Volunteerism and Older Adults

The Oregon Office of Economic Analysis (2011) predicts that by 2020 there will be a 48 percent increase in the number of Oregonians over age 65 compared to 2010. That is nearly a doubling of the population in a decade. At the same time, the 18-64 year old workforce will not grow fast enough to fill in the vacancies left by retirees, resulting in a labor shortage\(^1\). Recruiting elders to participate as volunteers is one way that the labor shortage can be addressed.

Currently older volunteers serve as companions to other elders in their communities, tutor school children, act as foster grandparents for children with disabilities, and promote early literacy to children\(^2\). Elder volunteers find connections to volunteer opportunities through non-profit organizations that partner with local governments and higher education institutions, such as community colleges.

In many non-profits, new roles such as community health coaches, peer counselors and high level literacy tutors are funding entirely outside of any government system. In addition, there appears to be an increase in the extent to which Grandparents are primary caregivers for grandchildren. Many non formal roles exist in our communities that are not classified as formal “volunteer” roles, however, the presence and function of those who are 55 + in non paid, or minimally compensated roles is clear. For example, in a 2007 study, The Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy indicates that 49% of Board members are over 55 years old.

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and Senior Companions are two of the most popular volunteer efforts that generate funding from the Federal government through Senior Corps. In addition to Federally funded programs, grants for the intergenerational programs, where seniors work with differing age groups are available through national non-profit organizations and partnerships. Grants and Federal funding make it possible for retired volunteers to receive a tax-exempt stipend for their work, as well as gas and mileage reimbursements. AmeriCorps supports stipends for individuals of all ages, as long as the funds are authorized through an entity such as the Corporation for National and Community Service.


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Retirees from professional backgrounds offer their talents, without charge to support small business managers through programs such as SCORE, [www.score.org](http://www.score.org).

Recently, “Encore Careers” have started to take hold in the non-profit sector, with retired professionals bringing their expertise into non-profit organizations to build capacity in areas that are difficult for non-profits to finance. Encore fellows ([www.encore.org](http://www.encore.org)) provide 1,000 hours of service at a non-profit salary rate, funded through a 50% match between a for-profit employer and the non-profit accepting the Encore fellow. Encore Fellows program is operated in Portland by Social Ventures Partners of Portland (SVPP). A model similar to Encore Fellows, known as ReServe, operates outside of Oregon in a number states.

Monetary benefits extend beyond the volunteers to the states and communities in which they serve. Washington County, Oregon recorded almost 51,000 hours of service from their RSVP programs, resulting in $1,032,750 of donated time in 2009. In 2010, the national volunteer group Senior Corps provided $2 billion worth of service. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that volunteers who committed at least 40 hours a year to a single cause lived longer lives, had better cognition and mental well-being, were less likely to suffer from depression, and experienced improved well-being in comparison to elders who did not volunteer (2010).

With the combination of cost savings and improved health outcomes of older volunteers organizations such as Community Experience Partnership and Senior Corps are expanding their outreach efforts to get retirees involved. Some of the challenges associated with elder volunteer participation include access to transportation, especially among rural residents who cannot drive, as well as decreased physical mobility. The challenges have not deterred the programs from recruiting new volunteers, however; instead organizations have fostered new community partnerships and encouraged older adults to be involved at various levels of service.

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