Civic Engagement in an Older America

In February 2005, The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) held a series of four public forums in conjunction with the 2005 White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA). These forums were part of GSA’s “Civic Engagement in an Older America” project, a 5-year initiative funded by a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to promote the study of civic engagement by experts in the field of aging. The research will examine the breadth and depth of civic engagement by older adults.

The four events were designated as official WHCoA events. The WHCoA, which is held once a decade, is preceded by a yearlong series of nationwide meetings, events, forums, and mini-conferences. The year culminates with a conference that produces findings and aging policy recommendations to guide federal and congressional actions for the decade ahead. The WHCoA policy recommendations also help the public and private sectors in promoting the health, independence, and economic security of current and future generations of older persons.

Each WHCoA designated forum was conducted in the style of a legislative hearing. Following moderator comments and speaker testimony, audience members were able to ask questions and share their thoughts during a public comment period. The forums, organized by consultant Brian Lindberg, were an opportunity for individuals to meet and hear from the nation’s leading experts on civic engagement. In addition, local service providers shared their approaches for encouraging the continued involvement of older adults in the community.

WINTER PARK, FLORIDA

Moderators:
Rick Moody, AARP; Scott Bass, University of Maryland, Baltimore County; George Maddox, Long Term Care Resources Program, Duke University; Remy Aronoff, White House Conference on Aging

Witness Testimony:
Panel One: Community Assessment and Action Plans for Civic Engagement
Ann Manley, Dr. P. Phillips Foundation and Chairman of the Orange County Commission on Aging; Paulette Geller, Program Director, Older Adults, Winter Park Health Foundation; Doug Beach, Senior Resource Alliance

Panel Two: Volunteerism in Action
Mary Casey, City of Orlando Mayor’s Senior Citizen Advisory Committee; Roger Neiswender, Volunteer, Edgewater High School Campus Redesign Project; Bette Taylor, Senior Mentor, Osceola County Intergenerational Program

Panel Three: Public Sector Opportunities and Challenges
Mayor Kenneth “Kip” Marchman, City of Winter Park; Byron Brooks, Office of the Mayor of Orlando

The Honorable Dorcas R. Hardy, Chair of the White House Conference on Aging Policy Committee, prepares for the St. Louis public forum. Photo provided by: Doris Reeves-Lipscomb

Rick Moody, Scott Bass, and George Maddox listen to Remy Aronoff, senior staff member of the White House Conference on Aging, in Winter Park, Florida. Photo provided by: Judy Watson Tracy
The first forum was held at the Rachel D. Murrah Civic Center in Winter Park, Florida, on February 3, 2005. Local sponsors included the Winter Park Health Foundation, Orange County Government, City of Orlando, City of Winter Park, and the Senior Resource Alliance. Winter Park was chosen as a forum site because of its comprehensive approach to engaging older citizens in community life. “Initially, the needs of the community were assessed and the goals and interests of the residents were identified,” explained Paulette Geller, Program Director for Older Adults at the Winter Park Health Foundation. “This assessment enabled us to implement targeted civic engagement programs.”

The next forum was held on February 15 at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. Washington University’s George Warren Brown School of Social Work and the Center for Aging served as sponsors for this event. Former U.S. House of Representatives Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt served as a moderator. Washington University is a national leader in its research and programs on civic engagement. “We are doing the serious work of planning for the retirement of the baby-boom generation and making meaningful opportunities available for older Americans today,” stated Congressman Gephardt, who now chairs Washington University’s Richard A. Gephardt Institute for Public Service.

The St. Louis forum was so well attended that even a spillover room (with live video feed) was needed. Dorcas R. Hardy, Chair of the 2005 WHCoA Policy Committee, commended the witnesses in St. Louis for their commitment to increasing opportunities in the community for older adults. “I am very pleased that you are exploring some of the very issues that the WHCoA has determined to be priorities. I am particularly impressed with your work on both paid and volunteer work opportunities for older Americans and baby boomers and your focus on caregiving as a form of civic engagement.”

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Moderators:
Richard A. Gephardt, Former Minority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, Chair of the Advisory Committee, Institute for Public Service, Washington University; Dorcas R. Hardy, Chair, 2005 White House Conference on Aging Policy Committee; Bob Blancato, 2005 White House Conference on Aging Policy Committee; Nancy Morrow-Howell, School of Social Work, Washington University

Witness Testimony:
Panel One: Chancellor Mark S. Wrighton, Washington University; Richard A. Gephardt
Panel Two: Institutional Capacity and Civic Engagement in an Older America
Amanda Moore McBride, Washington University, Nancy Morrow-Howell
Panel Three: Volunteerism Now and in the Future
Marylen Mann, OASIS Institute; Peggy Neufeld, Community Outreach and Research Liaison of the St. Louis NORC with the Jewish Federation; Geraldine Gandy, Grace Hill Settlement House, accompanied by Rheta Brown and Jessie M. White, STAES volunteers
Panel Four: Caregiving as Civic Engagement
Philip Rozario, Adelphi University; David Sykora, St. Louis Area Agency on Aging; Lynn Kessler, Person to Person Peer Counseling Program, accompanied by Elizabeth Nelson, Program Manager of Person to Person
Following St. Louis was a forum in Phoenix, Arizona, on February 25th. The Phoenix forum was held in the Burton Barr Central Library, a technologically advanced “library of the future.” Phoenix is recognized for its community leadership and innovation in volunteer and transition programs for older adults. The Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, Civic Ventures, and the Phoenix Public Library provided generous local support for this event. The forum presentations highlighted several innovative programs, including Boomerang, Tempe Connections, Mesa Life Options, and LifeVentures, all of which are Next Chapter Initiative projects funded by the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust.

The final forum was held at the Boston University School of Law on February 28, 2005. The forum’s local sponsor was the Boston University Aging Research Consortium. The City of Boston is a national leader in assessing the employer community’s involvement in civic engagement. Audience members heard presentations from several distinguished witnesses, including GSA members Judith Gonyea and Robert Hudson from the School of Social Work at Boston University, and Joseph F. Quinn, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College.
At the end of each forum, audience members completed a survey on the topic of civic engagement. The information and data obtained from the surveys, the focus groups, and the forum presentations will help GSA develop policy recommendations that will be presented to the Policy Committee of the 2005 WHCoA. The White House Conference on Aging will take place in Washington, DC, toward the end of 2005. For more information, visit www.whcoa.gov.

In addition to the public forums, ten focus groups were convened in urban, suburban, and rural environments with four more scheduled in mid-March in Phoenix and Sun City West, Arizona. Previous focus group locations included St. Petersburg, Winter Park, and Kissimmee, Florida; and St. Louis and St. Charles, Missouri. Focus groups scheduled to occur in the greater Boston area had to be cancelled because of inclement weather and were rescheduled via internet-based discussion and telephone conferences. The focus groups gave GSA the opportunity to reach out to older adults in different environments to gather their views on growing older, their current and projected community involvement, and the future promotion and offering of civic engagement opportunities. Each of the focus groups provided a unique opportunity to learn about what’s important to people as they age and how their lives are impacted through mutual aid, volunteering, or national service-type activities. For further information on the public forums and focus groups, contact Project Director Greg O’Neill at goneill@agingsociety.org or visit the Academy’s website at www.agingsociety.org.