

Volunteerism

Volunteerism is regarded as one measure of social capital and thus an indicator of a healthy civil society. In 2003, the World Bank defined social capital as “not just the sum of the institutions which under-pin a society – it is the glue that holds them together.”

Older adult volunteers are not just a component of social capital. Volunteerism has also been shown to improve their personal health. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Aging and Health, in their 2004 study of the Experience Corps, found that older adults who volunteer not only improve the educational experience of children, but realize meaningful improvements in their own mental and physical health. (18)

The Commission believes that the extraordinary, growing, and diverse group of new retirees will need a wide range of high-quality options if we are able to harness their great resources on behalf of our communities. Simply expanding volunteer opportunities in existing agencies will not be enough.

The Commission considered the following issues when developing its recommendations:

- **The importance of recognizing the different needs of older people based on income, area of residence, and ethnic, racial, and cultural issues.**
- **The importance of flexibility in establishing schedules that meet the needs of older adults.**
- **The importance of recognizing the needs of older adults with caregiving responsibilities that may deter their volunteerism or employment.**
- **The needs of some older adults for transportation services that enable them to volunteer and become employed.**
- **The importance of good training, support, and supervision in the development of volunteer programs for older adults.**

Existing volunteerism programs are invaluable and need to be expanded but they are just scratching the surface of the potential of an organized mobilization of retirees. Many organizations report shortages in the supply of volunteers to fill vital, existing roles such as in the Foster Grandparents Program, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Response Hotline, Literacy Volunteers, and the Long Island Mentoring Partnership. According to recent research on the subject, most nonprofit leaders have few plans, if any, to tap into the retiree pool. Furthermore, a 2003 Fortune magazine article, “Candy Stripper, My Ass,” depicts the frustration of highly qualified managers to apply their talents in the nonprofit world. (14)

County and town governments throughout the nation, including Suffolk County, deploy older adults as mentors, health care practitioners and educators, crime prevention aides, environmental educators and tour guides, human rights advocates, recreation program aides, advisors in the development of small businesses, code enforcement aides, court monitors, tutors, and in many other capacities.

Suffolk County has recognized the value that volunteers bring to government. In 1991, the then-County Executive established detailed standard operating procedures for volunteer assistance in its departments (Standard Operating Procedure # B – 03 of 2001). According to the S.O.P.: “ Suffolk County has the right to utilize volunteers as long as these volunteers do not take any jobs away from the Suffolk County workforce and as long as no employees laid off are replaced by a volunteer. This procedure applies to all present and future volunteer programs.”

Mature, motivated, and skilled older adult volunteers are especially important in this time of economic challenges to County government and the taxpayers that pay the bills. They present a talent pool that can augment the work of full-time employees, in both the public and private sectors, and enable government and its contract agencies to reduce the need to curtail valuable services.

According to the Independent Sector study, the average older adult volunteer works an average of 3.3 hours per week. If we assume that he/she volunteers forty weeks per year, this results in 132 hours per year. At the average hourly volunteer wage (calculated in 2002 by Independent Sector) of \$17.19, this produces \$2,269 per year/per volunteer. If we project a goal of recruiting and placing 500 older persons into new volunteer assignments, both inside of government and the non-profit service sector, this means \$1,134,540 of annual volunteer productivity and social capital. Further, the benefit to Suffolk County not-for-profit organizations in terms of fulfilling their missions would be a multiple of that amount.

Recommended Action Strategies

- Organize an annual county-wide volunteerism publicity campaign from the County Executive’s office encouraging County employees, retirees, and employees in the public and private sector to volunteer. The campaign should include volunteerism directly in government and in the not-for-profit sector. The campaign should work closely with RSVP and the Foster Grandparents Program in recruiting older adult volunteers.
- Initiate an effort to establish a Volunteer Clearinghouse for volunteers of all ages. The clearinghouse would match potential volunteers with opportunities in the private and public sector. This would not be a screening service but rather a matching service. This recommendation may require funding through grant writing. It is hoped that there would be corporate interest in launching the clearinghouse, which would require a small, dedicated staff.

The clearinghouse would be accessible on the Internet, by telephone and through office visits. Initially, study should be conducted of what similar programs may exist; the collection of data; and the design and implementation of the system's logistics.

Public Policy

The Commission is concerned about age discrimination and age restricted housing which it feels is a trend that should be a concern as it isolates the young from the older. It recognizes the fact that retirees on fixed incomes often have a hard time making ends meet due to increases in the costs of property taxes, health care, gasoline prices, and home heating oil.

The Commission sees the growing population of older adults in Suffolk County as requiring an expanded pool of long term care workers. The growing need is matched by a shrinkage in the pool of available long term care workers, especially Certified Nursing Assistants, Home Companions, and Home Care Aides. This worker shortage must be addressed before it grows into a crisis. For this reason, we applaud the efforts of Good Samaritan Hospital in partnering with Suffolk Community College in a pilot project aimed at helping to meet the nursing shortage and another program at Suffolk Community College for direct care workers employed in developmental disabilities programs.

The Commission also has concern that tremendous burdens will increasingly be placed on older family members to care for the frail and impaired. This population needs a variety of social care services like shopping, feeding, bathing, driving, and other normal activities of daily life, that without them, increase the likelihood of medical and acute care interventions and institutionalization. The average 21st-century Suffolk County resident will actually spend more years caring for parents than for children. Adult children account for the largest proportion of caregivers. Asian American, African American, and Hispanic American households tend to be more involved in caregiving than the general population. (52)

Recommended Action Strategies

- Each County department should conduct an internal review of its priorities and programs in light of the significant demographic shift to an aging Suffolk County. In addition to assessing how this growing aging population will impact on programs and services provided by each department, departments should consider how to better utilize retired seniors as assets to supplement their department's staffing needs. Town governments, private agencies, and businesses could follow the County's leadership in this regard, reassessing their own programs and priorities. The County Department of Parks and Recreation represents one working model of retiree deployment by involving them in seasonal employment.