

Executive Summary

Boomers and Babies: Engaging Boomer-age Volunteers in Oregon's System of Early Care and Education



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Executive Summary

This report identifies opportunities and constraints to engage older adults, specifically Baby Boomers (aged 55-65) in meaningful work (as volunteers or employees) to improve Oregon's system of early childhood education and care. As requested by the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF), a team of Oregon State University researchers conducted multiple focus groups and key informant interviews to examine this topic.

Our findings indicated that part of the task of developing successful ways to engage Boomers in all of the Early Childhood roles that OCF has envisioned will require some reframing of volunteering within early care and education. Many of the EC program staff we interviewed shared traditional ideas about using volunteers in their programs. Among those Boomers who are interested in volunteer service, only a subset is interested in working with young children. Many Boomers are concerned that direct service work with young children and families, particularly those who are very vulnerable, would be too demanding physically and emotionally. In addition, volunteer placement agencies indicated a limited amount of Boomer volunteer placement in EC programs. This stemmed from a lack of communication between EC programs and local volunteer placement programs as well as few inquiries from Boomers seeking placement in EC settings.

In contrast to the literature which emphasizes the idea that most Boomers are interested in professional level volunteer service, our informants were open to a wider array of volunteer service. Similarly, EC programs had many needs for volunteer support, only some of which required "professional" or managerial level work. Programs aimed at engaging Boomers should take a broad the view of service options within early care and education. This may include preparing a "menu" of viable volunteer positions within individual EC programs. Any effort to engage Boomers must respond to the need for flexibility in time commitments. Allowing for this flexibility may be difficult for some EC programs as they seek consistent interactions and relationships with their clients.

For Boomers in this study, the critical part of any volunteer task was not the perceived professional level but rather the value placed upon their role by the organization. These Boomers found "meaning, mastery and membership" to be more important incentives for volunteer service than stipends. As programs consider potential roles for boomer volunteers it will be essential to articulate the importance and relationship of the volunteer work to the overall success of the organization.

Boomers and EC programs were unequivocal in their shared desire for well-organized volunteer programs. However, most EC organizations lacked the capacity to effectively initiate and maintain a volunteer program. New initiatives should consider allotting funding for at least a paid part-time volunteer coordinator for EC programs in order to increase their capacity in identifying, training, placing and supervising volunteers.

Our findings illustrate the complexities surrounding the utilization of Boomer volunteers in EC programs. Efforts to create a successful initiative must begin with EC programs, volunteer placement programs, and Boomers reframing their current views and practices. By recognizing the diverse interests and needs of Boomers and being mindful of the need to increase the capacity of organizations, initiatives will be better positioned to have a beneficial impact on Oregon's early care and education system.