

AGING TODAY

Vol. XXVII, No. 4

PAGES 5 & 6

July–August 2006

ISSN: 1043-1284

www.agingtoday.org

THE ENGAGED AGE

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE AGE BOOM: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

By **JOHN DOXEY**

After more than 40 years of working in and around hospitals, retired nurse Kay Kindig knows that even patients with acute illnesses are often left alone in their rooms for long periods. “The staff in busy nursing divisions are simply too busy,” she said. “They don’t have time to come in and chat with patients or make sure they’re comfortable.” When the Kootenai Medical Center in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, tapped her to head a new retired-nurses program in 2005, Kindig, age 64, jumped at the chance.

The new program engages about 15 retired nurses to assist overworked hospital staff by listening to patients’ concerns, discussing their diagnoses and treatments, and smoothing the discharge process. Kindig, who has worked part time as a healthcare administrator since retiring in 2001, explained, “We’re able to relieve some of the load on the nurses, and you can just make life a lot easier for the patients and their families.”

SO-CALLED RETIREMENT

Kindig and her nurses count among the rapidly growing number of older Americans who expect to continue working at least part time as they age, often because they need the income but also to stay physically and mentally active. A succession of recent polls, including the 2005 “New Retirement Survey” by Merrill Lynch (available at www.ml.com/index.asp?id=7695_7696_8149_46028_46503_46635), show that about 80% of boomers and those a few years older plan to keep working in some capacity—either full time or part time, paid or unpaid—during their so-called retirement years.

For many of these people, not just any job will do. Recent research suggests that many Americans ages 50 and older hope to find new work that is more personally satisfying and helps improve the quality of life in their communities. A 2003 survey by AARP (see www.aarp.org/research/work/retirement/research-import-865.html) found, for example, that 54% of those who plan to keep working view helping other people as a very important component of their later-life endeavors. Teaching, nursing, childcare and health-services work were among the respondents’ preferred postretirement jobs.

A 2005 survey sponsored by MetLife Foundation and the nonprofit think tank Civic Ventures (visit www.civicventures.org/publications/surveys/new-face-of-work.cfm) suggests that half of people in the United States between ages 50 and 70 are interested in taking full-time or part-time jobs, either now or in the future, that strengthen their communities in areas such as education, healthcare, eldercare, the arts and the environment. “There seems to be a good fit between the desires of this new generation of older Americans and some of the sectors that are wringing their hands wondering how to find the talent to fill growing human resource gaps,” said Marc Freedman, president of Civic Ventures, which is based in San Francisco.

Moreover, the urge to do good work—to make the kind of social contributions that have come to be termed “civic engagement”—appears especially strong among boomers, the megageneration whose oldest members came of age in the socially conscious 1960s, fueling the civil rights, antiwar and women’s movements. In the MetLife/Civic Ventures survey, nearly two-thirds of boomers ages 50 to 59 pointed to nonprofit or public service jobs as their top choice for retirement-age work.

BOOMER TALENT POOL

“The boomers represent a vast pool of knowledge and experience, and they still want to feel valued and connected,” observed Patrick Cullinane, director of the American Society on Aging (ASA) program aimed at promoting civic involvement (go to www.asaging.org/civicing). He elaborated that instead of worrying about how the presumed burden of aging boomers might bankrupt national resources, such as through rising Medicare costs—a concern frequently expressed in media reports—“we should be viewing them as an important resource. If companies and nonprofit organizations can tap even a small percentage of this talent pool, it would go a long way toward addressing community needs to alleviate labor shortages.”

The boomer generation, 77 million strong, was born from 1946 through 1964 and makes up 28% of the United States population, dwarfing the 38 million-member Generation X. The oldest boomers, now age 60, can expect to live another 22 years, on average, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The emerging generation of civic-minded older adults comes as many industries and public services face current or projected worker shortages, in part because many boomers will be retiring or moving on to new opportunities and subsequent generations are unable to fill their shoes. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a shortfall of 10 million workers in the United States by 2010, when almost one in three U.S. workers will be at least age 50.

Serious labor crunches already exist in such critical service sectors as education and healthcare. The National Teacher Recruitment Clearinghouse expects the shortage of elementary and secondary school teachers to reach 250,000 during the next decade, and the American Hospital Association pegs the nationwide shortage of hospital nurses at 110,000 and rising.

Moreover, many nonprofit organizations that deliver and coordinate services for low-income groups, elders, children and others are likely to need workers more than ever. A 2005 survey commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that nearly three-quarters of nonprofit executive directors are boomers, and two-thirds of the 2,200 nonprofit leaders polled plan to leave their positions by 2009 (see the report at www.aecf.org/publications/browse.php?filter=20). Although many older Americans have already leapt into the breach to volunteer at such tasks as assisting religious groups, mentoring children, building homes for the poor or protecting the environment, others find it difficult to make meaningful and productive contributions.

POLICIES AND AGEISM

Part of the problem lies with laws and policies originally enacted to protect older workers from exploitation by employers and to open jobs for younger workers—laws and policies that increasingly discourage aging employees from reentering or remaining part of the paid workforce. For example, many older workers with traditional pensions, as well as their employers, say they would like to take advantage of phased-retirement programs allowing employees to continue working part time while drawing on a portion of their retirement funds. But the complex maze of laws, regulations and tax codes erected in the 20th century will not be revised easily. (See “Phased Retirement Will Ease Many Into Active Older Years,” **Aging Today**, July–August 2003, at www.asaging.org/at/at-244/toc.cfm.)

Another significant issue is the cost of training and educational programs that many require before moving into new jobs.

Even more formidable than legal and regulatory barriers, perhaps, are lingering prejudices against older workers and more skilled volunteers. Even though human-resource executives generally regard older employees as experienced and dependable, concerns about their abilities, adaptability, cost and technological competence keep many organizations from reaching out to older people or entrusting them with high-level responsibilities.

“The big prejudice is that workers lose their abilities as they get older, that people wouldn’t want to work at jobs that pay less than they earned previously, or that older workers are not willing to be managed by younger people,” said Peter Cappelli, director of the Center for Human Resources at the Uni-

versity of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. "But there's no evidence to indicate that any of these assumptions are true."

By many accounts, nonprofits are doing a particularly poor job of creating roles that appeal to vigorous, educated boomers and take full advantage of their professional skills, despite the organizations' deepening need for experienced employees. Not only are many nonprofits lagging behind for-profit businesses in offering the kind of flexible, part-time work schedules most people in their 60s are seeking in postretirement jobs, but also they generally "haven't begun to think of older people as valuable resources," said David Simms, managing partner of Bridgestar, a tax-exempt organization that works to attract and develop older leaders in the nonprofit sector. As a result, he added, "nonprofits are unprepared to train and supervise older employees and volunteers," who are often assigned to secondary roles.

NONPROFITS SURVEYED

Highlighting this indifference to older contributors is a 2005 survey of more than 800 executive directors and volunteer coordinators from 20 national nonprofits by RespectAbility, a program of the National Council on Aging that helps nonprofit groups make better use of older Americans (see www.respectability.org). Those polled expressed little interest in improving their organizations' efforts to attract and retain older adults, and fewer than half had confidence in the ability of their older volunteers to help coordinate and manage delivery of mission-driven community services.

"Although organization leaders often say they value the skills of older adults, in reality they have a lot of doubt about whether [older adults] can be leaders in their organizations," said Tom Endres, director of RespectAbility. "It's clear that if we're really going to bring older adults in, we're going to have to develop a more systematic, professional approach and offer a wider spectrum of opportunities."

Enders and others expressed concern that unless nonprofits start providing skilled boomers with opportunities to serve in high-impact roles, this talent pool might seek private-sector jobs with little community-service orientation. Although wide acceptance of older workers in the private sector has yet to emerge, a growing number of corporations, particularly in retail and healthcare, are creating the kinds of work settings and arrangements that appeal to mature employees. These businesses offer a variety of age-friendly programs, such as phased retirement, flexible hours, telecommuting, job sharing, compressed work weeks, retraining programs and "time off banks" of donated vacation time, which employees can use to care for family members.

"The private sector is ahead of the curve in this area, and the success they're having with older workers may awaken other sectors to their potential," said ASA's Cullinane. "The for-profit organizations represent a bigger lobbying force in terms of eliminating barriers."

The civic potential of older Americans could also be unleashed through government initiatives and incentives, such as tax credits for training that prepares people for service roles, expansion of successful service programs like the National Senior Service Corps (www.seniorcorps.org) and the Peace Corps (www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.whovol.older). Some feel government action may also be needed to remove employment barriers. "The resistance older workers face may be even greater than the employment discrimination women and African Americans faced, which took legislation to begin to erase," stated Cappelli. "The notion that things will take care of themselves isn't necessarily true."

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Public-education efforts could also build awareness—of both community involvement opportunities and the potential of older workers—and help sweep away barriers. To this end, several groups, including the federally funded Corporation for National and Community Service and the Harvard School of Public Health, have recently launched print and television advertising campaigns that urge boomers to give back to their communities through socially productive work.

"In a deliberative democracy, getting people to talk about things like civic engagement is the first step toward building support," says Robert Hudson, a professor of social work at Boston University and editor of the National Academy on an Aging Society's *Public Policy and Aging Report*. ♦

John Doxey is a writer based in San Francisco. This article is adapted from a background paper for media that he developed for the American Society on Aging with funding from Atlantic Philanthropies.