



Engaging Our Elders: The Power and Potential of Senior Volunteerism

In [Understanding the Motivations of Baby Boomer Volunteers](#), the national volunteerism support organization [AmeriCorps](#) argued, based on 2004 data, that volunteer opportunities “must be expanded and diversified in order to appeal to the 35 million people who are already over 65 and the 79 million baby boomers who are transitioning from primary careers and family building.” Today, the number of Americans over the age of 65 has risen significantly, to [56 million](#); within 40 years, that number is projected to rise to 94.7 million.

As researchers, the question of how nonprofit organizations can proactively design volunteer programs to be attractive to, and specifically supportive of, this fast-growing segment of our society is compelling. The [Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration](#) conducted in-depth research with volunteer program leaders across the midwestern US, and we believe our findings are relevant nationally. This article contains select highlights, and the full 28-page study is available [here](#).

Easier to Recruit, Deploy, and Retain

The data suggest that one reason to prioritize senior volunteers is the relative ease of recruiting and deploying them. Sixty-one percent of respondents say senior volunteers are easier to recruit than younger volunteers. And, once recruited, seniors can provide a stable base of support to an organization. Regarding volunteers who are 65–74 years old, our research found:

- 89 percent report this age group to be “very reliable”
- 76 percent report this age group to be “willing to work on a regular schedule”
- 75 percent report this age group to be “willing to do what’s needed”
- 74 percent report this age group to be “willing to volunteer more hours per week than younger volunteers”

Finally, the investment in recruitment and thoughtful deployment of senior volunteers proves to be a good use of staff time: Seventy-six percent of our respondents report that senior volunteers are easier to retain than their younger counterparts.

Unique Advantages and Challenges

Seniors bring a potent set of advantages with them into the volunteer workforce of an organization. Regarding volunteers who are 65–74 years old, our research found:

- 83 percent report these volunteers' "life experience" to be an advantage
- 79 percent report these volunteers' "useful skills" to be an advantage
- 58 percent report these volunteers' "in-depth knowledge of organizational background, history, or culture" to be an advantage

Respondents also report challenges in working with senior volunteers that are unique to, or more common than with younger volunteers, although challenges are less frequent than the advantages outlined above. Among the most frequent challenges reported are physical/health-related, use of technology, and seasonality in desired volunteer work, with this last finding likely more common to regions with extreme weather.

Understanding Seniors' Motivations

According to the volunteer program leaders in our study, it is important to recognize and understand why seniors are drawn to volunteerism, as well as what concerns may prevent them from engaging. The reasons that seniors may want to volunteer include:

- to meet new people
- the satisfaction of giving back to their community
- to cope with feelings of inactivity or isolation
- to pass on knowledge or experience they have gained

Reasons seniors may not want to volunteer include:

- fear of demeaning assignments
- not wanting to be supervised by someone younger than themselves
- feeling burnt out after a lifetime of work
- being too busy with family or other obligations

Employing recruitment and retention efforts that speak directly to seniors' motivations and concerns will increase the likelihood that seniors will value the program and promote it to their friends, which is critical given that recruiting seniors from social networks was the most successful strategy for gaining new senior volunteers, according to 83 percent of respondents.

Cross-Generational Volunteerism

The professionals we heard from imparted to us the importance of intergenerational collaboration where volunteers of all ages are mingling and collaborating with one another. Often, intergenerational collaboration can be accomplished by avoiding limiting volunteer tasks to certain age groups. When volunteers of all ages intermingle, an effective environment is created that supports the organization. Volunteers from different generations bring an eclectic blend of knowledge, skills, and experience to an organization.

Senior volunteerism, thoughtfully managed, represents a powerful strategy to counter the all-too-common marginalization of older people in the US while significantly boosting the capacity of nonprofit organizations to serve their communities. And according to [research by the Corporation for National and Community Service \(CNCS\)](#), the federal agency that oversees AmeriCorps and other federal volunteer and service support programs, it can literally improve lives. As the agency reports, "Senior Corps volunteers report much higher self-rated health scores, which is considered a valid marker of actual health, compared to older adults in similar circumstances who do not volunteer. They also reported feeling significantly less depressed and isolated compared to non-volunteers."

In short, the opportunity is there both to design volunteer programs that intentionally tap the considerable strengths of seniors and to foster nonprofit organizational cultures that welcome and celebrate seniors' contributions.—Joshua Braverman and Ryan Kaitz

Note: *The authors conducted this study as research interns at the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration and gratefully acknowledge the editing, guidance, and supervision provided by Karmit J. Bulman, Esq., Executive Director.*

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/engaging-our-elders-the-power-and-potential-of-senior-volunteerism/>