead, use, and sustain them. Their focus is to help older adults to become connected within their communities to a trusted organization before a crisis hits. These are not expensive organizations to run, but they do need seed money, funds to include diversity and inclusion, and expert leadership. They become part of a continuum of care within communities, with a focus on reciprocity and mutual assistance. An equally important theme, however, is the potential of the village model and other community-based approaches to strengthen communities by engaging the residents in organizations and programs that they build and largely sustain themselves. One of the exciting challenges of these programs is making them inclusive. In my own thinking – in San Francisco at least – diversity is really the norm and needs a broad definition that includes all of us since we all vary by age, health status, ethnicity, income, sexual orientation, education, languages spoken, faith traditions, etc. In San Francisco, I have been excited by the interest in the village model from a variety of people and look forward to further dialogues to find the connections and build the relationships that contribute to livable communities for all ages.
- Expand paratransit

Policy

Reward Older Volunteers and Workers

- Nonprofits show highly skilled volunteers they have worthwhile volunteer opportunities
- Stipend for volunteers: mileage or other stipend
- Foundation grants and grant-in-aid programs should be amended to provide a bonus payment for civic engagement of all kinds, from mutual help to empowerment and advocacy.
- Change tax code to allow seniors engaged in volunteer service to be eligible to receive group health benefits
- A way to bring focus on older adult engagement is to examine the laws and regulations that serve as barriers to participation as paid workers and/or volunteers. Social Security currently places limits on worker income at a time when we need to encourage older workers to stay in the workforce.
- Allow older VISTA and AmeriCorps volunteers who do not want or need the educational award to give it to their grandchildren or children
- We need an FDIC-kind of organization to ensure that seniors know that time given to help others is recorded and can be cashed in for education, respite and care and transportation

☒ *Help and Reward Organizations That Employ Older Volunteers and Workers*

- Allow non-profit agencies to pay medical insurance co-pays and/or insurance to volunteers as a tax free benefit
- Make it less expensive to hire older workers. For example, paying for the health insurance of older workers is killing small organizations/businesses, or innovating—offering volunteers the opportunity to work more hours to get health insurance
- Ideas on how to better train and empower service providers to obtain and sustain volunteers
- Make it easier for CBOs to get waiver for background checks
- Government program (tax credits) to encourage companies to help employees transition to volunteer opportunities after retirement; start preparation 6 months prior to retirement (outplacement to community involvement service)

☒ *Reexamine Existing Programs*

- I want to change Medicaid (Title XIX) to provide a wide range of flexible service without all the heavy-duty eligibility requirements. We need to give case managers time to work with clients and families to maximize natural resources.
- Lift income limits for Foster Grandparent Program and Senior Companion Program volunteers
- Look at a way to make services programs, for older persons not based on age, but rather on functional impairments or needs.
- Require recompetition of all Senior Corps grants: Foster Grandparent Program, Senior Companion Program, and RSVP, not just RSVP.
- Establish a task force that takes a close look at Foster Grandparent Program, Senior Companion Program, and RSVP program models and how they can be fundamentally changed for the better.

Communications

☒ *Encourage Organizational and Community Communication and Partnerships*

- Pursue collaborative partnerships: businesses, faith communities, non-profit organizations
- Partnerships of local CBOs and senior corporate HR executives on talent mobilization for community good
- Create a community dialogue to identify assets, foster collaborations, and establish priorities for action, based on locally-identified needs. Through the process, a heightened awareness of existing resources will be developed.
- Devise strategies to improve communication/collaboration across organizations, geographic locations, and sectors (e.g., foundations, researchers, service providers)
- More sharing of best practices, stories (in-the-trenches experience)
- Collaborative training for volunteers, including AAA, faith-based organizations, senior centers. Each agency also has agency-specific training
- Keep the conversation going!

☒ *Educate Middle-Aged and Older Adults about Options*

- Provide more educational opportunities about volunteerism for seniors
- More education about retirement and time after retirement at a younger age. More over lifespan.

- Make seniors aware of the need for their service: public service announcements
- Help seniors identify skills
- Help seniors identify skills that can be used in volunteering
- Work with area employers in their retirement education process
- Educational presentations on retirement that illustrate the importance of planning for civic engagement in retirement planning.
- Organizations that are looking for volunteers should go to senior living facilities and present their organization.

Educate the Non-elderly Public

- Planning to implement civic engagement aspect, collectively: one message or concept to market
- Accentuate the positive aspects of aging
- Get a series of stories of elders
- Broad national public awareness campaigns to promote engaged lives for people 50+ (encore careers, lifelong learning, community contribution)
- Get an Academy Award winning movie made that everyone has to see: older person (or boomer) saves the world or his/her neighborhood or company.
- Budget for PSAs on “work” that 55+ are doing in/for community
- Service learning
- Need students who are motivated to include study of gerontology with their area of focus (i.e., geriatric social workers)
- Awareness-raising campaign RE 55+ community service
- Presentations to established organizations: Chamber after hours, United Way Executive Council, Civic Clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, etc.), faith community, etc.

Advocacy

- Advocate with city, county, state, and national elected officials
- Develop talking points to give to members of Congress—talking points for advocates
- We need to create an organization that would be an umbrella organization for advocating for the collective whole—to ensure all voices/services/opportunities are heard. A true national collaborative.
- Show Obama volunteerism in local settings on a regular basis
- Training seniors to be non-partisan lobbyists at the state level
- Mobilize AARP more to support these efforts

Use a variety of media

- NCOA should hold an online forum with civic engagement and the Civic Enterprise diagram
- Utilize new electronic media to promote our resources

Other

Focus on Engagement in Specific Areas/Topics

- More infrastructure—for example—for other community services including arts and cultural

- We want to educate, empower, and deploy older adults to “save the world,” to contribute services, often with other generations, to conserve and protect the environment and to advocate/educate for the environment’s health. There are 2 of these Legacy Leadership Institutes for the Environment in Maryland, transforming their locales and mobilizing citizens. We’d love to see this nationally, to tap older adults’ desire to leave the world a better place.

Consider/Include Non-Majority/Specific Populations

- People with mental illness are involved in civic engagement roles and not considered “special” or disabled, but as a value asset to the community
- Use younger people in transition (homeless) to train and provide service
- One idea would be a major Senior/AmeriCorps that would focus on helping immigrant elders who qualify for citizenship to become citizens. Of the 8.5 million legal permanent residents who are eligible for citizenship, less than 30% are applying for citizenship and many of the 70% who are eligible but not applying are immigrants 50 and older.
- Get all the aging boomers together to make something good happen

Miscellaneous

- Funding to screen volunteers
- Do something on a smaller scale