Tompkins County
Office for the Aging

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Strategic Planning - 2014
Volunteerism, Civic Engagement and Education

A Consensus Conference on the topic of Volunteerism, Civic Engagement and Education was convened at the Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC) on June 12, 2014. Marcia Forte, Director of GIAC and Diane Dawson, CEO of Lifelong facilitated the meeting. Participants included:

Irene Gleason
Martha Smith
Ruth Katz
Jennie Graham
Nancy Bereano
Sandy Voorheis
Robin Dubovi
Stephen Griffin
Vally Kovary
Zach Nelson
Lisa Holmes
Trina Schickel

The following is a summary of the discussion and findings of this Consensus Conference.

Introduction and Demographics

Between 2000 and 2010, the Census shows a 89% increase in people between the ages of 60 and 64 and a 34% increase in people over the age of 60. The growth of this demographic and of the Baby Boomers in particular, has tremendous implications for the future of Volunteerism, Civic Engagement and Education. Tompkins County includes a growing population of older adults who may or may not be retired, and who are looking to remain active and engaged in their communities and neighborhoods. They may also, though working or retired, be constrained by their own caregiving responsibilities for parents, children or grandchildren

Strengths and Highlights

Tompkins County is a community rich in both educational and cultural resources. Cornell University, Ithaca College and Tompkins Cortland Community College offer a multitude of opportunities for older adults to experience and take part in educational, cultural and community events that appeal to this community of often self-described "life-long learners." Ithaca College has a unique partnership with Longview, allowing residents to attend classes and performances and use the facilities of the College for free. Lifelong offers technology classes in conjunction with the New Roots School, Ithaca College and Cornell students.

 Tompkins County benefits from a strong network of non-profit organizations. We see agencies such as Lifelong extending its reach to the rural edges of the County where exercise and yoga classes are made available, as well as over 200 classes a year offered on site.   These classes are mentally, physically, socially and creatively stimulating. Foodnet touches the lives of older adults throughout the County with daily personal delivery of nutritious meals to seniors. The City of Ithaca supports the Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC) Senior Program, helping to make it possible for older adults to socialize and stay connected. The County supports the many programs and services of the Office for the Aging. A variety of housing options exist for older adults and we are currently seeing even more options emerging.

There is a need to talk about volunteer opportunities before people retire, and Cornell University offers workshops to employees on the transition to retirement which are fully subscribed.   Additionally, Lifelong offers the "Lifelong Transitions" classes designed specifically for pre-retirees opening up even more community resources.

Additionally, our County has a long history of activism and philanthropy which has benefited our citizens. Older adults may well be looking to stay engaged and connected and there are numerous opportunities available to them.   The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) matches people's skills and abilities with available volunteer needs at local not-for profits. The United Way, the Office for the Aging, Hospicare and the Cancer Resource Center to name only a few, have volunteer options for those interested in becoming involved. Some organizations offer very strong training and support to their volunteers. The 211 Information and Referral line is a resource that can help connect people with volunteer opportunities.

Challenges and Opportunities

Baby Boomers do not necessarily self-identify as seniors and therefore organizations will need to be mindful of that fact when trying to reach this population.

Despite the fact that Tompkins County has a long history of activism, there are still groups of people who have not been reached or involved as much as they might like. Organizations will need to develop strategies to reach deeper into the population and to be cognizant of using visible and inclusive language when doing so. A personal approach is always optimal.

When looking at the challenges Tompkins County may confront, it is obvious that our weather can be a challenge, particularly for older drivers or even walkers who may hesitate to venture out in inclement weather.

There is also a need to decentralize opportunities so that citizens don't feel that the City of Ithaca is the only place where they can get involved. Transportation and parking can often present as a deterrent for older adults to get involved. In the rural areas, transportation is more limited and in the City parking can be a challenge. The colleges in particular present difficulties for older adults and/or rural residents who may not know where or even if you are allowed to park on the campuses.

Coming with the sharp rise in the 60 plus population, many of our citizens are approaching retirement and would benefit from knowing about what opportunities may be available to them before they retire. Retirement can be an unsettling experience for people after having worked for 40 or more years. Making this information available early can be helpful as employees transition from work to retirement, and can help to capitalize on all their valuable work skills. A centralized platform for accessing volunteer opportunities would be useful, as would workshops presenting volunteer opportunities within the community.

Our local non-profit organizations often lack the infrastructure to recruit, train and support volunteers. This infrastructure is essential to having the volunteer experience be a positive and meaningful one. There also needs to be recognition that Baby Boomers may no longer see the volunteer commitments as long-term. They are more interested in a person-centered approach to volunteering – one that may be short-term and meet their interests and needs rather than fitting into a proscribed job description. As one Baby Boomer described her feelings about volunteering, "I want to design the route and drive the car!" At the same time, members of older generations are in long standing volunteer positions which they enjoy. Organizations must be able to meet the needs of both long term and short term volunteers.

Finally, accessing the expertise of the student population in terms of the knowledge of technology presents a real opportunity for both older adults and students. Older adults are eager to learn more about various aspects of technology, such as smart phones, texting and tablets and students can be great teachers. Technology presents opportunities for continuing education for older adults and networking with a broader world community.   Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) are one example of a recent technological development in distance education and learning. MOOCS offer free interactive user forums that help build community for students and teachers.

Recommendations and Priorities

- Create a clearinghouse or "one-stop" listing of volunteer opportunities in the community.
- Provide educational offerings to attract groups that may be underrepresented. There is a need to reach deeper into the community, to groups not generally reached and who may enrich the life of the community with different skill sets. Inclusive and visible language is needed in any attempts to attract these underrepresented groups. Meaningful strategies must be identified for reaching older volunteers with opportunities that may appeal to them.
- Enhance the capacity of local non-profit organizations to recruit, train and manage volunteers effectively. Encourage options for short-term volunteer opportunities that are self-directed and flexible. A local volunteer coordinator spanning across multiple organizations may be useful in helping to create a kind of flexible network. It is also helpful to have an actual person with whom potential volunteers could speak. Perhaps a team of "connector-type" people, or navigators could assist people in finding a good volunteer match for them.
- Create a flexible platform and infrastructure for volunteers to self-organize around their own interests. Many Baby Boomers would like to design and create their own volunteer experience, based on their interests and skill sets. That experience may be short term or longer if desired.
- Use the younger generation as a resource. The ratio of students (30,000) to seniors (16,000) is very manageable compared to larger cities. Project Generations, the student-led volunteer program at Ithaca College and Cornell can be a great resource for teaching older adults about technology and its uses.
- Encourage organizations to utilize technology to enhance educational opportunities and increase social connectedness among older adults. For instance, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) provide interactive user forums that help build community for students and teachers. (see: www.coursera.com) They are a recent technological development in distance education and learning.
- Decentralize educational, volunteer and civic engagement opportunities so that more people can be reached.
- Reach soon-to-be retirees with transition planning and information about volunteer and other local opportunities. Cornell University, as an example, conducts informational workshops for employees who are considering retirement. Opportunities can be shared with individuals as they look to structure their lives after retirement.
- Provide clear expectations and suggestions to make it possible for citizens to become more easily engaged in activities. Access to events can be a stumbling block for older adults, particularly if they are not familiar with the area. They may not know where to park downtown or on the campuses.
- Create and utilize volunteer networks to meet the needs of older adults. The Share the Care network of the LGBT community is a good example. Such networks already exist and the stories need to be told.