

Civic Engagement

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Background

In less than five years the United States will see the first wave of a total of 78 million “baby boomers” reach the age of 65. Everyone from government agencies to marketing experts and retailers to nonprofit organizations are waiting to see what these people do with their time and money.

By 2020, approximately one in six Americans will be 65 years of age or older. According to a 2006 report from the U.S. Census Bureau, Maine’s population is now the oldest in the nation. Currently 14.4% of Maine’s population is 65 years old or older (181,315 people) while the national average is 12.4%. These population changes are causing many nonprofit organizations across Maine and the nation to rethink how they can attract and retain volunteers. Some suggest we can expect an increase in civic engagement as the baby boomers move into retirement. Retirees who are members of the “baby boomer” generation will be the healthiest, longest-lived, best educated, and most affluent in history. “In a 1999 national survey, more than a third of the next generation of retirees said that “volunteering or being involved in community service” would be a “very important” part of their retirement”.ⁱ

At the December 2005 White House Conference on Aging, David Eisner, Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service said “We need to change our perceptions of aging and our expectations for people over 55. We have to learn to see older people as an asset not a burden.” To meet this challenge the Corporation for National and Community service is rethinking who they target for recruitment and the benefits offered through their community service programs.

The federal government first developed civic engagement programs designed around the assets offered by older adults in the mid 1960s by creating two volunteer programs: *Foster Grandparents* and the *Retired and Senior Volunteer Program*. This was followed by the creation of a third program, *Senior Companions*, in 1973. These three programs use civic engagement as a means of addressing community problems utilizing the skills and assets seniors’ possess.

A popular belief being examined about the coming wave of older adults is they will want to be civically engaged rather than sit back and watch the world go by. “...boomers will enter later life with many healthy, productive years ahead” and “have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by contributing to the civic life of their communities.”ⁱⁱ This has many nonprofit organizations eagerly anticipating a huge influx of volunteers while far sighted businesses see the potential for new employees to fill the projected labor gap.

Volunteers are an indispensable asset to nonprofit agencies. They provide skills, knowledge, access to resources and numerous other tangible and intangible benefits. The hope of many of the groups (nonprofit, government and research) who are watching the “baby boomers” is they will volunteer in record numbers. The financial value volunteers provide to an organization is significant. According to IndependentSector.org the estimated dollar value of volunteer time in Maine is \$14.08/hour.

Older adults today are healthier and more engaged than any generation before them. They bring a lifetime of experience and knowledge to everything they do. Many of today’s elders want to stay actively involved in their communities. Research has shown there are benefits to an

individual's health and well being when he/she is civically engaged. Older adults today provide more hours of volunteer service than any other age group. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service's report *Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings* nationally, individuals 65 years or older provided an annual average of 96 hours of community service in 2005 (see table 1, below).

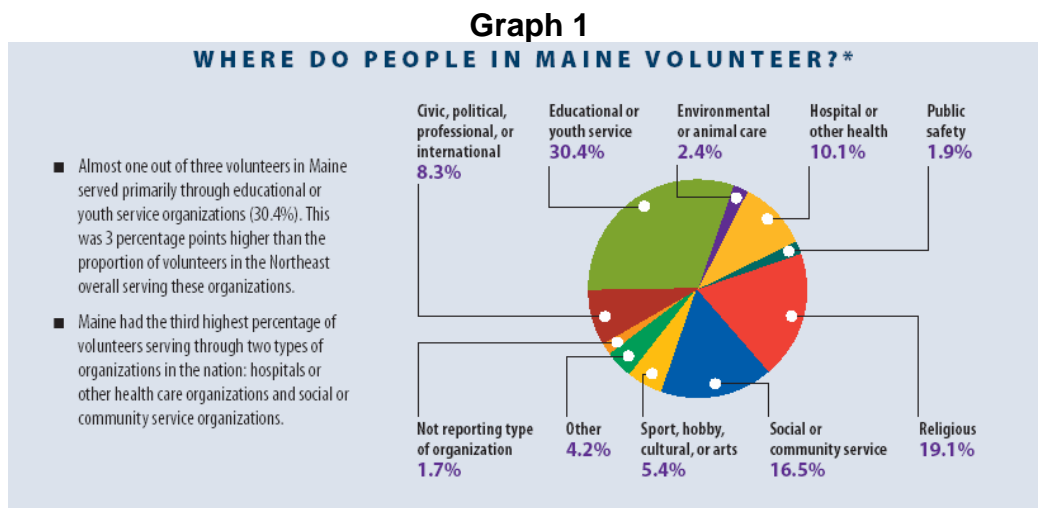
Table 1
U.S. VOLUNTEERING RATES AND ANNUAL HOURS PER TYPICAL VOLUNTEER, 2005

BY GENDER			BY RACE/ETHNICITY			BY AGE		
	Hours	Rate		Hours	Rate		Hours	Rate
Male:	52	25.0%	White:	50	30.4%	16 to 24 years:	36	24.4%
Female:	50	32.4%	Non-White:	50	22.0%	25 to 34 years:	36	25.3%
BY MARITAL STATUS			Black:	52	22.1%	35 to 44 years:	48	34.5%
Married:	52	34.1%	Asian:	40	20.7%	45 to 54 years:	50	32.7%
Other:	44	23.1%	Other:	50	23.7%	55 to 64 years:	56	30.2%
NATION			Hispanic:	40	15.4%	65 years and over:	96	24.8%
	50	28.8%						

Source: *Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings*, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006

In Maine individuals 65 years and older match the national average at 96 hours of service; and individuals 55-64 years of age provide 60 hours of annual service exceeding the national average of 56 hours of service annually.

As a whole, Mainer's volunteer with a large variety of organizations, as shown in Graph 1:



Source: *Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings*, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006

Problem Statement

What is meant by “civic engagement”? Many people limit civic engagement to volunteerism and community activism. Others contend it also includes being in the work force. For the purpose of this issue brief, we are primarily examining civic engagement as it relates to volunteerism and community activism. We do not intend to minimize the issue of older adults in the workforce by taking this approach. Many older adults will either wish to, or need to, remain in the work force. Older adult in the workforce is a significant issue that deserves to be examined separately from the topic of civic engagement.

There are two main questions about older adults and civic engagement which need to be addressed: 1) Will seniors seek to become civically engaged at the levels being anticipated? and 2) What are the best methods for attracting, engaging and retaining those who do choose to be civically engaged?

As attention is being focused on the aging of the “baby boomers,” we have seen an increase in research aimed at better understanding older adults and civic engagement. Researchers and experts on volunteer management are speculating “boomers” will want to become engaged as volunteers in record numbers. Many volunteer-driven organizations are counting on this. However, this speculation may be based on nothing more than hope and idealism. According to *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, a recent study from the Harvard School of Health and the MetLife Foundation, volunteerism peaks between the ages of 35-44 and declines from there. Their position is “the single biggest inducement to volunteerism is being asked by someone with whom one has an established relationship. Thus volunteering tends to be an extension of one’s family, work and social life, rather than something apart from it. After retirement, people are less likely to be asked to volunteer, and consequently, are less likely to do so.”ⁱⁱⁱ If this is true, how do we keep this group of people involved in our communities once they retire? If *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement* is correct and people are more likely to become involved with projects due to personal connections then the key will be for civic organizations to cultivate relationships with older adults while they are still working and not once they have retired (see Table 2).

It can be argued many older adults will behave the opposite of this by seeking out opportunities for civic engagement in order to find a level of social interaction similar to what they experienced prior to retirement. As was mentioned earlier, research has shown a connection between social interaction and health benefits, both physical and emotional. Considering older adults today are better educated, we can expect many will be aware of these findings and will want to take advantage of them.

Trends

- The dollar value, per hour, of volunteer work – U.S. \$18.04; Maine \$14.08. Maine ranks 21st with 25.8% of older adults volunteering^{iv}
- Among “baby boomers” nationally Maine ranks 15th with 38.4% volunteering^v
- “Baby boomers” are showing a preference for non traditional volunteer opportunities, (i.e., episodic, problem solving, short term, and personal fulfillment- oriented activities)
- According to the 2005 Annual Report, Maine Senior Corps had 2,585 volunteers serving a total of 636,564 hours

- Older adults tend to change to volunteering for faith-based organizations as they get age^{vi}
- Among older adults, women have more commonly filled volunteer roles.
- Nationally, people 55-64 volunteered 56 hours in 2005; people 65 and older volunteered 96 hours, which is significantly higher than any other age group.^{vii}
- Many “baby boomers” may have been influenced by the idealism expressed by President John F. Kennedy when he said “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” According to an AARP survey, 48% of working adults 45 and older say they volunteer.

Options

Significant questions relate to why older adults in Maine become and stay civically involved. To understand the issue better, a range of well informed individuals on civic engagement were spoken to in the state. These key informants represent a variety of nonprofit organizations, including: Maine state government, United Way, national service programs and local nonprofits.

When asked what benefits older adults provide to nonprofit organizations, the consistent theme heard from these experts is that elders bring a strong work ethic, vast experience, and a sense of civic duty with them. According to Jaime Comstock, Community Impact Associate with the United Way of Eastern Maine, “Their expertise is critical to the success of volunteer initiatives and programs.” Ken Murray, Director of Volunteer Services for the Southern Maine Agency on Aging sees older adults as possessing “an acute sense of civic responsibility” and “strong work ethic, and they take their volunteer assignments very seriously.” Elders 75 years and older today are a part of what our culture is referring to as the “Greatest Generation”. Their sense of civic responsibility and work ethic were formed by the profound experiences they had growing up and as adults. They have seen America go from the abject poverty of the Great Depression to the consumer-driven post World War II economic boom; they witnessed America’s parades to welcome our troops home after World War II and then saw soldiers being spat on and yelled at as they returned from service in Vietnam; they experienced the idealism of the Kennedy years and the embarrassment of Watergate. They have seen our society at its best and its worst and choose to work to make it better. Many of these individuals have been actively engaged in the daily life of their communities: from belonging to service organizations such as Kiwanis and the Freemasons, to political activism, to grass roots support for social activism. These shared cultural experiences appear to have created a consistent social identity for this age group.

When our survey participants were asked how they engage older adults, they uniformly said elders respond to many of the same inducements and motivators as other age groups:

- They want to feel that they are part of the organization’s team.
- They want to be recognized for their accomplishments and be given support.
- Volunteer managers need to periodically touch base with them to see if they are still happy with their volunteer position.
- Older adults want to be provided with opportunities for increased training and sharing of experiences.
- Like any other age group, older adults want to be able to fully share their skills, knowledge and experience.

During the month of August 2006, 15 forums were held across the State of Maine for seniors to express their viewpoints on the issues being discussed at the Blaine House Conference on Aging. Among the most consistent recommendations heard from participants attending the forums were:

- Employers should encourage their staff to participate in civic activities/volunteerism beyond “Day of Caring” programs.
- Increased acknowledgement/recognition is needed for the services older adults provide as volunteers.
- Increased opportunities for young and old to partner as volunteers are important.
- Financial and tax incentives should be developed to expand and reward volunteerism. Some examples provided were: improved mileage reimbursement and tax breaks for businesses who allow employees time off to volunteer.
- Information about opportunities for civic engagement need to be presented in more locations and forms above and beyond the internet. Many older adults do not have computers and depend on traditional printed materials and word-of-mouth to learn about their options. While forum participants expressed support for Volunteermaine.org and similar initiatives, they felt these websites needed better support and promotion by the state and United Ways.

Some observations to consider in appreciating what may be unique to “baby boomers” and adults over the age of 65 are:

- The two generations over 55 will re-engage in the activism and organizing behavior they showed as young adults if they experience barriers associated with traditional programs. Mary Alice Crofton, Director of the Maine Commission on Community Service, has already observed instances where older adults started their own programs to meet a need when traditional agencies couldn’t do it.
- They are more likely to be attracted to “signature” programs and not the standard volunteer opportunities. “Boomers” want to do more than stuff envelopes and ask their friends for donations. It is likely that “boomers” won’t be satisfied stuffing envelopes. According to Jay Winsten of the Harvard School of Public Health “boomers have expectations as to the kind of useful roles they can play in helping organizations.” Older adults bring a wealth of experience and skills to civic engagement and want to use those skills as much as a young person looks for opportunities to develop those skills.
- Older adults appear to be leaning away from traditional long-term civic commitments and toward short term, even episodic assignments. Many older people today have a flexible lifestyle and want to be involved with organizations which allow them to enjoy this lifestyle. Whether they are living in another state, or on the road, for part of the year or visiting family members for prolonged periods, older adults want to be able to pick up and go without worrying about committees and event planning.
- Many elders want to see the impact of their efforts and do more than fundraising.
- 45% of individuals 65+ volunteered with religious organizations in 2005. Social and community service ranked second at 18%.^{viii}
- Don’t assume because an individual was a business executive that he/she will want to take a leadership role. He/she may be tired of leading and want to be a follower or an advisor. Elders want the chance to learn and grow as much as individuals in any other age group.

Barriers

As the first group of “baby boomers” prepares to enter retirement, there is an increasing expectation that not only will these individuals become involved with civic organizations, but they *should* become involved. Whether this expectation is based on the health benefits of civic engagement or the need for volunteers to fill the gaps created by decreasing government funding, it has the potential to negatively impact on some older citizens: those who either cannot or choose not to be involved. Many older persons will not be able to volunteer due to health and medical issues (their own and/or those of a family member). In 2005, 46.5% of people 65+ cited health and medical problems as the most significant barrier to volunteering. In a distant second place was lack of time at 12.4%.^{ix} Others may choose not to volunteer, and still others may not be able to volunteer due to their need to work. It is important to be cautious about marginalizing these individuals for not meeting the expectation to be involved in civic activities.

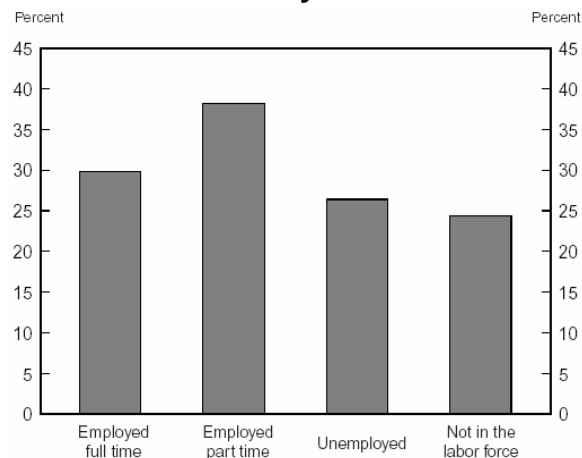
Health and medical issues are among the most significant barriers to civic engagement. But should they be? If we are looking at the traditional model of civic engagement where an individual goes to a set location, such as a soup kitchen or an office, to volunteer then health/medical issues can represent significant barriers. This is especially true in a rural state, with limited public transportation, such as Maine. According to Betty Lee Streckfuss, WHCoA delegate member of the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature, Spring, Texas, “Volunteer programs which make adjustments for volunteers with diminishing physical capacity and extend beyond social, economic and ethnic constraints, are noticeably missing.” Civic organizations need to look for ways to adapt to these challenges and not simply accept them as the status quo. In many instances we can overcome these barriers by thinking creatively. For example:

- If someone is home bound, they can:
 - Provide editorial support for publications
 - Handle phone calls to help coordinate a special event/fund raiser
 - Coordinate volunteer schedules
- If someone is in a caretaker role, organizations can look for ways to provide respite care through an agency or possibly by having volunteers who are caretakers take turns providing respite for each other
- If transportation is the issue
 - Arrange car pooling among volunteers
 - Staff members may be able to pick up volunteers on the way into work
- Find ways to use technology to create opportunities for civic engagement

Our society is seeing an increase in the number of people who are taking on a caretaker role later in life. The most common situation is when a spouse/partner becomes ill and needs assistance. But many older adults are now being forced to take on the role of parent again as they raise their grandchildren. This situation has become so significant that in New York City a new housing complex has been created exclusively for grandparents raising grandchildren. The intent is to provide an informal support system of individuals, for both the elders and the children. Being a caretaker limits an individual’s ability to take on responsibilities outside the home.

While there will be older adults who choose to remain in the workforce, there will also be a large number who will need to remain in the workforce out of financial necessity. Not all older adults have enjoyed the affluence of the “boomers”. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s *2005 American Community Survey*, over 11,000 Mainers 55 and older, live below the federal poverty level. These individuals and tens of thousands of others who can be classed as the “working poor” will not have the luxury of retirement at 65. They will continue to work full and part-time jobs. For them, civic engagement will be secondary to survival.

Table 2: Volunteer Rates by Labor Force Status, 2005



Source: *Volunteering in the United States, 2005*, U.S. Department of Labor

It is important to remember that similar to any other age group, the only trait older adults truly have in common is their age. “They can not be treated as one class of people but need to be offered a variety of volunteer opportunities” says Maryalice Crofton, Director of the Maine Commission for Community Service. Ken Murray, Director of Volunteer Service at the Southern Maine Agency on Aging, elaborates on this by pointing out that we should deemphasize the words “seniors” and “retired” when we are trying to recruit these individuals. When searching for opportunities for civic engagement we all want to be seen for the skills and knowledge we provide not our membership in a particular demographic group.

It is imperative for civic organizations that use volunteers to develop a strong volunteer program based on matching organizational needs with volunteer skills and interests and not simply resort to placing bodies in open spaces. “Early evidence suggests an alarming mismatch between the skills, time commitments, and interests of the “boomers” and available opportunities, both paid and unpaid. Volunteers are usually assigned to marginal roles, with little management oversight or responsibility. A recent survey of nonprofit organizations found virtually no long-term plans to recruit or retain older workers or volunteers.”^x

Implications

We are witnessing significant changes in Maine’s population that will culminate over the next 15-20 years. Simply stated, our population is getting older. This is due in part to younger residents leaving the state but also because we are seeing an increase in the number of older adults choosing to retire in Maine. The potential benefits to both individuals and organizations are remarkable:

- Research has shown civic engagement can have a positive impact on an individual's health, while at the same time resulting in organizations benefiting from the experience, knowledge and skills provided by this cohort of volunteers.
- Civic organizations could have an expanded pool of motivated and capable individuals to assist them in achieving their mission.
- Communities will be able to benefit from the expanded impact of this wave of volunteers. We could see: reductions in youth crime due to increased mentoring programs; increased respite and hospice programs; older candidates for political office; and the expansion of supports for caregivers to name just a few possibilities.

Volunteer managers and program administrators must not lose sight of the fact that “boomers” and older adults are comprised of individuals first and members of an age cohort second. These individuals want to be treated with the same respect and acknowledged for their individual achievements like members of any other group. As organizations seek to involve older adults, they will want to be sensitive to what they are offering: is the opportunity short-term or long-term; will it offer a chance to use the volunteer's skills and knowledge to their fullest potential or only meet the organization's needs; what benefit will older adults get from participating; what accommodations can be made to make volunteering more accessible?

- As government funding is cut for social services, the need for volunteers to fill these gaps is increasing. An emphasis is being placed on older adults to fill these roles.
- If we do not educate and inform older adults about the variety of volunteer opportunities available to them, we will underutilize them and possibly lose a significant and valuable resource.
- By creating an expectation that older adults should remain civically engaged we run the risk of undervaluing those who can not or choose not to participate. Civic engagement should be viewed as an opportunity not a necessity.

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- Phil Shea, President, AARP DownEast Chapter, Ellsworth

Endnotes

- ⁱ *2005 White House Conference on Aging Listening Session*; O'Neill, Dr. Greg, Director, National Academy on an Aging Society; Thursday, September 9, 2004.
- ⁱⁱ *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, Harvard School of Public Health-MetLife Foundation, 2004, p.8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, Harvard School of Public Health-MetLife Foundation, 2004, p. 19.
- ^{iv} *Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings*, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006, p.15.
- ^v *Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings*, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006, p. 17.
- ^{vi} *Volunteering in the United States*, 2005, United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington D.C., December 9, 2005, Table 4.
- ^{vii} *Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings*, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006, p.8.
- ^{viii} *News*, United States Dept of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Volunteering in the United States 2005*, December 2005, Table 4.
- ^{ix} *News*, United states Dept of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Volunteering in the United States 2005*, December 2005, Table 7.
- ^x *2005 White House Conference on Aging Listening Session*; O'Neill, Dr. Greg, Director, National Academy on an Aging Society; Thursday, September 9, 2004.