

NGA Policy Academy on Civic Engagement

Civically Engaging the Older Adult Population in New York: Issues and Considerations in Older Adult Volunteerism

Introduction

The demographic shift that New York State is experiencing with its growing older population, particularly the aging of the Baby Boom generation into the elder cohort, presents challenges – as well as opportunities – for engaging the country’s “only growing natural resource.” Creating and reinforcing meaningful civic engagement opportunities for aging adults will benefit both their own personal health, as well as the communities in which they are involved. However, doing so will require innovative recruitment and retention techniques, the development of an infrastructure that accurately matches volunteers with their unique talents and interests, and an overall restructuring of what volunteering looks like and means. There is no precedent from which to model and no standard that will adequately address all the needs of the target population, as the current cohort is a heterogeneous, culturally diverse group with attitudes and beliefs that are different from any generation before them. However, extensive research on civic engagement techniques presents a variety of options and models, with some outstanding commonalities, that are available to guide current and future initiatives. Additionally, it is important to note that, while the Baby Boomers receive a great deal of attention in the research, concepts and information about civically engaging older generations is less extensively reported.

Issues in Recruitment and Retention of Older Adult Volunteers

The needs of the current aging population are different from generations before. One challenge is going to be finding and matching volunteer opportunities with the skills of the population. In many cases, volunteers are looking to make a discernable impact in a professional position, as opposed to low-impact, more traditional opportunities (e.g., stuffing envelopes). Additionally, most organizations, especially smaller ones, do not have the financial resources to employ a “volunteer director,” do not have training opportunities for recruited volunteers, do not have available transportation, nor do they have the money to reimburse for mileage, meals, and other incurred expenses. Further, older Americans are largely unaware of volunteer opportunities, have not been asked to become civically engaged and often lack volunteer opportunities in their neighborhoods.

Finally, recruitment of older adult volunteers needs to be all-encompassing. Volunteers are not only Baby Boomers with a safe retirement income who are healthy and have ample time to provide. Sub-groups exist of low-income elderly who need to remain in the workforce or receive subsidies akin to traditional volunteering models, as well as generations older than Baby Boomers who are still mobile and capable of contributing when there is an appropriate position available, but may engage for different reasons, such as companionship and maintaining physical and mental vitality.

Common Themes and Best Practices

Consistently throughout the research and literature, a common theme that emerged was the lack of awareness of opportunities for volunteering. More aggressive techniques such as mailing volunteer opportunities with utility bills, ads in the employment section, newspaper articles and creating a government fund to disperse stipends to organizations to be used for volunteer recruitment and retention are viable options. However, overwhelmingly the literature suggested that to overcome recruitment problems that stem from a lack of awareness, a user-friendly infrastructure needs to be implemented that can connect older Americans not just with volunteer opportunities in general, but with those that match their skills, needs, and desired time commitment with meaningful volunteer experiences. Volunteer opportunities that allow a flexible schedule, the chance to learn new skills and be challenged, are well organized and meet the volunteer's reasons for volunteering (i.e. social, to "give back", to engage in the community) are ideal. Specifically for the Baby Boomers, there is a desire for short-term projects that are high-impact and have discernable results.

Other effective mechanisms for recruiting and retaining volunteers involve the use of incentives. Incentives can be traditional in nature (e.g., meal vouchers, mileage reimbursement, transportation/ transportation discounts and small stipends). Other, more innovative incentive techniques include a "time- dollar" approach where hours spent volunteering can then be translated into good or services for themselves. Additional financial incentives include giving discounts on prescription medication, real estate abatements, tax credits and raising the current mileage reimbursement. A potential government- based incentive program includes allowing aging adults that volunteer to earn higher education credits or scholarships, which can then be transferred to younger adults for their own educational use.

Making systematic changes in the way that volunteering is carried out also is important. For example, intergenerational volunteer programs are dually beneficial in that both populations can learn and grow by working with each other. Flexibility issues can be addressed through a "buddy-system" where volunteer pairs share the designated time either seasonally to account for some volunteers travelling for months at a time or even weekly. Organizations can create coalitions to reduce overhead costs (i.e. shared transportation and background checks), creation of a larger volunteer base that may individually contribute fewer hours, but overall provide the same amount of work and join with local universities and colleges to develop volunteer training institutes. Further, an underutilized resource for recruiting retired volunteers is to engage them while still in the workforce, if they begin volunteering during that time, they will be more likely to continue to do so when they officially retire. This initial volunteering may prevent the retiree from filling their schedule with other activities or becoming stationary and reluctant to engage in volunteer opportunities. If volunteering while still in the workforce is not possible, in the same way that employees near the end of their career engage in retirement planning for their finances, they should be encouraged to engage in civic engagement planning.

Older Americans may be encouraged to volunteer to help their fellow cohort or those older than themselves to remain in their homes by creating a culture that focuses on the circular nature of volunteering, meaning that older Americans are engaged and trained to help other older adults

with daily living tasks, with the understanding that when they are in need of help later in life, a volunteer will come to their aid and allow them to remain in their homes longer. An additional aspect of in-home care volunteering concerns retired health care professionals. Policy changes could be made that adapt licensing, education and supervision requirements for retired healthcare professionals under the provision that they are actively volunteering. Volunteers could receive healthcare benefits and travel reimbursement for their work.

Discussion and Summary

Overall, the literature revealed a common emphasis on the importance of connecting volunteers with opportunities that support their skills and needs. A key indicator of whether a volunteer would make a commitment and remain volunteering was in the meaning that the volunteer placed on the experience, and whether or not they felt that their presence was important and made a difference in the organizational functioning or another person's life. Regarding recruitment, to combat reports that aging Americans do not volunteer because they are not aware of opportunities, the creation of one reliable and accessible gateway to opportunities that is developed specifically for the aging population is imperative.

Aside from logistical, systematic, and policy changes that can be made to improve recruitment and retention, the underlying transformation that needs to occur addresses the greater issues of what volunteerism looks like and means, and the value placed on aging Americans and their contributions. The mental image of volunteers serving soup in a community kitchen has changed. There is still room for traditional volunteering, and still those that wish to perform such tasks; however, there also is a large number who will volunteer in managerial positions, lead teams and projects, and become mentors and community leaders. Agencies must learn to market opportunities in positive terms – as opposed to filling organizational gaps, deficits, or problem areas – and also need to be aware of older Americans who may be reluctant to volunteer because they fear an ageist response. Before volunteer opportunities can be created that provide meaningful experiences for older Americans, the perception that they have the ability to contribute meaningfully has to be established. Civic engagement should become to Americans not just an activity for altruistic individuals, but the norm for the country and local communities, because volunteering begins locally. To do so will involve national marketing efforts that portray the elderly as vibrant sources of knowledge, energy, and skills who are assets to growth as opposed to impositions and drains on the economy. Managers and organizational leaders should be educated on the value of older volunteers as mentors and innovators. Federal and state policies need to reflect such views, and older Americans should be engaged in the planning and developing process. The demographic change happening now and in upcoming years is unprecedented, and although this change poses challenges, it also offers opportunity for a new definition of civic engagement and a new definition of what it means to retire.