



# **FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY REPORT:**

*Understanding how  
Philadelphians age 50+  
view volunteerism*

by

**Jeanette Bressler, Ph.D., MSW**

**Kristi Jackson**

**Evelyn Montalvo**

**Nancy Z. Henkin, Ph.D.**

© *Temple University Center for  
Intergenerational Learning*

*Coming of Age is a partnership of the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning; WHY? Wider Horizons, the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and AARP Pennsylvania. It is funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, The Atlantic Philanthropies, AARP, and individual donors.*

*We are retired, vigorous adults wanting to stay involved, to help others, and to stay relevant. I think that's what we all want, and we like to do it on our own terms.*

## Introduction

Today's older Americans are the healthiest, most active, and best educated in our history. They also have the precious gift of *time*. Many of these adults are seeking opportunities to remain contributing members of their communities and to live a life that still matters. Indeed, it seems that we may be moving toward a new vision of retirement that is focused on lifelong learning and growth, contribution to the community and care for the future. Retirement is becoming less of a distinct stage and more of a transition between one chapter and the next. Yet despite these changing attitudes, there exists a major gap between the promise and practice of civic engagement among adults over age 50. It is estimated that only about one-third of older adults are involved in volunteer work. Why is the “aging opportunity” yet to be realized? Among the challenges that exist are:

- *Lack of a compelling vision* of the later years.
- *Structural lag* – Roles and opportunities in society haven't caught up with capacities and interests of many current and future retirees.
- *Lack of infrastructure* to expand a new kind of aging. Most policies and programs focus on the *needs* not *resources* of older adults.

*Coming of Age* is a Philadelphia-area initiative designed to address these challenges by:

- promoting opportunities for community involvement, leadership, and lifelong learning among adults who are age 50+ ; and
- building the capacity of non-profit agencies to develop compelling opportunities for this age group.

In order to better understand the views of baby boomers and retirees on volunteerism, we conducted nine focus groups comprised of 104 people, ages 50 and older. The findings in this summary report can be used by non-profits to enhance their ability to recruit, train and place older adults in meaningful volunteer roles.

*I'm kind of new at this because I'm only retired a year. My volunteer experience has been kind of casual throughout the years. This is the year I'm searching for what I want to do when I grow up.*

## Methodology

From October 2003 through May 2004, nine focus groups were conducted in the Philadelphia-area. Questions were asked about participants' goals for retirement, the benefits of volunteering, what they would look for when seeking a new volunteer experience, and the barriers to volunteering. Participants were also asked about their interest in on-going learning opportunities. In order to gain feedback from a diverse group of people over 50, each group was designed to include a specific constituency. Participants ranged in age from 50 to 90, with an average age of 73. 51% were female. 49% were male. The groups included:

- Older African American men, who did or did not currently volunteer
- Older Caucasian men, who did or did not currently volunteer
- Residents of a Continuing Care Retirement Community
- Older adults who volunteered for cultural institutions, such as the zoo, orchestra, and library
- Older adults who volunteered doing direct service with children or older adults .
- Older adults who did not currently volunteer
- Baby Boomers, at least age 50, who had graduated college
- Baby Boomers, at least age 50, who had not completed college
- Older Hispanics who were primarily recruited from senior centers. (This group was conducted in Spanish.)

*For the first time, we have the opportunity to do what we want to do. That's the beauty of being retired - that you can set your own schedule.*

*We are retired, vigorous adults wanting to stay involved, to help others, and to stay relevant. I think that's what we all want, and we like to do it on our own terms.*

*When I retired, I wanted all of my volunteerism to be in different areas than what I had been doing while I was working. And that is a way of expanding my world, by learning new things.*

## Goals for Retirement

Three themes most frequently emerged from discussions about participants' goals for retirement:

**To follow freely chosen interests and make decisions about their schedules.** Retirement means they have the freedom to choose what they do and when and how they do it. Among the retired participants, the strongly stated desire for freedom was associated with an aversion to the obligations and regimentation associated with employment.

**To be useful to society.** A number of participants talked about "giving back". For some, doing so is a responsibility that comes with age, with being an elder. For many, volunteering with organizations is one outlet for being useful. Informally helping neighbors, family, and friends was mentioned as a priority for a number of men.

**To enhance personal well-being.** Many participants described wanting intellectual stimulation, to be healthy, fit, and financially secure, to spend time with family, to travel, and to try new things. A number of participants described the desire to do something they felt passionate about.

### Employment, retirement, or something else?

A variety of feelings about ending employment as one grows older were described. Most of those in the older adult groups seemed delighted to be out of the full time work force. Yet, several of these retirees worked part-time or did consulting. It's important to note that older adult focus groups were held during business hours; this report does not represent the feelings and opinions of older persons who work full-time. When Baby Boomers looked ahead, some expected to continue working, others to fully retire, and others to start new careers. Service for stipends or as part-time work was appealing to many Baby Boomers as a transition to full retirement.

*As an elder in the community I have a responsibility to give physical help or intellectual help to those in need. That's my idea of this word "volunteer" - going out of your way to do something... To make my community a better place to live.*

*The wonderful thing about volunteering is that if you don't like it, you can quit.*

## The Meaning of "Volunteering"

Participants were asked what it meant to them to hear the word "volunteer". With a few exceptions, participants reacted favorably to the word. Rather than discussing the meaning of the word "volunteering", participants instead chose to talk about the meaning of the act of volunteering. Comments about the act of volunteering most commonly fell along four dimensions.

**Volunteering is what you do.** Volunteers provide a helping service "without self-interest", stepping "up to the plate to make the community better". Volunteering may be done with organizations or informally.

**Volunteering is where you do it.** Volunteers identify with the organizations and communities that they serve. These associations were especially strong for those whose volunteer work involved a significant commitment of time. Volunteers expressed pride in working for organizations that have stature in the community.

**Volunteering is an expression of self.** Volunteering is enriching. Volunteers described pride in the label "volunteer", as it implies that they are giving of themselves. They also described status ascribed to them by others for being volunteers.

**Volunteering is voluntary.** Volunteers give because they want to, not because they have to. This again relates to participants' reaction against the obligations associated with a lifetime of employment.

*I've been fortunate in that I've had a number of experiences where I've seen the effect [of my volunteering] in the community. And that gets me about three feet off the floor.*

## Benefits of Volunteering

All participants, whether or not they volunteered, were asked to describe the benefits of volunteering. Two broad categories emerged from these discussions—personal and societal gains. Comments on personal benefits were more frequent than comments on societal benefits. People who spent more time volunteering tended to talk more about personal benefits.

For many, there was clearly an **overlap** in personal and societal benefits; they felt better about themselves by helping others.

### Personal benefits:

- Feeling good about volunteering
- Having a novel experience
- Developing meaningful relationships (with other volunteers, the people served and with staff)
- Being appreciated
- Keeping busy
- Having fun
- Learning

### Societal benefits:

- Making a difference in one's community
- Working with others to achieve a common goal
- Helping children develop and learn
- Helping neighbors

*[The ideal volunteer position is] a job that would be for the common good. Those around us could relate to each other and learn and grow from each other. And it would be meaningful. I would walk home, invigorated, not fatigued and feeling I've done something that I'm obligated to do, but something that I really love doing and feel good about.*

## Elements of a Compelling Volunteer Experience

Participants discussed what they would look for if they were seeking a new volunteer experience. Most often, they said they would want to:

**Help others and help the community.** Participants want to be relevant and useful. Many participants had an interest in helping children, with several who volunteered with cultural institutions valuing their work in terms of teaching young people. The second most frequently described interest was helping the elderly. Other roles of interest included political volunteer work and environmental projects. Several Baby Boomers envisioned taking leadership roles in ambitious projects.

**Make choices about the timing of volunteer experiences.** Flexibility in scheduling was often described as a priority. A number of participants made comments to the effect that if they have to wake early and be somewhere on a regular schedule, they may as well be employed. Many participants indicated that they would be most interested in short-term volunteer commitments.

**Make choices about the content of volunteer roles.** Participants wanted to choose the volunteer job that most interested them. One suggested that organizations present potential volunteers with a list of possible tasks to choose from. Another suggested that new volunteers be given an application that inventories their skills and interests in order to enable them to identify the most suitable volunteer role.

**Work with others toward a common goal.** This characteristic relates to participants' description of missing the collegial relationships of the workplace, to the value they give to the social aspect of collaboration, and to the enhanced meaning that comes from working with others.

**Use existing skills and/or learn new skills.** Some participants wanted to use expertise developed over years to help organizations at an advanced level. Others described wanting volunteer roles that had nothing whatever to do with their past work life; they wanted to learn new skills and try new things.

### Other Elements Mentioned:

- Connecting with the organization's mission
- Feeling appreciated and valued
- Having ongoing access to relevant training
- Receiving cash-value types of incentives (e.g. stipends, transportation reimbursement, meals).
- Having opportunities to socialize with other volunteers.
- Doing work that they feel passionate about or love to do.

*I find that when I do volunteer, sometimes I'm standing around and I'm not doing anything. Or there doesn't seem to be good structure, creative structure. It seems inefficient or a waste of my time. And I don't have that good feeling that I'm making a difference.*

*I think that many people have a lot on their plate in terms of their own lives and don't have the energy to look outside that.*

## Barriers to Volunteering

Participants were asked to describe barriers to volunteering. Responses were placed into two broad categories- institutional barriers and personal barriers. The institutional barriers are particularly noteworthy; many participants had complaints about how they had been treated by non-profit organizations. Addressing the concerns raised may help organizations attract and keep volunteers.

### Institutional barriers included:

- **Disorganized agencies that are not prepared for volunteers.** A number of participants told stories about being recruited to volunteer for an organization, then not being given anything to do. Participants did not want their time wasted.
- **Organizational climate of disrespect.** Volunteers described being patronized by staff who treated the volunteers as less qualified than themselves. Participants told stories of being given menial, and sometimes distasteful, tasks that staff don't want to do.
- **Financial costs associated with volunteering.** Some participants explained that for older people who had difficulty making ends meet, the incidental costs of volunteering, such as transportation, meals, and miscellaneous supplies, were prohibitive. They felt that providing cash value incentives could enable many people to volunteer. Volunteers at several cultural institutions were required to pay dues, buy uniforms, and pay to receive training; one person felt that these expenses led to high turnover among volunteers.
- **Young staff who don't know how to work with older persons.**
- **Transportation - either not provided or costs not reimbursed**
- **Negative attitudes towards older persons in society**

### Personal barriers included:

- **Health problems.** Several participants described having health problems that prevented them from volunteering, in spite of their desire to do so. They indicated that they would volunteer if they could find roles that accommodated their health needs.
- **Lack of time.** Some retirees stated they are busier now than they were when they were working and that it's difficult to find the time to volunteer.
- **Family caregiving issues.** Caring for spouses, parents and grandchildren was cited as a major responsibility in many retirees' lives.
- **Lack of confidence.** Participants discussed that some people may feel that they don't have the skills needed to volunteer or that they may even do harm. Low literacy, and the embarrassment associated with it, was also described as a factor that discourages some older people from stepping forward to volunteer.
- **Stress.** Some said that they did not want to take on emotionally taxing roles. One participant indicated that he had had a stressful career and did not want to do volunteering that was stressful.
- **Feeling ostracized.** Several participants talked about cliquishness among and conflict between volunteers as a turn-off.
- **Lack of interest.** Some people don't have an interest in volunteering or don't have an awareness of community needs. Several men described preferring solitary activities.

*You need to be asked. If someone says, “I really need you, it would be great if you could help us out doing something”, that’s something that you could respond to. But the idea that there’s some kind of amorphous desire that you really have to go help somebody – Well, it does apply to me, but I think it’s very hard to execute.*

## Marketing and Recruitment

Participants suggested the following strategies for recruiting older volunteers:

- **Personalize outreach efforts.** The most powerful way to get someone to volunteer is to have someone they know just ask.
- **Provide options.** People want choice in both assignments and in time committed.
- **Use varied media.** Different types of mass media could be used, including radio, television, newspaper articles, fliers in libraries and markets. The internet is not how most older people find volunteer assignments.
- **Appeal to family members.** Several participants described the influence of their family in getting them to volunteer. Spouses encouraged people to volunteer. Others volunteered alongside spouses, children and grandchildren.
- **Be cautious about using age-related labels, such as “senior citizen” and “retiree”. The term “Baby Boomer” is appealing.** There was little consensus about age-related labels. About 2/3 felt pride in “senior” labels; most of the others felt distain when called senior or any other term related to age. On the other hand, those ages 50-59 liked being called “Baby Boomers”; this crossed ethnic, gender and educational groups in the Philadelphia-area sample.

### Hispanic Elders

- Participants talked about volunteering as something that is done “without self-interest”. Volunteering was not a goal of retirement, but rather an extension of their personal and cultural values – helping their families and communities. Most of their volunteer experiences were with organizations serving their own communities.
- All liked the idea of passing down ethnic/ cultural heritage to youth through story telling, to give them a sense of pride about their lives, culture, and experiences, as well as a way of contributing to their community and family.
- Focus group participants preferred being identified as being from their country of origin rather than from a generic Latin background. However, they would rather be called “Hispanic” than “Latino”.
- Barriers to volunteering included: language and dealing with a critical public who are intolerant of their accents or lack of proficiency in English. Participants said that illegal immigrants would not volunteer.

## Voices of...

### Men

- Men, more often than women, talked about the importance of informal volunteering — helping family members and neighbors.
- Men frequently described valuing solitary pursuits.
- Some men volunteered because their wives wanted them to.

*I think I am relevant, but I don't really feel the need to reach out through third parties. The relevance is in things that I like to do. I like to fix the electricity. I do construction. I hike. Those are the things that for me are fulfilling activities.*

*There's a lot of women — most of those organizations are 90% women and that turns off some of the men.*

*I think that you should have communication aimed at the wife who is in terror of having the retiree at home. I've heard this situation, and it becomes quite frankly, very serious. "What am I going to do with my husband when he retires"? So there's no reason why the wife cannot be well-prepared to send the retiree off to various situations.*

*I think a lot of people won't volunteer because as a child they were told what to do from their parents, when they went to work they were told what to do by their boss. So once they retire, they say, "Look, I'm busting loose. I ain't getting none of that stuff. I want to be free to do what I want to, when I want to."*

### Residents of a Continuing Care Retirement Community.

- These older participants did not want to be marginalized because of advanced age.
- They express interest in volunteering if it is convenient, preferably with activities located at the facility.
- Residents considered activities that they led at the CCRC to be community volunteer work.

*I think [volunteering is] doing an exciting thing. You want to give back, and that's difficult because of physical things. I don't think they ought to kind of wipe us off and just say everybody's retired, too bad.*

*I still want to continue in my professional work to whatever extent I can and I've been doing that. – Age 87*

*I just want to learn more things all the time. – Age 86*

### Baby Boomers

- A large number of participants expected to continue work for pay indefinitely. Some wanted to work at their current careers; others were interested in transitioning into another field, working part time or helping the community.
- Several envisioned ambitious projects and volunteer roles when they were older.

*I think the main [characteristic of a volunteer position] would be individual passion. Whether you care about aging, HIV, AIDS, children, education, animals, or violence – you've got to pick your passion.*

*I want a sense of purpose. If I'm coming [to volunteer], I want to know they're counting on me as much as I'm counting on them to have the opportunity.*

*I wouldn't want to volunteer in a job that I just left. I want to volunteer in something brand new. If I were asked to do something in the field that I was in, I would expect to be paid for it. So, I want to volunteer in other areas I don't have expertise in.*



## **Implications for Attracting and Retaining Older Volunteers**

Organizations that wish to attract older adult and Baby Boomer volunteers should keep the following in mind:

- The desire to be useful and relevant is strong among people 50+.
- People 50+ are looking for organizations that are well-organized and treat them with respect.
- Choice in assignments and scheduling is a priority.
- Opportunities to use existing skills and learn new skills should be emphasized.
- Opportunities to work in teams and to socialize should be created.
- Issues relating to working with young staff should be dealt with openly.
- Cash-value incentives are often important.
- Paid service as a transition to retirement is of interest, especially for Baby Boomers.