

Executive Summary

Oregon Community Experience Partnership

Objectives

The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) partnered with Technical Assistance for Community Services (TACS) and Life by Design NW to comprehensively assess the engagement experiences of older adults, community leaders, and nonprofit organizations. This assessment provides a foundation for OCF's efforts to advance civic engagement in Oregon while also addressing important social needs.

In designing the assessment, we recognized that our information gathering process would also offer great opportunities to build awareness of the opportunity created by the population of older adults who are interested in giving back to their communities. The assessment design was rooted in our belief in the powerful creativity that often emerges when experienced and committed individuals share new information through open dialogue.

Methodology

The assessment included:

- Design, execution, and analysis of data from telephone surveys of 150 adults ages 55 and up conducted by Oregon's premiere social and opinion research firm, Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall;
- Re-analysis of data about civic engagement from an online survey of 1,700 Oregonians conducted by Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall in December 2005;
- Analysis of demographic data and development of a profile of Oregon's older adults;
- Key informant interviews with 39 civic leaders from throughout the state;
- Key informant interviews with 21 nonprofit leaders from throughout the state;
- An on-line survey completed by 46 nonprofit leaders from throughout the state.
- Analysis of data and discussion of findings by the Partnership assessment team;
- Feedback about the draft report received during a small convening of local leaders and experts.

Key Findings

- Many older adults in Oregon are already deeply involved in their communities.
- Nonprofit organizations report that older adults are already over-represented on boards, as volunteers, and as staff in relation to the proportion of the group in the general population.
- Nonprofit and community leaders are more concerned about how to encourage civic engagement among younger adults, those 25 to 45, and are interested in intergenerational approaches through which older adults may inspire younger adults to become more involved in civic leadership and participation.
- Oregon's older adults prefer flexibility and opportunities to contribute their highest skills, just as national studies have reported.
- Older adults identified multiple approaches to connecting with opportunities to volunteer or do paid work for organizations serving the community as very useful.
- Older adults are most interested in exploring opportunities for new levels or types of civic engagement in the period shortly before they plan to retire.
- Older adults who relocate to Oregon from other states or move to new communities for retirement may have some difficulties finding opportunities to connect with civic life in their new communities.
- Educated, higher-income older adults who have lived in their current communities prior to retirement appear to encounter few barriers to civic engagement.

- Lower-income older adults anticipate working much longer than those who have higher incomes.
- Through key informant interviews, we heard from a few organizations representing or serving communities of color and immigrant and refugee communities that the language of “civic engagement” is limiting. People who are members of these communities may participate in very high numbers but not identify their participation as “civic engagement.” For example, one key informant told us that caring for grandchildren is a very important component of engagement for one community of color, but that residents of the community see this as part of life, not something special.
- Some older adults are interested in paid employment with nonprofits making a difference in their communities if employment opportunities can accommodate their needs for flexibility and provide opportunities to use their skills effectively.

Conclusions

It is clear that in Oregon, early childhood education, postsecondary education access, and other child and family concerns would benefit from the experience and skills of the growing older adult population.

In addition, older adults throughout the state are deeply interested in opportunities to make a positive difference in their communities. While many older adults are already involved in a variety of efforts to serve their communities, we see great opportunities to increase civic engagement. Promising strategies include:

Support culturally relevant approaches

- Fund small grants and provide other support to allow community based groups representing communities of color and immigrants and refugees to explore opportunities for older adults to share their wisdom and provide guidance to younger community members.
- Support partnerships between minority and majority communities to promote learning about civic engagement in different communities.

Provide new tools to connect older adults to their communities

- Develop an intermediary service to connect highly skilled older adults with opportunities for flexible employment with nonprofit organizations.
- Help older adults connect with meaningful opportunities for civic engagement by:
 - Building awareness and increasing utilization of www.OregonInvolved.org.
 - Reaching out to newcomers by combining personal invitations to get involved with web-based information on opportunities for involvement.
 - Providing seamless web access to information about volunteer opportunities.
 - Supporting new initiatives that help older adults work in partnership to build the next generation of community leaders.
 - Seizing the moment of greatest opportunity to encourage engagement by leveraging the efforts of Life by Design NW to provide discussion programs and other services for pre-retirees.

Create dialogue

- Use the Learning Community model to create an opportunity for Oregonians from throughout the state to share their experiences working to support older adult civic engagement through a Statewide Conference. The conference would provide opportunities for peer exchange and feature innovative approaches to civic engagement in targeted communities and among newcomers, and explore strategies to address older adult preferences for flexible engagement opportunities that make strategic use of their greatest skills.